Impact of Autism on Siblings

Typically developing individuals with an autistic sibling can experience a range of positive and challenging experiences. Having a sibling with autism can both positively and negatively impact a person's development, interactions with their autistic sibling, interactions wit others, their experiences with coping, and their overall mental health. This resource will look at each of these impacts.

Impact on the Self and Development

Possible strengths:

- Typically developing siblings may develop greater empathy and understanding for others.
- They may develop strong problem-solving skills and the ability to adapt and handle challenges.
- They may feel proud and a greater sense of purpose when helping their autistic sibling.

Possible challenges:

- They may be expected to take on responsibilities that feel "too big" for their age. This can include extra chores or even caring for siblings when parents need a break.
- They may feel the need to protect their sibling from harm or bullying.
- They may also worry about creating additional stress for parents.

While it is important to be aware of these challenges, for some siblings they can result in increased compassion and care for their siblings which can lead to a desire to create more awareness and engage in activities to encourage the acceptance of autistic individuals.

Relationship with Their Autistic Sibling

Positive experiences:

- Having a built-in playmate
- Feeling proud of their sibling's strengths
- Enjoying humor, intelligence, or special interests

Common challenges:

- Managing unpredictable behaviors (meltdowns, aggression)
- Difficulty socializing or playing together
- Feeling scared, embarrassed, or frustrated

Interactions with Others

- Siblings may feel proud, yet also upset when others misunderstand their sibling. As a result, they may feel the need to explain their sibling's behavior to others.
- They may worry about inviting friends over, or feel the need to conceal they have a sibling with autism.
- They may experience differences in time and attention from parents due to the higher-level needs of their autistic sibling resulting in less physical and emotional availability of parents.
- They may have limited time for extracurricular activities and limited peer interactions due to increased responsibilities.

How Siblings Cope

Individuals may develop a range of coping strategies in response to having an autistic sibling, some more beneficial than others.

Effective coping strategies:

- Learning compromise and problem-solving skills
- Developing strategies for smoother interactions with others
- Learning to ask for help when needed

Maladaptive coping strategies:

- Giving in to their autistic sibling and others in order to avoid conflict or emotional reactions
- Hiding their own needs to avoid burdening their parents
- Withdrawing from family to avoid stress or aggressive behavior from their autistic sibling

For tips on supporting typically developing siblings, please see our resource: Supporting Siblings of Autistic Individuals.