



Life with an Autistic sibling

How to navigate the journey.

When you have an Autistic brother or sister, it can influence both your sibling relationship as well as the broader dynamics of your whole family. In this fact sheet, we explore what it may be like to have an Autistic sibling, how it may be different from other sibling relationships and how parents can support their non-Autistic children.

**Our purpose
a different brilliant®**

Understanding, engaging
and celebrating the strengths,
interests and aspirations of people
on the autism spectrum.

How might having an Autistic sibling influence someone's life?

Everyone is different, but there are a few things that people with Autistic siblings commonly experience.

- **Growing positively as a person.** Having an Autistic sibling can help someone develop greater empathy, compassion, patience and maturity – not to mention a greater appreciation for neurodiversity. Some individuals are inspired to become advocates for Autistic people, or pursue work in related areas.
- **Shouldering more responsibility.** This could mean taking on extra household chores, protecting a sibling from bullying or supporting parents emotionally – and at times, this might feel like an unfair burden.
- **Having mixed feelings.** It's normal to cherish an Autistic sibling's companionship and unique strengths while also feeling challenged by some of their behaviours or communication differences.

- **Feeling judged.** It may be stressful and upsetting dealing with other people's negative attitudes or comments towards an Autistic sibling, especially if this causes hurt, anxiety or embarrassment.
- **Mental health challenges.** These can be triggered or exacerbated if someone feels their needs are neglected or overlooked due to their Autistic sibling's needs.
- **Worries about the future.** Some people have concerns about how their sibling will deal with future challenges like accessing support or dealing with the loss of parents.

Having an Autistic sibling is a journey that requires compassion, education, respite, coping skills and support.

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What can parents/carers do to help?

There are many ways you can support siblings. Here are just a few.

- **Set aside one-on-one time.** Create a safe, judgement-free space where the sibling can openly express their feelings and experiences, both positive and negative.
- **Give them regular breaks.** Enlist family and friends to help out with caregiving, so the sibling has some 'downtime' and doesn't miss out on social events and activities.
- **Share strategies and information.** Deep breathing, exercise, journalling and creative arts can all be healthy ways to manage stress. Education about autism (via evidence-based resources, events and groups) can also promote a better understanding of their Autistic sibling's behaviours, communication style and sensory needs.
- **Plug into a support network.** Creating connections with support groups, camps and mentors can give the sibling access to people who understand their situation. Parental support groups can also help you better understand sibling dynamics and how to balance their needs fairly.
- **Advocate for inclusion and acceptance.** Combat negative attitudes towards Autistic people through your actions and words, and model the kind of behaviours you want to encourage.
- **Check in regularly.** Keep a close eye on the sibling's emotional wellbeing from an early age, and stay tuned in to their friendships, school life, activities and goals. Watch out for any concerning changes like withdrawal, anger, anxiety or depression, and seek professional help from a counsellor if needed.

What can siblings do for themselves?

Do you have an Autistic sibling? No matter what age you are, there are times you may find things difficult. Here are a few strategies for protecting your own wellbeing.

- **Stay open.** Hiding or ignoring your feelings (especially negative ones) never helps. Share honestly with friends, family and mentors who you trust.
- **Make self-care a priority.** Make time for the things that make you feel good (without feeling guilty about it!), from catch-ups with friends to exercise and proper sleep.
- **Learn healthy ways to cope.** When times get tough, have 'go to' strategies that work for you, whether it's journalling, yoga, art, or a session with a counsellor or support group.
- **Find your tribe.** Seek out people who can relate to your experience, online or in real life. It'll help you feel seen, heard and less alone.
- **Keep learning.** The more you understand about autism, the better equipped you are to foster a positive relationship with your Autistic sibling. Documentaries, books, events and social media advocates are all great sources of knowledge. Through research, you can also find available services and supportive programs for your sibling.
- **See the flip side.** Having an Autistic sibling may be difficult at times, but it also presents unique opportunities for growth. Focus on your sibling's unique strengths and abilities, and cherish your bond.

Further reading

Web

autismawareness.com.au/therapies/sibling-support

raisingchildren.net.au/autism/communicating-relationships/family-relationships

raisingchildren.net.au/autism/communicating-relationships/family-relationships/siblings-asd

siblingsaustralia.org.au

References

- Leedham, A. T., Thompson, A. R., & Freeth, M. (2020). **A thematic synthesis of siblings' lived experiences of autism: Distress, responsibilities, compassion and connection.** *Research in Developmental Disabilities.*
- Moss, P., Eirinaki, V., Savage, S., & Howlin, P. (2019). **Growing older with autism – The experiences of adult siblings of individuals with autism.** *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders.*
- Watson, L., Hanna, P., & Jones, & C. J. (2021). **A systematic review of the experience of being a sibling of a child with an autism spectrum disorder.** *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry.*
- Zucker, A., Chang, Y., Maharaj, R., Wang, W., Fiani, T., McHugh, S., Fineup, D. & Jones, E. A. (2022). **Quality of the sibling relationship when one sibling has autism spectrum disorder: A randomized controlled trial of a sibling support group.**

Aspect offers a comprehensive approach, based on the idea of a **different brilliant®**, that:

- Respects difference and diversity
- Builds a person's skills based on their strengths, interests, aspirations and support needs
- Develops autism-friendly environments
- Supports others to understand and embrace autism and to develop respectful supportive interactions.