

What About Me? – Helping Siblings Understand Autism

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Raising autistic children can be very demanding on an entire family. Autistic children often require special attention and specific routines that may be difficult for siblings within the family to follow or understand. Parents often struggle with finding enough hours in the day to devote to other children in the family after attending to their child with special needs. Siblings might feel forgotten or left out, and may struggle with finding their place in the family.

It is important as a parent to be aware of feelings or responses to some possible stressful situations siblings of an autistic child may encounter:

- Embarrassment with peers regarding their sibling
- Frustration when they are unable to engage with their sibling
- Being the target of aggressive behavior by their sibling
- Jealousy of their sibling's time with parents
- Concern for their parents' stress and grief
- Concern over the future of their sibling and family dynamics

Once parents are aware that a sibling is struggling, they may be able to help their child through stressful situations by the suggestions below:

- **Explaining Autism** – Children need to understand what is happening around them. It is important to explain to siblings early on what autism is and make sure to do it often. This information will change and become more in-depth as children get older and are able to understand more. Keep in mind what is important to children as they grow. For example, when they are small, they are more aware about themselves. As they grow, they will become more concerned about what others think about them and their family.
- **Forming Bonds** – The relationship siblings form between each other is often lifelong and important. Due to the nature of this disorder, it can be difficult for children, as well as adults, to form satisfying relationships with an autistic brother or sister. However, there are strategies to help engage family members with their autistic sibling. These skills include making sure they have their attention, giving simple instructions, and encouraging “good” play or behavior.
- **Me Time** – It is also very important to give each sibling a time to feel special. Families should set aside some special time in their schedules to recognize each child as an individual. Families can also do things separately. Choose different activities to do with each of your children that appeals to them as individuals.
- **Support** – Parents may want to encourage their children to interact with other families who are experiencing the same family dynamics. This may help siblings to realize they are not alone and see firsthand how other children cope with different struggles within the family.

Every family faces different challenges and has their own unique way of handling situations. What works best for one family may not work at all for another family. Remember to keep communication open with all family members and take time to make each one feel special.