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Kylie W. Martin
kylie.w.martin@gmail.com

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Don't Forget About Their Siblings: Mental Health in Siblings of Autism

By Kylie Wride Martin

I heard a tantrum dawning downstairs. I groaned; this was the fifth tantrum that week.

Screaming and crying began to echo off our kitchen walls. As the reverberations increased, I made my way to my room and out of my parents' troubles. Even as a 7-year-old, I knew it was my job to lessen my parents' stress and do as they ask. I would remain in my room until the echoes died down.

I know first-hand that having a family member with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is stressful: it is stressful for parents, it is stressful for the child with ASD, and it is stressful for the neuro-typical children in the family. The burden of endless therapy appointments, IEP meetings, unforeseen meltdowns, and constant accommodations is felt by all members of the family.

The effects of this stress on your neuro-typical children are made apparent by research showing that siblings of autism may often feel a responsibility for their sibling's well-being and behaviors,¹ and they are also more likely to be lonely and depressed compared to individuals who do not have siblings with ASD.²

As a parent of a child with ASD, you have likely found resources to help you support your child with ASD. However, there are few, if any, resources that help parents also support their neuro-typical children.

If you're wondering how you can help your typically developing children to manage the unique stressors that your family experiences, here are a few tips:

- 1. Make time for "just us."** Your other children crave your attention just as much as your autistic child

1 Kolber-Jamieson, A. (2020, October 1). Under pressure: support for siblings of individuals with ASD. *Autism Spectrum News*. <https://autismspectrumnews.org/under-pressure-support-for-siblings-of-individuals-with-asd/>

2 Sipowicz, K., Podlecka, M., Mokros, Ł., Pietras, T., & Łuczyńska, K. (2022). Being an adult sibling of an individual with autism spectrum disorder may be a predictor of loneliness and depression—Preliminary findings from a cross-sectional study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.915915>



demands it. Although it may prove difficult, set aside some specific time each day to engage with your typically developing children one-on-one. This can drastically reduce feelings of loneliness and depression in your typically developing children by improving the parent-child bond. This will not only improve your child's well-being but your connection with them as well.

2. **Be reliable.** Because there are so many unexpected variables that stem from having an autistic sibling, you need to be a stable resource for your typically developing child. Set a schedule so they know when you are available to them. Allow them to feel safe and cared for. Your reliability will decrease uncertainty for your child.
3. **Educate them.** Studies have also found that educating your typically developing children about autism leads to "lower severity of depression and feelings of loneliness".³ Education provides them with cognitive and emotional resources to overcome stressful situations. Take a look at this list of 15 best books for siblings of autism. A personal favorite that helped me while growing up is: *My Best Friend Will*. This book provides bite-sized pieces of information from a real-life scenario navigating autism; it is a great book for children!
4. **Watch for signs.** Look for signs of depression, anxiety, or loneliness in your child without ASD. These may include withdrawn play, difficulty sleeping, lack of energy, or abandonment of hobbies.⁴ If you see any of these signs, act. Connect your child to mental health resources.
5. **Provide them a with support group.** Sometimes all a sibling of autism needs is to feel seen, to feel that someone understands their situation. One study found that children who engaged in a support group (specifically for ASD siblings) had improved coping skills and mental health.⁵ Look for a local support group in your area or connect with resources such as Sibshop, Siblings of Autism, or Sibling Support Project.

Even if you're experiencing the fifth—or twenty-fifth tantrum of the week, remember that your other children are experiencing that tantrum too. Providing them with resources will help them to navigate the many

3 Jones, E. A., Fiani, T., Stewart, J. L., Neil, N., McHugh, S., & Fienup, D. M. (2020). Randomized controlled trial of a sibling support group: Mental health outcomes for siblings of children with autism. *Autism*, 24(6), 1468–1481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320908979>

4 Shivers, C. M., Deisenroth, L. K., & Taylor, J. L. (2013). Patterns and predictors of anxiety among siblings of children with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 43, 1336–1346. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-012-1685-7>

5 Jones, E. A., Fiani, T., Stewart, J. L., Neil, N., McHugh, S., & Fienup, D. M. (2020). Randomized controlled trial of a sibling support group: Mental health outcomes for siblings of children with autism. *Autism*, 24(6), 1468–1481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320908979>



stressors of ASD. You will help lessen their risk of developing loneliness and depression in the future. Being proactive about these struggles will aid your typically developing child and the family as a whole. Your other children will appreciate your simple efforts to make them feel seen.

Research has shown that despite the challenges of having a family member with a disability, many families display factors of resilience.⁶ Although siblings of autism may be prone to anxiety and depression, you can help them to build resiliency, lessen mental health struggles, and strengthen the entire family unit.

Take time this week to try implementing one of these 5 strategies. Trust me, your children will thank you.

6 Bayat, M. (2007). Evidence of resilience in families of children with autism. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 51(9), 702–714. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2788.2007.00960.x>