

## SIBLINGS

*by Karen Levine, Ph.D. and Alex Smith-Michaels*

Having a child with a disability affects the whole family in positive and unique ways. Most families learn to be more compassionate, understanding, and nonjudgmental. Many siblings learn to be extra caring, helpful, and may enjoy helping with therapy.

Just as both mother and father might have had feelings of anger, sadness, guilt, etc. when your child was first diagnosed, many siblings also have these feelings as well. It is extremely important to know these are NORMAL feelings and ECN, Inc. strongly encourages you to talk with the child's siblings about his/her feelings. Siblings may also experience two other unique emotional symptoms. The first one is called "survivor's guilt". Survivor's guilt is when a typical sibling feels guilty for being the "healthy or typical" one. The second one is a fear s/he may catch the disability.

Many siblings pass through phases vacillating between emotions, probably very similar to the ones you felt. Again, this is normal. We caution you to watch for signs that the sibling might be feeling intense emotions. Some of these warning signs include: Depression, risk-taking or attention seeking behavior (i.e., behavior that is unsafe), withdrawing, or over compensating by being the "perfect" child or extraordinarily outgoing to the point it is unhealthy.

Below are some tips from Karen Levine, Ph.D. to assist with sibling issues:

- Encourage openness in talking with your non-autistic child. Let him/her know it is OK to have "negative" feelings such as sadness and frustration, as well as the positive feelings. Share with them at times your own negative as well as positive feelings.
- Siblings may have many fears regarding their brother or sister's disability. Reassure the sibling that he/she did not cause her brother/sister's disability, that he/she cannot "catch" the disability. It is important that siblings understand that their sister or brother will not "grow out of" the disability, and that the sibling will not "grow into" the disability.
- Help your child develop explanations about their sibling that they feel comfortable using with their friends to explain their sibling's differences.
- Consider bringing your non-autistic child to doctors' appointments at times, to ask questions and feel included.
- While it is important to involve your non-autistic child in the care and education of your child with autism, make sure the non-autistic child does not feel too burdened or have too much adult responsibility for care giving.
- Have predictable special times that are for each child alone.
- Emphasize fairness in terms of both (all) children having some types of chores, responsibilities, standards of behavior, etc., even though the nature of these will be different for each child.

### SIBLING ACTIVITIES

How can children interact with a sibling who has autism? Unfortunately, the reality is many children with autism are not going to invite themselves into your typical children's world and being to play appropriately. However, this does not mean that play between your children cannot occur. Before you continue, keep in mind that your typical child may not want to play with his/her sibling all the time, might be embarrassed to play with his/her sibling with his/her friends or might not know how to play with his/her sibling.



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The best weapon is knowledge. Most siblings, once they have knowledge, welcome the opportunity to share in their sibling's life. Have your child visit his/her sibling's classroom; ask the teacher if s/he can be a helper for a day, or once a month. If your child receives extra services such as speech, OT, PT, music, movement, ask the therapist if your other child can participate. Have the therapist teach your child **how** to interact - many times children have wonderful ideas of activities to share with their sibling. It is important for them to be an active participant in their sibling's life, but it is equally important to remember that the sibling is a child also and should not be made a therapist.

Many children just simply do not know how to play with their brother or sister in a way that both of you will enjoy. Below are some activities to try. Keep in mind that different activities are appropriate for each child's developmental level.

- Take an old sturdy bed sheet, have two adults/adolescents grab the corners and shake it up and down while you take hold of your sibling's hand and run underneath. A variation is to swing in the bed sheet!
- Paint on paper or the sidewalk with shaving cream or pudding.
- Buy a large tub - fill it with uncooked rice and assorted beans - you can make tunnels or anything else that your imagination can dream up. When you get bored with the rice and beans, try water or pasta in different shapes.
- Many children with autism enjoy music - try taking some old tin cans and metal spoons or some musical instruments and play them.
- You can make ice cream sundaes with your sibling. You take one job, such as putting the ice cream in a dish, while your sibling squeezes the chocolate syrup on top of each sundae.
- Next time you buy a computer game, buy one that two people can play at the same time.
- Sports such as bike riding, swimming (call your local YMCA), one-on-one basketball, skiing, fencing, and tennis can be enjoyed together
- Create a scene with legos or erector sets. You can build some of the components and your sibling the others. Be tolerant of his/her ideas even they don't seem to fit the theme that you had in mind.
- Despite how much your sibling might be enjoying the activity, s/he might not have a large enough attention span to stay with the activity for very long, or might become over stimulated easily. This can be very frustrating, but it's important not to take this personally. Another way to increase your likelihood for success is to set aside a specific time each day and have that be your play time.

Milestones, Inc. works with the family as a whole. Having siblings learn to play together is a goal commonly addressed. We encourage siblings to take part in activities with an understanding that the child's needs come first.

