

Talking with Siblings about Neurodiversity

Here are some tips and resources for providers to share with families on how to explain neurodiversity to siblings of young autistic children. These resources can be used with a range of age levels.

Explaining Neurodiversity and Diagnoses to Children

1. You may start by explaining to the sibling how people might learn or act differently than they do. You can then explain that everyone has things they are really good at and things they may need help with and that it is important to help every person do their best. Be sure to explain in simple, developmentally appropriate terms.
2. Then, you can name and explain their brother's/sister's diagnosis and that this diagnosis helps the family better understand how they learn.
3. You can describe the child with a diagnosis by answering the following questions for the sibling:
 - What does he/she like? Dislike?
 - What are his/her strengths? Challenges?
4. Next, you may ask the sibling, "What are your similarities?" to start a discussion that helps them recognize where they have similar interests and strengths. From there, it can help them identify where they have strengths they could use to help their sibling and where their sibling has strengths they could use to help them.

Example:

"Your brother has something called autism, which just means that his brain works a little different than yours. We all have things we are good at and things we have a hard time with. You are really good at using your words to communicate, but your brother hasn't learned that yet. So, that is why he sometimes throws things when he can't tell us what he needs. That is why he uses pictures to tell us what he needs. It's also why he has some people that come into our house to help us or why we have to help him in different ways when we go places. Since you do a great job using your words, I can show you ways you could help teach your brother about that when you are playing. Also, your brother is really good at organizing things, like his toys, so maybe that is something he could help you with sometimes."

Sibling Support Groups & Video Resources for Families

- Sibling Support Project - <http://www.siblingsupport.org>
- Tennessee Adult Brothers & Sisters (TABS) - <https://vkc.vumc.org/vkc/tabs/>
- Sesame Street in Communities - <https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/autism/>

Books

You can use these by having your child read it on their own and come to the caregiver/adult for questions or can use it in a more interactive way.

- Connor Sullivan, *I Love My Brother!: A Preschooler’s View of Living With a Brother Who Has Autism* (2001)
- Holly Robinson Peete, *My Brother Charlie* (2010)
- Cynthia Lord, *Rules* (2008)
- Donald Meyer and Patricia Vadasy, *Living with a Brother or Sister with Special Needs: A Book for Sibs* (1996)

Responding to Various Age Groups

Sibling Age Range	Developmental Skills	Caregiver Focus
2-5 years old	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on observable behaviors, but they may not yet have the ability to logically understand why. • Less able to articulate feelings, but they may do so using behaviors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concrete strategies/simple explanations. • Use ‘Why?’ questions as an opening to discuss. • Use clear, short explanations about challenges for autistic child.
6-12 years old	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beginning to understand connection between multiple events. • Understanding “illness” as transmitted through physical contact – idea of “contamination.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use facts as part of concrete explanations. • Convey that the sum of these difficulties together is called autism. • Communicate why certain adjustments are made. • Correct mistaken assumptions they may have made that imply “disease” or “illness” language.
Teens/Young Adults	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questions may focus on plans to have children (concerns about a genetic component to autism). • May feel a sense of responsibility. • May make it difficult for them to leave home and begin independent lives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss expectations they have in caring for autistic sibling and what they are NOT expected to do. • Discuss living arrangements. • Discuss who will have guardianship. • Reassure them about the legitimacy of assuming their own roles as adults.