

AUTISM MUM SUPPORT

Supporting Siblings

Supporting the whole family when children have different needs.

When one child needs significant support, the whole family adapts. Appointments, school difficulties, sensory needs, food, sleep, transitions, communication and recovery after overload can shape everyday routines. Brothers and sisters may understand far more than adults realise, yet they can still struggle with the impact. They might adore their autistic sibling and also resent cancelled plans. They might defend them fiercely at school and then desperately want quiet at home. Both feelings can exist together.

For Mum, this can create another layer of emotional responsibility. You may constantly calculate who needs you most, who can wait, whether somebody has missed out, and whether different rules are fair. There is no perfect mathematical balance. The aim is not to make every experience equal; it is to keep noticing each child as an individual and to make sure one child's needs do not permanently erase another's.

Fair does not always mean the same

Equality gives everybody the same thing. Equity responds to what each person needs. An autistic child may need headphones, predictable routines, fewer social demands, safe foods, recovery time or an earlier exit from an event. A sibling may need privacy, spontaneity, uninterrupted time with Mum, friends visiting, a quieter place to study or reassurance that their plans matter too. Explaining this explicitly can prevent differences being interpreted as favouritism.

Try language such as: 'You both matter. You don't always need the same things, so sometimes my support looks different.' Avoid asking siblings to accept everything simply 'because autism'. Autism can explain a need, but the whole family's boundaries and wellbeing still matter.

The child who becomes 'no trouble'

A sibling who appears extremely independent can easily be overlooked. They may stop asking because they know Mum is tired, solve problems alone, hide distress, achieve highly or become unusually helpful. Competence is not the same as having no needs. Make space to ask questions that are not about their autistic sibling: What is happening with friends? What are they excited about? What is hard at school? What would they like more of at home?

Notice them outside moments of difficulty. Connection that happens only after a sibling becomes upset can accidentally teach them that distress is the route to attention.

Mixed feelings are allowed

Siblings need permission to say that something is difficult without being made to feel disloyal. 'I hate when he screams' is not the same as 'I hate my brother.' 'I wish we could just go somewhere without planning everything' can express exhaustion rather than rejection. Begin with the feeling: 'That was really loud and you were frightened,' or 'You were looking forward to today and you're disappointed.' Once a child feels heard, problem-solving is usually easier.

SIBLINGS, MELTDOWNS AND FAMILY PRESSURE

Meltdowns can affect everyone

A meltdown is an involuntary response to overwhelm, not deliberate misbehaviour. At the same time, the sound, movement or unpredictability of a meltdown can be frightening for siblings. Both realities matter. Create a simple family safety plan before the next difficult moment: where siblings can go, which adult they should find, whether headphones are available, and what they are never expected to do. Children should not be responsible for physically intervening, calming their sibling or keeping everybody safe.

Afterwards, recovery may be needed by more than one person. Check in privately. A sibling may need reassurance, factual explanation, quiet or an opportunity to talk. Avoid making the autistic child apologise for having been overwhelmed simply to make everybody feel better; where harm occurred, support appropriate repair in a way that respects communication and capacity.

When plans keep changing

Repeatedly cancelling family activities can create resentment even when the reason is understandable. Look for flexible alternatives rather than assuming everybody must always do the same thing. One adult might continue an outing while another leaves early. A celebration might have a quiet space and a shorter attendance window. A sibling might sometimes attend an activity separately. Families do not fail because they divide and regroup according to need.

Prepare siblings honestly when plans are uncertain. 'We are hoping to stay for two hours, but we might need to leave earlier. If that happens, Dad will stay with you.' A backup plan gives their experience some predictability too.

Protecting possessions, bedrooms and boundaries

Autism does not remove a sibling's right to boundaries. If an autistic child takes possessions, enters bedrooms, damages belongings or repeatedly interrupts, look for environmental solutions and teaching rather than simply asking the sibling to tolerate it. Locks or storage boxes where appropriate, visual boundaries, duplicate high-interest items, separate calming spaces and adult supervision can reduce conflict.

Equally, autistic children need their own boundaries respected. Siblings should learn that sensory equipment, safe foods, communication devices and comfort objects are not toys to remove or bargaining tools.

Do not create a young carer by accident

Siblings often want to help, and appropriate family contribution can be positive. The concern is when help becomes responsibility: monitoring safety, interpreting communication for adults, managing meltdowns, sacrificing activities because no adult is available, or feeling responsible for Mum's emotional wellbeing. Praise kindness without turning it into a permanent role.

Ask yourself: **If my child stopped doing this tomorrow, would an adult have to take over?** If the answer is yes, consider whether the responsibility has become too large.

Sibling support snapshot

NOTICE	ASK YOURSELF
They are always 'fine'	Do they feel allowed to need me?
They avoid home	Is noise, conflict or unpredictability overwhelming?
They are constantly helping	Has helpfulness become responsibility?
They resent different rules	Have I explained needs without dismissing their feelings?
They worry about the future	Have adults accidentally placed future caring expectations on them?

MAKING EVERY CHILD VISIBLE

One-to-one connection without creating another impossible target

Dedicated time matters, but it does not need to mean expensive days out or hours of uninterrupted attention. Predictable small moments can carry enormous emotional weight: ten minutes at bedtime, a weekly drive, walking the dog, making toast together, a television programme only you watch, or a regular trip to the shop. The important message is: 'There is space in my mind for your life too.'

During that time, resist turning the conversation back to family logistics or the autistic sibling. Let the sibling choose what matters. Children often reveal important things sideways, while driving, drawing, walking or doing something together rather than during a formal 'talk'.

When siblings compare rules

Different rules are easier to accept when the reason is transparent and when siblings also experience flexibility around their own needs. Avoid presenting accommodations as rewards. A device used for regulation is not necessarily equivalent to recreational screen time. A safe food is not 'getting a special dinner'. Explain function rather than simply saying, 'because they are autistic.'

At the same time, review rules periodically. Sometimes a family arrangement began during crisis and remains long after circumstances changed. Ask whether it is still necessary, whether it can be adjusted and whether another child is carrying an avoidable cost.

Talk about autism respectfully

Use language that explains differences without turning the autistic child into a diagnosis. 'Her brain processes noise very strongly' is more useful than 'She can't help it, she's autistic.' Describe the individual child because autistic people differ widely. Encourage questions and say when you do not know the answer.

Be careful what siblings overhear. Meetings, phone calls and adult conversations may repeatedly describe deficits, risks and problems. A child hearing only this language can form a distorted picture of their sibling. Balance necessary problem-focused conversations with strengths, preferences, humour, interests and ordinary family identity.

Future-care anxiety

Older siblings sometimes quietly assume they will be responsible for their autistic brother or sister when parents age. Do not leave this as an unspoken expectation. Adult siblings can choose loving involvement without automatically becoming full-time carers. Families can discuss future planning gradually and appropriately, including housing, finances, advocacy, social-care arrangements and the autistic person's own wishes and rights.

Telling a sibling, 'Your life matters too; we do not expect you to give it up,' can remove a burden they may never have voiced.

A conversation page

Something I love about our family is...

Something that is hard at home is...

A time I feel left out is...

Something I wish adults understood is...

One thing that would make home easier for me is...

Something I would like to do just with you is...

MUM IN THE MIDDLE

When two children need you at once

There will be moments when needs collide. One child may be in sensory overload while another is crying about friendship problems. You cannot divide yourself perfectly. Prioritise immediate safety first, then communicate clearly with the child who must wait: 'I can see this matters. I need ten minutes to make things safe, then I am coming back to you.' The return matters. If you cannot return when promised, acknowledge it and reconnect later.

Mums often judge themselves for these moments as though a better parent would somehow meet simultaneous needs simultaneously. That standard is impossible. What children need over time is evidence that their needs remain in the relationship even when they cannot always be met immediately.

Sibling conflict is still sibling conflict

Not every disagreement is caused by autism. Brothers and sisters annoy each other, compete, borrow things, tease, argue and need space. Avoid interpreting every conflict through diagnosis. Ask what happened, what each child needed, what boundary was crossed and what repair is possible.

Likewise, avoid expecting the non-autistic sibling to 'know better' every time. Being more able to regulate does not mean they should always surrender. Adults may need to hold boundaries for both children.

Watch for signs a sibling needs more support

Pay attention to persistent changes: anxiety, withdrawal, anger, sleep disturbance, school avoidance, physical complaints, perfectionism, excessive responsibility or repeatedly expressing fear about home. These do not automatically mean family circumstances are the cause, but they deserve curiosity. Speak directly with the child and, where appropriate, school, the GP or another professional.

Some children benefit from sibling or young-carer groups because they can speak with peers who understand complicated family experiences without needing a long explanation.

Mum's guilt

You may carry guilt that one child has had to wait, that another cannot tolerate a sibling's friends visiting, or that family life looks different from what you imagined. Guilt can alert us to something worth reviewing, but it is not proof that you have failed. Ask: **Is there a practical change needed, or am I demanding an impossible level of fairness from myself?**

Sometimes the most supportive change is structural: another adult taking one child out regularly, protected sibling time, respite, practical help, or asking wider family to build independent relationships with each child.

Family balance review

Who currently receives most of the family's time, and why?

Whose needs are easiest to overlook?

Is any child carrying an adult responsibility?

Does everyone have somewhere to recover?

What is one small change that would make family life fairer - not necessarily equal?

SUPPORT, RIGHTS AND MOVING FORWARD

Build a family where needs can be named

A supportive family is not one in which nobody ever feels jealous, overwhelmed or left out. It is one in which those experiences can be spoken about without somebody immediately becoming the villain. Autism does not need to be hidden, and siblings' difficult feelings do not need to be hidden either.

Model language that separates people from problems: 'The noise was too much for both of you in different ways.' 'We need a better plan for mornings.' 'You both needed the same room and that did not work.' This moves the family away from deciding which child is the problem and towards changing environments, expectations and support.

Create a simple family plan

For our autistic child: What reduces overload? What communication helps? What are the early signs that capacity is dropping?

For siblings: Where can they go for quiet? Which plans should be protected? Who can give them individual attention?

For Mum: Who can step in? What happens when your capacity is low? Which responsibilities can another adult own?

For everyone: What do we do when the original plan stops working?

Write the plan for real life rather than the ideal day. A useful plan should still work when people are tired, late or emotionally overloaded.

UK starting points

Sibs: UK information and support focused specifically on brothers and sisters of disabled children and adults.

Contact: information and support for families with disabled children, including family life and practical issues.

National Autistic Society: autism information and resources for autistic people and families.

Young carers services: local services may support children who take on caring responsibilities; provision and eligibility vary.

School and GP: useful starting points when a sibling's emotional wellbeing, sleep, attendance or functioning has changed significantly.

Local authority/carers services: families may also be able to ask about carers assessments, practical support and local groups.

Services, eligibility and processes vary across the UK and can change. Check current information directly with the relevant organisation or local authority.

Books and further reading

For parents: Look for current books and resources on sibling relationships, autism, family systems and young carers. When choosing material for children, check that it presents autistic people respectfully and does not suggest siblings should become responsible for managing them.

For siblings: Age-appropriate stories and first-person sibling accounts can help children recognise that mixed emotions are normal. Choose resources that leave room for the sibling's own life as well as explaining autism.

Message from Maggie

When you are Mum in the middle, it can feel as though you are constantly measuring who got what from you and who had to wait. Families are not balanced minute by minute. There will be days when one child needs almost everything you have. What matters is that the quieter child is not forgotten over time. Keep coming back. Ask about their world. Let them say the difficult thing. Do not make them responsible for being endlessly understanding, and do not make yourself responsible for creating a family in which nobody ever struggles. Different needs can live in the same home. Every person in that home deserves to be seen.

