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Autism Safety
Council™

Autism & Sibling Safety

**Promoting Understanding,
Safety, and Mental Health**

A Guide for Parents and Caregivers



SAFESIBLINGS
AND AUTISM™

About This Guide

This guide was developed in collaboration with siblings, families, and autism and Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) service professionals.

It integrates knowledge from:

- Current research
- Clinical expertise
- Lived experience of siblings and their parents or caregivers

The content reflects documented practices and the most up-to-date knowledge available at the time of publication.

This guide is for informational and training purposes only and is not a substitute for professional medical, behavioral, or therapeutic advice. Individuals with autism or their siblings may have unique needs that require consultation with qualified healthcare providers, behavioral specialists, or support professionals.

Every individual and situation is unique. Decisions about safety planning, communication, and intervention should be made in collaboration with therapists, support personnel, and qualified professionals familiar with the individual's needs.



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*Advancing Autism Safety Through
Science, Expertise & Collaboration*



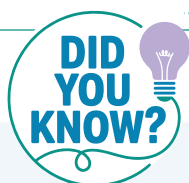
Understanding the Unique Safety Landscape for Siblings

Siblings of autistic children often grow up faster than their peers. They may learn early how to read moods, prevent meltdowns, avoid triggers, and alert adults to danger. While these skills can foster empathy and responsibility, they can also come at a cost.

Safety concerns for siblings may include:

- Physical injury from aggression or dysregulation
- Emotional distress from witnessing meltdowns or self-injurious behaviors (SIBs)
- Chronic stress from preventing elopement or crises
- Social isolation and missed childhood experiences
- Anxiety about police or emergency interactions
- Feeling responsible for managing situations beyond their age

Many siblings will say, “I’m fine.” They may truly believe it. That does not mean they are unaffected.



Open Communication Helps Siblings

One study found that siblings’ experiences were positively influenced by parents who communicated openly with them, and educated them about autism, suggesting that supportive family communication patterns relate to better sibling adjustment outcomes.

(Romney, et al, 2025)

References

Romney, J. S., Fife, S. T., Reitz, R. S., Piland, N., Soloski, K., Montgomery, A. L., & Wagner, K. (2025). Relational Patterns of Support and Communication in Families with a Child Diagnosed with Autism: an Interpretive Phenomenological Study. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 55(9), 3395–3409. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-025-06847-3>



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The Sibling Experience

Recognizing the Risks, Resilience, and Support Needs

Siblings of individuals with autism often play a significant and complex role within the family system. Understanding both the challenges and strengths of siblings is essential for creating informed, family-centered support systems that recognize their experiences, protect their well-being, and foster long-term resilience.

Emotional Health

Siblings of individuals with autism show higher levels of anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms compared to siblings of typically developing children. These effects are most pronounced during adolescence and periods of increased family stress (Orsmond & Seltzer, 2009; Hastings, 2003).



Social Impact



Siblings of individuals with autism may experience reduced social opportunities, such as hosting sleepovers, inviting friends over, or having both parents present at social or sporting events. They may also feel misunderstood by peers. Additionally, unique family routines or living arrangements can lead to feelings of embarrassment or discomfort when explaining their home life or answering questions from others.

Resilience

Many siblings report enhanced empathy, maturity, compassion, and social awareness. Despite challenges, siblings often describe personal growth and resilience resulting from their experiences (Stoneman, 2005; Cheng & Ye, 2020).



References

- Cheng, S. T., & Ye, J. (2020). A thematic synthesis of siblings' lived experiences of autism: Distress, responsibilities, compassion, and connection. *Research in Developmental Disabilities, 97*, 103547. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2019.103547>
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Aggression and Unpredictable Behavior

Some autistic individuals experience periods of physical aggression, especially during sensory overload, frustration, or communication breakdowns. Even when aggression is not intentional, siblings may be at risk.



Potential risks include:

- Hitting, kicking, biting, hair pulling
- Throwing objects
- Scratching, pinching, pushing down
- Property destruction
- Intensified aggression/strength during puberty
- Psychological distress or trauma

Caregiver strategies:

Keep lines of communication open with siblings and create a clear plan ahead of time to reduce fear and risk.



A simple, age-appropriate plan might include:

- Having them leave the area immediately
- Assigning a designated safe space
- Setting a rule to not intervene or engage their sibling
- Getting an adult or calling for help if needed

Be sure to practice this plan calmly, not during crises.

Assigning a safe place:

Families can plan ahead by assigning a safe place where siblings can go if they need distance or feel overwhelmed.

This safe place might be:

- A bedroom or personal space
- A quiet area in the home
- A trusted neighbor's or relative's home
- An outdoor space such as a backyard or nearby area that provides calm and physical separation



Witnessing Meltdowns

Meltdowns can be loud, chaotic, and frightening. Siblings may witness screaming, property destruction, elopement, or self-harm behaviors such as head banging or biting.



Even if siblings appear calm, repeated exposure can cause:

- Anxiety or hypervigilance
- Nightmares or sleep issues
- Fear of setting someone off
- Feelings of guilt
- Perfectionism
- Modifying their own needs to keep peace
- Emotional numbing or shutdown



Keep Reminding Siblings

“Your job is to stay safe, not to manage your brother/sister.”

What can help:



- Honest, age-appropriate explanations of what is happening
- Reassurance that meltdowns are not anyone’s fault
- Reminders that bad days happen, but so do good days
- Teaching about sensory overload and an overwhelmed nervous system, and how their sibling cannot control this
- A predictable plan for “meltdown times”
- Logging or journaling feelings and worries

Encourage them to identify and acknowledge their feelings:

- *“Did that startle you? It did me, too. It’s normal to feel startled when big sounds and feelings happen.”*
- *“It’s okay to feel anxious and talk about our feelings.”*
- *“I can see you’re feeling upset. It’s okay to feel upset or confused, and it’s good to talk about how we feel!”*

Planning ahead:

- Maintain your assigned safe space where siblings can go.
- Provide noise-cancelling headphones, comfort items, or distractions.
- Arrange for another adult to be present during high-risk times if possible.
- Remember, keep proactive communication going.



Isolation and Missed Childhood Experiences



Siblings of individuals with autism may experience isolation and miss out on typical childhood experiences due to unique safety issues, behavioral struggles, and complex challenges that may limit typical childhood experiences, and social opportunities.

Some families cannot safely:

- Go to movies or restaurants
- Travel
- Attend large gatherings
- Stay out late or spontaneously change plans

Siblings may miss:

- Birthday parties
- Sleepovers
- Extracurriculars
- Inviting friends home

Due to triggers, siblings may have to avoid:

- Openly crying or laughing
- Playing music out loud
- Playing instruments
- TV shows or movies
- Sounds, words, or movements
- Playing freely or loudly



This loss is real and needs to be acknowledged.

Making typical experiences possible:

While not everything is possible, some things can be with creativity and support:

Sleepovers: Host sleepovers when the autistic sibling is with another caregiver. You can also try to arrange sleepovers at their friends' homes, or host a sleepover at a relative's home.

One-on-one outings: Schedule regular solo time with siblings, and plan special trips just with them. Even short, routine outings matter.

Plan ahead: Save money for future class trips, and look into sports with travel opportunities. Check out summer camps, community activities, faith-based activities, or clubs with travel or "night out" opportunities.



Build a Safety Circle

Build a small circle of trusted, understanding adults, and accept help, even when it's hard.

Identifying Feelings



Growing up with a sibling on the autism spectrum can bring pride, love, confusion, frustration, worry, fear, guilt, and joy, often all at the same time. Siblings may struggle to name these feelings or may hide them to avoid adding stress to the family. Helping them identify their emotions and being understanding is an important part of their safety, wellbeing, and long-term resilience.

When siblings can recognize and talk about their feelings:

- They are less likely to act out through behavior or withdraw emotionally.
- They build empathy for themselves and others.
- They feel safer asking for help when feeling overwhelmed or unsafe.
- They learn that their needs matter, too.



Use Tools

Some siblings benefit from concrete supports, such as:

- Feelings charts or emotion wheels
- Drawing, journaling, or storytelling
- Rating feelings on a scale (e.g., "How big does that feeling feel right now?")

How Parents Can Help

1. Name Feelings Out Loud: Children often don't have the words for what they're experiencing. You can model this by labeling emotions you notice:

- "You seemed embarrassed when that happened in public."
- "I wonder if you felt scared when things got loud."

2. Make Space for Mixed Emotions: Let siblings know it's okay to feel more than one thing at once, such as love and anger, pride and resentment, protectiveness and exhaustion. Avoid correcting their emotions. Try:

- "You can love your sibling and still feel upset."
- "All feelings are allowed here, even the hard ones."

3. Listen Without Fixing: When siblings share their feelings, thank them and resist the urge to explain, justify, or solve immediately. Feeling understood often matters more than finding a solution in the moment. Instead:

- Listen calmly.
- Reflect back what you hear, such as "That sounds really overwhelming."

4. Reassure Them They Are Not Responsible: Siblings may feel pressure to manage behavior, keep the peace, or protect others. Gently remind them:

- They are not in charge of their sibling's emotions or actions.
- It's okay to step away and ask for help.
- Their safety and comfort are important.





The Importance of Early Counseling for Siblings

Even when siblings appear to be coping well, early counseling plays a vital role in supporting their long-term emotional health. Rather than signaling that something is wrong, counseling serves as preventive support. It also helps prepare siblings for future developmental changes and reassures them that adults are proactively planning for their safety and support.

Why Early Counseling Matters

- Children often lack language for complex emotions.
- Stress may surface later as anxiety or depression.
- Counseling helps normalize mixed feelings (love, resentment, fear, guilt.)
- It prepares siblings for future changes, including puberty.
- It offers a neutral space that is not the family system.
- It helps address common behaviors, like perfectionism and avoidance.



Preparing for Future Challenges

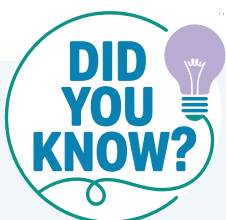
If the autistic sibling has not yet gone through puberty, siblings may be unprepared for:

- Increased strength
- Hormonal changes affecting behavior
- New safety concerns



Counseling Can Help Prepare Your Child

Counseling and honest conversations can help reduce shock and fear as children age, as well as provide coping strategies, and reinforce that adults are invested in their safety and well being. Finding a counselor who has experience with autism is recommended.



There are low-cost and community-based supports that may be available.

- **School supports:** counselors, social workers, psychologists, and emotional supports through 504 plans or IEPs
- **Community mental health resources:** family service agencies, university clinics, and autism or family support organizations
- **Peer connection:** sibling support groups, camps, and recreation programs
- **Faith and community centers:** free counseling, youth groups, or mentoring
- **Access tools:** virtual counseling services and insurance help lines

Take it one moment at a time



Parenting in a family affected by autism asks more of you than most people will ever see. It requires constant adjustment, fierce advocacy, and a level of emotional effort that is not always visible or recognized. In the midst of managing safety, schedules, therapies, and daily life, it can be easy to feel like you're falling short, especially when your family's life doesn't look like the ones you see around you.

Just know that an emotionally healthy family is not built through big trips, perfect traditions, or picture-perfect moments. It is built in small, steady ways. It can be found in a loving note left on a pillow, ten minutes of intentional one-on-one time, or a quiet check-in that says, "I see you."

It grows when families speak openly, encourage communication, and make room for every voice. It lives in gestures -- big and small -- that help each person feel heard, valued, and safe, and in the shared understanding that you are working together as a team.

Whenever possible, sneak joy in where you can. Joy does not have to be elaborate; it can be laughter over a shared moment, a favorite snack, a walk outside, or a moment of rest. Self-care is crucial.

It's also important to acknowledge that comparison is hard to avoid. You may look at other families and grieve what feels out of reach. That feeling does not make you ungrateful or a bad parent, it makes you human. When those moments arise, lean on other parents who understand.

Above all, give yourself grace. **You are making decisions rooted in deep love and commitment, even when those choices are painful or imperfect.** Your willingness to show up, adapt, and keep going is what puts you among the most extraordinary parents on the planet.

Sibling Feelings Log

Name: _____ Date: _____

How I Felt Today

(Circle all that apply)

Happy 😊 Okay 😐 Worried 😟 Angry 😡 Sad 😞 Frustrated 😡
Scared 😨 Left out 😞 Loved ❤️ Calm 😌 Overwhelmed 😵

Other: _____

What Was Happening? (Write or draw)

What Helped (or Might Help)?

(Check any)

Time alone Talking Music Play/Movement Writing/Drawing Comfort item

Other: _____

One Thing I Want Someone to Know:

One Good Thing Today (Big or Small)

My Sibling Has Autism



I have a sibling who has autism.



Autism means their brain works differently than mine. This can affect how they talk, move, play, or handle big feelings.



Sometimes my sibling may get overwhelmed. They might yell, cry, break things, or need a lot of help from adults. This is called a meltdown. Meltdowns are not my fault, or my sibling's fault.



When a meltdown happens, I do not try to stop it or fix it. I can go to my safe place, put on my headphones, or ask an adult for help.



My sibling may get more attention, different rules, or extra help. It is okay to feel sad, mad, confused, or jealous.



I can love my sibling and still have hard feelings at the same time. My feelings matter, too. I can talk to a parent, trusted adult, or counselor about how I feel.



Resources and Support for Siblings

Sibling Support Project (siblingsupport.org)

Offers Sibshops, online support, and educational resources specifically for siblings of individuals with disabilities, including autism.

Books for Siblings

For Children:

- My Brother Charlie by Holly Robinson Peete
- Everybody Is Different by Fiona Bleach
- Autism: The Story of My Amazing Brother by Zabella Hernandez

For Teens & Adults:

- Life as an Autism Sibling by Autism Sibling Support Project
- The Sibling Slam Book by Don Meyer

Child Mind Institute

Resources on anxiety, stress, and emotional well-being for children and teens.

Mental Health & Counseling Resources

Psychology Today (psychologytoday.com)

Directory to find therapists experienced in autism and sibling support.

Online Communities

- Sibling Support Project Facebook Groups
- Reddit – [r/SiblingsOfAutism](https://www.reddit.com/r/SiblingsOfAutism) (best for older teens and adults)

Crisis & Safety Support

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (for emotional distress or crisis situations)

Podcasts

Constant Chaos

Focuses on supporting siblings and family dynamics.

Sibling Support on the Better Behavior

Show with Dr. Nicole Beurkens

Explores sibling experiences, emotional health, and practical strategies.

Once Upon a Gene – Siblings Edition

Personal stories and conversations about growing up in autism families.

Live from Sibshops! (A Piece of Hope series)

Highlights sibling voices and Sibshops experiences.



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