

The Other Child: Non-Autistic Siblings and their Relationship with their Parents

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**Abstract**

Parents who have children with autism tend to spend much of their time dealing with the daily struggles and routines of the autistic child. Therefore, it is possible that the parent's relationship with their other child/children can be affected. For example, it is interesting to see how having an autistic child affects the parent's emotional relationship and how much time they spend with the non-autistic child. From the previous literature we can conclude that having a child with autism do affect the parent's relationship with the non-autistic child/children. The non-autistic child/children's relationship with their parent's was negatively affected. The parent-child relationship tended to be strained and distant. The following paper looks to examine scholarly articles that look at the relationship between parents and their non-autistic child/children and how the relationship is affected by their autistic child.

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### **Introduction**

Autism is a spectrum disorder and it is a neurodevelopmental condition that lasts throughout a person's entire life. Symptoms can range from mild to severe. An individual is usually diagnosed with autism at a young age, usually before the age of three. Autism tends to affect one out of every 68 children, the numbers seem to be on the rise. It usually affects more boys than girls (Altieri, & Kluge, 2009). Autism is becoming more common and therefore it is good to know more about the disorder. Not all children who have autism will present the same symptoms or behaviours. For example, some children may lose their entire speech and other children only lose it partially (Molesworth, Chevallier, Happe, & Hampton, 2015). A child with autism has trouble communicating and making decisions. They also have impaired social skills and have trouble socializing. Autistic children tend to stick to specific patterns and routines and they tend to keep to themselves (Saunders, Tilford, Fussell, Schulz, Casey, & Kuo, 2015).

A parent who has a child with autism spectrum disorder has to deal with a lot of stress. For instance, they sometimes do not feel able to handle their child's special needs while sometimes having to handle other children too (Leon, 2014). The parent needs to be more attentive with the autistic child and needs to be a lot more involved in the child's care. Leon (2014) believes that being involved in your child's routines (school, activities, mealtimes & bedtimes) can cause stress. If you do not address the stress then it can cause damage to your relationship with your other non-autistic children. Not only does having an autistic child place stress on the parent's, it can cause stress on the other children in the family as well. Gross (2004) talks about siblings of autistic children and how they have a lot of responsibility and stress placed on them due to their autistic sibling's complex needs.

The autistic siblings' behaviours can cause the parents to worry more. This can affect the child's life and cause some of their social relationships to be strained. A lot of research looks at the parent's relationship with their autistic child. It is important to look not just at the parent's relationship with the autistic children but with the non-autistic child/children as well. Having a child with a disability like autism can affect a parent's relationship with the whole family. Rivers and Stoneman (2003) talks about how having an autistic child affects the non-autistic child's relationship with both their autistic sibling and their parent's. Therefore, it is interesting to see how it affects the relationship and what can be done to help the parents cope.

This paper will examine previous research that looks at the effects of having a child with autism and how it affects the parent's relationship with their other non-autistic children. It can be seen through previous research that having a child with autism does affect the parent's relationship with their other children. We will see this more clearly throughout the rest of the paper. I will begin by discussing how having a child with autism affects both parent's relationship with the non-autistic child/children. Then I will look more specifically at how the child with autism affects the non-autistic child's emotional bond, and how it affects the amount of time they get to spend with their parents as well. I will also look at some ways in which the mother or father can cope with their children and how they can make their relationship with their non-autistic child/children better.

### **Parent's Relationship with the Non-Autistic Child**

A parent's relationship with their non-autistic child is very important. Many couples who have a child with a disability, such as autism, are faced with a lot of choices. Not all of the choices are easy to make (Hartley, Mihaila, Otolara-Fadner, & Bussanich, 2014). The mothers tend to take on more of the childcare (e.g. making sure the children are dressed, cleaned, fed and

safe), whereas the fathers tend to take on aspects of the financial situation (e.g. working, making sure the bills are paid and that they have enough money for all the family's needs (Rivers and Stoneman, 2003). We can see that having a child with autism affects the parent's relationship, so it is only natural that it affects the parent's relationship with the other child/children too. Many children who have an autistic sibling are seen to show negative signs. For example the child may feel lonely or left out and some siblings even act out (Meadan, Halle, & Ebata, 2010). Karst et al., (2014) wrote how the research conducted to date looks at just the autistic child and ignores the broader family context. Therefore, it is necessary to look at all aspects of the family and how they are affected.

**Parent's Emotional Bond with the Non-Autistic Child.** The parent's bond with their non-autistic child can be compromised or damaged due to the amount of time and energy they have to spend on their autistic child (Houser, McCarthy, Lawer, & Mandell, 2014). Bengt (2002) talked about one woman who said that when one of her children got diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, her other child felt left out and ignored. The younger son felt like his parents only cared about his older autistic brother and did not care about him. Those types of feelings can definitely cause problems with the parent's emotional bond with their non-autistic child. Many children feel like their parents, especially their mother, loves their autistic sibling more, thus causing the non-autistic siblings to be unsatisfied with their relationship with their parents and feel distant from them (Houser, McCarthy et al., 2014). Many researchers like Rivers and Stoneman (2003) used self-report inventories and questionnaires to obtain their information. For instance, they recruited parent's and non-autistic children and got them to fill out questions on a questionnaire separately. This allowed the researchers to get different views and opinions on the family life.

Chan and Goh (2014) looks at the children who have autistic siblings and how it affects their relationship with their parents. They found that parent's with autistic children are more likely to have behavioural problems and emotional stress. The non-autistic sibling is usually referred to as the 'forgotten child' or 'shadow siblings'. Chan and Goh say that this is probably because the autistic child is usually paid more attention due to their difficult problems and complex needs. This means the siblings of the autistic child do not get so much attention and time with their parents. It is important that the non-autistic child/children knows that their parents love them but that their autistic sibling needs the extra attention and commitment.

One boy at the age of 12 writes how he feels like his mom does not like him so much as she does his autistic brother. He believes that he is closer to his dad and his autistic brother is closer to his mother (Chan & Goh, 2014). This may be because mothers are more oriented on childcare, which was previously discussed, and they will do whatever they can for their children (Rivers & Stoneman, 2003). So, when one of their children is born with something like autism, then the mother will be very protective and try and help her autistic child in any way she can.

**Amount of Time Parents Spend with their Non-Autistic Children.** Chan and Goh (2014) conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews, with both the autistic child's parents and siblings. It is important for researchers to keep in mind that when conducting these interviews, individuals may give answers that they think seem socially acceptable, this can cause the results to be biased. Chan and Goh interviewed both the parents and non-autistic siblings separately, so they did not have to feel pressure about answering the questions in a certain way, therefore these interviews are less biased. Chan and Goh (2014) talked about some specific cases of children and parents who know they do not get to spend enough time with each other due to their autistic child/sibling. During the interviews the children would often say that their parents do not pay so

much attention to them, or that they do not get so much time with them. Macks and Reeves (2007) also found that a lot of children who have autistic siblings tend to feel left out and ignored. Many non-autistic children understood that their parents needed to spend more time with their autistic sibling, but others were upset and wished their parents would spend more time with them. Mothers have also admitted to giving their autistic and non-autistic children different punishments when they misbehave. For example, they would be more careful and understanding for their autistic child. This also caused the non-autistic sibling to feel upset and even angry with their parents (Macks and Reeves, 2007).

### **Factors Affecting the Parent's Relationship with Non-Autistic Child**

We see that the parent's relationship with their non-autistic child is affected by having an autistic child, but there are also some factors that can influence the relationship for the better or worse. Macks and Reeves (2007) talk about families who have more than two children with at least one autistic child and how having more children is actually better on the non-autistic child. They say that this is because with bigger families parents do not put so much pressure (i.e. housework chores and high expectations) on the one sibling, they equal it out among each sibling. The parents also do not have such high expectations for the non-autistic children when there are more than one child. The non-autistic child will also have more siblings to talk and relate to.

Some other factors that affect the children and parent's relationship is the age of the non-autistic child. Macks and Reeves (2007) and (Cerbula, 2012) write how the older non-autistic children are more likely to have difficulty with their coping abilities, behaviour and emotions. The older siblings of the autistic child tended to get into more arguments with their parents due to their age and the way they handle their emotions.

The personality of the parent is another factor that can affect the parent's relationship with their non-autistic sibling (Cerbula, 2007). A child is able to pick up on their parents mood, so the happier the parents the happier the children. If a parent is always negative, angry and stressed the children will be able to tell. Therefore, the child will follow their parent's behaviours and become negative and stressed as well. A relationship will not be able to strengthen if both individuals involved are negative and stressed.

### **Methods to help better your parent/child relationship**

Having children can be very stressful and exhausting work, this stress and exhaustion tends to increase when a family has children with autism. It is good to learn and practice ways that one can cope with it all. One way a parent can improve their relationship with their child/children is participating in parent role splitting. Parent role splitting is when the parents will split up their time between their children. That way both the autistic child is being supervised and the non-autistic child/children is getting attention as well. Mothers are usually the main ones to look after the autistic child and the father would try and spend more time with the non-autistic children to try and make up for the lack of time the mother spends with them (Macks & Reeves 2007).

Another way parents can improve their relationship with their non-autistic child/children is spending one-on-one time with them. This is especially important for mothers who tend to devote a lot of time to their autistic child. So, a mother could make plans or schedule activities that involve just the non-autistic children (Macks & Reeves 2007). For example, some of the children in the interview talked about how their mothers would take them out and buy them some treats. This made the child feel special and loved. Devoting time to each child separately is something that families should do even if their children are not autistic.

Applied behaviour analysis (ABA) is a program that can be implemented for the autistic child and their families, by parents, teachers or therapists (Cerbula, 2012). ABA is a demanding home based intervention, it teaches children proper skills and behaviours that they can incorporate into their daily life. The ABA tends to increase the autistic child's intelligence, communication and behaviour. The program causes the autistic child to be happier, thus causing the rest of the family to be happier too. This is seen to benefit the autistic child and the family as a whole, including siblings if there are any. ABA is seen to make the relationships in the family easier and more relaxed. The parents reported that the siblings' relationships also improved from participating in the ABA program. Teachers and social workers reported that the siblings and parents improved considerably from the start of the ABA program. The siblings obtained more supports socially and the parents tended to be less stressed with daily activities.

### **Limitations**

With all the research that is conducted there are limitations and problems that will occur throughout the process. When doing research on autistic children and their families, you may come across many issues. For example, there may be some ethical problems or difficulties finding parents who will let their autistic child participate in the study.

Altieri and Kluge (2008) discuss how when you are doing a study on autistic children the sample size tends to be small. For the study they conducted the small sample size prevented their findings from being as accurate as they could have been. It is also important to keep in mind that there are other factors that can cause strain on a parent besides the autistic child. For example, how many children a family has, their financial situation, and whether or not they are a single parent (Altieri and Kluge, 2008). According to Potvin et al., (2015) the financial status of the parents played a big role in the results they obtained for their study. For instance, they found

that most of their volunteers had difficult financial backgrounds and this caused their stress to be higher. They said it would be a good idea to make sure you had families with various financial backgrounds.

For future research it will be good to look at not just other scholarly research, but to conduct interviews (with ethics approval) on families who have an autistic child. You will be able to obtain more accurate conclusions about the parent's relationship with their non-autistic child/children (Potvin et al., 2015). Even though all research may have some type of limitation it does not mean your research is not good. You should just make sure to state in your paper any limitations that you may have experienced. That way people who wish to replicate your study will be aware of the limitations they may face.

### **Conclusion**

Children who have autistic siblings may feel lonely and left out sometimes, but they can still be pretty understanding of the situation and that their autistic sibling needs more attention (Cham and Goh, 2014). Therefore, a parent's relationship with their non-autistic child will be affected, but it may not always be in a bad way. For instance, sometimes the non-autistic sibling may learn to be more understanding and appreciative of the time they do get to spend with their parents. Sometimes having an autistic child causes the parent's relationship with the other children to be strained, causing the non-autistic siblings to be depressed from the lack of attention from their parents (Cebula, 2012).

We can also gather from previous literature that a mother is the one who cares for the children more and tries to make time for each child, even though she is usually preoccupied with her autistic child a lot of the time. Chan and Goh (2014) found that a family who has an autistic child creates problems for the family and causes strains and extra pressure.

Understanding autism and the effects it can have on a family system is very important. Research on autism is very important and useful to the Autism society (Potvin et al., 2015). It is helpful for social workers, for instance, to know about the effects of having a child with autism on the parent's relationship with their other children. The social workers are able to work with the families and help make their lives better. Bingt (2002) write how useful it is to learn about the coping methods that will help strengthen your family structure when you have a child with autism. Also you never know when you or someone you know is going to have a child with autism, so it always good to know about the disorder, how it affects your family life and what you can do to make the relationship with all family members better.

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