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The Importance of Familial Relationships in Traversing the Autism Journey

BY ANGELA WEST

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that can affect social communication and behaviors. ASD is considered a “spectrum” disorder because it can involve a range of symptoms that can vary in severity, presentation and impact on one’s daily life.

When a child is diagnosed with ASD, it is the beginning of a journey that can affect the entire family unit. Family, sibling and parental/caregiver relationships are all essential in navigating this diagnosis and building stronger foundations for everyone to thrive and grow through the process. While parents may want to protect their child and siblings from changes, it is crucial to involve and educate the whole family about ASD.

What are some tips for parents?

If you are a parent of a child with ASD, it can be a challenging time that requires some adjustments and rethinking of familial relationships. It is important to acknowledge and address the specialized needs and therapies required by your child and involve the whole family. Here are some tips to help:

- Educate yourself about ASD and its implications for your family. Share age-appropriate information with siblings so that they can better understand their sibling’s needs and how to be supportive. It is important to educate them without making excuses for their sibling’s behavior. Understanding the disorder can help them become more compassionate and understanding when extra attention is needed.
- Talk about ASD. Be open in your discussions and provide a “safe space” for everyone to ask questions and to express their feelings. Encouraging these open discussions is healthy and creates a strong and safe bond between the different relationships in the household.
- Don’t isolate the diagnosis from the family; instead, incorporate it into your daily routines. Being thoughtful and respectful of changes that can be made to accommodate your child with ASD will benefit the whole family. For example, if your child has sensory issues and other siblings want to attend an event that may be difficult for your child with ASD to manage, consider making arrangements to



accommodate the other children.

- Acknowledge the importance of siblings through this journey. Praise your children for being helpers to the family and their sibling with ASD. Let them know that their patience is appreciated and understood. It is vital that while acknowledging and praising your child, you don’t “expect” too much or place too heavy a burden on the sibling. Although siblings of children with ASD may not have the same cognitive or behavioral challenges, they have their own set of unique needs and require individual support and guidance. It is important to balance praising your child for their support and patience while ensuring they don’t feel pressured to act as another caregiver. Remember, they are the sibling, and their relationship and support differ from the parent/caregiver role. Siblings often thrive as helpers to siblings and caregivers, but it’s important to be sure that they have the opportunity to enjoy their own childhood and share the same experiences and opportunities as their peers.
- Set aside special time for the sibling in the relationship to enjoy one-on-one time with you. While sibling relationships are a great benefit to children with ASD, siblings also need to experience their own childhood moments in addition to that sibling bond.

Being a parent of a child with ASD requires some adjustments, but incorporating these tips can help strengthen familial relationships and support your child’s growth and development.

What is the significance of sibling relationships in a household influenced by autism?

Although having a sibling with autism can be challenging due to their specialized needs and the attention they may require, the bond between siblings is unique and can benefit both children in many ways:

- For children with ASD, their sibling may be their first friend and offer acceptance and understanding within peer groups. This relationship can help the child with ASD grow and develop in their social skills, peer interaction and language skills.
- Children diagnosed with ASD can learn and develop by interacting with their siblings. Observing and mimicking their siblings’ behaviors can help them improve their social, language and motor skills.
- Involving siblings in ASD therapies can be beneficial for both the diagnosed child and their siblings. It can provide learning opportunities for siblings to become confident, compassionate, caring and respectful individuals.

Building strong and supportive relationships within the family and community is crucial in navigating the autism journey with a child with ASD. Sibling relationships can play a significant role in supporting the child’s development and strengthening familial bonds.

Connecting with a local autism support organization in your area can also provide valuable resources and encouragement. Many organizations offer fun and engaging activities for the whole family, such as virtual scavenger hunts, movie days and other events. Participating in these activities can be a great way to connect with other families affected by autism and to build a supportive community. ■

Angela West, M.S., BCBA, LBA, Founder and Chief Clinical Officer of Behavioral Framework, is Board Certified and Licensed as a Behavior Analyst in Virginia and Maryland. With over 15 years of mental health and ABA experience, Angela has diverse programming and behavior management knowledge. Angela has a long history of developing and expanding ABA programs in both Maryland and Northern Virginia.