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Understanding Autism Spectrum

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Sharing a Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum with Siblings

Podcast 4

Welcome to my podcast. I'm Anna Tullemans bringing you information, support and tips on all aspects of Autism Spectrum.

Today's podcast is part 4 of a series of podcasts on how to share a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum. Today we will be discussing sharing the diagnosis with siblings and further individual podcasts deal with sharing with the child, family and friends and grandparents.

You will find more information in my book "Disclosing the Diagnosis" which is available on my website: www.annatulleman.com.au . Each chapter gives specific ideas and encouragement on how to approach the topic of diagnosis and how to explain it in language that people will understand. It includes chapters for grandparents, siblings, extended family members and the wider community such as schools.

Remember that the following is just a starting point to give you ideas. It is not definitive by any means. You need to look at what approach will work best for you and your family. You know your child best so follow your instincts and it will be the right way for you.

There are four reasons that siblings need to know about a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum.

1. They need to know why the child with the diagnosis displays behaviours and why they sometimes get away with the behaviour
2. So they can explain the diagnosis to their friends
3. Why some friendships may fail when they have a sibling with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum
4. To understand their own emotional needs and the needs of the of the child with the diagnosis

How you explain a diagnosis will be different depending on the age of the sibling. We need to make sure that we use language that the sibling understands and use examples that they see happening in their everyday life. I'll explain more of this as we go along.

It's important that start explaining Autism Spectrum as soon as you think the sibling can understand and that you include information such as "You can't catch Autism Spectrum". The



sooner the sibling understands the sooner they can make adjustments to their own behaviour that will be beneficial for the child with the diagnosis and for the sibling themselves.

How to give explanations:

Young children:

Give clear short explanations such as:

- *Sammy finds it hard to play sometimes, or Sammy finds it had to pretend play with toys like you do*

4 – 6 yr olds

Use the same kind of words as previously but add more to the explanation:

- *“Sometimes Joshua likes to line up his toys instead of playing with them like you do. This is his way of playing”*

6 – 9 yr olds

This group is more able to understand the more abstract meaning of a diagnosis so you could say:

- *“John finds it hard to understand how you might feel when he takes your ball. This is because he has Autism Spectrum...”*

This group may also have questions that need answers so make sure you understand the information that you are going to give.

Adolescents

This group will understand more detailed verbal and written information about Autism Spectrum.

Talk about the specific behaviours that they see displayed by their brother or sister. They need very specific information on strategies to deal with the behaviour of their sibling.

- *“Tom talks about his favourite subject everyday. It’s part of having Autism Spectrum. When he starts to talk about his favourite subject you can tell him that he has five minutes to talk and then you need to talk back to him”*



Some ideas to try to explain the diagnosis:

- Explain the special requirements in a way that has meaning for the sibling
- Tell them they can't catch Autism Spectrum
- Explain some of the strategies that you are going to use to help the child with AS and explain how they can use them too
- Praise them when they do use these strategies
- Give siblings a chance to talk about how they feel, and give them a chance to express and accept those feelings. They need to be acknowledged and validated
- Give the sibling coping strategies to deal with situations that arise at home or in shopping centres
- Suggest ideas for explaining the diagnosis to their friends
 - Give the diagnosis a name
 - Give them the words and sentences to describe the difficulties
 - Give them words to describe how others can be helpful to the child with the diagnosis
- Give siblings a private place where they can retreat to and some time out space where they are safe
- Explain to the sibling that you may need to spend extra time with the child but that that doesn't mean you love them less
- Find time for extra individual activities for the sibling, but not so many that they feel like you are trying to get rid of them
- Give them a chance to meet others who are in the same boat
- Remember that siblings don't have to do everything together

Help siblings understand the meaning of the diagnosis and teach them how to have some good times with their brother or sister. Make sure that you set up situations where the interactions are going to be positive for both the sibling and the child with the diagnosis. If you don't discuss the diagnosis with the siblings they may feel isolated and not part of the solution. Keep the conversation going in regards to new approaches or other fun ways to interact with each other.

As a parent try to be fair and manage any negative feelings by allowing the sibling to talk to you when they are mad. Always acknowledge and validate how they feel. It's ok to have these feelings and to express them. If it is very difficult to manage the siblings feelings then I suggest that you seek professional help. It can turn those negative feelings into a wonderful bond for the siblings. Look for ways that the whole family can have fun and play and interact together.

When it comes to jobs around the home set reasonable and achievable goals and personal responsibilities for both the child with AS and their siblings. Siblings can very quick to judge any unfair treatment and will voice their feelings.



Here are ideas on how to support the sibling

- Find time each day to do something together. More quality time in short bursts may work better
- Encourage your child to have an interest, hobby or sport away from their sibling
- Encourage your child to invite friends to your home for a visit. This is a good way to help their friends get to understand the child with the diagnosis and also to understand why the sibling needs to do or say certain things when they are together
- Give the sibling time and space to talk to you about any issues that arise: don't brush them aside
- Have a laugh and find humour with your child even on the tough days

How you view and talk about the diagnosis can be a source of strength to other family members. Use positive language and model the behaviour that you want the siblings to use.

You may feel overwhelmed but always listen carefully to the siblings concerns and feelings. They can become their siblings greatest ally when out in the real world.

Well I hope you have enjoyed this podcast on **sharing the diagnosis with siblings**. This is number 4 in a series of sharing the diagnosis with the child, grandparents, siblings, extended family, and friends.

If you would like more detailed information on this topic or to purchase a copy of my book "Disclosing the Diagnosis", you can go to my website: annatullemans.com.au

Thank you for listening and we'll see you next time.

