

Factors Contributing to Sibling Relationship Quality when a Child has Autism Spectrum Disorder



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Abstract

For children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), sibling relationships can be their primary peer influences. The connections and tensions in sibling relationship may impact the development, well-being and life quality that children with ASD and their typically developing (TD) siblings experience. Similarly, caregivers contribute significantly to the family's functioning and parenting style and parental stress are two factors that impact a caregiver's ability to effectively foster positive relationships.

Finally, the interplay between sibling relationships, caregiver characteristics, sibling involvement in intervention, and success in ASD intervention is of interest. The integrated use of parenting habits and positive sibling relationships in promoting greater caregiver-perceived success in ASD intervention is worth evaluating and enhancing. Primary caregivers ($N = 108$) completed an online questionnaire and a hierarchical multiple regression was conducted. Results indicated: 1) Parenting stress explains 12% of the variance found in the warmth and closeness of sibling relationships; 2) Sibling involvement and success in ASD intervention cumulatively contributes to 13.5% of the variance found in the warmth and closeness of sibling relationships; and 3) warmth and closeness uniquely explains 7% of the variance of success in ASD intervention. Limitations, practical implications, and future research direction will be discussed

Purpose

•When a caregiver is able to demonstrate, promote, and encourage positive sibling relationships, the primary peer relationships of the children can be seen as positive and nurturing rather than tumultuous and discouraging. When ASD is present in a family unit, how does a caregiver's well-being impact the development of positive sibling relationships? Are there specific parenting traits that can encourage healthy relationships? If so, how does the relationship impact the success of the child with ASD in his or her journey through ASD interventions?

•Using a positive psychology philosophy and a constructivist paradigm, the author hopes to offer helpful suggestions to both caregivers and professionals regarding promotion of healthy family relationships and situations in the presence of ASD.



Method

• Participants:

- Primary caregivers of, at least, one child formally diagnosed with ASD and one typically developing child, with access to the internet to complete the online questionnaire.
- $N = 108$

• Materials *All psychometrically validated for this sample

- Sibling Relationship Questionnaire – Revised (Parent; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) – **Warm/Close**
- Parental Authority Questionnaire – Revised (Reitman et al., 2002) – **A1=Authoritarian Parenting Style**
- Parenting Stress Index – Short Form (Abidin, 1983) – **TPS=Total Parenting Stress**
- Novel Instruments
 - Sibling Involvement in ASD Intervention Questionnaire – **TSI=Total Sibling Involvement**
 - Success in ASD Intervention Questionnaire – **TAS=Total ASD Success**

• Procedure

- Online questionnaire using Survey Monkey
- Strategic Sampling using Anglophone Canadian Facebook groups and ASD relevant websites

Results

• Hypothesis 1 - H₀ → A1 and TPS do not explain Warm/Close

- A1 does not significantly contribute to predicting Warm/Close, $F(1, 106) = .226, p = .636$.
- TPS uniquely explained 11.5% of the variance found in Warmth and Closeness of sibling relationships, $F(1, 106) = 13.72, p < .01$.

• Hypothesis 2 - H₀ → TSI and TAS do not explain Warm/Close

- TAS uniquely explains 7.1% of the variance in the Warm/Close variable, $F(1, 106) = 8.11, p = .005$.
- TSI contributes an additional 6.4%, $F(1, 105) = 8.17, p = .001$.
- TAS and TSI contribute 13.5% of the variance of the Warm/Close variable.

• Hypothesis 3 - H₀ → A2, TSI, and Warm/Close do not explain TAS

- A2 and TSI do not significantly contribute to explaining TAS.
- Warm/Close significantly explains 7.2% of the variance of the TAS variable, $F(1, 104) = 2.994, p = .005$.

Implications for Counsellors

Relevance of family-focused interventions for families in the presence of ASD and/or inclusion of family members and member-specific counselling strategies when working with children with ASD.

- Firstly, providing caregivers information on the impact of stress on the sibling relationship and the overall family functioning is recommended.
- Second, involving TD siblings in your direct intervention with children with ASD would have two positive implications.
 - This involvement would strengthen the relationship between the children within the family.
 - The indirect positive impact on the success in ASD intervention could be a result.
- Third, dedication, by practitioners, to the promotion of healthy sibling relationships is highly valued and positive outcomes are evidenced by the current study.
- Finally, despite the lack of statistical evidence for the impact of parenting style on the sibling relationship, the author can recommend with certainty that addressing parenting practices is essential when conducting a family-focused ASD intervention.

Future Research Direction

1. More thorough evaluation of the sibling dyad in the presence of ASD is necessary.
2. Improving the SRQ for using in the presence of ASD is necessary.
3. Further research into the different parenting styles adopted by caregivers of children with ASD needs to be conducted in order to determine the appropriateness of the PAQ with this population.
4. Research evaluating the impact of sibling involvement on the ASD intervention, the sibling relationship, and the outcomes of the intervention is recommended.
5. Finally, extending research into family-focused ASD intervention strategies is highly recommended. Children do not develop, struggle, grow, and adapt in a vacuum. Interpersonal relationships are ever-present, even when the child is unable to recognize them or communicate with them. It is, therefore, safe to say that formal interventions should not happen in a therapeutic "vacuum". The author hopes to formally research the implications of this recommendation.

