

# Five Tips for Brothers and Sisters

As a result of her work with many families who deal so gracefully with the challenges of autism, family therapist Kathryn Smerling, Ph.D., offers five tips for siblings, that originally appeared in the Autism Speaks 100 Day Kit:

- 1. Remember that you are not alone!** Every family is confronted with life's challenges... and yes, autism is challenging...but, if you look closely, nearly everyone has something difficult to face in their families.
- 2. Be proud of your brother or sister.** Learn to talk about autism and be open and comfortable describing the disorder to others. If you are comfortable with the topic...they will be comfortable too. If you are embarrassed by your brother or sister, your friends will sense this and it will make it awkward for them. If you talk openly to your friends about autism, they will become comfortable. But, like everyone else, sometimes you will love your brother or sister and sometimes you may not like him or her. It's okay to feel your feelings. And often it's easier when you have a professional counselor to help you understand them – someone special who is here just for you! Love your brother or sister the way he or she is!
- 3. While it is okay to be sad that you have a brother or sister affected by autism, it doesn't help to be upset** and angry for extended periods of time. Your anger doesn't change the situation; it only makes you unhappier. Remember your Mom and Dad may have those feelings too.
- 4. Spend time with your parents alone.** Doing things together as a family with and without your brother or sister strengthens your family bond. It's okay for you to want alone time. Having a family member with autism can often be very time-



consuming and attention-grabbing. You need to feel important too. Remember, even if your brother or sister didn't have autism, you would still need alone time with Mom and Dad.

- 5. Find an activity you can do with your brother or sister.** You will find it rewarding to connect with your brother or sister, even if it is just putting a simple puzzle together. No matter how impaired he or she may be, doing something together creates a closeness. Your brother or sister will look forward to these shared activities and greet you with a special smile.

# Five Things Siblings of Someone with Autism Want You to Know

*Being a sibling to someone with autism is a unique experience that can be difficult for other people to understand. In the essay below, Marissa Hacker, whose twin brother Matthew has autism, shares from her perspective what siblings like you may want other people to know. Marissa started **Fantastic Friends**, an organization that teaches people with autism the value of friendship, like Matthew. It might be helpful to write your own list, or share some of these with people in your life you think might want to learn more about what you are going through.*

## This is what I want people to know about having a sibling who is on the autism spectrum...

### **1) My sibling is my best friend and knows EVERYTHING about me.**

That's right, folks. You may not think they are listening, but OH BOY, are they listening! I was chatting with my mom the other day about how I felt emotional about certain things that I have been through. Supposedly, my brother was in the other room taking a nap. Right after these words left my lips, a very concerned Matthew dashed into our living room pouring out the words, "Marissa, why are you unstable and have you been unstable your whole life?" Yea, that's my brother for you! He knows everything and anything about me.

So next time you tell us something, you better believe that our siblings will know and find out (somehow) too!

### **2) Treat our siblings like you treat everyone else.**

This is so extremely important! It doesn't matter if our siblings stim, rock back and forth, script from movies, etc.! That is just how they are. Accept it, y'all.

This is a sibling hot button. Please talk to our siblings just like you talk to us, and don't baby our siblings, either. If my brother wants to talk about Disney movies, heck, you better tell him your favorite Little Mermaid character. Go with it :)

### **3) We have our own identity.**

"I LOVE and adore your brother. He is so cute and funny and amazing and smart and charming!" "I saw the picture of you and your brother on Facebook, you guys are SO CUTE!" "You're such an amazing sister! I bet your brother can't live without you."



Thank you, thank you, seriously everyone, thank you! You're compliments really do mean a lot to us and make us feel like the superhero siblings that we are destined to be. However, it is important to remember that siblings lead their own lives and have their own personal identity. As much as we adore our special needs brothers and sisters, we also like to just have "us" talk. Once in a while, talk to us about things we like, such as activities we are into, our favorite movies and of course, other fun things that make our world go round.

Make us feel like we have our own personal identity, in addition to having the "super sibling" identity.

### **4) Accept and understand my sibling, don't judge.**

We all want our siblings to feel loved, accepted and included. As a sibling, it can be INCREDIBLY frustrating when people don't understand or don't try to understand how my sibling feels.

The quote is so true: "Don't judge unless you have walked a mile in his shoes." If our siblings are having a bad day, such as having a meltdown or acting unusually, please don't judge the person, their sibling or their parents for the behavior. Please people. You don't live with autism 24/7 and you see my sibling on a very limited basis. You have no clue how my sibling behaves in other settings. Plus, we all have bad days. Who am I to take a life analysis on you and your bad days?

So please don't judge, jump to conclusions or blame family members for behavior. We are here to celebrate all of our siblings and their incredible talents and uniqueness.

### **5) Siblings have a sharp "hurt" radar.**

Since birth, I have always protected my brother. I am his big (well, older by 1 minute) twin sister and I will ALWAYS protect him. In school, people were mean to Matthew and used to make fun of him. When I would find out, I would ask him who did it, and the next day I would immediately confront them in a nice way.

Together we will always stand up for our special needs siblings and try to make the world more accepting and understanding place for them.