

FAMILY, PARTNERS AND LIFE ADMIN · 10.5

Siblings of Neurodivergent Children: What They Need Too

The sibling of a neurodivergent child is the most often-overlooked person in the family system. Their experience is real, distinctive, and usually not what the assumptions predict.

FOR

Parents and carers

AUDIENCE AGE

6-17

REVIEWED

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PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

IN SUMMARY

Siblings of Neurodivergent Children: What They Need Too

What the evidence actually shows

- **The picture is mixed, not uniformly negative.** Studies of siblings of autistic and ADHD children show adjustment that varies more with family factors (parental attention, social support, income) than with the diagnosis itself.
- **Some flourish; many do fine; a minority struggle.** Siblings are at somewhat elevated risk of internalising difficulties (anxiety, hidden grief), but the effect is moderate and modifiable. The "burdened sibling" framing has not aged well.
- **The "non-disabled" sibling is often also neurodivergent.** ADHD and autism run strongly in families. A sibling showing persistent difficulty is worth thinking about clinically, not only as a family-systems issue.

What siblings often experience

- **The "good child" pattern.** Becoming the responsible, easy, low-load child often looks like good adjustment from the outside and is exhausting from the inside. The cost shows up later.
- **Hidden grief.** Siblings sometimes grieve the relationship they thought they would have. This is real, ordinary, and rarely spoken aloud.
- **Alternating embarrassment and protectiveness.** Most siblings describe both, sometimes within the same hour. Permission to feel both is part of the support they need.
- **Quiet worry about the future.** Older siblings often carry questions about who will care for their brother or sister when the parents are gone. They rarely raise it; they are usually relieved when parents do.
- **A specific kind of social load.** Friends ask questions. Sleepovers can be harder. The sibling becomes an explainer to peers about a sibling they did not choose to explain.

How we can help

- **Use Sibs UK and patient-org support.** Sibs UK runs services specifically for siblings of disabled children. Many local areas have sibling support groups. The "I'm not the only one" recognition is often the most powerful single intervention.
- **GP for persistent distress.** Speak to your GP if a sibling shows persistent low mood, anxiety or school avoidance lasting more than a few weeks. School pastoral leads and counsellors are often a useful first step.
- **Investigate where the sibling profile fits.** If the sibling shows a recognisable neurodivergent profile, a paediatric assessment via the GP route, or private assessment via NeuroFX, is the route to clinical clarity. Don't wait for a crisis.

WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

Speak to your GP if a sibling is showing persistent low mood, anxiety, school avoidance, social withdrawal, or other signs of distress lasting more than a few weeks. School pastoral leads and school counsellors are often a useful first step. Sibs UK can connect families to sibling-specific support groups. If the sibling is showing a recognisable neurodivergent profile of their own, a paediatric assessment via the GP route, or private assessment via a CQC-registered provider like NeuroFX, is the route to clinical clarity.

SOURCES

Macks & Reeve 2007; Hastings 2003; Faraone consensus 2021; Sibs UK; NAS

NEXT STEPS**Speak to NeuroFX**

Private ADHD and autism assessment for adults and children aged 6 and upwards.
CQC-registered. Bedford Consulting Rooms, 4 Goldington Road, Bedford MK40 3NF.

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