

Book Review

Title: *Siblings of Children with Autism: A Guide for Families* (2nd Edition)

Author: Sandra L. Harris & Beth A. Glasberg

Publisher: Woodbine House, 2003

Paper, ISBN: 1-890627-29-1, 180 pp.

Cost: \$16.95 USD

Reviewer: Rhonda S. Black

Siblings of Children with Autism: A Guide for Families provides insights into the cognitive and emotional world of siblings who have a brother or sister with autism. The text discusses issues across the lifespan, starting with early childhood, moving through middle childhood and adolescence, and finally addressing issues for adult siblings. Text boxes and tables are included throughout. One text box, titled "Telling Your Child About Autism," gives simple explanations for youngsters in early and middle childhood. Examples such as "you can't catch autism" and "it is nobody's fault" fall under what to say in early childhood. "It causes problems with talking, playing, understanding other people's feelings" and "people with autism can learn, but it takes a lot of work" are examples of what to say to siblings in middle childhood. The authors also discuss sibling bonds which change over time and may not be as strong between children who are widely separated in age or who have spent relatively little time together. This bonding pattern may be common for siblings where one child experiences autism. The authors skillfully remind readers that strong bonds are not always happy ones. Intense sibling bonds "can be warm and loving, but also can be negative and tension filled" (p. 9).

While the authors have impressive research credentials, they manage to leave the language of professional journals behind to provide an accessible guidebook for parents struggling to address often overlooked needs of *siblings* of children with autism. They have created a reader-friendly text without using jargon or lengthy technical explanations. For a topic as perplexing as autism, they excel not only at describing autism spectrum disorders in plain language, but also in explaining how to convey that information to siblings.

The text recommends keeping explanations about autism simple and truthful, easing fears, understanding and dealing with sibling emotions (especially jealousy), keeping children safe from explosive behavior, and not expecting siblings to assume too many caregiving responsibilities. Two chapters are devoted to ways to help children share their feelings and a discussion of barriers to communication. Another chapter explained how to help children play together with recommendations such as giving clear instructions (and teaching siblings how to do the same) modeling play skills, teaching siblings to use behavioral techniques and the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), and selecting appropriate activities siblings can share.

A “Parents Speak” section, using direct quotes from parents to illustrate the chapter’s topic, is offered at the end of all but one chapter. This adds to the accessibility and relevance of the text for an audience of parents. I speculate few parents would feel “alone” after reading these sections. Another section of the book talks about support groups for parents and siblings, and the importance of drawing on both informal and formal support networks.

An especially pertinent table identifies “Professionals Who May Be Able to Help.” Professionals, including psychiatrists, clinical and educational psychologists, special education teachers, behavior analysts, and family therapists are all described and explained according to their educational backgrounds, roles they may play, and services they may provide. This information can be invaluable to families who may be caught in a maze of human services organizations providing different, but related, kinds of assistance. At the end of the book, a section of resources/organizations for parents is provided. The authors convey a message that help is out there, so don't be afraid to ask.

Case studies offered throughout *Siblings of Children with Autism*, make the text more concrete and personal. For example, a case study early in the book portrays Kevin, who secretly resented his younger brother Mitch. Kevin confessed to a friend that he thought his parents loved Mitch much more than they loved him. Kevin then expressed he knew Mitch had autism but did that mean every little thing Mitch did was great, or that he should be able to get away with anything he wanted? Kevin felt he was treated unfairly, and had to be perfect at “everything” to make up for what Mitch could not do. The next-door-neighbor overheard the boys talking and informed Kevin’s mother who had not realized he felt that way. Some of Kevin's outbursts and uncooperativeness now made sense to her. This case example demonstrates one of the most common issues for siblings of children with autism—doubt about one’s importance in the family when parents appear preoccupied with the child with autism. Similar case examples occur throughout the book to illustrate other issues facing siblings of children with autism.

In summary, quotes from parents and siblings, easy-to-read text boxes and bullet lists, and pictures and case studies provided throughout are invaluable in making this a family-friendly text. I thought this book well worth the price.