

Handout 4— Explaining autism spectrum disorders to siblings

Having a sibling with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be challenging for siblings. Some may wonder why their sibling is different. Others may just accept these differences and not make a big deal out of them. From an early age, it is helpful for siblings to understand what ASD is and how it affects their brother or sister with ASD. This can also help them to find the words to explain it to their friends, if friends ask questions. Having common language that your family uses to understand and communicate about ASD can be helpful.

Here are a few tips on how to do this:

- **Early and often.** Talking to siblings about ASD on a regular basis can help them understand their brother or sister. Start early, using words that siblings can understand. Demystify the symptoms of ASD in your child with ASD and help siblings learn how to develop a good relationship.
- **Age appropriate.** Explanations of ASD should be relative to the age of the child. A very young sibling will not understand a comprehensive explanation of possible genetic causes of ASD. Yet, they will wonder if they can catch it, and how they can play with their sibling the best way will be important to them. Teenage siblings will be more ready for more in-depth explanations.
- **Explanations will change.** Additional information and explanations may change as siblings get older. The basic point that your child with ASD has differences and that everyone has something different about them may stay the same. As children get older, they can understand more about ASD in relation to the world.
- **Ask siblings.** Siblings may have concerns or questions. Involve them in the discussion, asking for their opinion and finding out what their understanding of their brother or sister with ASD is. Children will surprise you with their insight and ability to accept and understand.
- **Understanding special qualities.** Explaining ASD to siblings is not about making your child with ASD appear different or challenged. It's about helping the sibling to understand the unique qualities of ASD in order to enhance their relationship with their sister or brother. All children, all people, have unique characteristics that make them special. Understanding what each brings to the other's life is important.