

Communication between Children with ASD and their Typically Developing Siblings

June 06, 2019

by Monica Gordon-Pershey

ASD, communication, families

[Comments are off](#)

Siblings grow up alongside one another and provide each other with friendship and support. Brothers and sisters bond in special ways that are distinct to siblings. According to some past research, siblings' influences on children's social development are sometimes stronger than parental influences and are as strong as peer influences.

Because children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) might need support and guidance to learn how to communicate and interact with others, parents of children with ASD may specifically encourage their typically developing children to provide models of communication and social interaction skills for their siblings with ASD. Adults may assume that typically developing siblings will make good teachers, but my colleague and I thought that it would be necessary to conduct a research study to document exactly how a sample of typically developing siblings provide models and teach their siblings with ASD.

In our research study, we explored sibling pairs where one sibling has ASD and the other child does not. We attempted to discover whether the typically developing children initiated, led, and modeled communication behaviors and if the children with ASD responded. We looked for positive communicative behaviors (such as sharing, cooperating, requesting, praising, comforting, physical affection, laughing, and smiling) as well as the common sibling communicative behaviors that could be more negative or troublesome (as in difficulty sharing, not cooperating, or teasing).

Six families with children ages 4 to 15 years permitted my colleague to conduct one 45-minute home visit while the siblings were going about their normal daily activities, followed by a 20-minute interview with the typically developing children and then a 25-minute interview with the parent(s). During the visit, the children played with toys, board games, or video games, or did homework, snacked, watched TV or iPad videos, drew, read together, played the piano, jumped on a trampoline, played "tag," or did whatever they liked while the visitor remained nearby to observe and take notes about the children's communicative behaviors. At least one parent was in the house, but the parents did not tell the children how to act. Of the six children with ASD, one child exhibited no functional language, one child spoke in single words, and four children spoke in sentences. Three of the children with ASD were younger than their siblings, and three were older.

The home visits resulted in a substantial database of communicative behaviors. The total number of communicative behaviors produced by all of the typically developing siblings taken together was 586, and the total number of communicative behaviors exhibited by all of the siblings with ASD was 594. Thus, the grand total was 1,180 behaviors. We identified 38 specific types of communicative behaviors and we sorted each of the 1,180 behaviors into these 38 categories.

The most frequently occurring communicative behavior exhibited by the typically developing siblings was to regulate the actions of their sibling with ASD by giving directions or telling them what to do, with 130 occurrences. This represented 22.18% of their total behaviors. Examples of giving directions were, "Don't let go until I'm done. Put your hands together," "Jump," "Come on. Keep reading," "Keep nice hands," "Last turn." Interestingly, the children with ASD did not tell their siblings what to do, not even once. The most frequently occurring communicative behavior exhibited by the siblings with ASD was to answer in a positive way, with 123 occurrences (19.90% of their total behaviors). The typically developing children also answered in a positive way, 42 times (7.17% of their behaviors), as in "You're doing so well." Other categories of behaviors occurred as about 1% to 15% of the demonstrated behaviors for all of the children; for example, asking questions, guiding the sibling's hands, teasing, and comforting.

My colleague interviewed the typically developing children by asking 17 short questions. The children said that they and their siblings with ASD play mostly physically: playing catch, chasing, wrestling, and on swings; or sitting with iPads, videos, and television, along with some pretend play, reading, and drawing. They don't play together for long periods of time and may not play together every day, and their siblings with ASD like to be alone. They mentioned that their siblings don't understand board games, video games, sports, or games where children interact. All of the children stated that they know that ASD is a problem with how the brain works and that people with ASD cannot speak and communicate well. They want their siblings to be treated like everyone else.

Parents responded to eight interview questions. They expressed that they explained to their typically developing children that ASD is a problem where children have difficulty communicating. They described the child with ASD as different, but not "less," and told their typically developing children to be understanding, patient, and kind, and to love their sibling "the way he is" and that "It's no one's fault." Parents said there was no specific time when they spoke to their children about ASD. Some told their children as soon as the diagnosis was made, but others explained the ASD over time, as the children perceived differences or concerns. Parents all answered their children's questions and dealt with problems as they arose. Some stated that tutors and therapists spoke to their children. Some used educational videos. Parents stated that their typically developing children needed time to understand ASD and continued to ask questions about what is wrong and why their siblings do not get better, and showed anger and frustration. Some children had misconceptions about ASD, such as thinking of ASD as being an illness or as being something that the child with ASD could try to change. All of the parents stated their typically developing children show tolerance, protectiveness, patience, and parent-like behaviors. They also stated that their children did not spend a lot of time playing together, but that they got along when they did, and that their play during the observation was how they usually play.

In summary, we discovered that the time that siblings spend together can offer powerful opportunities for the child with ASD to learn about communication and interaction. Within each family, hundreds of communicative interactions occurred in just a 45-minute block of time, and most of the time the typically developing children were being assertive and directive and were teaching their siblings. If the observations made here would be true of other children, then typically developing children have countless opportunities each day to lead, initiate, and model, and they do so quite naturally.

Next, we learned from the parent interviews that typically developing children need to have knowledge about ASD. They need to understand what having ASD feels like for their sibling. How parents teach their typically developing children about ASD is unique for every family, but we learned here that truthfulness is an important component that could reconcile some misconceptions, frustrations, or unease.

Source

Monica Gordon-Pershey, Ed.D., CCC-SLP, Cleveland State University.



About the Author

Dr. Gordon Pershey is an Associate Professor in the Speech and Hearing Program, Department of Health Sciences, Cleveland State University, and serves as the Speech and Hearing Program Director. She earned a bachelor's degree in Communications from Cleveland State University, a Master's degree in Communication Sciences and Disorders/Speech-Language Pathology from Montclair State College, and a Doctor of Education degree in Language Arts and Literacy Instruction from the University of Massachusetts-Lowell. Dr. Gordon Pershey has been a faculty member at Cleveland State University since 1995, during which time she has obtained approximately \$100,000 in grants to fund her research and scholarship. Dr. Gordon Pershey is licensed by the state of Ohio as a speech-language pathologist and holds a Certificate of Clinical Competence from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. She is also a licensed school speech-language pathologist and reading teacher.

Social Share



The Orange Effect Foundation

17040 Amber Drive
Cleveland, OH 44111
info@theorangeeffect.org

Donate Now

Donate



Receive Our Monthly Newsletter

First Name:

Last Name:

Email address:

Your email address

Sign up

