



Sibling Relationship in Children with Autism: Perspectives of Siblings of Children with Autism

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Abstract

Received: 20 Dec 2017
Revised: 27 Dec 2017
Accepted: 30 Dec 2017

Keywords:

Autism, Perspectives
Relationship, Siblings.

The aim of the present study was to explore sibling relationship in children with autism. 15 siblings of children with children with autism were considered for the study. 8 of the 15 siblings (5 girls and 3 boys) were elder to the children with autism and their mean age was around 12.2 years. The remaining 7 children (4 boys and 3 girls) were younger siblings of children with autism and their mean age was 11.3 years. Questionnaire comprising of 42 questions reflecting 7 areas like stimulation, play, attention conflict of relationship etc. was administered on these children. The findings obtained in the current study depicted the fact that the siblings showed less empathy, care, concern and have conflicts in their relationship with their sibling with autism

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Autism is a neuro-developmental disorder which is characterized by impairments in several domains. Autism is a single disorder consisting of broad range of characteristics; hence it's referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorder. It is a complex neurobehavioral condition in which there is major impairment seen in social interaction, language and communication skills and emotional skills. The onset of autism is in the early childhood and most of the symptoms are manifested before the age of three. Children with autism demonstrate difficulties on social domain like lack responsiveness to people, difficulty in initiating and sustaining conversations, apparent aloofness and lack of empathy, They also exhibit deficits on behavioural domain, which includes behaviours such as impulsivity, stereotypical behaviour, resistance to change in environment, absence of pretend play and temper tantrums are observed and under the domain of communication, there is delay in speech and language skills, echolalia and idiosyncratic use of words and phrases are the main characteristics which are not intact in an individual with Autism.

As there are significant issues seen in the social aspect of an individual with autism, there will be some amount of hindrance present in the relationship with the individual's sibling. In terms of longevity sibling relationship is considered to last longer. Sibling relationship is known to enable nurturance. Every sibling starts off as a play partner and eventually ends up as a supporter. The sibling relationship is known to have a stronger bond during adolescence. Sibling relationship is known to depend on many ecological and social variables. One of the most important ecological variables is the order. Elder siblings are assumed to afford more social support to their younger siblings. The other important variable which governs sibling relationship is the gender of the siblings. It is noticed that girls as siblings demonstrate more affection, intimacy and support than boys. As far as the flip side of sibling relationship is concerned, several aspects like conflict in relationship, jealousy and unhealthy competitions have been reported. (Buherster & Furman, 1990; Harris, 1990)

Sibling relationship in children with developmental disabilities has been explored. The findings of these research studies carried out by researchers like Glasberg, 2000; Foden, 2007 have shown the sibling relationship to be affected and well being of the non disabled sibling to be impacted. Among the different disabilities taken into consideration for studying sibling

relationship, autism is a less explored area. The sibling relationship has been studied at different stages through studies it has been proved that the age between 7-12 years is ideal to study sibling relationship. Knott (1995) reported the first significant finding in this direction. He found the quantum of interaction to be less in children with autism and their siblings compared to typically developing children and their siblings. Rivers and Stoneman (2003) contrasted this finding by stating that children in the age of 7-12 years showed greater empathy and concern to their siblings with autism. Both these studies employed self report to gather details on sibling relationship. Fismann (2000) reported emotions like shyness and embarrassment to be found in siblings of children with autism. Sibling relationship has also been studied in adolescents. In adolescents, conflict of relationship, negative reactions like humiliation, inferiority complex was found.

The perspective of siblings of children with autism is often compared with the perspectives of children of siblings with other developmental disabilities. Crissak (2003) found that perspective and reaction of these two groups of children to be the same. Glassberg (2000) reported verbal interaction to be less between children with autism and their siblings compared to children with developmental disabilities and their siblings. In terms of social competence, Harris (2007) reported that the social competence of siblings of children with autism was almost the same as the social competence of the siblings with other developmental disabilities. In addition to these findings, studies on well being on younger siblings well being has been reported. While some studies (Herman, 2006) reported normal well being; few other studies have found subtle social impairments in the siblings. However most of the studies, in this direction have favoured normal well being. Sibling relationship in children with autism is studied through questionnaires and self report. Buhrmester (1995) configured a questionnaire with questions addressing 5 domains like warmth, closeness, rivalry, conflict and status. Foden (2007) developed a more comprehensive questionnaire for assessing the quality of sibling relationship. It comprises of 48 questions with five closed choices as answer and is able to provide an overview on sibling questionnaire; however this questionnaire is culture specific.

Objective

1. To assess quality of sibling relationship in siblings of children with autism.

Method

Participants

Fifteen siblings of children with children with autism were enrolled for the study. Eight of the 15 siblings were elder to the children with autism. Five of these 8 children were girls and 3 of them were boys and their mean age was around 12.2 years. The remaining 7 children (4 boys and 3 girls) were younger siblings of children with autism and their mean age was 11.3 years. All the children were able to read and write.

Instrument

1. Sibling Relationship. Sixty questions tapping sibling relationship were shortlisted after reviewing the existing questionnaires given by Buhrmester, 1995 and Foden 1995. All these questions were translated to Kannada (local language) and given to 3 experts working with autism children. These experts were asked to carry out a goodness rating on a scale of 1,2 and 3. 3 stood for highly relevant, 2 for relevant and 1 for irrelevant. The motive of the questionnaire was explained to these judges prior the administration. 46 questions marked under 2 and 3 were shortlisted and circulated to the siblings of children with autism.

Procedure

These 42 questions reflected 7 areas like stimulation, play, attention received, conflict of relationship, care, concern and negative emotions (ex humiliation etc). Stimulation domain was tapped through questions on how much you spend with your sibling, do you make a conscious effort to teach concepts to your sibling etc. 'Play' was tapped through questions like do you indulge your sibling in play activity. 'Care' domain was taken care through questions such as do you show concern, care or empathise on your sibling. The participants were asked to mark one option of the four choices given. The four choices were "Not much" "Some-times" "Always" and "Very much". Each domain considered had 7 questions each except the domain "stimulation" which had 5 questions only.

Results and Discussion

As both elder and younger siblings were considered in the study, the results of the questionnaire filled by these participants were analysed separately for each of this group. Elder siblings reported modest amount of stimulation to their younger siblings with autism. They also reported to play, share their toys and show concern to them. However there were instances where the siblings showed negative emotions to their siblings. 6 out of 8 siblings expressed more negative reactions for example, they felt disturbed and humiliated in society and they also felt that prominence was always given to their siblings. Positive and negative reactions were equally spread in the elder siblings. Younger sibling group reported more negative reactions compared to positive reactions. 4 of the 7 participants in this group claimed that they would not spend time nor share their toys or books with their siblings. The remaining 3 participants contradicted these statements. 6 of the 7 participants stated that they felt that the attention was not equally divided. The attention pattern inclined more towards their sibling (elder) with autism. They also reported humiliation. The report of one participant in this group differed from all the other participants in this group. The participant claimed to be positive towards the sibling and did not report any instances signifying conflict of relation or bias.

Sibling relationship during early years of life is always assumed to be subjected to jealousy and conflict in relationship. Researchers believe that these factors would be more in siblings of children with communication disorder as more attention would be given to these children may be because they are not verbal. Western studies by Buhermester (1995), and Foden (2000) have been carried out in this direction, but the results of these studies cannot be adapted to Indian context as the bonding and relationship would be different in Indian population.

However the results of the present study did not differ much with the previous studies, which have documented in literature. Younger siblings reported more conflict in relationship. The results were in par with the findings of Knott,1995. Children even in the age range of 7-12 years of age also experienced conflict in relationship which contradicted Stoneman's findings.

In the current scenario, the siblings are not included in counselling and may have less empathy and knowledge regarding their sibling with autism. The premise of the study was to check for these factors. Younger siblings empathised less, had less knowledge and possessed more conflict in relationship compared to elder sibling group. However it was clear that negative reactions and problems persisted in the siblings regardless whether they were elder or younger to children with autism.

Conclusion

The present study was carried out with the aim of exploring sibling relationship in children with autism. A questionnaire was formulated by carrying out a meta analysis of all the



questions carried out in this direction and was circulated to siblings of children with autism. The questionnaire had 42 questions reflecting 7 areas like stimulation, play, attention received, conflict of relationship, care, concern and negative emotions (ex humiliation etc). The findings obtained in the current study shows that the siblings show less empathy, care, concern and have conflicts in their relationship with their sibling with autism. Hence it is essential to include these siblings in the process of intensive counselling to make them understand the problem better, which in turn would enable better reciprocation.

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