



PDA & Siblings

By Diane Gould, LCSW & Founder of PDA North America

www.pdanorthamerica.org / copyright PDA North America / info@pdanorthamerica.org

Early in my career, I led sibling groups. They were wonderful to do because the siblings were so kind and caring. The benefitted greatly from the relationships made in group and the support they received. They felt that they were getting something special when they often felt like they were missing out because of their brother or sister.

The issue of neurotypical siblings comes up frequently in my consultations. Parents feel so torn between the competing needs of their children. We know how much PDA children need their parent(s). Being stretched so thin adds to the stress of parenting a PDAer.

I have made a short list of issues that I have commonly seen and have also provided some ways to support all the children in your family. Every family is unique but hopefully this is helpful.

Characteristics of Siblings of Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) Children

Negative Characteristics (based on the general autistic population):

- feelings of anger
- resentment
- guilt
- embarrassment
- increased acting out in adolescence

Positive Characteristics:

- accepting
- non-judgmental
- caring

- altruistic

Sibling Issues

Sibling Issues:

- Role of helper becomes identity
- Fear of 'catching' the disability
- The need to be perfect
- Guilt at surpassing sibling with ASD
- Struggle with "unfair treatment"
- Feeling that they don't get enough attention
- Some may hurt themselves or try to get sick for attention
- May have their own challenges that go unnoticed
- Feeling of loss
- Fear of getting hurt during meltdowns that include aggression
- Fear that their parents' may get hurt
- Struggles with last minute schedule changes
- Worry about having friends over
- Most difficult for same gender siblings and those closest in age

Sibling Issues: Concerns for the Future

- Dating
- Marriage
- Fear of having an autistic child
- Guardianship

Supporting Siblings

Supporting Siblings:

- In general, the stronger the family, the better it will be for all the children
- Allow and encourage siblings to express feelings without guilt (and not just the positive ones)
- Let school staff and others know that the sibling may need extra support based on what is happening at home
- Teach about emotions and validate
- Help kids find language to talk about mental health
- Share your feelings but not your burdens
- Reward siblings for things other than helping
- Find some individualized times for siblings and show interest
- Explain PDA to siblings and teach them how to explain to others
- Use parenting skills that treat children uniquely, not equally

- Teach them to get their own needs met
- Check in with them frequently and let them know that they can talk to you or someone
- Don't have them help in ways that are not age appropriate
- Can use PDA parenting strategies for all children
- Find informal supportive adults to spend time with them
- Refer to sibling groups or start your own
- Get therapy for sibs if needed
- Practice self-care

Safety Plan:

- Have a plan for if a situation at home is escalating
- Explain and practice in advance
- Process the experience after an incident

What to Watch For:

- Behavioral changes
- Excessive worry
- Asking repeated questions about the future
- Signs of prolonged sadness or depression
- Acting out