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## Examining the Relationships of Siblings of Individuals With Autism Spectrum Disorder

### What is this research about?

Generally, sibling relationships change over time. Relationships tend to be less strong in adolescences and there is less contact in early adulthood. As siblings enter middle and later adulthood, the relationship grows stronger and there is more contact. This pattern may be different when one sibling has an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), however, there is not a lot of research involving these families. This study explored how sibling relationships are different in adolescence compared to adulthood when one sibling has ASD. The researchers also looked at what factors relate to positive sibling relationships.

### What did the researchers do?

The researchers invited adult and adolescent siblings of people with ASD to participate in this study. Adult siblings completed a questionnaire package and adolescent siblings did a phone interview and smaller questionnaire package. The questionnaires and interview measured sibling relationship quality, psychological well-being, coping skills, social support and behaviour problems in the brother or sister with ASD.

### What did the researchers find?

Adolescent and adult siblings reported similar levels of positive feelings about the relationship

### What you need to know:

Sibling relationships are quite unique when a brother or sister has ASD, and can be impacted by the presence of social support and behaviour problems. Adolescents and adults siblings have different ways of coping and relating to a brother or sister with ASD.

with the brother or sister with ASD. Sibling relationships were more positive for adolescents when the family was larger, and more positive for adults when there was more support from their parents. Behaviour problems had a negative impact on the relationship for both adolescents and adults.

Adolescent and adult siblings reported different styles of coping and different levels of family support. Compared to adult siblings, adolescent siblings reported receiving more support from parents and friends, were more likely to cope with stress by expressing their emotions, and less likely to try and find solutions to their problems. Adult siblings also had less contact with their brother or sister with ASD than adolescent siblings. In adulthood, men who had a sister with ASD had the hardest time finding shared activities to do, while women with a sister with ASD showed the most involvement in shared activities.

## How can you use this research?

This is one of the first studies to explore sibling relationships in adolescent and adult siblings of individuals with ASD. These findings could be very helpful for families of individuals with ASD, and also emphasize the importance of family support for all sibling relationships.

## About the Researchers

Gael Orsmond, Hsin-Yu Kuo and Marsha Mailick Seltzer are researchers in Autism and Developmental Disabilities.

Dr. Orsmond is a Professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy at Boston University.

Dr. Kuo is now a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Occupational Therapy at the University of Alberta.

Dr. Mailick Seltzer is the Director of the Waisman Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

## Citation

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## Keywords

Autism, Siblings, Coping, Social Support, Behaviour Problems

This research summary was written by Suzanne Robinson for the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research. This research summary, along with other summaries, can be found on our [blog](#) and at [asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries](http://asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries)

## About the Chair

The Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research is dedicated to studying ways to improve the mental health and well-being of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families in Canada.

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