

Living with a Sibling who is on the Autism Spectrum: The Siblings' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of neurotypical siblings who have a brother or sister on the autism spectrum. Drawing on qualitative case studies of three adolescent siblings, the research investigates the emotional, social, and developmental impacts of these relationships. Through semi-structured interviews, the study identifies themes such as caregiving responsibilities, the emotional burden of unequal attention, and future caregiving concerns. The findings highlight both the challenges and growth opportunities associated with these sibling relationships. By examining these experiences within the unique cultural context of Malta, this study contributes to the broader discourse on inclusion and family dynamics in autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Implications for educational systems, family support programmes, and future policy developments are discussed.

Keywords: Neurotypical Siblings, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Sibling Relationships, Family Dynamics, Caregiving Responsibilities

Families with a member on the autism spectrum navigate a unique set of challenges and dynamics, especially siblings who play crucial roles in caregiving and emotional support. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), a neurodevelopmental condition, is characterised by differences in social communication and behaviours, impacting not only individuals but also the relationships within their families. While research has extensively examined the perspectives of parents raising children with ASD, the experiences of neurotypical siblings remain underexplored, particularly in small, close-knit cultural contexts such as Malta.

This study investigates the lived experiences of neurotypical siblings growing up with a sibling on the autism spectrum. The research focuses on adolescents, a developmental stage marked by identity formation, emotional growth, and increasing responsibilities. By capturing these experiences through qualitative case studies, this research sheds light on the emotional, social, and developmental implications of these sibling relationships.

AIMS, OBJECTIVES, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study aims to understand the multidimensional impact of growing up with a sibling with autism. It seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does having a sibling with autism affect the life of their neurotypical brother or sister?
2. What are the long-term concerns of neurotypical siblings regarding their autistic sibling's future?

By addressing these questions, the study explores how sibling dynamics influence social development, academic performance, emotional well-being, and future aspirations.

Significance and Rationale

This research stems from one of the researcher's personal experience of growing up with an autistic sibling, which fostered an intimate understanding of the challenges and growth opportunities within such relationships. While parents often receive extensive support, neurotypical siblings are frequently overlooked in family dynamics and interventions. Addressing this gap, the study highlights the importance of their voices in developing more inclusive family and societal frameworks.

Moreover, the study's focus on Malta provides a culturally specific perspective that complements existing research conducted in larger and more diverse contexts. The findings have implications for educators, policymakers, and support organisations aiming to create holistic interventions for families affected by autism.

Research Gap

While previous studies have highlighted the resilience and empathy often developed by neurotypical siblings, they have not adequately addressed the long-term psychological and social impacts, especially in small cultural contexts. This study contributes to the literature by offering insights into these dimensions and advocating for targeted support mechanisms for neurotypical siblings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent literature continues to shed light on the multifaceted experiences of neurotypical siblings of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), emphasising both the challenges and the developmental impacts within family dynamics.

A meta-analysis by Shivers et al. (2019) highlights that neurotypical siblings often experience a complex interplay of positive and negative emotions, which can significantly influence their self-identity and personal development. The study emphasises the necessity for support mechanisms that address these complex experiences to promote well-being among these siblings (Watson, Hanna & Jones. 2021).

In terms of quality of life (QOL), recent research indicates that siblings of children with ASD may experience differences in QOL compared to siblings of neurotypical children. A study by Giallo et al. (2014) found that these siblings often face unique stressors that can impact their overall well-being, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to support this population.

While individuals with autism often face challenges in social interactions, they may also exhibit strengths, particularly in technical or structured domains (Attfield & Morgan, 2006). The

distinct behavioural characteristics of ASD profoundly influence family dynamics, including sibling relationships.

Furthermore, the influence of having an autistic sibling extends into adulthood, affecting various life domains, including career choices. Wright et al. (2019) reported that neurotypical siblings are often drawn to caregiving professions, a decision shaped by their early familial experiences and the responsibilities they assumed during childhood.

These findings align with studies, such as those by Kaminsky and Dewey (2002), which documented the dual nature of these sibling relationships—highlighting both the development of empathy and the potential for emotional challenges. The cumulative evidence underscores the importance of comprehensive support systems that address the unique needs of neurotypical siblings, promoting their psychological well-being and personal development.

In conclusion, while the presence of a sibling with ASD presents distinct challenges, it also offers opportunities for personal growth among neurotypical siblings. Ongoing research and the development of targeted support interventions remain crucial to enhance the quality of life and well-being of these individuals.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) encompasses a range of neurodevelopmental differences, manifesting in atypical communication, social interaction, and repetitive behaviours. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) defines ASD as a cluster of developmental disabilities with wide variability in presentation. While individuals with autism often face challenges in social interactions, they may also exhibit strengths, particularly in technical or structured domains (Attfield & Morgan, 2006). The distinct behavioural characteristics of ASD profoundly influence family dynamics, including sibling relationships.

Family Systems Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the interconnected roles and relationships within families with a neurodivergent member. In these families, the presence of a sibling with autism often disrupts established dynamics, necessitating adjustments by parents and siblings alike. Neurotypical siblings frequently take on caregiving roles, balancing their own developmental needs with the demands of supporting their sibling with autism (Angell et al., 2012; Cridland et al., 2013). These roles, while fostering resilience and empathy, can also lead to feelings of neglect or frustration due to unequal parental attention.

The emotional landscape of neurotypical siblings is characterised by a complex interplay of positive and negative experiences. Studies indicate that these siblings often develop heightened empathy, independence, and patience, stemming from their unique familial context (Aksoy & Yildirim, 2008). Conversely, they may also experience guilt, stress, and emotional exhaustion, particularly when faced with societal misconceptions about autism or the disruptive behaviours of their autistic sibling (Attfield & Morgan, 2006; Moss et al., 2019).

The social experiences of neurotypical siblings are equally complex and multifaceted. While some develop advanced social skills and tolerance, others report feelings of isolation and challenges in peer relationships due to their sibling's behaviour (Bagenholm & Gillberg, 1991). These mixed outcomes underscore the importance of tailored support systems that address

both the challenges and strengths inherent in these relationships. As neurotypical siblings transition into adulthood, concerns about future caregiving responsibilities become prominent.

This study aims to explore the specific challenges and opportunities present in small, close-knit societies like Malta. This research addresses these gaps by providing culturally specific insights into the lived experiences of neurotypical siblings and advocating for targeted support systems.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of neurotypical siblings of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). A qualitative design was chosen for its ability to capture the depth and complexity of personal experiences, focusing on the subjective perspectives of participants. Narrative case studies were employed to construct detailed accounts of the siblings' experiences, enabling a holistic understanding of their roles, emotions, and concerns within the family dynamic.

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, allowing participants the flexibility to share their stories while maintaining a structured focus on the research objectives. This method ensured a balance between open-ended exploration and consistency across interviews.

The study utilised purposive sampling to recruit participants who could provide rich and relevant insights. Three adolescent siblings, aged 18 to 21, were selected based on the following criteria:

- They had a brother diagnosed with ASD.
- They actively supported their sibling emotionally and practically.
- They were involved in family caregiving dynamics.

All participants were female, ensuring homogeneity in developmental stage and gender to facilitate focused comparisons. Collaboration with Special Olympics Malta, an organisation supporting individuals with intellectual disabilities, facilitated participant recruitment. This partnership ensured access to a population with relevant lived experiences.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. Interviews were conducted in English or Maltese, depending on the participant's preference, to ensure comfort and encourage open communication. Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes and was audio-recorded for accuracy.

The interview guide consisted of 13 open-ended questions divided into three themes:

1. Background information about the sibling relationship.
2. Experiences and challenges in living with a sibling with autism.
3. Concerns about the future, including caregiving responsibilities.

Probing techniques were used to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses and share detailed narratives. Two interviews were conducted face-to-face, while one was conducted via Zoom to accommodate a participant studying abroad.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee to ensure the study adhered to ethical research practices. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and pseudonyms were used in all documentation to protect their identities.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, care was taken to create a supportive interview environment. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer questions or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes within the data. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and initial codes were generated through a line-by-line review of the transcripts. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflected the participants' experiences and insights. The thematic findings were compared against existing literature to contextualise the results and highlight unique cultural or contextual factors.

Trustworthiness of the research was ensured through triangulation, peer debriefing, and maintaining a detailed audit trail. Additionally, the researchers' reflective notes contributed to a deeper understanding of the data, minimising bias and enhancing credibility.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights, its findings are limited by the small sample size and the homogeneity of participants (all participants were Maltese female adolescents). Future research should explore a more diverse population to capture a broader range of experiences and perspectives. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide a deeper understanding of the evolving dynamics of sibling relationships over time.

RESULTS

The findings of this study illuminate the multifaceted experiences of neurotypical siblings living with a brother on the autism spectrum. Using thematic analysis, the data was categorised into key themes that highlight the complexities of these sibling relationships, including family dynamics, emotional and social impacts, caregiving responsibilities, and future concerns. Each theme is supported by direct narratives from the participants to provide a rich understanding of their lived experiences.

The following are the six thematic findings:

Family Dynamics: Navigating Unequal Attention

The reflections of the three participants offer significant insights into the impact of having a sibling with autism on family dynamics, particularly for neurotypical siblings. A recurring theme among the participants was the unequal distribution of parental attention, often

favouring the child with autism due to their immediate and pressing needs. This disparity frequently left neurotypical siblings feeling neglected or confused. As P3 reflects, *"...When I was younger I would not compare, I was more like sort of it was expected...not that I understood it but I sort of let it go."* This statement illustrates how neurotypical siblings may eventually come to accept the imbalance in attention, even if they struggle to fully comprehend it during childhood.

P2 highlights another dimension of this dynamic, describing her initial lack of understanding: *"...I couldn't understand at a point, like why, why is this happening...there was a part of me when I was younger that was a bit embarrassed of it, that my family's different..."* This reflection underscores the sense of isolation neurotypical siblings may experience as they attempt to navigate the unique challenges of growing up in a family shaped by autism. Such challenges often include managing the emotional impact of their sibling's behaviour, coping with the additional care and attention their sibling requires, and balancing their own needs with the overall demands of the family. Furthermore, these dynamics often involve shifting roles and responsibilities within the family, as well as dealing with societal stigma. Together, these factors profoundly shape the neurotypical sibling's perception of their role within the family and their relationship with their autistic sibling.

Despite these challenges, the participants also highlighted a process of acceptance and resilience that develops as they grow older. P1 reflects on this journey, stating, *"When I was little, I always had to explain what autism is. I can't remember a point in my life where I didn't know what autism was."*

Over time, many neurotypical siblings adopt the role of informal caregivers, often feeling a strong sense of duty to support their autistic sibling. This caregiving role evolves with age, extending into adulthood in various forms. For example, P2 describes how her responsibilities have shifted over time: *"...my main concern at the moment...I don't see him at work, so I don't really know what's going on..."* This comment reflects her anxiety about no longer being able to directly oversee her brother's well-being in his workplace. While her brother is communicative, she remains concerned about potential challenges, such as being misunderstood by coworkers, encountering difficulties without adequate support, or even facing ridicule. These concerns underscore her protective instincts and the evolving nature of her caregiving role, which now requires reliance on others to provide the support she can no longer offer directly.

Another key aspect in the family dynamics is the unequal attention they often receive compared to their sibling with autism. P1 recalls her childhood experiences of receiving less support from her mother, particularly with homework: *"When I was little, I used to take it personally because Mum helped him more with his homework...but now I understand."* This reflection highlights her journey from feeling excluded to developing empathy as she matured, recognising that her mother's focus on her autistic sibling was both necessary and appropriate. P1 further notes, *"I never made a fuss...I used to see myself as capable because she (mother) wasn't helping me with my homework, but I still managed."* This demonstrates how the experience ultimately fostered a sense of self-reliance and independence, rather than resentment.

Similarly, P2 reflects on the confusion she felt about the unequal attention her brother received: *"There was a lot of focus on my brother and I couldn't really understand why it was a bit different, the type of focus..."* While her words highlight an early lack of understanding, they also suggest

a gradual acceptance as she came to appreciate the unique demands placed on her family by her brother's needs.

P3 offers a broader critique, observing that some parents fail to adequately address the needs of their neurotypical children: *"Some parents do a terrible job of actually realising that they have the child, and another child."* She notes that this imbalance is not unique to her own family, remarking, *"A lot of parents...sometimes they forget that the other children, like are still children!"* Despite these critiques, P3 demonstrates a thoughtful understanding of the challenges faced by parents, adding, *"Now I understand it...I can further vocalise that...it can be done that you show both, like both of them, the attention dedicated for their age..."* Her reflections emphasise the importance of finding a balance in meeting the distinct needs of each child, even if achieving perfect equality is often unattainable.

Taken together, these reflections underscore the complex and multifaceted impact of autism on family dynamics. Neurotypical siblings must navigate feelings of exclusion and confusion, while also developing empathy, independence, and resilience. Their journey is shaped by a unique combination of challenges and transformative experiences, ultimately influencing their roles, relationships, and identities within the family.

Emotional Impact: Coping with Complex Feelings

The unequal attention experienced by neurotypical siblings in families with a child on the autism spectrum often results in significant emotional strain. Feelings of neglect and emotional burden are common, as siblings grapple with the imbalanced focus their parents place on their autistic sibling. P3 captures this emotional weight, stating, *"...if you thought that you would have the capacity to take more, than just go on, but with a child that is on the spectrum, then don't bring another child into this scenario."* This reflection underscores the profound sense of responsibility and, at times, the overwhelming nature of the caregiving role that neurotypical siblings may feel.

Despite these challenges, many siblings develop empathy and resilience over time as they gain a deeper understanding of their parents' decisions and behaviours. P1 illustrates this journey, reflecting on her own emotional growth as she matured: *"...now I understand."* This shift in perspective allows neurotypical siblings to reframe their experiences, fostering stronger relationships with both their parents and their autistic sibling. This process of emotional adjustment highlights the capacity of neurotypical siblings to navigate the complexities of family dynamics and transform initial feelings of strain into growth and connection.

Cultural Beliefs and the Neurotypical Sibling's Role

For neurotypical siblings, cultural beliefs and societal perceptions significantly influence their experiences and their role within families of a child with autism. P3's reflections highlight how deeply ingrained cultural and religious beliefs shaped her family's understanding of her brother's diagnosis and, consequently, her own experiences as a sibling. She recalls her father's struggle to accept the diagnosis, rooted in cultural and religious notions: *"...but a lot of people,...they have a strong sense of like religion...and in the, specifically in the bible, in the new bible, it was said that ehm like disability is sort of like a curse on the family and my father refused to believe that his son had autism..."*

For P3, these beliefs added complexity to her role as a sibling, as she witnessed how cultural frameworks not only hindered her father's acceptance of autism but also shaped the family's emotional dynamics. The stigma associated with disability in certain cultural contexts created barriers to open discussion and support, affecting her ability to fully process and address her sibling's needs.

Despite these challenges, P3 actively sought to challenge these harmful cultural narratives. She reflects on her efforts to educate others and advocate for her brother, stating, *"...I just try as hard as possible to sort of like make people understand that—that's very wrong."* This statement underscores the proactive role neurotypical siblings often assume, not only in supporting their sibling with autism but also in addressing societal misconceptions and advocating for a more inclusive understanding of autism within their cultural and social spheres.

These experiences illustrate how neurotypical siblings navigate the intersection of family dynamics and broader cultural stigmas. The interplay of these factors shapes their emotional resilience and sense of agency, compelling them to address cultural and societal attitudes that affect both their sibling's well-being and their own role within the family. By confronting these challenges, neurotypical siblings like P3 demonstrate their capacity to influence both family and societal perceptions of autism, highlighting the critical role they play in fostering understanding and acceptance.

Sibling Relationship: Dynamics of Neurotypical Siblings and Their Siblings with Autism

The sibling relationship between neurotypical children and their siblings with autism is characterised by unique dynamics, shaped by empathy, shared responsibilities, and evolving roles. This relationship often involves a balance of informal caregiving, fostering independence, and navigating emotional complexities.

Such a relationship often presents distinct challenges that differ from typical sibling bonds. Emotional strain, role expectations, and a lack of mutual understanding can complicate these relationships. P3 describes the emotional toll of being the eldest sibling, stating that she often feels blamed or perceived as "wrong" by her mother. This sense of judgment intensifies the emotional stress, as she feels pressured to act as a role model while shouldering greater responsibilities within the family.

P2 reflects on a sense of emotional distance in her relationship with her sibling, noting, *"It is a bit different than a typical relationship...we're not super, super close in that sense."* While they engage in casual, everyday conversations, P2 explains that deeper emotional exchanges are rare, as she deliberately avoids burdening her sibling: *"I won't open up about certain things...especially if I'm upset...don't want to put any extra kind of burden on him."* This protective stance illustrates how neurotypical siblings often adapt their behaviour to shield their sibling with autism from additional emotional strain.

Additionally, early experiences of confusion and misunderstanding are common. P2 recalls being perplexed as a child by *"a lack of understanding...of why he is different."* This reflection underscores the challenges neurotypical siblings face as they navigate their sibling's unique needs while striving to balance their own emotional and familial responsibilities.

Fostering independence in their siblings with autism is another critical aspect of the neurotypical sibling relationship. Siblings often strive to strike a balance between supporting their sibling's growth and avoiding overprotectiveness. P3 speaks to this challenge, explaining her approach: *"You're telling me you're ready for independence, and I am going to help you get the amount of independence that you want."* By respecting her brother's readiness, P3 empowers him while maintaining an adaptive and supportive role.

Similarly, P2 reflects on her evolving role, emphasising her efforts to encourage her brother's independence while avoiding being overly involved: *"I always look out for him"* but ensures she is *"not too overbearing."* P2 views each step toward independence as a milestone, noting her brother's ability to travel more independently as a significant achievement in their relationship.

P1 provides a perspective shaped by her sibling's developmental progress. She recalls her initial fears that her brother might remain dependent but now celebrates his growth: *"The change he's made is great...he needs help, but he's not a baby."* For P1, treating her brother with high expectations has been instrumental in fostering his independence. She asserts, *"If you treat him like a baby, he won't grow up and won't learn what independence is."*

The caregiving responsibilities assumed by neurotypical siblings often redefine their roles within the family and their relationship with their sibling. P2, a twin, reflects on her sense of responsibility, sharing that she would *"always look out for him...small things, he's eating his lunch? Where is he playing?"* Despite her parents' attempts to shield her from excessive caregiving, P2 acknowledges, *"I always consider the fact that the autism is still there...so I have to take extra care."* This highlights how caregiving duties, even when minimised by parents, persist as a fundamental aspect of the neurotypical sibling's experience.

P1, reflecting on her experience, contrasts her role with siblings who *"have their own lives"*. For her, the caregiving responsibilities associated with her brother have been a defining aspect of her identity. Although these responsibilities initially caused distress, she now sees them as *"a part of me,"* illustrating how caregiving becomes an ingrained part of a sibling's life.

P3, as the eldest sibling, describes feeling more like a "guardian" than a sister, reflecting the expectations placed upon her: *"Younger sisters...feel responsible, they feel kind of obligation to take care of their sibling."* While she acknowledges the emotional weight of this role, noting that *"it is tiring,"* she does not attribute this entirely to her sibling but also to external factors such as inadequate school support. P3's reflections extend to future considerations, as she anticipates that her caregiving role will continue to evolve as both siblings age.

The sibling relationship in families with a child on the autism spectrum is marked by distinctive challenges and responsibilities that shape neurotypical siblings' roles and identities. From navigating emotional complexities to fostering independence and embracing caregiving duties, these siblings often balance their own needs with the demands of supporting their autistic sibling. The reflections of P1, P2, and P3 underscore the resilience and adaptability required to nurture this unique sibling bond, highlighting their critical role in fostering familial and personal growth.

Future Concerns: Anticipating Caregiving Roles

As neurotypical siblings of individuals with autism contemplate the future, their reflections reveal a spectrum of emotions ranging from anxiety to hopefulness. Participants expressed concerns about balancing their sibling's needs with their own evolving lives, particularly as they envision moving out, starting families, and navigating their sibling's long-term care.

P1 voiced significant anxiety about the future, especially regarding her sibling's transition as she leaves the family home: *"It's like I worry about the future...you want to make sure that if he stays with mum, he doesn't feel like he's still at home, and that's something negative."* This concern highlights her desire to ensure that her sibling maintains a sense of independence while living with their mother, avoiding any perception of stagnation.

Similarly, P2 reflected on the potential challenges of balancing her future family's needs with her commitment to her sibling: *"If my parents then pass away when we're older, kind of it's a whole different story...that's new adapting. Even if I have a family, you know, my own family is going to change dynamics of everything."* While P2 acknowledges that these challenges may not be immediate, she recognises the long-term pressure associated with her sibling's care: *"...it's still now not close to happening yet in my head...I brush it off...but then once it starts becoming a bit more real, that's where I think...I feel the pressure of it more."*

P3, on the other hand, expressed a strong sense of commitment to maintaining a close relationship with her sibling, envisioning various scenarios that balance connection and independence. She remarked: *"...sometimes he is like we build a house, you live there and I'm there, which is a sweet sentiment, but realistically we would be either in completely two separate countries but consistently call and study or else literally be neighbours."* While P3 values the idea of independence, she also underscores the depth of their bond, stating, *"I can't imagine a future without having him by my side."*

The participants also highlighted the importance of shared responsibility within family relationships. P1 emphasised the need to involve a future spouse in caregiving discussions, stating, *"I think this is something you need to talk about with your husband...the responsibility...is not solely on me."* Her comment reflects an understanding that caregiving duties can be shared, easing the pressure on her while fostering collaboration with a partner. Similarly, P2 envisioned supporting her sibling's independence through regular check-ins and assistance with practical matters: *"...if he's living alone...to check on him every day...make sure household tasks, he's doing them, get him a cleaner if needs be."* These reflections illustrate the significant role sibling relationships play in shaping the long-term plans and responsibilities of neurotypical siblings. While participants expressed concerns about balancing personal goals with their sibling's needs, they also conveyed a deep sense of dedication and commitment to their sibling's well-being. This dual focus on personal aspirations and familial obligations underscores the enduring impact of these relationships and the thoughtful considerations neurotypical siblings undertake as they prepare for the future.

Siblings' Well-being: Perspectives of Neurotypical Siblings

Participants also reflected on their journey of personal growth shaped by their unique family dynamics and responsibilities. Their experiences influence their character development, social

interactions, and even their professional aspirations, revealing how these relationships profoundly shape their lives.

Neurotypical siblings often credit their relationship with their autistic sibling as a significant factor in developing empathy, resilience, and responsibility. For P3, this growth is multifaceted, as she questions whether her caring nature stems solely from her relationship with her brother or is also influenced by her own experience with ADHD. She reflects, *"I have always been kind of the mummy of the group...very caring but at the same time straightforward,"* a balance she attributes, in part, to her sibling dynamic.

Similarly, P1 highlights how growing up with an autistic sibling encouraged her independence, as her mother often focused on her brother's needs. *"I got used to studying alone...now that I'm older, I can handle things on my own,"*. Despite this independence, P1 remains deeply caring, expressing concern for her brother's safety, such as feeling anxious when he does not return home on time – a vigilance she notes is less common among her peers without siblings with autism.

P2 reflects on how her relationship with her sibling cultivated a strong sense of empathy that extends beyond her family. She explains, *"Without him realising, I've become a lot more empathetic...I keep it in mind that who knows what their dynamic is with different people in their life."* This awareness, she believes, has helped her approach others with greater understanding and a commitment to helping them grow, a mindset she attributes to her sibling relationship.

Another aspect in this dynamic is the social development of the sibling. The social experiences of neurotypical siblings are shaped by their family dynamics, particularly as they navigate the intersection of their sibling's condition and their relationships with peers. P2 recalls initially keeping her home life separate from her social life as a child, fearing that her brother's differences might affect how her friends perceived her family. Over time, however, her perspective shifted: *"Now that I am older...I stopped doing this as in I just kind of joined everything...rather I enjoy seeing him interact."* This evolution illustrates a move from discomfort to pride, as she became more comfortable integrating her brother into her social world.

P1 also reflects on how her understanding of her brother's interactions with others has changed. She observes *"Before, when we were young, it felt like we were the only ones at home who understood him. But now, he can have a conversation with everyone"*.

These siblings also develop a strong moral compass when it comes to advocating for their sibling and expecting acceptance from others. P2 remarks, *"But if someone wasn't open about it, I don't think I'd be...friends with them...because that's not OK...and not just because it's me, but in any lights with any condition disability, I don't think it's, it's a, there's no excuse for not treating them properly."* This sentiment demonstrates the protective instinct neurotypical siblings develop and their unwillingness to tolerate exclusion or disrespect.

P3 echoes this protective stance, noting her tendency to avoid individuals who exhibit discriminatory attitudes: *"I tend to avoid people that have kind of a red flag, you know how you*

can sense someone either they are labelist or racist." For P3, ensuring her social circle is inclusive aligns with her broader values of fairness and respect.

As they mature, neurotypical siblings also develop a greater sense of self-acceptance. P2 reflects on this shift: *"When I was younger, I used to feel that a lot more very different from my friends and all that. But now, I don't really feel as much that difference anymore, like I don't...it doesn't bother me."* This represents a broader understanding of individuality and a move away from self-comparison.

Career Aspirations Shaped by Sibling Influence

The influence of an autistic sibling often extends to neurotypical siblings' career choices, shaping their aspirations and professional paths. For P2, exposure to her brother's speech therapy sessions sparked a subtle yet meaningful interest in the field. *"I became a speech language therapist not directly because of him...but...seeing the speech language therapist come home and all this, I think did eventually impact me,"* she reflects.

P1 also credits her brother's influence for her desire to help others, particularly those facing challenges. *"When I had to choose a career, it really took me a long time, but I always based it on things that involve taking care of others,"* she explains. She adds that her brother's experience has inspired her to pursue a career in medicine or speech therapy, explaining, *"Knowing that you're helping others with the same condition as your brother, it's like you do it with more heart"*.

For P3, the influence is less direct but equally significant. Growing up with an autistic sibling and having a neurodiverse social circle inspired her interest in critiquing policies and advocating for systemic change. *"I have always been exposed to people with autism...and coincidentally most of my friends have also mostly been neurodivergent...so I think that all combined has kind of influenced my career path."* Her aspirations were further shaped by her love for research and policy analysis: *"It is more of like my environment coupled with like how much I love sort of reading journals and critiquing them...that sort of pushed me that way."*

DISCUSSION

The reflections of neurotypical siblings illustrate how their relationship with their autistic sibling profoundly shapes their character, social development, and professional aspirations. Through experiences of empathy, independence, and advocacy, these siblings grow into individuals who are not only deeply caring but also motivated to contribute positively to the lives of others, both personally and professionally. The findings of this study emphasise the complex and multifaceted nature of sibling relationships in families affected by autism spectrum disorder (ASD). While participants faced significant challenges, such as unequal attention and emotional strain, their experiences also fostered resilience, empathy, and personal growth. These results align with previous literature that highlights both the positive and negative impacts of growing up with a sibling with autism (Angell et al., 2012; Shivers, 2019).

Emotional and Social Dynamics

Participants described a range of emotions, from pride in their sibling's achievements to frustration over the disruption of typical family dynamics. These emotions mirror findings by

Moss et al. (2019), who reported heightened levels of empathy and understanding among neurotypical siblings, balanced by feelings of stress and guilt. The ability to navigate these emotions reflects the adaptive strategies developed by participants, underscoring the importance of support systems in promoting emotional well-being.

Socially, participants faced challenges in peer interactions, often struggling to explain their sibling's behaviour or manage societal misconceptions about autism. These findings echo Bagenholm and Gillberg (1991), who noted that neurotypical siblings often experience isolation and difficulties in maintaining friendships. However, the participants in this study also demonstrated increased advocacy and a commitment to raising awareness about autism, highlighting the transformative potential of their experiences.

The Role of Caregiving

Caregiving emerged as a central theme, with participants describing their responsibilities as both rewarding and demanding. These experiences align with Orsmond and Fulford's (2018) findings that siblings frequently take on caregiving roles, often at the expense of their own personal goals. The participants' narratives revealed a delicate balance between supporting their sibling and pursuing their own aspirations, emphasising the need for interventions that alleviate the caregiving burden.

Future Concerns and Aspirations

Anxiety about future caregiving responsibilities was a recurring concern among participants. This finding is consistent with research by Ferraioli and Harris (2009), which highlights the long-term psychological impact of these responsibilities. Participants expressed a desire for structured plans and resources to ensure their sibling's well-being, particularly as parental support diminishes. These concerns also influenced participants' career choices, with some gravitating toward caregiving professions, reflecting a broader trend observed in previous studies (Hayden et al., 2022).

Resilience and Growth

Despite the challenges, participants consistently emphasised the personal growth and resilience they developed through their experiences. Increased patience, empathy, and problem-solving skills were recurrent themes, aligning with Aksoy and Yildirim's (2008) findings that neurotypical siblings often emerge with enhanced emotional and social competencies. This resilience underscores the potential for targeted interventions to further empower neurotypical siblings and foster positive outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The findings of this study underscore critical implications for educational systems, family support programmes, and policymaking, consistent with previous research on the needs of neurotypical siblings in families affected by autism. First, schools should implement targeted resources and training to help neurotypical siblings navigate their complex roles. This aligns with Kaminsky and Dewey's (2002) findings that peer support groups and counselling services significantly improve the emotional well-being and coping mechanisms of siblings in such contexts. Structured workshops and awareness campaigns within schools could further foster resilience and advocacy skills among neurotypical siblings, equipping them to manage challenges effectively.

Second, family-focused interventions should address the specific challenges neurotypical siblings face, particularly the need for open communication and a more equitable distribution of parental attention. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of family cohesion in promoting sibling resilience, with Tozer and Atkin (2015) advocating for inclusive programmes that involve all family members in discussions about caregiving responsibilities. Such interventions can mitigate feelings of neglect while reinforcing positive family dynamics.

Finally, policymakers must prioritise the development of long-term care plans and comprehensive support systems to alleviate future caregiving concerns. Research by Ferraioli and Harris (2009) underscores the psychological burden faced by neurotypical siblings as they anticipate future caregiving responsibilities, particularly in the absence of parental support. Proactive policies that include financial aid, caregiver training, and accessible residential facilities can ensure sustainable and equitable care frameworks for individuals with autism.

These steps, rooted in evidence-based strategies, highlight the need for a holistic approach to supporting neurotypical siblings, ensuring their well-being while empowering them to contribute positively to their families and communities.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of neurotypical siblings growing up with a brother or sister on the autism spectrum. The findings highlight the duality of these relationships, characterised by both challenges and opportunities for growth. Neurotypical siblings often take on significant caregiving responsibilities, navigate complex emotional landscapes, and grapple with long-term concerns about their sibling's future. Despite these challenges, they also demonstrate remarkable resilience, empathy, and a commitment to advocacy.

Key themes identified include the emotional and social impacts of unequal attention, the demands of caregiving, and the transformative power of these experiences. The participants' narratives reveal the importance of targeted interventions and support systems to enhance their well-being and empower them in their roles.

The study underscores the need for Educational and Peer Support Programmes: Schools should provide resources tailored to neurotypical siblings, including counselling services and workshops that foster resilience and advocacy. It also emphasise the need for Family-Centered Interventions: Programmes that focus on equitable attention and communication within families to reduce the emotional burden on neurotypical siblings. Finally, this study highlights the need for Policy Development, policies that prioritise the creation of long-term care frameworks to alleviate future caregiving concerns for siblings of individuals with autism.

This study sheds light on the unique and often overlooked experiences of neurotypical siblings, emphasising their critical role within families affected by autism spectrum disorder. By amplifying their voices and addressing their needs, we can foster more inclusive and supportive environments that benefit the entire family unit.

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