

Coronavirus Q&A: Siblings

Q: "I have two children, a 14 year old son with Asperger's and an 11 year old daughter with a PDA profile of autism. My son finds it hard to deal with his sister because she needs to be in control all the time. He is more laid back and flexible, but reaches his limit regularly because she cannot do something for him if she doesn't want to. She then doesn't understand why he won't do something for her in return. They bicker a lot and neither is willing to back down. As I have severe asthma we will have to self-isolate for 11 more weeks. How can I help them both to work together instead of at odds?"

Remember we never expected this situation – daily life has changed and become more difficult for many families. Try not to set yourselves too many tasks that will create stress (whether that's clearing out the garage, doing the gardening or doing too much school work) - if your children need you emotionally or to talk to you about what's happening in our world, try to be there for them. At the moment let's try to concentrate on family relationships. Emotional and mental health has to be our first priority.

In this case, both children may have challenges with social interaction and communication, and are well on the way to adolescence, as well as being siblings. So this time may be difficult anyway, even without self-isolation.

Also it's important to remember that there is an element of standard teenage and pre-teenage behaviour going on – and these concerns are likely being faced in hundreds and thousands of homes across the country. However for autistic children it will be especially hard. Feeling in control is an important way of feeling safe for many autistic individuals – and at the moment there's simply no way of controlling the external environment. So some children will be trying to control the things they can – and at the moment that will be their family members and household activities. They'll also pick up on the anxiety of those around them, so spending time reassuring them and being present for them when they are struggling will help.

It's about finding what works for your children, but some of these ideas may be helpful:

1. **Do they have a shared interest?** If so maybe they could do this activity together for a time limited period e.g. 30 mins once per day? This would encourage them to enjoy this activity together but not spend too long with each other?
2. **Rather than doing things for each other, could they do things for YOU?** For example, taking turns to make you a cup of tea, wash the dishes, take out the bin out etc. – maybe doing one of these chores before mid-morning break, with the incentive of their favourite snack when it's done?
3. They may need to spend some of their morning and afternoon in their own quiet place, e.g. their bedroom? **They will need their own 'downtime'** to help regulate emotions and sensory balance. It may be better for them to spend time on their own rather than arguing, as this will affect their emotional wellbeing.
4. You may need to schedule/**share your time between both of your children individually**, i.e. 1:1 at separate times. Obviously this is not always easy, but may be easier than your children trying to work or play together by themselves.
5. Or you may need to **be present to facilitate the time they spend together?** This will help you to minimise their arguments and create a much more positive experience for them both.

It's likely that your children, as so many others, will have 'lagging skills' ([see Ross Greene – Lives in the Balance](#)) and may only be able to in the same room for now with a parent present.