

SIBLINGS BEHAVIORAL REPRESENTATION THE OF FAMILY MEMBER WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Considering the consequences of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) on the family life, the perceptions of young siblings need to be assessed. The aim of this research was to evaluate the representations of eight sisters, aged between 6 and 12, of children with ASD using drawings and interviews on these illustrations. Drawings and interviews reveal that these children perceive their brother or sister with ASD as a full participant in the family's daily activities. However, they perceive several characteristics and consequences of ASD in the social interactions of their siblings having ASD.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum disorder, siblings, graphic representations

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is estimated at 1% (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) or higher (Centers for Disease Control, 2014). Studies regarding children with ASD and their siblings present mixed findings including both positive and negative effects of the syndrome on the family. The positive consequences are linked to the development of humanistic values, while the negative effects include behavioral problems or limited parents' attention to the typical child (Vallée-Ouimet, & Poirier, 2014). Research on siblings is often based on the perceptions of parents and teachers. Furthermore, studies conducted with children are mostly based on interviews or psychometric questionnaires. The interview process has several advantages but it also has limitations (Sattler, 2006). The limits are associated with the young children's capacities in describing their feeling and attitudes. Drawing offers an alternative way to obtain the child's representation. Drawing is also part of the child's natural activities.

OBJECTIVE

The present study aims to use drawing in order to get an understanding of how siblings of children with ASD perceive their relationship with their brother or sister.

METHOD

Participants

Eight girls aged from 6 to 12 years old (Mean age: 9 years, SD: 1,6) with a sibling with ASD participated in this study.

The siblings with ASD were four boys and four girls aged between 5 and 12 years old (Mean age: 8,5 years, SD: 2,8). Three siblings with ASD attended school in a regular classroom, four attended special school programs and one was home schooled.

Instruments and procedure

A questionnaire was used to collect information about the family and their siblings. We asked children to draw three different situations:

- 1) Their family practicing an activity of their choice;
- 2) The sibling playing with his brother or sister with ASD;
- 3) His brother or sister with ASD playing on the school playground.

We chose these three situations to gather perceptions on three different dimensions: relationships in the family, personal relationships (situation of play) and perceptions in a social setting with peers. Following the three drawings, we questioned the children in order to obtain information about the characters and situations represented in the drawings. The following table presents these questions.

RESULTS

According to the preliminary results, all of the sibling's graphic portrayed the whole family. The sibling with ASD was always present. The represented activities were diversified: walking in a park, swimming, having a meal, dancing. When asked to picture themselves playing with their sibling with ASD, children also identified different activities: playing with "Legos or Shopkins", biking, swimming, running, dancing. One child drew herself running in a hallway to allow his brother with ASD to spend his "excess energy".

For some children, these activities were done regularly. One sister reported dancing with her sister before supper on a daily basis. When asked to imagine their sibling with ASD on the playground, two drawings portrayed the child with ASD playing alone. In the third drawing condition, interactions with peers were less evident than in the second drawing, as the child with ASD is represented practicing a solitary activity. However, three children were clearly represented having interactions with peers: soccer, playing "Battleship" and playing tag. When talking about their interactions with their brother or sister, the majority of the siblings clearly stated differences or particularities related to the ASD symptoms. For example, a child reported that her brother often "plays in his head", forgetting to interact with his environment. Another reported being "sad and desperate" (words used by the child) by the isolation of her sister with ASD on the school playground.

CONCLUSION

These preliminary results indicate that the participants perceived their siblings with ASD as full members of the family. All of them also reported playing with their sibling and some consider the ASD characteristics in the choice of the game. Additionally, most of the participants are aware of the differences created by ASD.

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