

Perceived Emotional Neglect and Parental Attention Among Typically Developing Siblings of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Qualitative Study in Greek Families

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ABSTRACT

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) affects not only the diagnosed child but also the emotional functioning of the entire family system. Although considerable research has focused on parents and individuals with ASD, the experiences of typically developing (TD) siblings remain comparatively underexplored, particularly within the Greek cultural context. The present study aimed to investigate parental perceptions of emotional neglect among TD siblings of children with ASD and to explore the strategies used to maintain emotional balance within the family. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with nine parents of children with ASD and TD siblings residing in Greece. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Seven overarching themes emerged: (a) continuous struggle for emotional balance, (b) affectionate yet fragile sibling relationships, (c) direct expressions of neglect and exclusion, (d) rebuilding emotional connections, (e) unequal praise and recognition, (f) communication as a protective factor, and (g) long-term parental concerns regarding emotional outcomes. The findings indicated that perceptions of emotional neglect did not result from parental indifference but rather from emotional exhaustion, competing caregiving demands, and the complexity of managing ASD-related needs. Parents described various strategies aimed at restoring emotional balance, including one-to-one rituals, emotional validation, and open discussions about autism. Furthermore, communication and family routines emerged as important protective factors promoting sibling adjustment and emotional well-being. The study highlights the importance of family-centered and sibling-focused interventions and emphasizes the need for culturally responsive support systems that address the psychosocial needs of all family members. These findings contribute to the limited qualitative literature concerning sibling experiences in Greek families affected by ASD and provide practical implications for clinicians, educators, and policymakers.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, typically developing siblings, emotional neglect, sibling relationships, qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and interaction, accompanied by restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior and interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Recent estimates suggest that approximately one in every 100 children worldwide is diagnosed with ASD (World Health Organization, 2021). The demands associated with raising a child with ASD often affect the entire family system, influencing parental well-being, family relationships, and sibling interactions (Hayes & Watson, 2013; Karst & Van Hecke, 2012). Although considerable attention has been devoted to the experiences of parents and individuals with ASD, the psychosocial experiences of typically developing (TD) siblings have received comparatively less attention. Existing research indicates that TD siblings may develop empathy, resilience, and prosocial attitudes (Orm et al., 2021). However, they may also experience anxiety, loneliness, increased caregiving responsibilities, and feelings of emotional neglect resulting from the disproportionate allocation of parental resources toward the child with ASD (Shivers

et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2021). Parental stress represents one of the most significant factors influencing family functioning in families affected by ASD. Parents frequently experience emotional exhaustion and increased caregiving demands, which may unintentionally limit the emotional availability offered to their other children (Meadan et al., 2010). Consequently, TD siblings may perceive reduced parental warmth and unequal emotional attention, even when parents remain highly committed to meeting the needs of all family members (Watson et al., 2021).

The Greek cultural context provides an additional dimension to these experiences. Greek families are traditionally characterized by strong interdependence, intensive parental involvement, and high expectations regarding caregiving responsibilities (Koukou et al., 2017; Veroni, 2019). Despite these characteristics, limited research has examined how Greek families manage emotional balance and sibling relationships when one child has ASD. Furthermore, most previous studies have employed quantitative approaches, leaving the subjective experiences and perceptions of family members insufficiently explored. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate parental perceptions regarding emotional neglect among typically developing siblings of children with ASD and to explore the strategies employed by parents to maintain emotional balance within Greek families. Through a qualitative approach, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of sibling relationships and to provide practical implications for family-centered interventions and psychosocial support.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Family Dynamics and Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) affects not only the individual diagnosed with the condition but also the functioning of the entire family system. Parents often face increased caregiving demands, emotional exhaustion, financial pressures, and concerns regarding the future of their child, all of which may influence family relationships and overall well-being (Karst & Van Hecke, 2012; McStay et al., 2014). Research consistently demonstrates that parents of children with ASD experience significantly higher levels of stress compared with parents of typically developing children (Hayes & Watson, 2013). Factors such as behavioral difficulties, social stigma, limited access to services, and uncertainty about future outcomes contribute substantially to parental burden (Altieri & von Kluge, 2009).

These challenges affect the allocation of parental resources within the family. Because children with ASD often require intensive support, therapy sessions, and constant supervision, parents may unintentionally devote disproportionate amounts of time and emotional energy to the child with ASD (Meadan et al., 2010). Consequently, family relationships may become characterized by unequal patterns of attention and emotional availability. Such processes are particularly relevant within collectivistic and family-oriented cultures, such as Greece, where strong interdependence and caregiving obligations constitute central family values (Koukou et al., 2017; Veroni, 2019).

Emotional Experiences of Typically Developing Siblings

The experiences of typically developing siblings are complex and multidimensional. On the one hand, several studies have shown that growing up with a sibling with ASD may foster empathy, emotional maturity, resilience, and prosocial behaviors (Orm et al., 2021). Siblings frequently develop increased sensitivity toward diversity and may acquire advanced interpersonal skills through their daily interactions and caregiving experiences (Shivers et al., 2019). On the other hand, the literature also highlights significant emotional challenges. Typically developing siblings may experience anxiety, loneliness, frustration, and increased responsibilities at an early age (Watson et al., 2021). Exposure to disruptive behaviors, communication difficulties, and the unpredictability associated with ASD may create stress and negatively affect sibling relationships (Tudor et al., 2018; Lindor et al., 2019). Moreover, siblings often assume caregiving roles beyond their developmental stage, which may contribute to emotional burden and feelings of isolation (McHale et al., 2016). Previous studies have reported that emotional adjustment largely depends on family functioning and parental support. Open communication, emotional validation, and opportunities for individual attention have been associated with better psychosocial outcomes and greater resilience among typically developing siblings (McHale et al., 2012).

Perceived Emotional Neglect and Parental Attention

Perceived emotional neglect refers to children's subjective experience of receiving insufficient emotional support, recognition, or parental attention rather than to deliberate parental rejection or material deprivation (Rohner, 2004). In families raising children with ASD, emotional neglect may emerge unintentionally as parents prioritize the intensive needs of the diagnosed child (Watson et al., 2021). Previous research suggests that typically developing siblings often perceive unequal treatment and reduced emotional availability from parents, despite recognizing the special needs of their brother or sister (Shivers et al., 2019). Parents themselves frequently report feelings of guilt associated with their inability to distribute attention equally among their children (Meadan et al., 2010). These perceptions may affect self-esteem, emotional security, and sibling relationships, potentially leading to internalized feelings of invisibility or exclusion. Within the Greek cultural context, traditional family values and strong caregiving expectations may intensify these dynamics. Families often prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable member, sometimes at the expense of the emotional needs of other children (Koukou et al., 2017; Veroni, 2019). Consequently, understanding how parents perceive and manage these emotional imbalances is essential for designing effective family-centered interventions.

Research Gap

Despite the growing body of literature concerning ASD and family functioning, several important gaps remain. Most studies have focused primarily on parents or individuals with ASD, whereas the experiences of typically developing siblings have received comparatively less attention (Meadan et al., 2010). Furthermore, existing research has predominantly employed quantitative methodologies, which, although valuable, may fail to capture the complexity and emotional depth of sibling experiences (Watson et al., 2021). Another limitation concerns the scarcity of culturally sensitive studies. Most available evidence originates from North America and Western Europe, whereas research conducted within Mediterranean societies remains limited. In Greece, where family cohesion and caregiving responsibilities occupy a central place in social life, little is known about how cultural norms shape sibling relationships and perceptions of emotional neglect (Pavlopoulou & Dimitriou, 2019). Moreover, intervention studies focusing specifically on the psychosocial needs of typically developing siblings remain scarce. Although substantial efforts have been directed toward supporting children with ASD and their parents, structured sibling-centered interventions are still underdeveloped (Meadan et al., 2009). Consequently, qualitative investigations are needed to provide a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences of families and to inform culturally appropriate support strategies. Accordingly, the present study aimed to explore parental perceptions regarding emotional neglect among typically developing siblings of children with ASD in Greece and to identify the strategies used by parents to maintain emotional balance within the family system.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to explore parental perceptions regarding emotional neglect and sibling relationships in families with children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Qualitative approaches are particularly appropriate for investigating lived experiences and complex emotional phenomena because they allow participants to provide rich and detailed accounts within their natural contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Semi-structured interviews were selected due to their flexibility and their ability to facilitate in-depth exploration while maintaining consistency across participants (Kallio et al., 2016). This approach enabled the researcher to investigate parental experiences concerning emotional balance, parental attention, and strategies used to support both children.

Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants who possessed direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample consisted of nine parents residing in Greece who had at least one child diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder and one typically developing child. Participants represented diverse family structures and socioeconomic backgrounds. Parents were selected because of their central role in family functioning and their ability to provide reflective accounts regarding sibling interactions

and parental practices. Although the inclusion of typically developing siblings themselves could have offered valuable first-hand perspectives, ethical considerations and differences in developmental maturity led the study to focus exclusively on parental narratives. All participants provided informed consent before participation and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

Procedure

Following ethical approval, participants were recruited through learning support centers and private psychologists across Greece. Families that met the inclusion criteria received information regarding the purpose and procedures of the study. Parents who agreed to participate provided written informed consent before data collection. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted either face-to-face or online via secure videoconferencing platforms, depending on participants' preferences. The interview guide was developed following a review of the relevant literature and included open-ended questions concerning parental attention, sibling relationships, emotional challenges, and strategies used to support typically developing children. Interviews lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' permission. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to preserve the participants' narratives and emotional expressions. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and identifying information was removed from transcripts. Participants were reminded of their right to decline any question or withdraw from the study without consequences.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). Initially, the researchers repeatedly read the transcripts to become familiar with the data and identify meaningful patterns. An inductive coding approach was adopted, allowing themes to emerge from participants' narratives rather than imposing predetermined theoretical categories. Codes with conceptual similarities were grouped into broader themes through an iterative process of comparison and refinement. Throughout the analytical procedure, reflexivity was maintained to minimize the influence of researcher assumptions and enhance interpretative rigor. The researchers also maintained reflective discussions throughout the analytical process to acknowledge how their professional backgrounds and previous experience in autism and family research could influence data interpretation. Continuous reflection and collaborative discussions were used to challenge assumptions and strengthen the credibility of the thematic analysis. Credibility and trustworthiness were strengthened through continuous comparison between the emerging themes and the original data (Nowell et al., 2017). Seven overarching themes were ultimately identified, representing parents' experiences regarding emotional balance, sibling relationships, perceived neglect, and long-term concerns about family functioning.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis revealed seven major themes that describe parental perceptions of emotional neglect and family dynamics among typically developing siblings of children with ASD.

Continuous Struggle for Emotional Balance

Parents consistently described the challenge of balancing the needs of both children. The extensive therapeutic and caregiving demands associated with ASD often resulted in reduced emotional availability for the typically developing sibling.

One participant stated:

"I try to manage my time as much as possible, but my son has many needs, and sometimes I feel that I neglect my daughter."

Another parent explained:

"There are moments when one child needs immediate attention, and the other simply has to wait. That is something that makes me feel guilty."

These accounts suggest that perceived neglect originates primarily from emotional exhaustion and competing demands rather than from parental indifference.

Affectionate Yet Fragile Sibling Relationships

Parents described sibling relationships characterized by affection, protection, and emotional closeness, but also by frustration and disappointment resulting from communication difficulties and limited reciprocity.

One father reported:

"My daughter is very protective of her brother, but sometimes she feels disappointed because he cannot respond emotionally in the way she expects."

Although sibling bonds were generally positive, unmet expectations frequently generated feelings of loneliness and emotional distance.

Direct Expressions of Neglect and Exclusion

Several parents recalled emotionally powerful moments in which their typically developing children explicitly expressed feelings of exclusion.

One father recalled:

"When I missed his school event because of his brother's therapy, he looked at me and said, 'I exist too, Dad.'"

Another mother remembered:

"My daughter once said, 'You always care more about him than about me.'"

These statements represented turning points for many parents, increasing their awareness of the emotional needs of their typically developing children.

Rebuilding Emotional Connections

Parents reported adopting intentional strategies aimed at restoring emotional balance and strengthening relationships with their typically developing children.

Examples included one-to-one routines, bedtime rituals, and shared activities.

One participant stated:

"Every Thursday is our special day. We spend time together doing something she enjoys."

Another parent explained:

"Before bedtime, we always talk about his day. Those moments help him feel that he has my full attention."

These practices appeared to function as protective mechanisms against emotional disconnection.

Unequal Praise and Recognition

Parents acknowledged that the achievements of children with ASD were often celebrated more visibly, whereas the accomplishments of typically developing siblings could unintentionally receive less attention.

One mother stated:

"My son's progress requires so much effort that we celebrate every small achievement. Sometimes I realize that my daughter's successes are taken for granted."

Such differences in recognition occasionally contributed to perceptions of unfairness and emotional neglect.

Communication as a Protective Factor

Open communication regarding autism emerged as an important protective mechanism. Parents who discussed ASD openly reported fewer misunderstandings and greater empathy among siblings.

One mother explained:

"We use simple language to explain autism to our daughter. It helps her understand her brother's needs."

Conversely, parents who delayed these discussions reported confusion and frustration among their children.

These findings suggest that age-appropriate autism education within the family may reduce perceptions of favoritism and strengthen sibling relationships.

Long-Term Concerns and Emotional Burden

Parents expressed considerable concern regarding the long-term psychological consequences experienced by their typically developing children. Many worried that their children might assume excessive caregiving responsibilities or suppress their own emotional needs.

One participant stated:

"I worry that my daughter will become too responsible and forget about her own needs."

Another parent reported:

"I want my son to know that he is equally loved and supported. That is why we have already sought psychological guidance."

These concerns demonstrate that parents recognize the potential long-term impact of family dynamics and actively seek ways to protect the emotional well-being of all family members.

DISCUSSION

The present study explored parental perceptions regarding emotional neglect among typically developing siblings of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder within the Greek cultural context. The findings revealed that emotional imbalance does not arise from parental rejection but rather from the considerable demands associated with caring for a child with ASD. These findings may also be interpreted through the lens of Family Systems Theory, which conceptualizes the family as an interconnected emotional unit in which changes affecting one member influence the functioning of the entire system. From this perspective, the increased caregiving demands associated with ASD inevitably reshape parental roles, emotional availability, and sibling interactions. Consequently, the emotional experiences reported by parents should be understood as systemic responses to family adaptation rather than as isolated parent-child difficulties. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a useful framework for understanding the broader contextual influences on sibling experiences. According to this perspective, children's emotional development is shaped not only by family relationships but also by interactions across multiple ecological systems, including schools, healthcare services, community support, and cultural expectations. Within the Greek context, strong family cohesion and caregiving responsibilities may simultaneously promote resilience while increasing emotional pressure on typically developing siblings.

Consistent with previous research (Meadan et al., 2010; Watson et al., 2021), parents reported difficulties in distributing time and emotional resources equally among their children. Feelings of guilt and emotional exhaustion were common and appeared to contribute to perceptions of neglect among typically developing siblings. The study also confirmed previous findings indicating that sibling relationships are characterized by

both affection and frustration (Trew, 2024). Although typically developing siblings often demonstrated empathy and protectiveness, unmet emotional expectations and communication difficulties occasionally resulted in feelings of disappointment and exclusion. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the importance of open communication and family rituals as protective mechanisms. Parents who intentionally created opportunities for individual interaction and discussed autism openly appeared to foster stronger emotional bonds and greater understanding among siblings. These findings are consistent with previous studies highlighting the role of communication and family functioning in promoting sibling adjustment (McHale et al., 2012; Morris et al., 2024). Importantly, the study contributes to the limited literature concerning Greek families and demonstrates the influence of cultural values emphasizing family cohesion and caregiving responsibilities. These cultural characteristics may strengthen family bonds while simultaneously increasing emotional pressures and feelings of responsibility among typically developing siblings.

Practical Implications

The findings of the present study highlight the importance of adopting family-centered approaches that address the emotional needs of all children within families affected by Autism Spectrum Disorder. Although interventions traditionally focus on the child with ASD and parental stress, the experiences of typically developing siblings deserve equal attention. First, increasing parental awareness regarding emotional equity is essential. Parents may benefit from psychoeducational programs aimed at recognizing early signs of emotional neglect and developing strategies to maintain balanced emotional relationships with all children. Small but consistent practices, such as scheduled one-to-one activities and active emotional validation, may help strengthen sibling well-being. Second, sibling-focused psychosocial interventions should be incorporated into support services. Counseling programs, peer support groups, and resilience-building interventions could provide safe environments where typically developing siblings can express emotions, discuss concerns, and develop adaptive coping strategies. Previous evidence suggests that early emotional support may reduce anxiety and internalizing difficulties among siblings of children with ASD (Shivers et al., 2019). Third, open communication regarding autism should be encouraged within families. Providing age-appropriate explanations about ASD may reduce misunderstandings and foster empathy and acceptance among siblings. Autism education can promote healthier family relationships and diminish perceptions of favoritism or emotional inequality. Finally, policy makers and mental health professionals should recognize typically developing siblings as individuals with legitimate psychosocial needs. In Greece, where family cohesion and caregiving responsibilities are strongly emphasized, support services should adopt culturally sensitive approaches that address the needs of the entire family system rather than focusing exclusively on the diagnosed child.

CONCLUSION

The present study explored parental perceptions regarding emotional neglect among typically developing siblings of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Greece. Through qualitative analysis of nine semi-structured interviews, seven themes emerged, illustrating the complexity of family life and the emotional challenges associated with balancing the needs of all family members. The findings suggest that perceived emotional neglect does not result from parental indifference but rather from emotional exhaustion, competing demands, and the considerable caregiving responsibilities associated with ASD. Although sibling relationships were characterized by affection and protectiveness, they were also accompanied by feelings of frustration, exclusion, and unequal recognition. Importantly, the study demonstrated that parental strategies such as open communication, individual rituals, and emotional validation may function as protective factors that strengthen sibling relationships and promote emotional well-being. Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of culturally sensitive family-centered interventions that acknowledge the psychosocial needs of typically developing siblings. By focusing on an underexplored area within the Greek context, this study contributes to the growing literature on sibling experiences in families affected by ASD and provides practical implications for clinicians, educators, and policy makers seeking to support the well-being of the entire family system.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study.

First, the sample consisted of only nine parents from Greece, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Although qualitative research emphasizes depth rather than representativeness, caution should be exercised when extending the results to other populations or cultural contexts. Second, the study relied exclusively on parental perspectives. Although parents provided valuable insights, their interpretations may not fully capture the subjective experiences of typically developing siblings. Including siblings themselves could provide a more comprehensive understanding of emotional experiences and coping processes. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow conclusions regarding the evolution of sibling relationships and emotional adjustment over time. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how these experiences change throughout development. Finally, social desirability bias cannot be excluded. Parents may have unintentionally emphasized emotionally reparative behaviors or underreported experiences associated with guilt and emotional imbalance. Despite efforts to encourage honest reflection, this possibility remains an inherent limitation of qualitative self-report studies.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should incorporate the perspectives of typically developing siblings, parents, and other family members to provide a more comprehensive understanding of family dynamics in families of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Longitudinal and mixed-methods designs are needed to examine how perceptions of emotional neglect and sibling relationships evolve over time and across developmental stages. Future studies should also be grounded in established theoretical frameworks, such as Family Systems Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, to better explain the complex interactions between individual, family, and environmental factors. Furthermore, including participants from diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and geographical backgrounds would enhance the generalizability of findings. Finally, intervention-focused research evaluating sibling counselling, family-based psychoeducation, and psychosocial support programmes is essential to identify evidence-based strategies that promote sibling well-being, strengthen family resilience, and improve overall family functioning.

Ethical Approval

All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committees and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their inclusion in the study.

Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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