

Self-reported stress among adolescent siblings of individuals with autism spectrum disorder and Down syndrome

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Many studies have shown that parents and caregivers of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) experience more stress than other parents, even parents of individuals with other disabilities. However, we do not know if siblings of individuals with ASD experience similar increases in stress. The current study used an online questionnaire to survey 116 adolescent siblings of individuals with ASD (ASD-Sibs) about their overall stress levels and their perceived social support. The responses from the ASD-Sibs were compared to 99 responses from adolescent siblings of individuals with Down syndrome (DS-Sibs). Results showed that ASD-Sibs reported about 10% more stress overall than did DS-Sibs, but there were no differences between the groups in perceived social support. Having a brother or sister with ASD was related to increased stress even when accounting for differences in behavior problems of the brother or sister. These results are important for families of individuals with ASD because they show that siblings may experience the same high levels of stress previously found in parents, even though they report average levels of perceived social support. More research is needed to determine why siblings may experience increased stress and how to develop strategies to help siblings and families in general alleviate and manage stress.