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Effect of parental communication on adjustment of typically developing children with an atypically developing sibling

College of Sciences and Health Professions

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Abstract

Disorders comprised of intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) as a group are comprised of autism spectrum disorders, Down syndrome, and various genetic conditions that stunt the intellectual and functional development of an individual. These disorders affect roughly 14% of families in the US (Boyle et al., 2011), which approximates to seven million households in the US. The presence of IDD in a child is often associated with increased stress for the parents, given that IDD is often accompanied by behavioral problems in the affected child. Surprisingly, relatively little work has been done on the effects of IDD on typically developing children (TD) of the affected siblings. The few studies that examine these effects show mixed results, with some noting worse adjustment, in the form of greater internalizing problems (e.g., depression & anxiety) and externalizing behaviors (e.g., oppositional defiant behaviors) in the TD child that continues through adulthood, and others noting positive interpersonal outcomes (Kersh, 2007; Hodapp, Urbano, & Burke, 2010). One potential explanation for these mixed findings may lie with the communication between parents and their TD offspring. Specifically, discussing the IDD sibling's condition with the TD child may reduce the resentment these youths often feel by the high parental demands required by their IDD sibling. Further, it may reduce the TD child's worries about developing the IDD child's condition. This study aimed to examine the role of parental communication in the TD children's worries about their IDD sibling and their internalizing and externalizing symptoms.