

Systems Theory: Families and Autism

Melanie Horn Mallers, PhD

CSU Fullerton, Department of Human Services

My friend's son (4 1/2 years old) was recently diagnosed with autism. Though he is considered high-functioning, and *merely* "on the spectrum", my friend and her husband are understandably devastated. They will begin the journey of visiting with multiple doctors and participating in ongoing assessments, as well as organizing special arrangements for his schooling. Also ahead is dialogue with other parents, friends, and people, as well as seeking out new resources to explain why this little boy acts "oddly" and "differently". They are scared and frustrated. They are also relieved since with the diagnosis comes permission to stop blaming themselves for their son's behaviors. They can stop thinking they were bad parents employing poor discipline strategies. My friend is also brave. She's moving forward reminding herself that this is the same little boy she has always loved. She works hard each day to mentally prepare herself for this unexpected life passage.

I visited with my friend and her son, along with her three year old daughter, at the park last week. Though my initial focus was on her son, I couldn't help but notice her daughter. This little girl, who is considered "normal", was learning to mimic her brother. She now thinks it is fun to sit and rock, repeat words in a sing-song manner, and even head-bang, all common behaviors related to autism (Autism Fact Sheet, National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/autism/detail_autism.htm). This struck me as interesting. Though there is much literature out there on autism, its diagnosis, related causes and treatments, and there is some information on how the family is impacted by autism, such as decreased marital quality and impaired sibling relationships (DeMyer & Goldberg, 1983; Morgan, 1998; Wehman, 1998; Wood & Zolinda, 2003), I have rarely heard discussion regarding how autism impacts the development of younger siblings of autistic children. How does my friend tell her young daughter it is not ok for her to sing and rock when her older brother does it and he is not "punished" for his behavior? How will she and her husband create equal time with their children when their son is going to need more from them? How do my friend and her husband adapt to rearing an autistic child alongside a child without autism?

In attempting to answer these questions, I began to explore the possible application of several family theories, including symbolic interaction, family strengths, social construction and the feminist framework. I decided what is most applicable is **family systems theory**. According to family systems theory, everything that happens to any family members has an impact on everyone else in the family (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2003). A family is considered one emotional and functional unit whereby individuals cannot be understood in isolation from one another, but rather as a part of their family, one that is interconnected and interdependent. Family systems theory grew out of the general systems theory which was created by Bertalanffy and colleagues (1960) who argued that a whole is made of interacting parts and that all things or entities are interconnected. Family theorists later applied these ideas to marriage and family as a system.

In attempting to integrate this theory to the situation described above, it appears that this loving family will need to redefine their original system and its day-to-day functioning. Roles will have to shift and parts will have to change. In fact, it seems that

their small family unit could be developed into a larger unit, one comprised of other families with autistic children whereby support can be obtained and siblings can get socialization from other *healthy* siblings. As such, “boundaries” will need to be broken so that connections can be made to other “systems” (family units). Parents may need to create “sub-systems” whereby special time is created solely for the other siblings. This may help to alleviate feelings of being left out or ignored. The family will need to be encouraged to be an “open” or “morphogenic” system, one that is open to growth or change, and not “closed” or “morphostatic,” one that maintains the status quo and avoids change. This family, and others like it, can learn to change by sharing household duties, being more flexible in gender and power roles, and redefining expectations. Another principle of systems theory that can be useful to consider is “feedback” or the process of exchanging ideas back and forth. This is in essence increasing communication between family members and setting designated times to exchange ideas and express feelings. The autistic child will inevitably also cause stress on the parents and other siblings. Getting time away, maintaining a sense of humor and taking time for oneself will be key steps to ensuring the “unit” does not fall apart.

The application of systems theory to families with an autistic child reminds us that we can broaden the meaning of family to include friends and neighbors and other support systems. Change is inevitable, flexibility in roles is essential, and moments to speak freely and honestly are critical. All families can benefit from such opportunities for growth and bonding. We should all be reminded of one of the core tenants of family systems: healthy families, whether dysfunctional or challenged, ensure that each member is valuable and special.

- DeMyer, M. K., & Goldberg, P. (1983). Family needs of the autistic adolescent. In E. Schopler & G. B. Mesibov (Eds.), *Autism in Adolescents and Adults* (pp. 225-250). New York: Plenum Press.
- Goldenberg, I., & Goldenberg, H. (2003). *Family Therapy: An Overview* (6th ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Morgan, S. (1988, June). The autistic child and family functioning: A developmental-family systems perspective. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 18(2), 263-280. Retrieved February 2, 2009, doi:10.1007/BF02211952
- Rivers, J., & Stoneman, Z. (2003, August). Sibling Relationships When a Child Has Autism: Marital Stress and Support Coping. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 33(4), 383-394. Retrieved February 2, 2009, doi:10.1023/A:1025006727395
- Von Bertalanffy, L., & Rapoport, A. (1960). *General Systems: Yearbook of the Society for General Systems Research. Vol. IV*. Oxford England: Braun-Brumfeld. Retrieved February 2, 2009, from PsycINFO database.
- Wehman, T. (1998, June). Family-centered early intervention services: Factors contributing to increased parent involvement and participation. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 13(2), 80-86. Retrieved February 2, 2009, from PsycINFO database.