

# Sibling Dynamics in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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## Introduction

Although there has been tremendous interest in understanding the development and adjustment of siblings of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)(Hastings & Petalas, 2014; Orsmond, Kuo, & Seltzer, 2009), there are few large scale and well-designed studies on this topic. There is evidence that having a brother or sister with ASD has both positive and negative impacts on siblings (Moyson & Roeyers, 2011). Indeed, studies have shown that the sibling relationship when one child has ASD is less intimate, involves fewer prosocial behaviors, and consists of fewer nurturing behaviors compared to the sibling relationship when both children are typically developing (Kaminsky & Dewey, 2001). However, literature has also conveyed that siblings who have a brother or sister with ASD see positives to these experiences as well.

To further the understanding of sibling relationship when one child has ASD, the present study examined the sibling relationship and its relation to child family correlates using a sample of 157 families who had a child with ASD (aged 5-12 years) and at least one typically developing sibling.

## Hypotheses

- 1) Siblings of children with more severe ASD symptoms will have a more negative sibling relationship than siblings of children with less severe ASD symptoms.
- 2) Older siblings will show more helpful and positive feelings towards the child with ASD as compared to younger siblings.
- 3) Families with a greater number of typically developing siblings in the home will show more positive sibling relationship with the child with ASD.
- 4) Presence of an intellectual disorder in addition to the ASD will result in a more negative sibling relationship.

## Methods

### Participants

- 157 mothers age in years:  $M = 38.89$  ( $SD = 5.68$ )
- Household income:  $M = \$80-89K$  ( $SD = \$30K$ )
- Child with ASD age in years:  $M = 7.95$  ( $SD = 2.28$ )
- Birth Order: 48.9% younger typically developing siblings(s), 32.7% older typically developing siblings(s), and 18.4% younger and older typically developing siblings

### Measures

Mothers independently reported on:

- *Family Impact Questionnaire-Revised* (Donenberg & Baker, 1993)
- *Social Responsiveness Scale-Second Edition* (Constantino & Gruber, 2012)
- *Family and Child Demographics*

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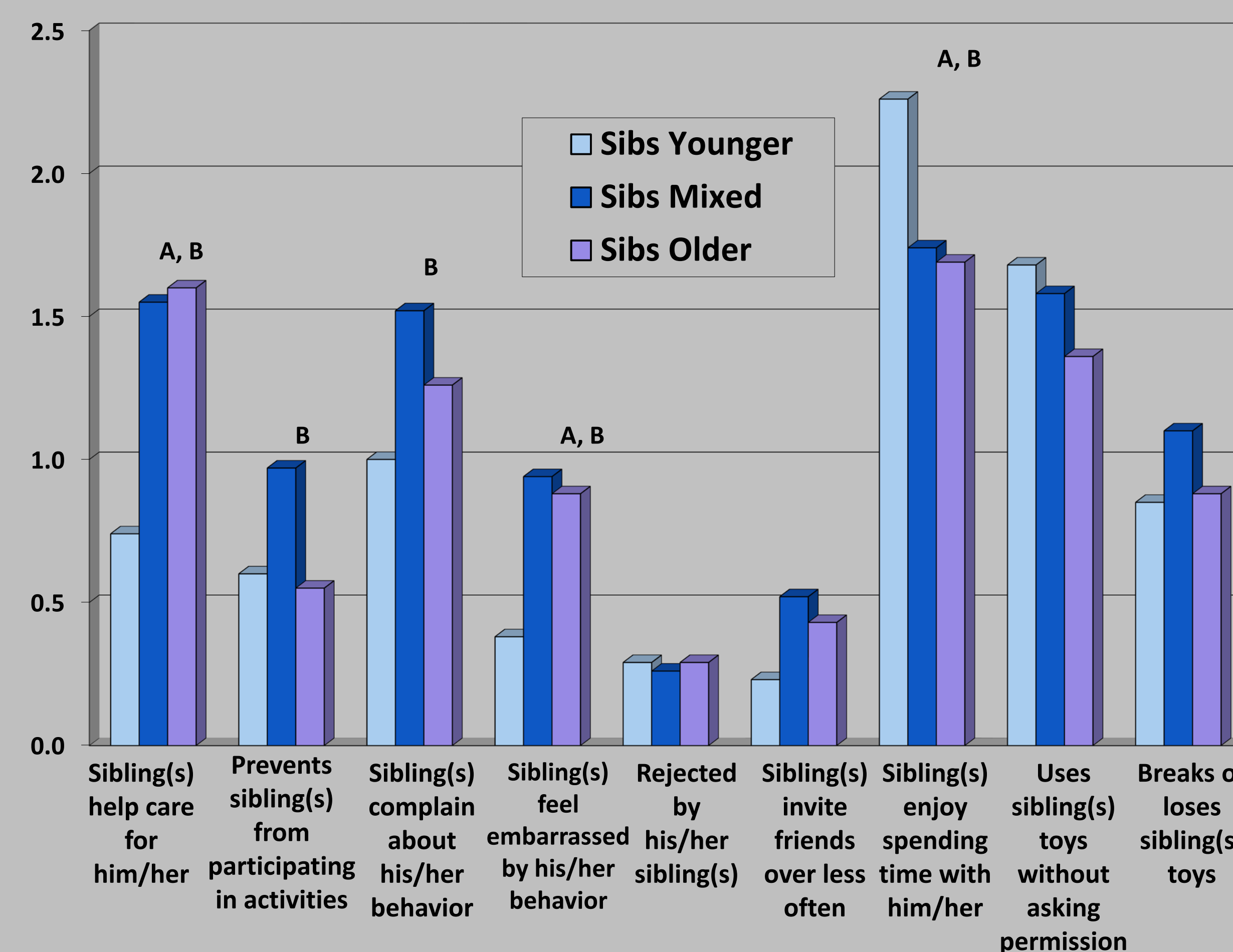
## Results

### Hypothesis 1: Severity of ASD Symptoms and Sibling Relationship

	Severity of Autism Symptoms
Prevents sibling(s) from participating in activities	↑ $r = .25, p .001$
Siblings complain about him/her behavior	↑ $r = .31, p <.001$
Sibling(s) feel embarrassed by his/her behavior	↑ $r = .24, p .002$
Rejected by his/her sibling(s)	↑ $r = .25, p 0.01$
Sibling(s) invite friends over less often	↑ $r = .23, p .003$
Sibling(s) enjoy spending time with him/her	↓ $r = -.33, p <.001$
Uses sibling(s) toys without asking permission	↑ $r = .21, p .007$
Breaks or loses sibling(s) toys	↑ $r = .25, p .001$
**Sibling(s) help care for him/her	↑ $r = .01, p = .97$

Note. \*\*no significance between variables

### Hypothesis 2: Birth Order and Sibling Relationship



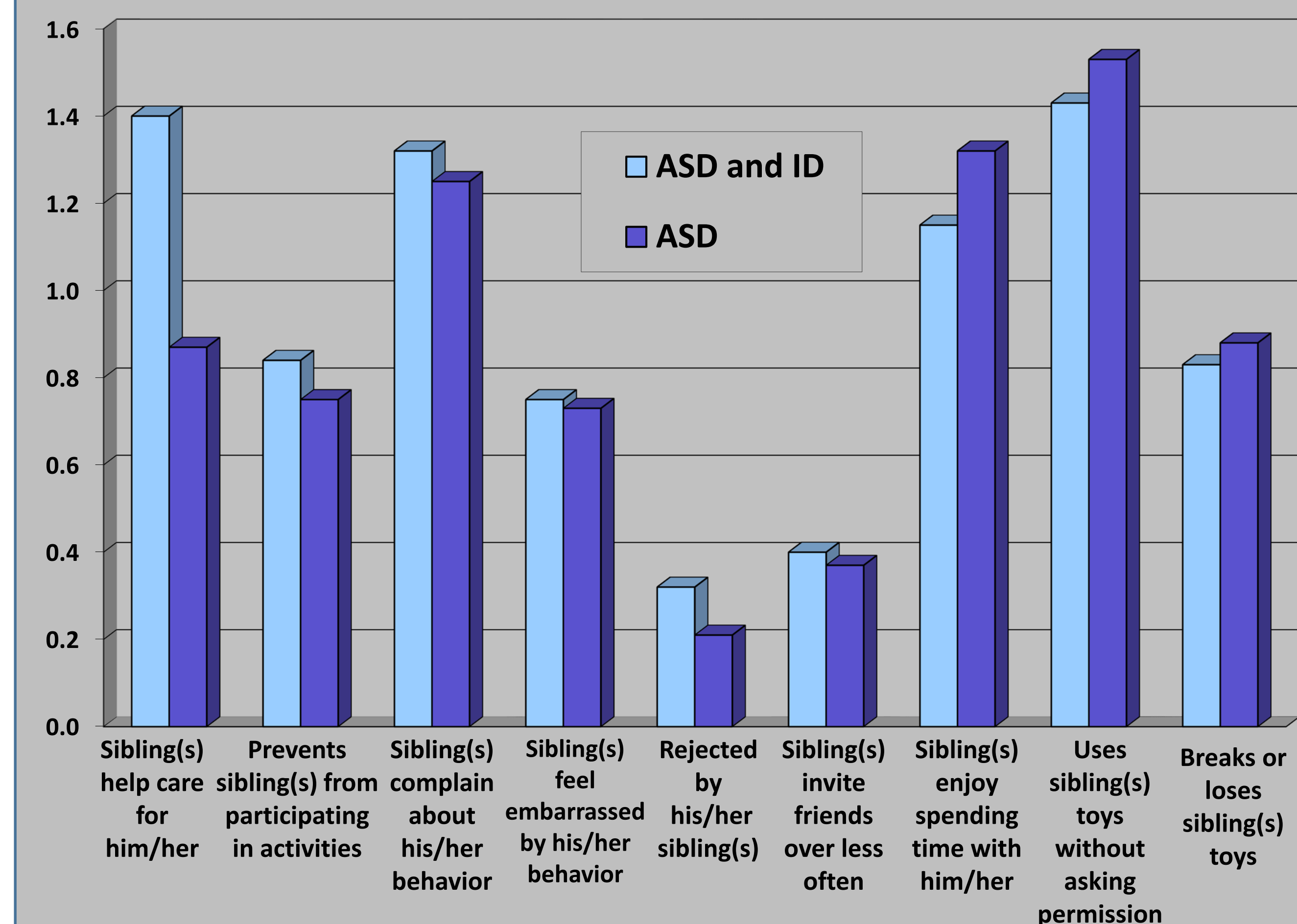
Note. A = significant difference younger vs. older;  
B = significant difference younger vs. mixed

### Hypothesis 3: Number of Typically Developing Siblings and Sibling Relationship

	Typically Developing Siblings
**Prevents sibling(s) from participating in activities	↑ $r = .09, p .25$
**Siblings complain about him/her behavior	↑ $r = .09, p .25$
Sibling(s) feel embarrassed by his/her behavior	↑ $r = .17, p .034$
**Rejected by his/her sibling(s)	↓ $r = -.11, p .190$
**Sibling(s) invite friends over less often	↑ $r = .06, p .496$
**Sibling(s) enjoy spending time with him/her	↓ $r = -.04, p .60$
**Uses sibling(s) toys without asking permission	↑ $r = .04, p .62$
**Breaks or loses sibling(s) toys	↑ $r = .07, p .39$
Sibling(s) help care for him/her	↑ $r = .17, p .03$

Note. \*\*no significance between variables

### Hypothesis 4: Intellectual Disability and Sibling Relationships



## Discussion

Overall, we found that there was a more positive sibling relationship in families in which the child with ASD had a lower severity of ASD symptoms as compared to families in which the child with ASD had a higher severity of ASD symptoms. Moreover, the sibling relationship(s) between the typically developing sibling the child with ASD were more positive if the typically developing sibling included an older sibling as compared to families in which there were only younger typically developing siblings. Family size (i.e., number of typically developing siblings) did not have a big impact on the sibling relationships, with the expectation that in larger families the typically developing siblings were more likely to help take care of the child with ASD and typically developing siblings were more likely to feel embarrassment by the child with ASD. Finally, the sibling relationship was not different if the child with ASD also had ID compared to if the child with ASD had average cognitive functioning.

These findings suggest that child and family variables are related to differences in the sibling relationship. Younger siblings of children with ASD appear to be at risk for poorer relationship dynamics. Interventions and services should consider addressing ways to strengthen sibling relationships as fostering a positive sibling relationship may be beneficial to the social development of both the child with ASD and their typically developing sibling.

## References

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**Acknowledgements:** National Institute on Mental Health (NIMH R01MH099190 to S. Hartley) and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD; P30 HD03352 to A. Messing).