

An Updated Review of Literature on the Social, Emotional, and Behavioural Adjustment of Siblings of Autistic Individuals

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Introduction/Rationale

Research has been shifting to explore the impact of a child with autism in the context of a family system, particularly siblings as it is one of the longest bonds in a child’s life¹.

Siblings of autistic individuals report high levels of stress, worry for the future, and increased responsibilities².

Research also shows that there are many benefits that these siblings also experience including enhanced understanding of others, sharing a unique bond with their autistic sibling, and increased self-competence³.

Meadan et al.⁵ conducted a review to explore the social, emotional, and behavioural adjustments of siblings of autistic individuals.

Meadan et al.⁵ found the literature showed mixed results on outcomes for siblings’ adjustment and limited research had been completed that addressed these areas.

The purpose of the current study is to update the review conducted by Meadan and colleagues and summarize the literature conducted after 2009 that explores the experiences and dynamics of sibling relationships in families of autistic individuals.

Method

An electronic search was conducted using ERIC and PsycINFO databases. Keywords used in the electronic search included, but were not limited to, autism, siblings, and social adjustment.

Inclusion criteria:

- Published in English between 2009 and 2021
- Peer-reviewed research article (books, dissertations, reviews, and meta-analyses were excluded)
- Reference sibling health and adjustment (parent and family focused studies were excluded)

Potential articles were reviewed by research team for inclusion and exclusion.

Similar to Meadan et al.⁵ we used the themes outlined by Hodapp et al.⁴ to guide data extraction. These themes were:

- Methodological challenges;
- Measurement tools;
- Addressing developmental and life-course perspectives;
- Exploring mediators and moderators;
- Cultural and subcultural issues; and
- Balanced portrayal of outcomes (both positive and negative).

Discussion/Implications

Meadan et al.⁵ reviewed the literature up to 2008 and found 12 articles addressing sibling adjustment. In our search of the literature from 2009 to 2021, we found a total of 67 studies that examined the adjustment of siblings.

In Meadan et al.’s⁵ discussion of mediators and moderators, they identified a trend of the research identifying factors, predictors, and variables as opposed to using the terms mediators and moderators.

- Our review identified a similar trend.

In addition to the factors of gender, birth order, and levels of family support and maternal stress that were originally identified by Meadan et al.⁵, the current review also identified the following variables in sibling adjustment:

- Age (of both sibling and autistic child);
- Sibling understanding of autism;
- Cultural influences;
- Presence of the Broader Autism Phenotype (BAP) in parents and/or siblings;
- Presence of internalizing and externalizing behaviours in autistic child (including autism symptom severity).

Overall, the majority of articles (84%) reported significant associations between factors while Meadan et al.’s⁵ review presented more balanced results. This could be a result of publication bias and should be addressed in future research studies.

A limitation in the current literature is that there were no studies of paternal well-being and its impact on the adjustment of typically developing siblings of children with autism.

Understanding the risk factors for poor adjustment of siblings of children with autism allows clinicians to identify the likelihood of a sibling requiring intervention.

Interventions should focus on environment factors such as addressing sibling’s understanding of and attitude toward autism, increasing social support and resources in cultures with more stigma towards autism, and decreasing family stress levels.

Interventions focusing on parents, particularly mothers, should also be considered, as maternal anxiety, depression, and well-being were shown to be strong predictors of sibling adjustment.

Findings

After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, 67 articles were reviewed. Preliminary findings are focused on the theme of mediators and moderators (n = 37 articles).

Demographics of siblings of children with autism were commonly discussed:

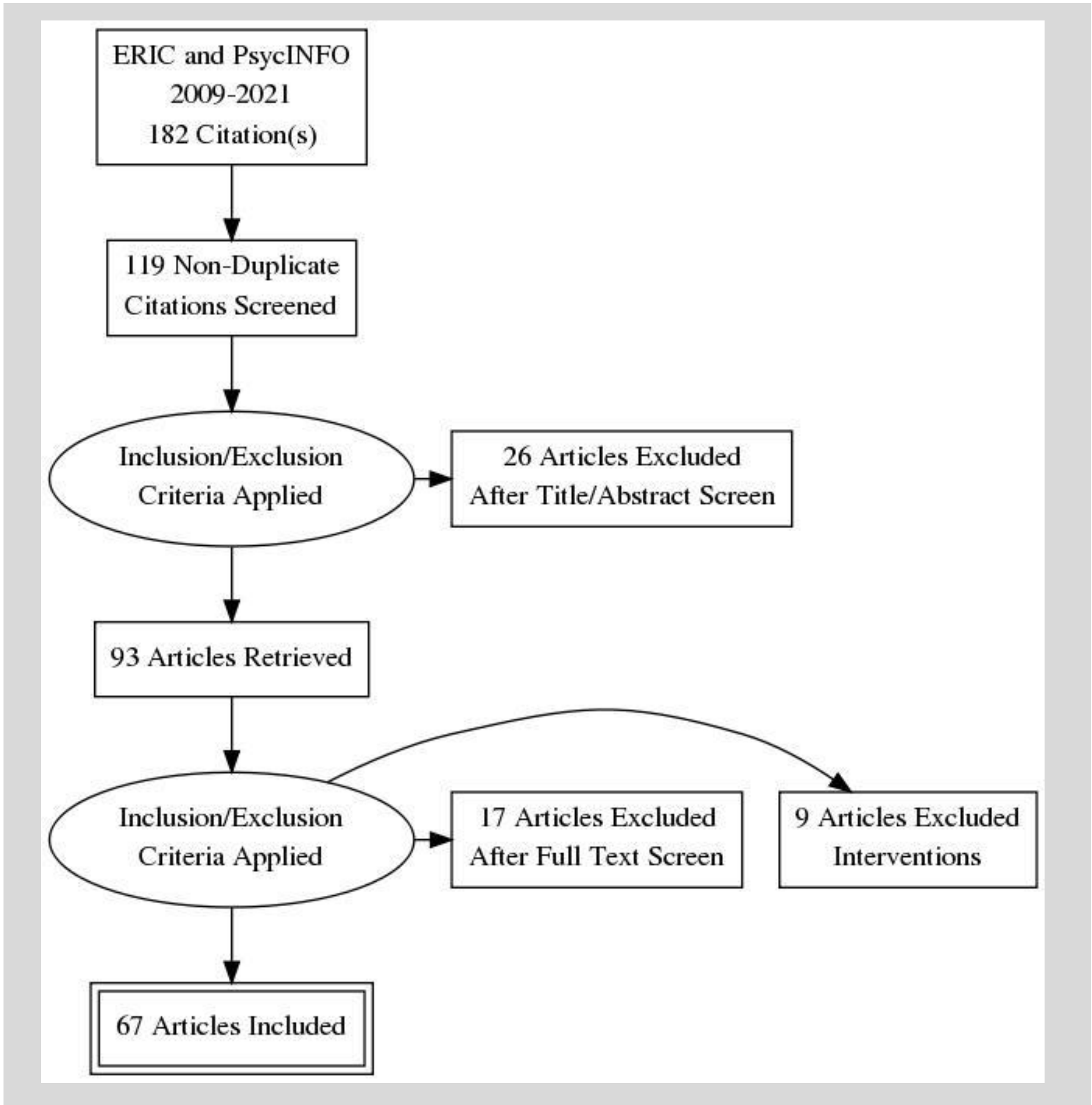
- Age of both siblings^{6, 12, 15, 19, 21, 25, 26, 44}
- Gender^{8, 12, 14, 26, 43, 44}
- Birth order (i.e., whether sibling with autism was older or younger)^{12, 14, 26, 37, 40, 42, 43, 44}

Family environment factors:

- Sibling understanding of and attitude toward autism^{9, 10, 13, 15, 16, 19, 25, 27, 35}
- Cultural influences (social stigma, social support, collective culture)^{8, 11, 13, 18, 34, 39, 40}
- Family stress levels^{7, 17, 18, 21, 34, 36, 39, 42}

Behavioural symptoms in family members:

- Broader Autism Phenotype (BAP)
 - In parent^{33, 41}
 - In siblings^{22, 23, 41, 42, 43}
- Maternal anxiety, depression, and well-being^{17, 22, 24, 28, 33}
- Internalizing and externalizing behaviors, including autism symptom severity in the autistic sibling^{16, 20, 22, 23, 29, 30, 31, 32, 38, 43}



References

Please see following slide for references.

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