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Study shows delays in siblings of children with autism spectrum disorders

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A new University of Miami (UM) study shows that one in three children who have an older sibling with an Autism Related Disorder (ASD) fall into a group characterized by higher levels of autism-related behaviors or lower levels of developmental progress. The study will be presented at the International Meeting for Autism Research (IMFAR) in May, 2012. ASDs are developmental conditions characterized by problems with social interaction and communication. Previously, an international consortium of researchers found that almost one in five of the younger siblings of children with an ASD themselves developed an ASD.

UM's College of Arts and Sciences professor Dr. Daniel Messinger, presenting author of the study, says, "It is clear that the younger siblings of a child with an ASD may face challenges even if they are not themselves identified with an ASD. This new work identifies classes of outcomes in these children. We found that the majority of these high risk siblings appear to be developing normally. However, a higher than expected proportion of the children face challenges related to higher levels of autism-related behaviors or lower levels of verbal and non-verbal developmental functioning."

The study reveals that difficulties faced by the younger siblings of children with ASD involve both lower levels of verbal and nonverbal functioning and higher levels of autism-related problems. Examples of a child's autism-related problems — which are not as severe as those of children with an ASD — include lower levels of back-and-forth play with others and lower levels of pointing to express interest in what is

going on around them.

Overall, the research says, the majority of high-risk siblings are developing typically at three years of age, but the development of a substantial minority is affected by subtler forms of ASD-related problems or lower levels of developmental functioning. Lower levels of developmental functioning and higher levels of autism-related problems in the at-risk siblings define what researchers refer to as the broad autism phenotype.

Provided by University of Miami

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