Sibling Bullying in Families of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

A) RATIONALE FOR THE PROJECT
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is characterized by social and communication difficulties, repetitive behaviours, and high sensitivity to sensory stimulus (APA, 2013). In the UK, the prevalence of ASD has been estimated at ~1 (Baird et al., 2006). ASD has a number of psychopathological correlates, which further reduce the quality of life of those affected (Matson & Nebel-Schwalm, 2007).

Children with ASD have difficulties in social interactions, such as turn taking in conversation, and deficits in non-verbal communication (APA, 2013). These difficulties have implications for children’s relationships with the people around them. In the general population, good quality sibling relationships are important as they help children to develop social skills and are a source of emotional support. However, up to 50% of children have been bullied by their siblings and up to 40% have bullied their siblings (Wolke, Tippett, & Dantchev, 2015). Sibling bullying in childhood is associated with adverse behavioural (Wolke & Samara, 2004; Wolke & Skew, 2011) and worse mental health outcomes (Bowes, Wolke, Joinson, Lereya, & Lewis, 2014). Given the heritable nature of ASD, sibling bullying may be more likely in families in which a child with ASD due to a higher risk of poorer language and communication skills within these families (due to the broader Autism phenotype). Indeed, recent evidence suggests that children with ASD are more likely to bully and be bullied by their siblings compared to children without ASD (Toseeb et al., in press – preprint available upon request). However, what is still unclear is 1) the form that sibling bullying takes in families with a child with ASD, 2) the risk and protective factors of sibling bullying in such families, and 3) the effect sibling bullying on mental health and educational outcomes in children with ASD.

B) REFERENCES THAT SHOULD BE READ (if you do not have access to these, please email me)


C) RESEARCH AIMS / QUESTIONS
1. What is the prevalence and frequency of sibling bullying in families with a child with ASD?
2. What are the types of sibling bullying that occur in families with a child with ASD?
3. What are the risk and protective factors of sibling bullying in families with a child with ASD?
4. What is the relationship between sibling bullying, mental health, and educational difficulties in families with a child with ASD?

D) METHODS
Families with a child with ASD (and those without as controls) will be recruited from schools and local support services. Parents, siblings, and the child with ASD will be asked to complete questionnaires and/or take part in structured interviews about sibling bullying, mental health, ASD symptomology, language and communication difficulties, and sociodemographic information. Data about educational outcomes will be obtained from school records. The data will be analysed using quantitative analysis within a multilevel modelling framework (training in advanced statistical modelling will be provided).