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Autism Parenting Magazine

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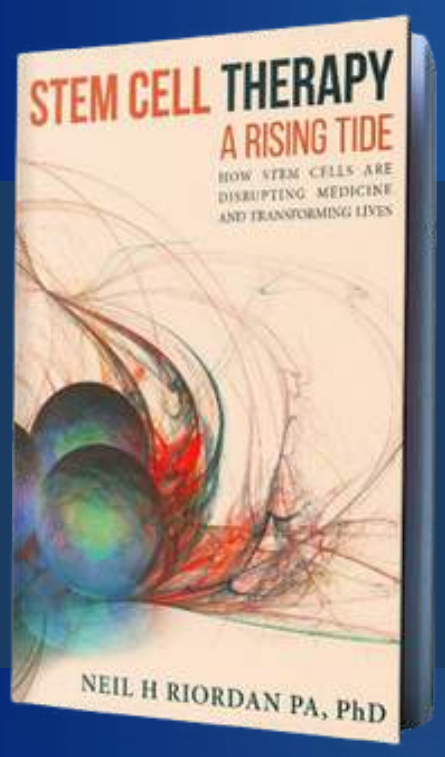

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Editor's Letter

Dear Readers,

August often reminds us to look ahead: to a new grade level, college or trade school, or a new job. As parents of a child or an adult with autism, we want those ventures to be free of challenges. We also want them to be met with success and filled with the same joy as riding a carousel, feeling the spray of the ocean, or tasting an icy popsicle, all for the first time.

This month's theme is "Success on the Spectrum". Society may believe that success means more money or status. Yet, as parents or grandparents of a child on the spectrum, we know true success comes when they say a word or phrase for the first time. Or when a new food is introduced that they like. Or the family can get through a vacation with minimal meltdowns.

This month, take the time to count the successes your family has experienced and celebrate them. Remind your loved one of these moments so they can reflect on their accomplishments as they forge ahead to new experiences. May you have much joy in savoring those first sweet tastes and refreshing feelings of success, whatever they may be.

Happy reading!

Sharon Longo

Editor
Autism Parenting Magazine

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An award-winning publication on a mission to improve the quality of life for families impacted by autism worldwide.

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Finding Success on the Autism Spectrum

By Cory Morrison

Success is any progress or growth achieved, no matter how big or small.

Success doesn't always have to be about how much money you make, how rich your social life is, how independent you are, or whether you achieve certain milestones by certain ages.

It can be about literally anything that is progress, no matter how small an improvement, or even if a person is doing the same good things.

As a society, we can benefit from understanding that success is flexible and can look different for many people.

Redefining success

I've always believed that instead of trying to meet society's standards, it's best to ask yourself whether they are meaningful and easy to achieve or keep for you.

For example, when you look for a job, I recommend listing your best strengths and then finding positions that best match them. For instance, if you have strong pattern recognition skills, a data analyst would be a prime example of something that may work out for you.

Other common autistic strengths may include, but are not limited to, attention to detail, strong interests, honesty, and reliability.

Different paths are entirely valid, and finding jobs or other things you like doing often requires self-awareness of your strengths. It's also a good

idea to find positions that greatly align with your special interests.

One of my interests is writing, so I took journalism school years ago, have written for Autism Parenting Magazine, wrote a memoir last year, and much more. All of these have been with varying degrees of success, but what matters the most to me is that progress happened, and that itself is a success.

Common challenges and practical strategies

Although we can all achieve success, many of us on the spectrum may face obstacles if we aren't fully aware of our challenges. Here are some challenges I've faced:

Communication differences

I've found that if workplaces and friends don't give me clear feedback in person or deliver information too fast, it's harder for me to succeed when associating with them.

I feel it's best to let people know that you may want instructions repeated if missed, or have written instructions, when possible.

This challenge is why I've found better success interacting with peers on social media than in person.

Sensory sensitivities

Lighting, textures, and crowds can affect my ability to focus on tasks at hand more than I initially thought. The older I get, the more I realize how the environment alone is part of why I have a hard time focusing. It's not just processing difficulties.

Breaks, quieter spaces, and adjusted environments (such as angling the desk away from bright light, if possible) are best for addressing these issues.

Executive functioning

Often, starting and persisting with tasks (particularly ones I'm not too familiar with) takes

more mental effort for me than the average person.

When I set absolute firm routines (for example, using the Notes app on my iPhone) or break down instructions into smaller pieces, it's much easier for me to get things done in a timely manner.

The social part

In typical environments, I find that social cues often fly over my head, which has, unfortunately, led to misunderstandings more often than I'd like.

I can learn from these experiences, do what I can to prevent similar situations, and look for environments where people are more tolerant and open-minded about my social difficulties.

When employers, friends, and family don't focus on trying to change the autistic person, the environment becomes less toxic. Therefore, when environments adapt to the autistic person instead of forcing them to comply, they can be more successful. This is why some environments and friendships have worked out much better than others.

Finding the right environment

It's not always easy to tell at first glance whether an environment will be supportive. However, there are clues I've found to be effective:

- When you meet someone new, are they not only friendly but also ask you questions?
- Are they allies with other people who have similar disabilities and perhaps hint at being mental health advocates?
- Do they have a "take your time" mindset?
- Are they willing to provide supportive feedback instead of pointing fingers at you and ditching you when things go just a little wrong?
- Do they avoid showing subtle signs of distance from you over your mistakes?

If yes to all five, I think you've found the right place, friendship, or relationship. If there are three or fewer, it may be best to consider other options.

I've found that in many environments or with people I've met, the score is often zero or five, which has allowed me to better judge over time.

Paths to success

I still have some things to address in my life. I feel the best way to approach success is with an open mind, recognizing that there's so much variety and possibility to make it happen.

Careers related to interests, freelancing, entrepreneurship, creativity (writing, music, art), and advocacy or community involvement are all prime examples. My interests in writing, piano, and autism advocacy have helped me to gain an online presence I'm proud of, even if I feel I could still do so much more.

Success is achievable

Success is personal and attainable. There's always hope with support systems and the right mindset: being patient, monitoring your growth with a positive attitude, and self-acceptance. Even if you don't achieve exactly what you want, you're still making great progress.

Although this is easier for me on some days than others, I've never completely backed off from this outlook during my journey. We all have good and bad days, but eventually, they lead to success.

Cory Morrison is 33 years old and has lived in the Toronto area his whole life. He was diagnosed with autism at 3.5 years old. He is a college journalism graduate with an increasing interest in writing and publishing content. He also has special interests in weather, music (listening and playing), motivational quotes, and autism advocacy.

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Help! My Child Swears

By **Dr. Brett J. Novick, MS, EdD, LMFT**

Here are some practical strategies for parents if their child uses swear words.

Nothing may be more embarrassing than when our children use swear words that could make a truck driver blush. The initial impulse may be to punish or remove them from the situation. However, like all behaviors, the use of profanity serves a purpose.

Why do children swear?

When your child uses four-letter expletives, it can be for many potential reasons. First, children learn more from what we do than from what we say. In this case, it is a little bit of both.

Children hear profanity from peers, the media, and the internet. They are exposed to content of questionable value, with very loose age-appropriate boundaries on social media.

Sometimes, swearing is simply used for shock value. They learn that negative attention can be more effective than positive behavior.

Our kids with ASD may have a limited vocabulary, so the words they use may also be restricted. As a result, anger and frustration may often be expressed through profanity.

Younger youth may use profanity because they see the attention it draws without fully understanding the words' meanings. Therefore, they do not attach much importance to or recognize the power of such language.

Older children and adolescents might use these words to fit in with peers, to express independence in their thinking and speech, or to release emotional tension, similar to adults.

Especially with younger children, we shouldn't laugh or dismiss this behavior as "cute." Doing so sends mixed messages when they go to school and face negative consequences for similar language.

Echolalia and swearing

Individuals with ASD may have echolalia. As the name suggests, this is the process of "echoing" words that the child hears. The main purpose of this behavior is to create a connection between hearing language and independently understanding the words.

Echolalia typically occurs in two forms:

- Immediate echolalia: Words are repeated right away
- Delayed echolalia: Words or phrases from people, television, or the internet may be repeated after a delay ranging from hours to weeks

Videos or movies containing profane language might also be repeated.

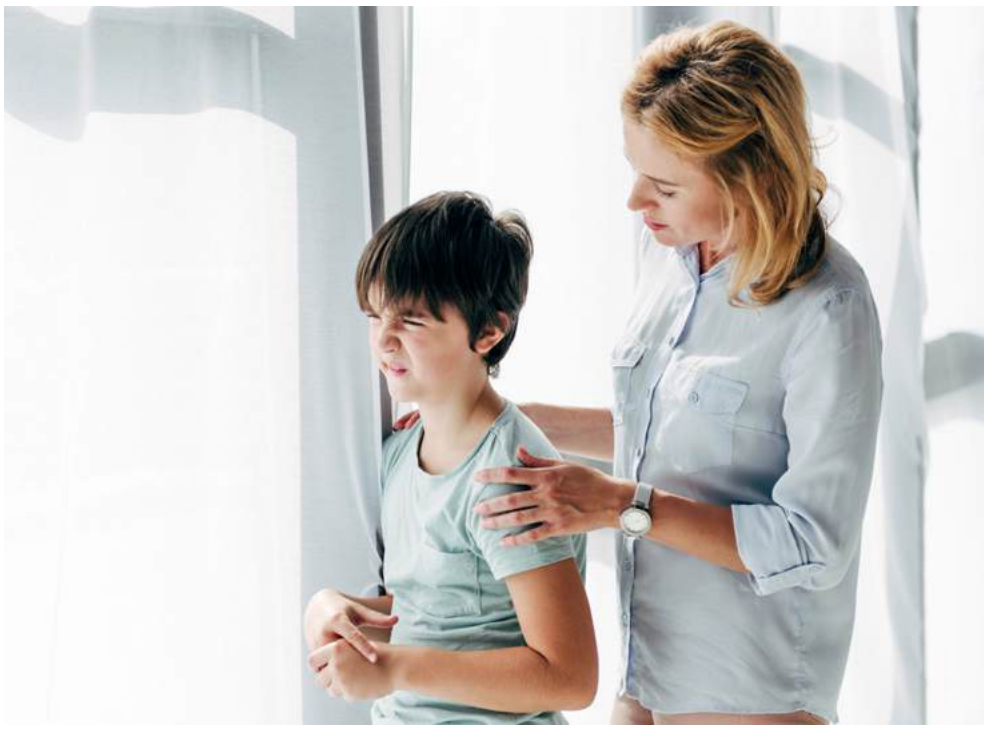
Swearing as a sensory or motor release

Just as we sometimes curse to vent anger, our children may do the same. When overstimulated, yelling four-letter words can provide an emotional release.

Due to emotional dysregulation, what might seem like a minor annoyance to neurotypical people can trigger a strong reaction in those with ASD. The brain can become hyper-focused on the trigger, with profanity serving as a release valve for rage.

Impulse control and swearing

Most people follow the 'ready, aim, fire' thinking. This means they think about a decision, aim themselves toward that choice, and finally act.



In the case of ASD, children often exhibit what we call fire-ready-aim thinking. The prefrontal cortex (which controls impulses) may not respond quickly enough before the words have already left their mouth. They might fire off a volley of swear words before considering the consequences.

Swearing can be a way of expressing anger and frustration when they can't think of other, more appropriate phrases.

When your child is tired, sick, or fatigued, they may simply lack the ability to self-regulate their language.

Difficulty and ineffectiveness in expressing strong emotions

Profanity is an ineffective way for children to express what specifically upsets them. For example, using profanity doesn't communicate that they are overwhelmed and need a break, or that they are feeling frustrated or believe they have been wronged.

A much more effective and helpful way to communicate is to use "I" messages, in which a child explains how they feel, why they feel that way, and what they might need to resolve the issue.

When our children are angry and ranting loudly, their brains are stuck in a fight-or-flight mode. As a result, they are not logical but emotional

and reactive. During these moments, logical conversation is difficult.

When your child's rational thinking is significantly diminished, they need those around them to act as an anchor to help reduce emotional reactivity.

Therefore, use fewer words and maintain calm emotional expressions. Adopt the "pilot's voice," one that reassures others of the ability to handle any situation. Also, display less angry body language. These actions can help them mirror calm behavior even amid rage and uncertainty.

Parents and others who provide that calm example also lessen the reinforcement children might receive for negative attention-seeking behavior. That said, it is also crucial to avoid using harmful language ourselves if that is an issue.

You can also try redirecting them to another activity that might be calming or one they prefer.

What to do about swearing

Often, our initial response to our children's cursing is to try to silence them. It is much more helpful to replace a behavior rather than to stop it completely.

Replacing profanity with assertive communication is much more effective. For example, instead of calling someone a name, which does not convey one's needs or emotions, you could say, "I am angry at you for punishing me and would like you to give an alternative consequence." This response communicates the specific need and desire.

Another tactic is to replace the profane word(s) with colorful substitutes like "fudge" or even nonsensical words. Parents can also determine words with their children that act as a "family-approved" list that can substitute for the restricted words.

Be sure to express your gratitude with as much emotion and energy as possible when your child communicates their needs, wants, or frustrations, without resorting to swearing.

Further, practice scenarios that may test their ability to handle a situation without resorting to anger, frustration, and then profanity. These can include situations such as having difficulty with homework or losing a game. Practicing scenarios helps them assert themselves more productively, rather than being aggressive or overly passive.

Children with ASD may be particularly sensitive to changes in their environment, having specific triggers or needs for regulation. Sometimes swearing may be used to address these frustrations.

Addressing overstimulation may involve doing the following:

- Moving to a safe or less-triggering environment, such as a quiet corner or a room to decompress
- Using fidget tools to redirect energy
- Taking a movement break
- Using a weighted blanket, vest, or lap pad for tactile input that fosters a sense of soothing

Profanity is often accompanied by anger and great difficulty accessing logical thought. Therefore, we need to be clear and directive, telling our children what we want or do not want them to do. In doing so, we create a teaching moment rather than a punitive measure.

What not to do when encountering swearing

Because of the shock when a child uses profanity, we might overexplain or become overly emotional. Fewer words and less emotion are better than punishment or long lectures.

It's also easy to assume that a child uses swearing to be oppositional or defiant. Remember, there are several reasons a child might use profanity. It's easy to assume bad intent. Instead, we should look into the reasons behind the behavior and avoid strict consequences, which can cause unintended effects.

For example, simply punishing a child misses the chance to teach a healthier way to handle the situation. We might be teaching them just to obey rather than self-regulate and understand why they should choose their words carefully.

All behavior, including using profane words, serves a purpose, even if we don't immediately see what it is.

When should we seek outside help for swearing?

Parenting is among the most challenging jobs, and sometimes we simply cannot do it alone. If your child resorts to physical aggression or destruction in conjunction with profanity, or if the use of profane language causes issues at school, at work, or socially, it may be time to seek professional intervention.

> "Speech-language pathologists may assist our children in articulating their needs more clearly so they do not resort to unproductive ways of expressing frustration."

Counseling can help our children find alternative ways to express anger and work toward assertive, rather than aggressive, communication of their needs.

A Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) can also identify the root of the problem and suggest strategies to replace and hopefully eliminate the behavior.

Speech-language pathologists may assist our children in articulating their needs more clearly so they do not resort to unproductive ways of expressing frustration.

Hope, growth, and the role of swearing

As our children grow and mature, it is natural for them to test boundaries, and to some extent, give in to negative or positive peer influence. This includes what they are or are not allowed to say, both inside and outside the household.

We may take their use of profanity personally and feel it reflects poorly on our parenting. However, it does not, and is usually just part of the developmental process from childhood to adulthood. Frustration and a lack of impulse control can make this behavior even more common and harder for both the parent and the child to manage.

Teaching our children more effective ways to express their frustration, anger, and needs is important. Doing so will help them grow and confidently assert themselves in school and society, thereby benefiting their success.

Progress in any behavior or habit can be slow at first. It might be helpful to use a chart or log to track your child's progress. Improvement rarely happens in a straight line. Instead, it involves dips and rises on the way to better behavior.

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Dr. Brett J. Novick, MS, EdD, LMFT, holds a Master's degree in Family Therapy and post-degree certification in School Social Work and Educational Administration. He earned his EdD in Educational Leadership. He has been a School Social Worker and Counselor for the last 23 years and is an adjunct instructor at Rutgers and Stockton Universities. Brett has been a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in private practice, community mental health, and substance abuse settings over the last twenty-five years. Additionally, he has supervised family counseling, school counseling, and centers for abused and neglected children, adults & children with developmental disabilities, and has been a licensed foster parent. He authored numerous educational and self-help books, two SEL and CBT children's books, and has written for national educational, parenting, and mental health magazines. He created four therapeutic games for youth and has won numerous awards for his educational work. His latest book, Beyond Academic Success: Creating Social-Emotional Learning Balance in Elementary Students, was awarded the 2024 National Book of the Year by the SSWA.

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Q&A With Dr. Temple Grandin

This month, Dr. Temple Grandin answers questions about puberty and helping teens with jobs.

Shelley of Tokyo, Japan, asks four questions: “How can we prepare teens to handle strong emotions that arise during puberty?”

Tell them it’s normal to have some strong emotions. Engaging in plenty of exercise would help with this. You also just need to tell the teen that their body is changing and it’s normal. Having some strong emotions is normal, but it’s important to learn how to manage them.

“What are strategies we can use to help teens understand the concept of privacy during puberty?”

They have to be taught. When you go into a restroom to use the toilet, you shut the door. There are parts of your body that are private. You just have to teach them.

I came across a book that had a target showing the different levels of contact with people.

You can hug immediate family, but you don't hug the post office clerk.

You explain that there are rules about what parts of the body the clerk in a store could touch, such as your shoulder. There are other parts that others don't touch. You have to teach it in a very matter-of-fact way, calmly and with facts.

It's that simple. There are certain rules, such as you never expose your privates in public. You can get in serious trouble for that. That has to be explained as it's something you just don't do.

You can also observe others in public places such as a shopping center to understand what is socially acceptable.

There are rules, some of them strict, but you need to explain them, coaching them the same way I would coach somebody to greet a customer nicely.

Private behaviors you can do in your room; you do not do them at the shopping center.

For example, my mother got me a sewing job when I was 13. It was with a seamstress in the community who had a little home business. I went in and sewed dresses, hemmed them, and took them apart.

Let's focus on businesses in the community. Parents know other people. Have the teen go out and help out at their store.

Q "How can we help teens explore job options in the community?"

A Some of these teens need to get a job where somebody outside the family is the boss. That's important. Parents and teachers should work to open back doors.

> "Let's focus on businesses in the community. Parents know other people. Have the teen go out and help out at their store."

If the teen has artistic ability, maybe he could work with a local artist. If a teen likes movies, they can look for a job as an usher at the local movie theater. I had the opportunity to visit my aunt's ranch, where I learned working skills.

They might not be of legal age to work in a regular job, but they can do informal jobs. They can help the shopkeeper clean up the store after work.

In some small stores, only one person works there, and they don't have time to unpack merchandise from the boxes. A young person could go there after school to help unpack the items from the boxes and put them on the shelves. They can even flatten the boxes.

Look around the neighborhood for tasks they can do, since in most countries, you don't have the paper routes anymore. That was the old-fashioned childhood job that kids got at 11 or 12.

You could consider volunteering at a church, walking dogs for others, or helping out at a nursing

home. I want them to work for somebody outside the family.

People are not often very creative about figuring out jobs they can do in their neighborhood. Mother got me the sewing job, but it was something she just found in the neighborhood.

Q "How can we teach workplace expectations like following instructions, punctuality, and dress code?"

A Teens need to start learning work skills. Ideally, I'd like to see teenagers know how to work and have completed summer jobs before they graduate from high school.

I've seen cases where a child graduates from college with honors but has no work skills. They're not the same skills.

Teens also have to learn to be on time and do what the boss tells them to do.

Here are some hints that will save jobs. If a task involves a sequence, such as closing out the cash register or logging in, write down the steps in a pilot's checklist format. That's really important. If you just tell them verbally, they might not remember.

Let's say they are responsible for opening up the store or restaurant. They might need to unlock the grating and push it all the way back into the wall. If they need to log in to the cash register, provide a step-by-step guide.

There are workplace expectations, such as following instructions, especially when they involve sequential steps. We also need to teach autistic workers how to make their own checklists of sequential tasks.

For example, a procedure on a computer. Write down the sequence and teach the teenager how to do that. Many people will need an external working memory, which is something they can do.

You cannot be vague with an autistic person. If you say they are rude to customers, that's too vague. You might say, "You called Mrs. Jones fat yesterday, and that's not acceptable. The next time you see her, you are going to have to apologize."

Tell them exactly what they have to do.

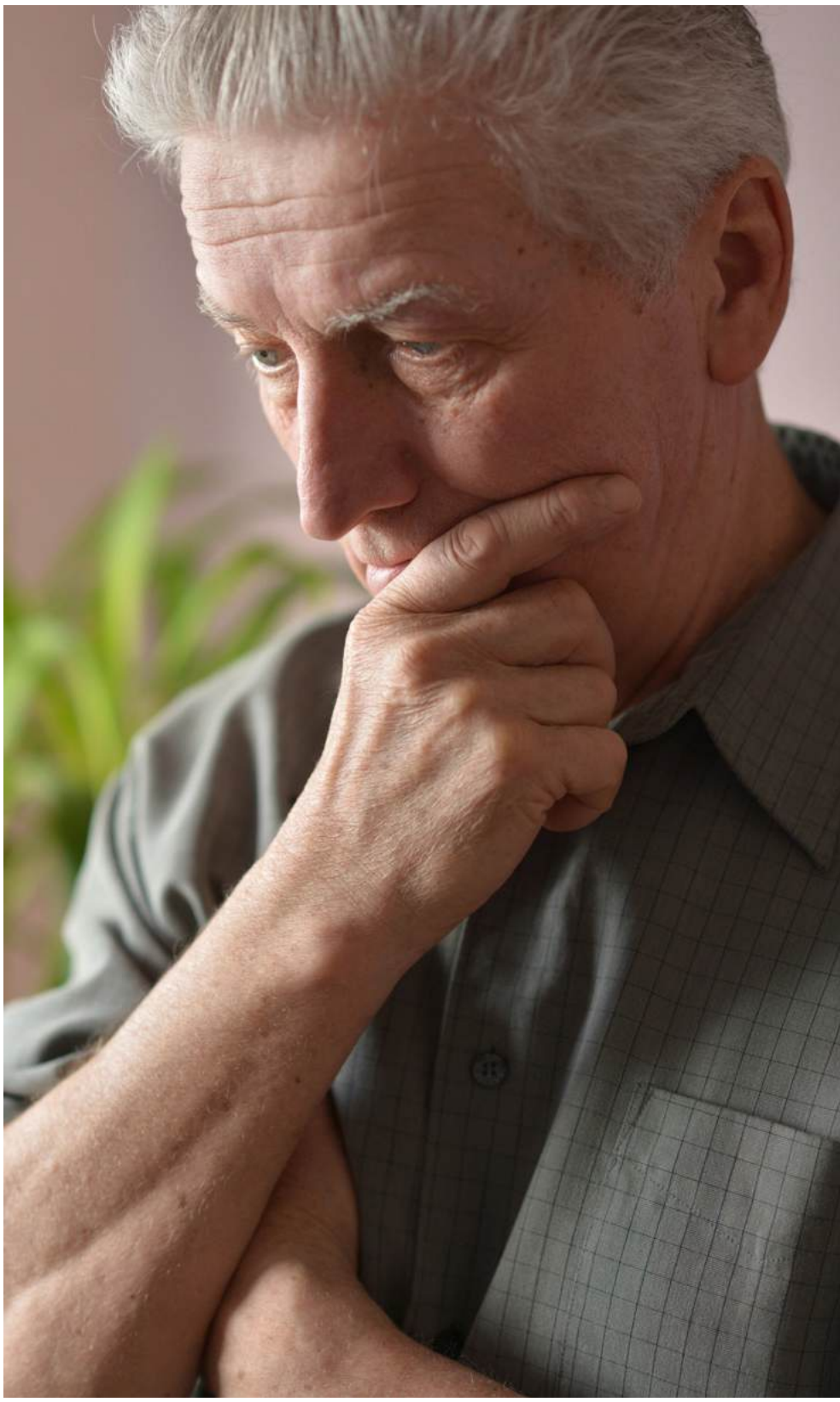
Dr. Temple Grandin, PhD, is a Distinguished Professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University. Many companies around the world use facilities she has designed for handling livestock. She has also been instrumental in implementing animal-welfare auditing programs for McDonald's, Wendy's, Whole Foods, and other corporations. Temple has appeared on numerous TV shows, such as 20/20 and Prime Time. Her books include Thinking in Pictures, Livestock Handling and Transport, and The Autistic Brain. Her books, Animals in Translation and Visual Thinking, have been on the New York Times Bestseller List. Temple was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in September 2017. In 2022, she was named a Colorado State University Distinguished Professor, and in 2023, she was inducted into the Colorado Authors' Hall of Fame.

When a Grandchild Is Diagnosed with Autism

By **Valarie Whiting, PhD**

Learning that a grandchild has autism can bring a mix of emotions.

Grandparents often hold a special role in a family, offering wisdom, stability, and unconditional support. Yet the moment they learn that their grandchild has been diagnosed with autism, they can feel love, concern, confusion, and a deep desire to help.



They try to understand what the diagnosis means for the child they adore and for their own adult children who are navigating new challenges.

With understanding and compassion, grandparents can become powerful allies in their grandchild's life.

Emotional reactions

It is very common for grandparents to experience a wide range of emotional reactions when they first learn of an autism diagnosis.

Some feel confused or uncertain about what autism means today.

Others may feel initial sadness or worry about what the future might hold for their grandchild. Guilt feelings can also surface, as some grandparents wonder, "Did this come from my side of the family?"

Fear for the child's well-being, education, or independence may also arise.

These responses are normal and deeply human. Grandparents love their grandchildren and naturally want life to be easy and joyful for them. At the same time, generational perspectives can shape these reactions.

Many grandparents grew up in a time when autism was poorly understood, rarely discussed, or surrounded by stigma. Because of this, the diagnosis may initially feel unfamiliar or even frightening.

With time, learning, and open conversations, many grandparents move from uncertainty to understanding, and from worry to becoming some of their grandchildren's strongest champions.

Learning and unlearning

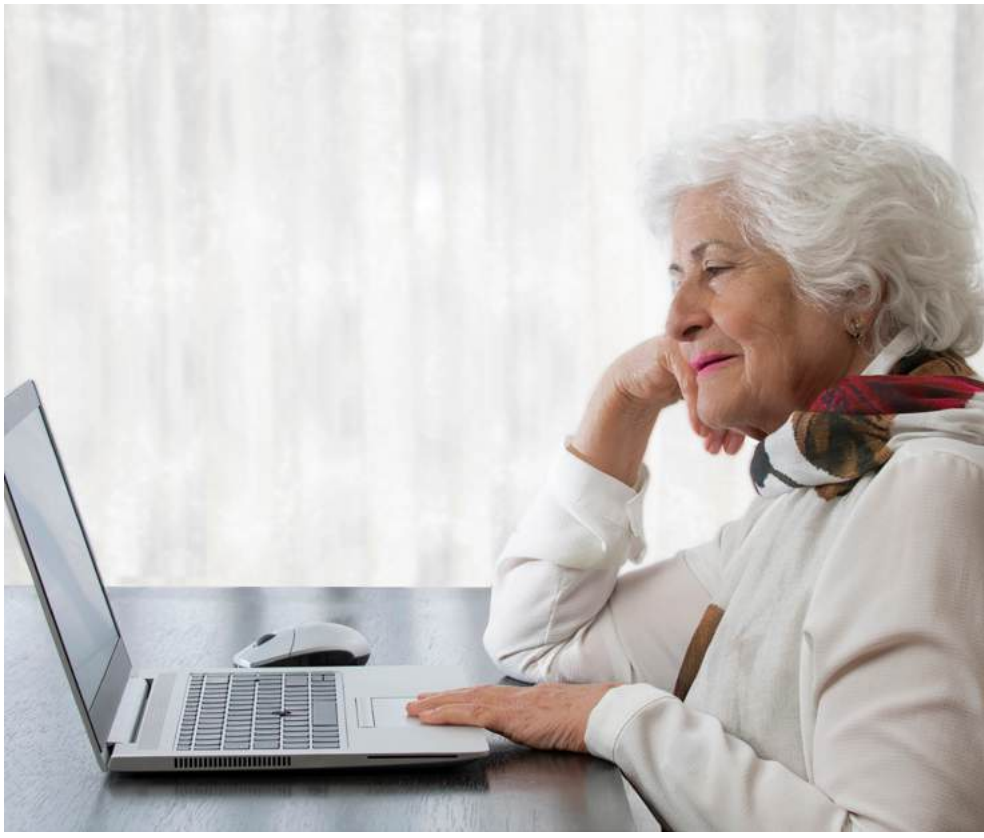
One helpful step grandparents can take is to seek accurate, up-to-date information about autism. Research and understanding have evolved dramatically over the past several decades. What once was viewed through the lens of disability is now more widely understood as part of the natural diversity of human brains.

This learning process may need to include unlearning outdated beliefs or stereotypes. Many autistic individuals lead meaningful and successful lives, particularly when they receive understanding, appropriate supports, and opportunities to thrive.

Grandparents can learn through many accessible resources, including:

- Books written by autistic individuals and professionals
- Reputable websites
- Support organizations
- Workshops
- Conversations with educators or therapists

Listening directly to autistic voices can be especially powerful.



Grandparents who approach learning with curiosity and openness often discover that autism does not define their grandchild. It helps explain how their grandchild experiences and engages with the world.

Supporting their adult child

In addition to loving their grandchild, grandparents often want to support their own adult child who is now navigating the realities of parenting a child with autism.

One of the most valuable forms of support is emotional presence. Listening without judgment, offering encouragement, and acknowledging the challenges parents may face can make an enormous difference. Sometimes parents simply need someone to say, "You're doing a great job."

Practical support can also be meaningful. Grandparents may help in the following ways:

- Attending appointments if invited
- Assisting with childcare
- Learning strategies that support the child's communication or sensory needs
- Helping advocate for services when appropriate

Even small gestures, such as preparing a meal, offering a break, or helping with daily routines, can provide relief to overwhelmed parents.

Equally important is respecting their adult child's parenting choices and boundaries. Parenting approaches may differ from the way grandparents once raised their own children, and autism-informed strategies may be new to them. Demonstrating trust in the parents' decisions strengthens family relationships and creates a united support system around the child.

When grandparents offer support with humility, patience, and respect, they become invaluable partners in the family's journey.

Building a relationship with the autistic grandchild

Perhaps the most important role grandparents play is simply being a loving, steady presence in their grandchild's life. Building a meaningful relationship with an autistic grandchild may involve adjusting expectations and learning new ways of connecting. Every autistic child communicates, learns, and experiences the world differently.

Grandparents can begin by meeting the child where they are.

A child may prefer quiet interactions, predictable routines, or activities that focus on their special interests.

Another child may communicate using gestures, pictures, technology, or fewer spoken words.

Take time to observe, listen, and follow the child's lead, which can open doors to connection.

> "Understanding autism grows from information and from shared moments of creativity and connection."

Create a sensory-friendly environment during visits by

- Reducing overwhelming noise
- Allowing the child to take breaks
- Offering calming activities, such as coloring, puzzles, reading, or outdoor walks

Each of these actions can make interactions more comfortable and enjoyable.

Most importantly, grandparents should celebrate their grandchild's strengths, personality, and unique perspective. Whether the child is curious about nature, fascinated by numbers, deeply creative, or wonderfully observant, those qualities are part of what makes them extraordinary.

Love, patience, and acceptance can lead to a lifelong bond.

Voices of experience

Many grandparents of an autistic grandchild say learning about autism changed their perspective in meaningful ways. What begins as uncertainty often can grow into deeper understanding, stronger family connections, and pride in their grandchild's accomplishments.

Grandparents who approach autism with an open mind, patience, and an open heart offer something powerful to the child and the family: an environment where the child can thrive.

Every family's journey is different, and learning continues over time. Understanding autism grows from information and from shared moments of creativity and connection.

Your grandchild doesn't need you to have all the answers, just to love them, learn with them, and believe in who they are.

Valarie Whiting, PhD, is a passionate advocate for autism awareness and inclusion. As the author of 10 workbooks at Autism Color Club, she brings her personal experiences and expertise to the forefront, shedding light on the joys and challenges of raising an autistic child. With a background in education and special needs advocacy, Valarie's writing is infused with empathy, understanding, and a deep commitment to fostering acceptance and understanding of neurodiverse individuals. Through her insightful articles and heartfelt stories, she strives to empower families, caregivers, and communities to embrace neurodiversity and create a more inclusive world for all. Valarie's dedication to raising awareness and promoting acceptance shines through in her work, making her a valuable voice in the autism community. Dr. Whiting has also worked as the Statewide Director of Training for the Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services since 2004. She still teaches Autism and Human Services Leadership online. She has been in the field for over 45 years, with an MA in Severe Special Needs and a PhD in Human Services Management. She was instrumental in developing the training and protocols of PBS, ASD training, and more for DDS. You can find many helpful articles, training, and videos she wrote or produced about PBS and more at

www.ddslearning.com and her website

[www.autismcolorclub.com.](http://www.autismcolorclub.com)

How to Be a Good Friend on the Spectrum

By **Carol Tatom Nentwig, BA.HSE, CHW**

Here are practical strategies to help your child learn friendship skills.

Friendship is one of life's most rewarding experiences, but for autistic children, the road to connecting with peers often looks a little different.

Being a good friend means building a foundation of mutual respect, confidence, and shared joy. It isn't about following a rigid set of social rules or performing for others.

Because autism is a neurological difference that naturally affects how a child communicates and processes social interactions, their version of friendship might involve unique ways of bonding.

By understanding these differences, we can help our children find meaningful connections that honor who they truly are.

Redefining friendship

For many parents, the initial instinct is to hope their child is popular or has a large circle of friends. However, for an autistic child, friendship is often more about quality than quantity. It is rooted in kindness, reliability, and shared interests, not the number of party invitations a child receives.

Many autistic children thrive in one-on-one interactions rather than large groups, which can be sensory overload. They may prefer to engage in the following:

- Parallel play: Sitting near a peer while both work on separate tasks

- Highly structured activities centered around a special interest: Building a specific LEGO® set or playing a favorite video game

Parents should remember that these social differences are not deficits. An autistic child's preference for deep, focused conversation about a specific topic or their need for quiet companionship is a valid way of relating to others.

Core skills to practice at home

Social skills are often learnable through practice rather than being strictly instinctive. Help your child build a "social toolbox" by practicing these core skills in a safe, low-pressure environment at home.

Turn-taking and sharing

- **Practice with games:** Use board games or simple catch-and-throw activities to establish a rhythm.
- **Model verbal cues:** Consistently use clear phrases like "Your turn" and "My turn" to make the invisible rules of interaction visible.
- **Use visual supports:** If your child struggles with the concept of time, a physical timer can show them exactly how long a turn lasts.

Reading basic social cues

- **Recognize expressions:** Use photos or drawings to practice identifying simple emotions.
- **Role-play:** Act out different scenarios, keeping it simple and focusing on cues like "happy," "bored," or "upset".
- **Use context clues:** Point out body language, such as a friend looking away when they are tired of a topic.

Listening and responding

- **Teach the "comment + question" formula**: A friend makes a statement, and the child comments and questions.

Friend: "I got a new dog."
Child: "That's cool. What is its name?"

- **Practice exchanges:** Use special interests as a starting point for short back-and-forth conversations.

Repairing social mistakes

- **Normalize mistakes:** Everyone messes up socially; let your child know it's okay to misinterpret a situation.
- **Use simple scripts:** Give them easy-to-remember phrases like, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings," or "Can we try that again?"

Provide support without encouraging masking

Parents should teach social skills without encouraging "masking" (when an autistic person suppresses their natural traits, like stimming or intense interests, to appear neurotypical). Masking can sometimes help a child blend in, but it comes at a high emotional cost.

Good friendship never requires a child to pretend to be someone else. Encourage true connections where your child feels safe being themselves, respecting the following:

- Their sensory limits (like needing headphones at a loud park)

- Their social battery (knowing when they need to leave a playdate early)

It is perfectly okay if your child prefers having only one or two close friends, or one meaningful connection. Quality friendships are those where the child feels accepted, not performative.

Creating low-pressure social opportunities

Forcing a child into a chaotic playground setting can lead to anxiety rather than connection. Instead, aim for structured, "low-stakes" environments.

- **Short and structured:** Arrange playdates that have a clear start and end time. Knowing that a visit is exactly one hour long can help an autistic child manage their energy.

- **Activity-based:** Plan meetups around a shared task. LEGO® clubs, art classes, and gaming sessions provide a "buffer" for social interaction. When the focus is on the project, there is less pressure to maintain constant eye contact or small talk.

Before an outing, discuss what might happen. Afterward, have a gentle "check-in." Ask what they enjoyed and whether anything felt confusing, without being critical.

Coaching through challenges

Socializing involves risks, including facing rejection and misunderstandings. When a peer says "no," or a conflict arises, validate your child's feelings. Don't blame your child or the other person. Instead, use this as a teaching moment about different perspectives.

If bullying occurs, it is important to teach your child that they deserve respect. Gradually, you can teach resilience by helping them understand that not everyone will be a "best friend," and that is okay. The goal is to help them navigate the world while keeping their self-esteem intact.

Celebrating friendship

Your child does not need to be "socially typical" to be a wonderful friend. Autistic children often bring incredible honesty, loyalty, and a unique perspective to their relationships. Celebrate the kindness they show and the joy they find in others.

Whether your child has a dozen acquaintances or one best friend who loves trains as much as they do, that connection is a success. Recognize their milestones and validate their individual approach to building relationships.

Friendship is a meaningful connection when two people truly understand one another.

Carol Tatom Nentwig, BA.HSE, CHW, has a bachelor's degree in human services and is a licensed community health worker in Texas. Carol is also an autism parent, writer, and advocate for special needs. Carol is currently the Executive Director of Community Engagement at Centria Healthcare. She enjoys being able to work with families and help connect them to support and resources that improve their quality of life.

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The Pros and Cons of Leucovorin

By **Jeremy Brown**

Who might benefit from leucovorin, and what should parents know?

In September 2025, the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) began the process to approve leucovorin for people with cerebral folate deficiency, commonly associated with autism.

For families of nonverbal children, this development has sparked interest and cautious optimism about how the medication could support improved communication.

Yet, with every other potential medication, there are many questions surrounding its use: How effective is this medication? Which children might benefit? What should families consider before trying it?

What is leucovorin?

In its simplest form, leucovorin, also called folinic acid, is a manmade compound of Vitamin B9, designed to treat cerebral folate deficiency. Folate is essential for brain development in early life. Research suggests many autistic people have abnormalities in how their bodies process and transport folate.

Leucovorin is designed to work around this problem. Unlike standard folic acid, it can use alternative pathways to deliver folate to the brain. Many believe it can help improve developmental delays, verbal skills, and communication among autistic children.

Why would leucovorin help communication?

Folate is connected to language development. When the brain lacks folate, it may contribute to delays in speech and communication.

Some people with autism have things called folate receptor autoantibodies or FRAAs. These antibodies interfere with the body's ability to move folate into the brain. As a result, even if folate is present in the body, the brain may not receive enough of it.

Leucovorin is a folinic acid that's been shown to bypass these autoantibodies. Improving folate availability in the brain has the potential to support areas related to language, attention, and social interaction.

Some clinical studies have shown that autistic children who have taken leucovorin have seen improved verbal and social skills, such as:

- Improved focus and attention
- Stronger language processing skills
- Increased verbal expression
- More back-and-forth interaction

It's important to note that responses vary, and not every child experiences these changes.

What does the research say?

Early research offers encouraging but still limited findings. In one study, a majority of children, about 77 percent, who tested positive for FRAA biomarkers and took leucovorin showed measurable gains in speech and behavior within 12 weeks.

Some of those reported gains included:

- Expressive language (speaking and word use)
- Receptive language (understanding others)

> "Leucovorin is a folinic acid that's been shown to bypass these autoantibodies. Improving folate availability in the brain has the potential to support areas related to language, attention, and social interaction."

- Social engagement and interaction
- Reduced repetitive behaviors

While there is some research suggesting that leucovorin may help children with autism, that research is fairly limited. Most scientists agree that more research is needed before any recommendations can be made about the routine use of leucovorin.

Pros: Why some families choose to try it

There are plenty of potential reasons families may choose leucovorin for their autistic children. Even modest improvements in speech or interaction can be helpful in daily life.

It's a generally well-tolerated medication and can be combined with speech or behavioral therapy, which makes it more appealing.

Plus, improved communication can renew hope among some families and has been linked to a better quality of life. For some families, it represents a step forward after limited progress with other approaches.

Cons and considerations

Despite its promise, leucovorin is not a guaranteed solution. The most obvious consideration is that not all children will respond.

And much like any other medication, there is the possibility of side effects, including:

- Irritability
- Increased activity levels
- Sleep disturbances

Leucovorin requires a prescription, must be used under medical supervision, and ongoing monitoring may be necessary.

Depending on your insurance coverage, the cost and accessibility could also be barriers.

Another important consideration is the lack of long-term data. While short-term studies are encouraging, the long-term effects are not yet fully understood.

Remember: any medication for your child must be discussed with their doctor, and no one should ever self-supplement with high-dose folinic acid.

Informed and empowered

If your child has a folate deficiency, leucovorin is just one possible tool that may help improve their communication. However, it's not a standalone solution.

Families considering the medication should speak with their child's doctor and continue therapies alongside the treatment.

Each child's biology and development are unique, so treatment decisions should be individualized.

Still, leucovorin represents a promising area of research in autism-related care. It may not work for everyone, but for some families looking to support communication, it offers a potential advancement.

As research continues to evolve, the most important step remains: informed, collaborative decision-making with medical professionals.

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Jeremy Brown is a writer, editor, podcast co-host, Emmy-winning local news producer, husband, and father. His work in local TV news left him yearning for a more creative outlet, and the coronavirus pandemic and his wife's caregiver burnout presented an opportunity to stretch his creative muscles while also helping others. Jeremy and his wife, Sarah, launched the podcast Caregiver Chronicles together in August 2020. While Sarah is the lead, Jeremy co-hosts for many episodes and edits every episode of Caregiver Chronicles.

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Finding the Right Communication Method for Your Nonspeaking Child

By **Maggie McGarvie, SLP**

How can parents support their nonspeaking child's self-expression through meaningful communication?

When your child reaches their first, second, and third birthdays, and there are no words yet, it can bring questions, fears, and uncertainty about the future. Families should know that communication is much more than spoken words.

Some parents may feel grief that their child's communication looks different. However, it is important to remember that children can communicate successfully without speech.

Many tools and systems help children express their needs, thoughts, and emotions.

The goal is not to force speech, but to support meaningful communication in whatever way works best for your child.

The reasons behind non- or minimally speaking

A child may be nonspeaking or minimally speaking for many reasons. Some children are autistic and communicate differently. Others may have the following:

- Childhood apraxia of speech

- Developmental delays
- Genetic conditions
- Hearing differences
- Neurological conditions affecting speech production

No matter the reason for the disconnect between the brain and the oral-motor mechanism, nonspeaking does not mean having nothing to say. In fact, nonspeaking children understand language, have thoughts and opinions, and want to connect with the people around them. They simply need the right tools to express themselves.

Communication methods and systems

There are many communication systems available to support children. Communication is not one-size-fits-all. Finding the right method is about meeting your child where they are. Here are some of the most commonly used systems:

Gesture-based communication: natural and accessible

Gestures are one of the earliest and most natural ways children communicate. Long before words develop, children use their bodies to share information with others. Your child may be doing them, and you do not even realize it.

People often underestimate the power of pointing to an object, reaching for something, nodding, or bringing something to someone. These are not just actions; they are communication!

When adults respond to gestures, children learn that their communication matters. Parents can support an increase in gestures by noticing and responding to them, modeling words with gestures, and modeling new gestures.

Sign language: Using hands to communicate

Some children learn basic sign language to communicate their needs, wants, and ideas. Sign language uses hand movements to represent words and concepts, making it a powerful communication option for children with strong motor skills who enjoy movement-based learning.

Parents often use starter signs such as “more,” “help,” or “eat,” which are understood by most adults. Sign language can do the following:

- Reduce frustration
- Support language development
- Help children feel understood

It is also portable. Children can use their hands anywhere without needing equipment.

A common myth is that sign language prevents speech development. Research shows the opposite. Using signs can actually support speech in the following ways:

- Building vocabulary
- Reducing pressure
- Strengthening communication skills

There are some limitations:

- Some families need time to learn signs alongside their child.
- Some children may find fine motor movements challenging.
- Adults or peers in the community may not understand signs, so generalizing skills can be difficult at times.

However, sign language is often used to support early communication.

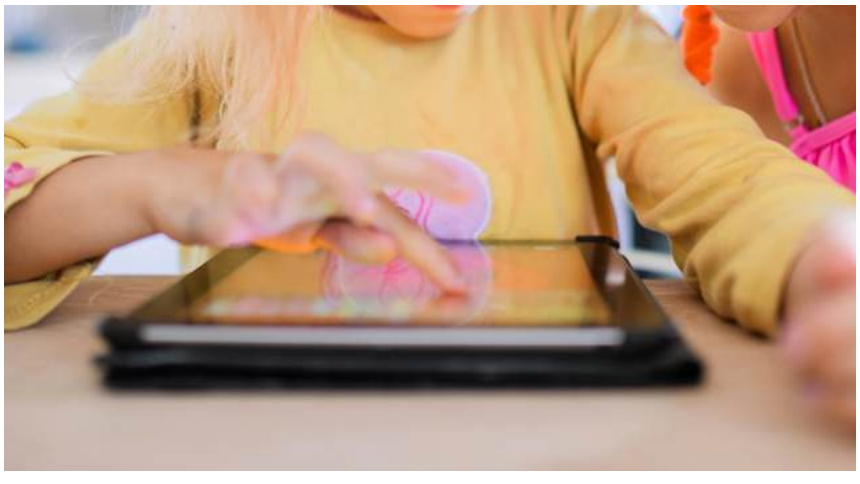
PECS: Picture Exchange Communication System

This structured method was created in 1985 to teach children to communicate using pictures. In this system, a child hands a picture to another person to request an item, activity, or help. Over time, children can learn to combine pictures into simple sentences.

PECS is often taught through step-by-step instruction with support from a trained professional, such as a speech-language pathologist or behavior specialist. The structure helps children understand the power of communication: When they give a picture, something happens.

One limitation is that PECS requires consistent teaching and access to materials. It can also take time to build vocabulary.

Many families use PECS as a starting point and later transition to other communication methods.



In addition, visuals (pictures) are often used to support understanding and help expand expressive communication, even if not used with the traditional PECS protocol. Never underestimate the power of a picture.

AAC devices: high-tech communication tools

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices are tools that help children communicate using technology. These devices can produce speech when a child taps pictures, symbols, or words on a screen. Some are simple tablet apps, while others are dedicated communication devices designed specifically for communication.

For children with motor impairments, an eye-gaze system or other individualized mechanisms can be developed to support vocabulary selection.

One of the biggest benefits of AAC is that it gives children a reliable voice, even when speaking is difficult. Research consistently shows that using AAC does not stop children from developing speech; it supports language development.

Families may need guidance from a speech-language pathologist to select the right device, program vocabulary, and model communication throughout daily routines.

Due to the ever-expanding capabilities of technology, vocabulary is almost limitless and can be individualized for each child.

Spelling for communication

Spelling is a method that allows individuals to express their thoughts by pointing to letters to form words, sentences, and messages on a letter board or keyboard. The goal of spelling is to connect, have autonomy, and communicate meaningfully, not to have perfect spelling or grammar.

Spelling has helped individuals over the age of four expand their expressive language skills, and many autistic teens and adults have been successful using this method.

It is important to try all methods and always presume competence.

Choosing the right communication method

To choose the right communication method for your child, find the system that fits their needs right now. Several factors can influence this decision:

- Motor abilities
- Visual processing skills
- Cognitive development
- Sensory preferences
- Daily routines
- Family involvement
- Access to therapy support

> “Communication is about connection, and every child progresses differently.”

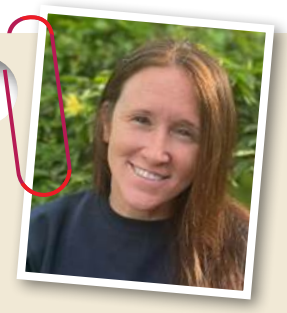
Many children do well using a combination of communication methods, which can evolve as your child grows and changes. Working with a speech-language pathologist can help families make informed decisions and adjust supports over time.

Supporting your child’s communication journey

A parent’s role is important to their child’s communication development. You do not need special training to make a meaningful difference. These simple strategies can help:

- Respond to every attempt to communicate.
- Keep communication tools within reach.
- Model communication frequently throughout the day.
- Give your child time to respond.
- Celebrate small successes.

Communication is about connection, and every child progresses differently. When children feel heard, understood, and supported, their communication grows.



Maggie McGarvie, SLP, is a neurodiversity-affirming pediatric speech-language pathologist with 16 years of experience, specializing in helping families connect with and understand their autistic child(ren). She shares insights on sensory needs, language, play, and behavior via her YouTube channel to help families who are feeling lost.

https://www.instagram.com/yourathomeslp/

https://www.youtube.com/@YourAtHomeSLP/playlists

Success Story: Exceeding Expectations

David Valentino writes about his daughter's success in many areas. Have a success story you want to share? Click here.

Our living room had a back door to the outside, so naturally, shoes piled up there. My wife's flip-flops and boots, my loafers and running shoes, and Sophia's little toddler tennis shoes were all neatly placed on the mat.

My little nonverbal one-and-a-half-year-old meandered over to the mat and grabbed a boot. With little red curls bouncing up and down, she made her way to the TV stand and placed a boot on the edge perpendicular to the television. Then, one by one, I watched her organize the shoes across the stand. While staring at all of the shoes, my eyes welled with tears.

It was at this moment that I thought my daughter was autistic. Now what?

The diagnosis

The following week, after our visit to the pediatrician, we sat in the waiting room at our local children's hospital. My wife reached out and settled my leg, which was bouncing in a fast, uneven rhythm. Sophia was to be evaluated by a team consisting of a psychologist, a speech therapist, an occupational therapist, and an autism specialist.

A voice called out my daughter's name. It was our turn. Sophia had just discovered a play area, and when I picked her up, she began to weep and flail her arms. I felt just like she did, nervous, confused, and upset by this whole experience, only she expressed her discontent more clearly.

We awkwardly marched down a cold corridor to the small playroom. The strangers evaluated my daughter and diagnosed her with autism spectrum disorder.

The pamphlet

They handed me a pamphlet and told me there were a lot of phone numbers and websites I needed to check out. Then they wished me luck.

The news wasn't shocking, but it was panic-inducing. I had to escape. I was a prisoner of confusion. I had so many questions, but the most concerning was: What was expected of me?

I had a pamphlet.

The clear answer

Later that day, after Sophia fell asleep on the couch, my wife told me to get some fresh air, so I drove to the park. I pulled into a parking spot and took out the pamphlet.

Looking around, I saw the sun shining, the tops of the trees swaying to the subtle song of the wind, and typical kids, no older than six, playing. Then I noticed a little girl crying as she walked off the field toward her mommy.

Her forehead was scrunched, her mouth was agape in agony, and her arms were outstretched towards her mother. She started telling her mother what was wrong, and I grew jealous.

Sophia knew only two or three words, and when she was sad, all she could do was cry. She wasn't able to tell me what hurt.

After a deep breath, through wet, blurry eyes, I finally started reading the pamphlet. I read about early intervention, ABA therapy, speech therapy, and a social services organization in my area. It was overwhelming.

I also took out my phone and searched, finding so many pages and methods. What was the answer?

Then I looked up and saw that little girl, and she was laughing in her mother's love and embrace.

That was when it became clear. The only expectation of me was to be Sophia's father, and that meant, first and foremost, I just had to love her.

> Today, Sophia is in the tenth grade, and she loves to have conversations with her family and friends. She also loves Disney movies and fashion.

Exceeding expectations

Today, Sophia is in the tenth grade, and she loves to have conversations with her family and friends. She also loves Disney movies and fashion.

She is a brown belt in karate. She is a writer and illustrator. She can tell you the release date of every major Disney animated film and the voice actors who played the major roles.

She is also on the bowling team, and yesterday she was selected to bowl in the upcoming JV invitational. That means she is one of the top JV bowlers at her high school!

Sophia makes a positive impact on everyone she meets, and I am so proud of my beautiful daughter, who has exceeded all expectations.

Rethinking Classroom Supports

By **Leigh De Silva, MAS**

Classroom supports must align with what a child needs, not what they want.

As a behavior support practitioner and developmental educator working with children diagnosed with both autism and ADHD, I have watched well-meaning educators implement supports that make learning harder.

At some point, we started confusing what children want with what they need. This distinction matters.

A child may want a drawer full of fidget toys, free-choice seating, and minimal structure. Yet, a child with autism and ADHD often needs the exact opposite: predictability, clear boundaries, and reduced sensory input.

When we prioritize needs over wants, classrooms become calmer, and learning becomes more positive.

Structure, consistency, and reduced stimulation

Many classrooms are filled with sensory equipment, flexible seating arrangements that change daily, and rules that bend depending on the child's mood. Teachers tell me they are being "child-led" and "responsive to individual needs".

When I observe these environments, I see overwhelmed children who are dysregulated and unable to focus.

Children with autism thrive on predictability. They need to know what will come next, where they will sit, and the rules.

Children with ADHD have brains wired to seek novelty, which means that every new item, every change in routine, and every bright and interesting object in their peripheral vision pulls their attention away from learning.

Put these two neurotypes together, and you have a child who desperately needs structure, consistency, and reduced stimulation to function well.

Yet many current classroom practices offer too much choice and stimulation, and too little structure. They prioritize what the child appears to want in the moment over what research tells us these children actually need.

Simple rules, simply stated

Children with autism and ADHD need about three to five rules, stated simply, and applied consistently.

Research consistently shows that children with executive function challenges, a core feature of both autism and ADHD, struggle with keeping multiple pieces of information in their working memory.

When we give these children complex, multi-layered rules, we set them up to fail. They cannot remember all the exceptions and conditions. They become anxious about getting it wrong.

> “Children with autism thrive on predictability. They need to know what will come next, where they will sit, and the rules.”

When they inevitably break a rule they did not understand, they are often punished for something that was never within their control.

Simple rules also establish clear cause and effect:

- “Raise your hand to have a turn to speak.”
- “Listen to classmates to make friends.”

These clear rules help create an environment where the child can make informed choices and understand what is expected of them.

One instruction at a time

“Get out your book, turn to page 42, read the first paragraph, and answer question three.”

For a neurotypical child, this may be a manageable sequence. For a child with autism and ADHD, there is a possibility of failure.

By the time they have processed the first instruction, they have lost the second one. By the time they have found their book, they have forgotten the page number. They look around, see their peers working, and feel the rising panic of not knowing what to do.

Single-step instructions are not about “simplifying” the curriculum. They are about making content accessible. “Get out your book.” Pause. “Turn to page 42.” Pause. “Read the first paragraph.”

Children who have intellectual disabilities, are simply tired, or have anxiety can follow these instructions, benefiting multiple students in a classroom.

The best adjustments are those developed for the few, but that simplify the classroom structure and therefore benefit the majority.

The fidget toy myth

Fewer fidget toys are better than more.

I regularly observe classrooms with fidget boxes, sensory corners, and drawers containing various tactile objects. The intention is good. The execution is counterproductive.

A child with ADHD may see a box of fidgets as a distraction machine, not a calming tool. The child spends energy deciding which fidget to use, comparing fidgets, trading fidgets with peers, and wondering what other fidgets might be available. Learning takes a backseat.

The evidence-based approach is simple: one fidget toy, kept in a consistent location. My recommendation is to provide the child with one fidget toy and keep an identical fidget in the teacher's desk. If the child's fidget is lost or broken, an exact replacement is provided immediately; no disruption or decision-making is required.

Critically, the fidget should be used **under the desk** to protect other children in the classroom who also have ADHD and are attracted to novelty.

A fidget spinner whirring on a desktop is a beacon for every attention-seeking brain in the room. Under the desk, it serves its purpose by providing sensory input to help regulate the child's use without becoming a distraction to others.

Clear student and teacher roles

In the push toward child-centered learning, we have sometimes lost clarity about roles. Children

with autism and ADHD benefit from knowing exactly who is in charge and what that means.

The teacher is the teacher. The student is the student. This is clarifying, not authoritarian.

When roles are unclear, anxious children become more anxious. "Am I supposed to decide what happens next? What if I decide wrong?"

Children with autism can struggle with uncertainty when decision-making is shared in classroom contexts. They do better when they know: "The teacher will tell me what to do. My job is to listen and try."

Children should still have a voice and be able to make choices, but the structure should be clear. "You will complete this worksheet. You may choose to use a pencil or a pen."

The task is non-negotiable. The small choice within it gives the child appropriate independence without overwhelming them with decisions.

What children actually need

To support children with both autism and ADHD, they need fewer choices, less stimulation, and more clarity.

They also need a calm, predictable, and structured environment with adults who are confident in their role and consistent in their expectations.

The child who fights against structure may need it most.

The role of parents and educators is not to give children everything they ask for but to create conditions in which children can learn.

This means determining whether our current practices serve our children's needs or reflect our discomfort with setting boundaries.

It means being willing to say "no" to popular trends when the evidence does not support them.

It means remembering that structure is the foundation of a child-centered practice.

Children with autism and ADHD can learn, engage, succeed, and thrive in classrooms. Yet they need us to stop prioritizing wants over needs and to start building structured, calm, predictable environments that their brains require.

That is supportive, not restrictive. It is what these children deserve.

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The Power of Routine

By **Alicia Trautwein**

Routines help offer structure, control, and predictability.

Navigating daily life can present unique problems for those with autism, including coping with sensory sensitivity, processing changes, and maintaining a sense of predictability and security.

Regular routines can create stability and structure, which lowers anxiety and promotes independence. Routines are an effective strategy for making life easier and more pleasurable for autistic people and their families.

Why routines matter

Routines offer predictability for autistic individuals. Sudden changes are troubling for many autistic people, which can cause stress and sensory overload.

By creating consistent routines, these individuals will have a better understanding of their day, which allows them to navigate life with greater confidence. Here are some reasons why routines matter:

Reduced anxiety and stress

Having a reliable structure lessens uncertainty, helping autistic individuals feel more in control.

Improved independence

Routines establish habits, which encourage independence. Over time, individuals are more likely to complete tasks independently when they understand the necessary steps.

Enhanced predictability and control

The mental strain of anticipating change reduces once someone understands what comes next. Predictability also allows people to focus on the now instead of worrying about unexpected events.

Better time management and organization

Structured routines help break the day into manageable pieces, making it easier to set aside time for tasks, especially for individuals who struggle with executive functioning skills.

Smoother transitions between activities

Transitions can be harder for those with autism because they might need more time to shift between activities. Since a routine offers a natural indicator of what will happen next, it simplifies these changes.

Research supports the power of routines for reducing stress and improving overall well-being for autistic individuals. For example, studies have shown that predictable environments reduce behavioral issues and promote emotional stability among autistic children.

Routines and brain function

People with autism often have unique differences in how they process information and in executive functioning: planning, organizing, and finishing tasks. Regular routines provide a mental "shortcut" that lessens their cognitive load.

According to research, predictable routines help autistic people cope with daily stress by activating brain regions linked to safety and comfort. Routines help the brain to function better, improving focus and reducing sensory overload.

Types of routines to consider

Routines are more about implementing consistent patterns that provide stability and not about rigid deadlines. The following types of routines are especially beneficial:

Morning and bedtime routines

These bookend routines help create a smooth day's beginning and finish. While sleep routines involve calming activities like reading or listening to relaxing music, morning routines involve getting dressed, eating breakfast, and leaving at a regular time.

Mealtime routines

Regular mealtime routines, such as sitting in the same place, setting the table, eating, and cleaning up afterward, can ease anxiety related to diet and food while making meals more fun.

School and work routines

Creating routines for school and work helps keep those responsibilities separate from personal time and encourages an environment for productivity.

For students, this could mean a set schedule for starting and completing homework. For adults, it might involve a series of preparatory tasks for starting the workday.

Leisure and self-care routines

In any routine, it's important to plan for fun and relaxation. Spending time outdoors daily or having a weekly family game night are examples of leisure activities that help balance the day.

Self-care practices that encourage physical and mental well-being are equally important. These activities can include stretching, brushing one's teeth, and taking a bath.

Implementing effective routines

To create beneficial routines, start small and build gradually. Here are some steps to make routines stick:

- **Identify goals**: Decide which areas of the day would benefit most from added structure. This might mean establishing routines around mornings or mealtimes.

- **Break down tasks**: Divide harder tasks into smaller, simpler steps. For example, if the goal is to create a nightly ritual, start with putting on pajamas, brushing your teeth, and so on.

- **Use visual schedules:** Many individuals with autism respond positively to visual tools that clarify expectations. Digital tools, charts, or pictures that visually remind individuals of every step of the routine can add another layer of assistance.

- **Retain consistency:** Consistency is vital because it promotes familiarity. While flexibility is important, especially as routines are started, consistency helps routines take root over time.

- **Tailor to individual needs**: Since every autistic individual is unique, routines should reflect personal needs and preferences. If a child finds certain textures soothing, make sure to incorporate them into their morning or bedtime routine.

The goal is to establish routines that fit each individual's comfort zone, energy levels, and sensory preferences.

Managing changes in routine

There will always be changes, even with a good routine. For example, holidays or unforeseen circumstances, like someone being sick, can lead

to a sudden change. Here are a few tips for dealing with those deviations from their regular schedule:

- **Prepare in advance:** Give notice of changes. This can involve explaining the change verbally, using a visual aid, or practicing the new sequence if it's a big alteration (e.g., a family trip).

- **Introduce flexibility gradually**: Practice it by making small changes to the routine now and then. Over time, these alterations will help individuals learn to cope better with disruptions to routine.

- **Teach coping mechanisms for unexpected disruptions**: Even with careful planning, unexpected changes can still happen. Teaching coping skills such as deep breathing can help autistic people cope with sudden changes to routine.

Routines help everyone

Routines provide many benefits for autistic individuals of all ages, including decreased anxiety, increased independence, and easier transitions.

Creating regular family routines can foster harmony and make everyone feel safer and more supported. Maintaining these routines can have a lasting impact, enhancing everyday life with calmness, consistency, and happiness.

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Alicia Trautwein, an advocate for autism and neurodiversity, intertwines her personal experience as an autistic mother of four, three of whom are on the autism spectrum, with her professional work. She founded “The Mom Kind,” a platform that provides insights on parenting neurodiverse children, and extends her advocacy through a podcast and public speaking. Through her multifaceted efforts, Alicia seeks to educate and support families, promoting a more inclusive society.

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Ask Dr. Malcolm

By **Ronald I. Malcolm, EdD**

Dr. Malcolm answers parents' questions and concerns about their autistic children. You can submit your questions here.

Gladys from Kumasi, Ghana, asks:

What can I do to minimize aggressiveness in my autistic son?

Defining aggression

Aggression with children with autism can look different from child to child. Some parents view aggression as hitting, kicking, or biting.

Other parents are more concerned when their child appears to be destroying physical property in their home or at school.

Other children may appear verbally aggressive in their language. They may use profanity, insults, or even make verbal threats.

While some children with autism engage in aggressive types of behavior, not all do so intentionally. It is not always a purposeful form of aggression that is directed at a specific person. It may be your child's way of attempting to communicate.

Not all behavior is acceptable, but your child's aggressive behavior may be a form of communication they use to get their needs met.

Pediatrician

You will need to consult your pediatrician for some guidance. They may work with you directly or refer

you to another professional who specializes in children with autism.

Letting your child's pediatrician know what types of behaviors your child is displaying will give them better insight as to how to assist both you and your child. It could also rule out any other hidden medical concerns that may be causing these issues.

This will be especially important for you to consider if your child is nonverbal. Some behaviors manifest as aggressive acts when an individual is in pain and unable to vocalize that.

Again, the pediatrician may refer you to another professional. They may also want to discuss the possibility of placing your child on medication. Do your research and educate yourself on the medication being prescribed so you know the possible side effects that can occur.

Some children may need to try several different medications until the right one is found to provide the help they need. In fact, if your child is currently taking any medications, ensure that you share that information with your pediatrician. It could be that they are having a negative reaction to their current medication, and it is manifesting in the form of aggressive behaviors.

Environmental changes

Sometimes, when a child exhibits aggressive behavior, it may be something in their immediate environment that is triggering it. Taking a moment to observe what is happening in their immediate environment during the aggressive episode may help you determine what changes could reduce their aggression.

Some children respond aggressively to any sudden change to their daily routine. Others are impacted by bright lights or loud noises. Some respond out of fear or anxiety due to something being introduced into their environment that causes this. Even something as simple as the presence of a dog or cat may trigger them to respond aggressively.

Board certified behavior analyst (BCBA)

You may find that you'll need some assistance from a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA). They could work with your child in your home or at school. Typically, they will want to gather data utilizing an A-B-C method.

They will look for "Antecedents" that occur before the behavior begins, triggering it. They will then define the "Behavior" in very specific and measurable terms for everyone. Finally, they'll determine what the "Consequence" for the behavior was.

Having the information from the "Antecedent – Behavior- and Consequence" can help you reshape the behavior.

Functions of the aggressive behavior

As you begin to observe your child and their environment more during times of aggression, you might gain a better understanding of the functions of their aggressive behavior. As mentioned earlier, not all aggressive behaviors on the part of children with autism are intentional.

One function of their behavior may indicate that they are experiencing "pain." It could be the beginning of them coming down with the flu or even developing a toothache. They may not have the verbal means to explain it to you.

Some children with autism use aggressive behavior to escape or avoid a non-preferred task. They may act aggressively in hopes that you'll leave them alone so they can continue playing their video game instead of cleaning their bedroom. Others may use aggression to gain your attention or items they want.

Replacement strategies

Once you better understand the function of your child's aggression, you can begin to implement replacement strategies. Your child can be taught that, instead of aggressively screaming or crying to continue a preferred activity, you can set a timer to indicate that the activity will end in 5 minutes. This will give your child additional time to process that the event will soon conclude.

Your child can also be taught that when they want your assistance, instead of hitting or kicking you, they can request "help" by presenting you with an "I need help card." Instead of destroying personal property because they no longer want to continue with an unpreferred task, they can present you with an "I need a break" card.

Preferred items

Ask your BCBA to conduct a Preference Assessment with your child. All children, regardless of their level of autism, tend to have items or activities that they prefer.

Your child may be heavily reinforced by fidgets, drawing, a specific toy, various food items, playing with puzzles, different forms of technology, video games, etc. These items can be used as positive reinforcers to reward your child for using their replacement behaviors.

> "Many children on the spectrum may have excessive energy that they need to burn off. Involve your child in an outside activity."

Some children will need immediate, consistent reinforcement with the preferred item at the beginning. You can later begin to increase the length of time between offering the preferred item as a reward. Keep in mind that preferred items may change over time, and you'll need to conduct new Preference Assessments to determine this.

Active engagement

Many children on the spectrum may have excessive energy that they need to burn off. Involve your child in an outside activity. They can join a sports team, take swimming lessons, go horseback riding, take music lessons, help an elderly neighbor with yardwork, etc.

Involving them in the community and at school can help develop their social skills and increase their self-confidence. While burning off excess energy, they may also improve their overall sleep patterns.

Social stories

Social stories are a great way to introduce your child to what appropriate behaviors may sound and look like. They can be developed by parents, special education teachers, BCBA's, etc, to teach your child what to do in stressful situations.

Social stories can also assist your child when they begin to feel a high level of anxiety or a reaction to a trigger. These are stories that can be read consistently at home and at school.

Some children have the skills necessary to assist with writing their own social stories.

Never underestimate the power of peers

I have always been amazed by the influence that same-age peers have on shaping behavior. Sometimes adults attempt to reduce a certain behavior in a child without success. Yet, when another child attempts to assist with a certain behavior, they may be successful.

There are always children at school or in your neighborhood who will offer empathy to your child when they are experiencing a sudden change in their environment and beginning to become aggressive.

Additionally, children surrounded by same-age neurotypical peers are also exposed daily to socially acceptable norms both in their school and community, which acts as a great model for behavior.

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Navigating College, Trade School, and Career Paths for Young Adults

By **Susan M. Tatem, LPTA, CGIP**

Here are some practical strategies to prepare your child for paths after high school.

If you're the parent of an autistic teen or young adult, "What happens after high school?" can cause a knot in your stomach. You might be smiling on the outside while your mind is quietly running through every "what if."

Know you're not alone. Success is achievable, but it doesn't look the same for everyone.

Let's explore the three common options, as well as practical preparation strategies to support them.

The college route

For some autistic young adults, college is a great fit, especially when they have a strong area of interest and the right supports in place. A traditional four-year university offers the full campus experience, dorms, clubs, and a wide range of majors.

Community colleges can be a strong starting point. They're often more affordable, closer to home, and more flexible. Many students begin at community college and transfer later, which can reduce stress while they build independence.

Campus disability services can make a major difference, but the process usually changes after high school.

In college, the student requests accommodations, provides documentation, and follows up. Accommodations aren't automatic, and parents often have less access to details than they did in high school. Practicing self-advocacy early matters.

Some common supports include:

- Reduced course loads
- Note-taking assistance
- Permission to record lectures
- Quiet testing spaces
- Extended testing time

Social life is also part of the equation. Dorm living can be exciting and overwhelming, so plan for sensory needs, downtime, and routines. Interest-based clubs can support peer relationships without constant unstructured social pressure.

Trade school and vocational training

Autistic learners who thrive with hands-on instruction, clear outcomes, and structured schedules may benefit from trade school and vocational programs. Many include labs, simulations, apprenticeships, or supervised practice, so students learn by doing.

These programs are often shorter than college degrees and focus on practical skills that lead directly to employment. For many young adults, it's reassuring to know, "If I learn this skill, it leads to this job."

Popular fields that often align with autistic strengths include technology (IT support, coding, cybersecurity), mechanics and skilled trades (HVAC, automotive, welding), healthcare support roles, and culinary arts.

The best fit depends on your young adult's sensory profile, energy, and interests, so visit

"Popular fields that often align with autistic strengths include technology (IT support, coding, cybersecurity), mechanics and skilled trades (HVAC, automotive, welding), healthcare support roles, and culinary arts."

programs in person when possible. Ask the following questions:

- What is a typical day?
- How do instructors communicate their expectations?
- What is the learning environment like (noise, lighting, pace)?
- What are the attendance requirements?

Finally, ask how they support students during internships or apprenticeships.

A program can look great on paper and still feel impossible if the environment is too loud, too fast, or too unpredictable.

Entry to the workforce

Some autistic young adults do best by entering the workforce, especially if learning by doing feels more natural than classroom study. Direct workforce entry can work well when there's a supportive supervisor, predictable routines, and tasks that match strengths and support needs.

A job can also provide structure, income, and real feedback about what environments feel acceptable.

Supported employment programs and job coaching services can be game changers. Vocational rehabilitation services, workforce

centers, and disability-focused nonprofits may help with job matching, interview practice, on-the-job coaching, and workplace accommodations.

Some programs connect job seekers with employer partnerships and autism-friendly companies, which can improve onboarding and help them keep their jobs.

Building work experience through internships and volunteer roles can reduce pressure and create references. Look for roles with clear tasks and measurable expectations.

In some workplaces, a coach can help shape the role by matching duties to strengths while still meeting the employer's needs. For example, a coach may provide written checklists, break tasks into steps, or create a predictable break routine.

Preparation strategies for all paths

Whether preparing for college, trade programs, or employment, the goal is steady progress. The following skills support success by strengthening communication, daily functioning, and problem-solving:

Self-advocacy skill development

Practice short scripts for asking questions, requesting accommodations, and clarifying instructions. Start small, then repeat.

One helpful habit is "teach-back," where your young adult repeats the instructions in their own words to confirm understanding.

Social skill development

Focus on the following to help with social skills:

- Functional skills
- Greetings
- Requesting help
- Handling feedback
- Repairing misunderstandings

Many autistic young adults benefit from practicing real scenarios at home, then trying them in safe settings. This practice is communication that supports connection and reduces conflict.

Executive function support and tools

Use calendars, alarms, checklists, and task breakdowns. Pick one system and use it long enough to build muscle memory.

A weekly planning session, even 15 minutes, can prevent last-minute overwhelm.

Financial literacy and independence skills

Teach basic banking skills, as well as how to maintain a budget and track spending. Practice the following "Activities of Daily Living" (ADLs):

- Meal planning
- Laundry
- Transportation
- Medication routines

Having these skills can reduce anxiety and increase confidence, no matter which path your young adult chooses.

Healthcare transition planning

Help your young adult learn the basics of managing their own healthcare, including:

- Scheduling appointments
- Managing prescriptions
- Communicating with providers

Reduce stress during new visits with a one-page medical summary that includes the following:

- Diagnoses
- Medications
- Allergies
- Emergency contacts

If phone calls are challenging, explore patient portals or written messaging.

Building support networks

Encourage your young adult to identify safe, practical supports: an advisor or instructor, a supervisor or coworker, and one trusted person for emotional support.

For parents, connect with transition resources and other families. Most successful adults have networks. Your young adult deserves one too.

Ready for the future

Post-secondary transition can feel scary, but with one step at a time, your young adult can make progress. College, trade school, and direct workforce entry can all lead to meaningful adult lives when the pathway fits the person and supports are in place.

If your child takes a bit longer, that doesn't mean they're failing. They're building lasting skills in their own way.

With preparation, accommodations, and steady support, your young adult can move forward into a safe and purposeful future that's truly their own.

Susan M. Tatem, LPTA, CGIP, is the CEO and founder of Bright Path Coaching, where she supports parents of children with autism aged 12 and older in preparing for independence and adulthood. As a mother of an adult daughter with autism, Susan brings both personal insight and professional guidance to every family she serves. She is also the creator and host of Puzzled Parents, a talk show focused on the autism journey.

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On the Shore, Watching Ben Float

By Chelsea Krivoshein

One sibling describes how life with her autistic brother led to acceptance and advocacy.

My younger brother Ben has always been able to float. In pools and lakes, he would lie still on the surface with arms out like wings. Ben innately knew he could trust the water.

Living alongside a sibling on the autism spectrum taught me steady patience, genuine empathy, and unwavering advocacy. It did not start that way.

Resentment and jealousy

As a child, I sometimes resented Ben, deep down, unmentionably. His sensory overload moments were disruptions that I perceived most families did not encounter.

I was jealous of other families who seemed "normal," and whose lives appeared easy. Our family learned how to move as one. We had to understand how to read each other in ways many families did not.

I didn't know how to name what I was feeling, but I often felt invisible. I can remember my parents carrying Ben out of sensory overload situations. He flailed in a state of dysregulation.

People stared. I was embarrassed, not by Ben, but mostly by how people judged him and our family without understanding. I understand now, as an adult, that when my parents carried Ben out of places, they intended to help him feel secure.

Sibling protection

When Ben and I went to the same elementary school, I tried to keep an eye out for him outside or in the halls. Not because anyone told me to; that's how our family worked.

When I was eleven years old, I could read from afar when he needed me. On those days, it felt natural to step in, not as a hero, but as a sister who wanted her brother to know he had an ally.

We weren't separate parts; we were a family that adapted to each moment. I wasn't just looking out for Ben; I was showing up the way our parents showed up for us.

We walked home together most days. Crossing the road turned into a lesson for both of us. Ben never rushed, even when drivers grew impatient. It was a balance to encourage him to move faster without being counterproductive.

There was no urgency in him to match the speed of the world around him. This made me realize much later that moving slowly isn't the same as falling behind.

Staying present and refusing to let people's impatience set your rhythm is a life lesson. Take the time you need, even if the world is honking at you.

My parents intentionally and consciously spent individual, quality time with my older brother, Dustin, and me. Those invaluable outings reminded us that we mattered too. This was their way of keeping balance in our family.

A memorable camping trip

A particular camping trip captured our family dynamic perfectly. We stopped at a creek to swim, and Ben went straight to the creek, walked in, and floated.

He was blissfully unaware that he was moving downstream. As Ben drifted, his voice carried calmly over the water: "Goodbye, Mother. Goodbye, Father. I hate you all. Goodbye forever."

So much energy went into keeping him comfortable, and hearing that could hit like a gut punch. For our family, we knew, this was Ben. His words weren't a declaration of hate. They were part humor, part theatrical protest; a way of processing frustration.

My dad rushed to catch him before he picked up speed. We never found his left shoe, but Ben returned unscathed.

Most families would see this as purely a scary story. For my family, this was a moment we all laughed about later. Humor was how we made it through the hard parts.

That afternoon by the creek became a story that lived on in our family, retold over tables and campfires.

It reminded me that moments of chaos often carried beauty. They showed how we instinctively moved in sync, without needing to plan who would go first.

That was the rhythm we'd practiced all our lives, stepping in when someone started to drift. Trusting the current of our family would bring everyone back.

Accepting, respecting, and advocating

As I got older, my resentment shifted. It evolved into acceptance, empathy, and a deep respect for differences.

Ben was not a person to manage. He was his own person, with strengths, ways of coping, and a unique perspective. I learned to advocate constructively when people made assumptions.

Those lessons shaped me. They taught me that love is not always loud or obvious.

It can be stepping in to protect someone before they drift too far.

It can give space when someone needs to reset.

And sometimes, it's simply being nearby, making sure they know you're there.

Even as an adult, Ben still floats, and I watch him with the same awe and protectiveness. He trusts the water to hold him.

I'll always be there on the shore, ready to notice, to step in, and to make sure he comes back.

Chelsea Krivoshein is a fourth-year student at the University of the Fraser Valley, where she is pursuing a career in teaching. She worked for 19 years supporting children with diverse needs, an experience that shaped her passion for inclusive education. Chelsea also brings a personal perspective as both a sibling and parent of a child who is neurodivergent. She lives in Abbotsford, British Columbia, and values advocacy and inclusion that strengthen families, schools, and communities.

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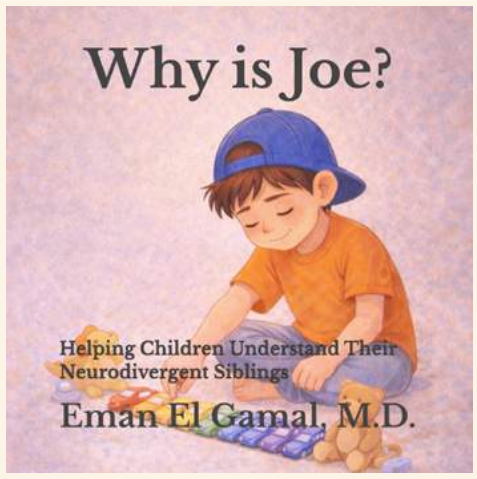
What's New On The Bookshelf?

Why Is Joe?

Helping Children Understand Their Neurodivergent Siblings



By **Eman El Gamal, MD, DFAPA, DFAACAP**

A children's book to help young readers understand their neurodivergent siblings with empathy and love.

Why Is Joe? Helping Children Understand Their Neurodivergent Siblings is a neurodiversity-affirming picture book written to help children understand and connect with a sibling who experiences the world differently.

Many families raising neurodivergent children discover that siblings often have questions they don't know how to ask.

- Why does my brother cover his ears?
- Why does my sister need extra help?
- Why do plans sometimes change?
- Why does Mom or Dad spend more time helping one child?

These questions are natural, yet many children struggle to find language for them.

Through gentle storytelling, simple questions, and engaging illustrations, Why Is Joe? helps children explore these experiences in an emotionally safe and developmentally appropriate way. Rather than viewing differences as problems to be fixed, readers are encouraged to understand that neurodivergent children may communicate, learn, play, and experience the world differently.

The book promotes empathy, curiosity, acceptance, and meaningful family conversations while helping siblings feel seen and supported in their own experiences. It offers parents, caregivers, educators, and therapists a valuable tool for discussing neurodiversity with young children and fostering stronger sibling relationships.

Designed for shared reading between children and adults, Why Is Joe? reminds families that understanding begins with curiosity, and connection begins with compassion.

Eman El Gamal, MD, DFAPA, DFAACAP, is a board-certified child and adolescent psychiatrist, educator, author, and parent with more than 15 years of clinical experience working with children, adolescents, and families.

She is the founder of iParenting Press and author of multiple parenting and children's books, including iParenting: Raising Resilient Kids, iParenting: Raising Neurodivergent Kids, and Why Is Sam? Helping Kids Understand Siblings with ADHD.

Through her writing, teaching, and clinical practice, Dr. El Gamal helps families navigate resilience, neurodevelopment, parenting, and mental health with compassion and evidence-based guidance.

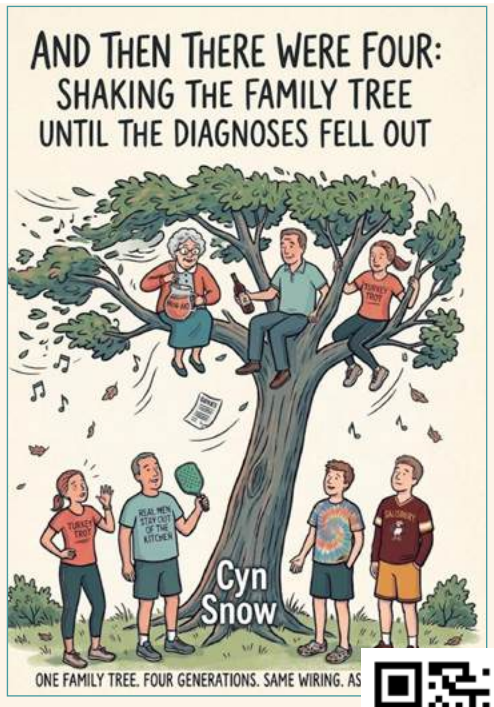
Amazon: https://a.co/d/09TFmRmZ

Also by Eman El Gamal, MD:

- iParenting: Raising Resilient Kids
- iParenting: Raising Neurodivergent Kids
- Why Is Sam? Helping Kids Understand Siblings with ADHD

What's New
On The Bookshelf?

And Then There Were Four:
Shaking the Family Tree Until the Diagnoses Fell Out



By **Cyn Snow**

One late-diagnosed mother of two sons on the spectrum writes about her family's four generations of autism.

Cyn Snow set out to write a practical guide for parents of autistic kids. Along the way, she discovered she was autistic. And not just her. Four generations, as it turned out. The guide became a memoir.

The title, And Then There Were Four, does double duty. It traces the lineage (the author's late grandmother, her late father, Cyn herself, and her two grown sons) and names the household she lives in now (Cyn, her husband, whose neurodivergence she recognized, and their two grown sons, still figuring it out together).

Written for parents raising neurodivergent kids, late-diagnosed adults, neurodivergent couples, and the professionals who want an honest view from the inside.

The book moves through the territory parents will recognize: the IEP meetings, the misread teachers, the masking, the sleep deficits, the energy crashes, and the mom-guilt that lives in a separate zip code from the neurotypical version.

The book also looks backward: at the relatives who made sense once the family pattern came into focus, and at a marriage between two autistic adults raising two autistic sons without a map.

The voice is wry, direct, and honest about the parts that don't resolve. There's no tidy ending. There are funny chapters, and there are chapters that won't let the reader off easy. Both are on purpose.

Cyn Snow is a late-diagnosed autistic author, speaker, and workshop facilitator. She spent more than twenty years raising two autistic sons: the years of broken sleep, the holidays that needed reverse-engineering, the relationships that didn't survive, the self-doubt that did. She was diagnosed herself at fifty-nine. She also facilitates **The Neurodivergent Box**, experiential workshops for parents, neurodivergent adults, and professionals.

And Then There Were Four is available on

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