

Caring for a Child on the Autism Spectrum

As a foster or adoptive parent, you probably already know that, the more tools and tips you can keep in your toolbox, the better prepared you will be for the challenging times. That is especially true if you are parenting or caring for a child on the Autism Spectrum.

Autism, or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech, and nonverbal communication. According to the Centers for Disease Control, autism affects an estimated one in 54 children in the United States today.

Receiving an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis for a child in your care may be frightening or overwhelming. The “spectrum” is so wide ranging, parents may be at a loss regarding where to start with getting help. The one thing experts agree on is that early intervention is key to helping a child with autism reach their full potential. But even if your child is older and just now receiving a ASD diagnosis, it’s not too late for interventions.

When and how does autism become apparent?

Children on the autistic spectrum may not follow the typical patterns of child development. Pediatricians, family physicians, daycare providers, teachers, and parents may initially dismiss signs of ASD, optimistically thinking the child is perhaps a

little behind on achieving their developmental milestones and will eventually “catch up.” In some children, hints of future problems may be apparent from birth. In most cases, the problems in communication and social skills become more noticeable as the child lags further behind other children the same age.

Often, between the ages of 12 and 36 months old, the differences in the way a child interacts and reacts to people becomes more noticeable. In other situations, there is a plateau of progress, making the difference between a child with autism and other children in the same age group more apparent.

What are some specific behaviors that children on the autism spectrum exhibit?

According to the Child Mind Institute, “Children with autism spectrum disorder are characterized by a combination of two unusual kinds of behaviors: deficits in communication and social skills, and restricted or repetitive behaviors. These symptoms may vary greatly in severity.” Following are a few signs, symptoms, or red flags you may notice for each of these behavior categories.

Social communication and interaction

- Aversion to displays of affection, such as a hug or cuddling
- Preferring to play alone



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- Failure to respond to their name (specifically in children younger than three)
- Trouble carrying on conversation
- Lack of eye contact
- Recognizing emotions
- Responding appropriately to various social interactions
- Understanding social relationships
- Nonverbal or talking in a “robotic” or singsong tone

Restricted or repetitive behaviors

- Performing repetitive actions
- Fixating on minute details to the point of distraction
- Becoming upset at the slightest change to routine
- Putting toys in order instead of playing with toys
- Showing an all-consuming interest in a certain object or topic

What can I do if I suspect an autism spectrum disorder?

- Contact your pediatrician for a consultation and referral to a specialist who treats children with autism spectrum disorder, such as a pediatric neurologist, child psychiatrist, child psychologist or developmental pediatrician.
- Contact the school to find out about services available in your district.
- Join a support organization for autism and become involved with other families who face the same challenges.
- Educate yourself and your family with as much information as you can.

Therapies and intervention options

When it comes to autism treatment, there are a dizzying variety of therapies and

approaches. Some focus on reducing problematic behaviors and building communication and social skills, while others deal with sensory integration problems, motor skills, emotional issues, and food sensitivities. With so many choices, it is extremely important to do your research, talk to autism treatment experts, and ask lots of questions. But keep in mind that you don't have to choose just one type of therapy. The goal should be to treat your child's unique array of symptoms and needs. This often

requires a combined treatment approach that incorporates several different types of therapy.

Common interventions include behavioral therapies such as applied behavior analysis (ABA), speech-language therapy, play-based therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, nutritional therapy, and

social skills groups. Supports for older youth and teens may also include vocational training, educational supports and applied therapies. But keep in mind that the routine is important and the program should be designed in a way that can be maintained and sustained. Keep in mind that there is no single treatment that works for everyone. Each person on the autism spectrum is unique, with different strengths and weaknesses.

Tips for parenting and caregiving

Focus on the positive. Just like anyone else, children on the spectrum often respond well to positive reinforcement. Be specific, so that they know exactly what you liked about their behavior. Find ways that are effective in rewarding the positive behavior; such as extended playtime or a small prize from the ever present prize machines.

“I’ve learned the very definition of unconditional love is choosing to love someone exactly for who they are.”

—Quote from a parent of two sons on the autism spectrum

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Stay consistent and on schedule. Children on the spectrum like routines. As parents, we learn quickly that unexpected changes in daily routines can cause confusion and disruptive behavior. Set up a schedule for your child, with regular times for meals, therapy, school, and bedtime. Consistency is the key, with the understanding that changes will and do happen. When changes do occur, do your best to inform the entire family of the changes ahead of time.

Practice patience. You'll likely try a lot of different techniques, treatments, and approaches as you figure out what works best. Stay positive and try not to get discouraged if the child doesn't respond well to a particular method.

Become aware of sensory sensitivities. Many children on the spectrum can be hypersensitive to light, sound, touch, taste, and smell. Other children on the spectrum can be "under-sensitive" to sensory stimuli. Learn as much as you can about sensory integration dysfunction. Make your house as sensory friendly as possible. Explore which sights, sounds, smells, movements, and tactile sensations can be potential triggers that can lead to disruptive behaviors. Conversely, learn what elicits a positive response. Depending on their sensory needs, and if you have an Occupational Therapist involved, ask for specific recommendations that you can incorporate in your home.

Seek out support. Whether online or face-to-face, support from other families, professionals, and friends can be helpful for you and for your entire family. Support groups can be a beneficial way to share advice and gain new knowledge and information. An additional benefit of participating in support groups is building positive connections with other parents of children on the spectrum.

Don't forget to laugh. Finding activities that are fun for the whole family will be beneficial

for all. It can be easy to forget the importance of play. Be mindful about the benefits of incorporating playtime to help to encourage smiles and laughter into daily routines.

Remember that you are not alone; there are other foster and adoptive parents and families in similar situations. We can learn from one another by sharing resources, building connections, and supporting one another. In addition, the Wisconsin Family Connections Center is here to offer you support and encouragement throughout your parenting journey.



Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *Facing Autism: Giving Parents Reasons For Hope and Guidance For Help*, by Lynn Hamilton
- *Could it Be Autism?*, by Nancy Wiseman
- *Different Like Me: My Book Of Autism Heroes*, by Jennifer Elder
- *The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun*, by Carol Stock Kranowitz
- *Ten Things Every Child With Autism Wishes You Knew*, by Ellen Notbohm

Additional Resources

- [Autism Spectrum Disorder Diagnostic Criteria](#)
- [Autism Society of Greater Wisconsin](#)
- [Aspergers/Autism Network \(AANE\)](#)