



Unlocking Potential: Creating an Environment Where Autistic Children Thrive

"I am different, not less." This Temple Grandin quote perfectly articulates what it means to be on the autism spectrum.

There are countless perspectives and controversies regarding what autism looks like, what causes it, and what to do about it. Here's what we know: the spectrum is nonlinear and includes a wide range of individual talents, abilities, needs, and challenges. It can be overwhelming to know where to begin in providing support when parenting someone on the autism spectrum. The better we can recognize and meet the individual needs of those on the spectrum, the more we can empower autistic individuals to reach their full potential.

Understanding Autism

It may be helpful to begin by reframing outdated and harmful beliefs and language around autism. It's important to note that the autistic brain does not have deficits—just *natural variations* from the "typical" brain. It is simply wired to work differently. In a world where systems and norms are determined by the "neurotypical" majority, many people on the spectrum face challenges engaging in everyday life.

As one third grader put it, *"Having autism means that most kids are mean to me. I'm glad I don't have that kind of brain."*

Three Levels of Autism

The DSM-5 categorizes Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) into three levels, based on social and behavioral challenges within the ASD spectrum. (Please see the resource section for more on characteristics of each level.)

- Level 1 / requiring support
- Level 2 / requiring substantial support
- Level 3 / requiring very substantial support

These levels replace outdated terms such as "high functioning," "low functioning," "Autistic Disorder," or "Asperger's Syndrome." Autism advocates promote framing the autism spectrum as "neurodivergence" rather than a "disorder." There is also advocacy within the autism community to use identity-first language or "autistic person," rather than "person with autism." "Autistic" recognizes autism is just another integral part of the individual's identity, rather than a disorder they "have."



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Autism Spectrum Common Characteristics

There's a famous quote by Dr. Stephen Shore, "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." Although the spectrum is vast, there are some common characteristics individuals may display:

- Doesn't respond, delayed response, or appears not to hear
- May resist cuddling or being touched
- Prefers playing alone
- Poor eye contact
- Delayed speech or no speech
- Avoidance of or awkward social interactions
- Speaks with a distinct tone or rhythm
- Performs repetitive movements, such as rocking, spinning, or hand flapping ("stimming")
- Has specific routines or ordering and is upset at the slightest change
- Has intense interests
- Has problems with coordination or has atypical movement patterns (e.g., walks on tippy toes, can't ride a bike)
- Has sensory processing differences –may be over- or under-sensitive to light, sound, touch, taste, smells (e.g., can't tolerate seams on clothing)
- Has very specific food preferences and difficulty tolerating different food textures, temperatures, or colors

Sensory Issues

Studies suggest that an estimated 90% of autistic people have difficulties with sensory processing. This can manifest as uncomfortable or even painful oversensitivity or reduced sensitivity to light, sound, taste, touch, and smell. Sensory dysregulation happens when the brain struggles to process input effectively. This can lead to sensory-seeking behaviors or overload and is often mistaken for misbehavior. (Learn more about Sensory Processing Disorder at <https://childmind.org/article/sensory-processing-issuesexplained/>) Getting curious and looking for patterns of what preceded a reaction is helpful. Each child has their own unique way of processing sensory input. It's all about getting to know the child as an individual, what feels right for them, and recognizing when they're in sensory distress.

Special events such as holiday celebrations or even sporting events may include a variety of sensory triggers. Tools such as noise-canceling headphones, fidget toys, quiet spaces, and even considering alternative autism-friendly activities may be necessary. For example, you may request that the child be allowed to sit just outside the gym for pep rallies. When necessary, a doctor's note can help navigate these types of school activities.

Considering an Assessment for Autism

If you suspect the child you are parenting or caring for has autism, consult with your pediatrician. A series of assessments will be done, either by your pediatrician or a specialist (such as a neurodevelopmental pediatrician or child neurologist). The evaluation will include your observations of

the child's development and behaviors, so it's important to document patterns and concerns as much as possible.

Children can be diagnosed as early as 18 months old. Early intervention has proven beneficial, but it is never too late to seek help.

Understanding the Child

Just as the autistic child needs to navigate their neurodivergence, so do we as parents. For example, while the family loves to see fireworks, they may be highly distressing and even painful for the autistic child with sensory issues. Behavior is communication. Forcing the child to participate in activities or thinking they will "get over it" will have an impact on your relationship and make the child feel unsafe.

Educating ourselves and taking the time to identify both abilities and limitations can save a lot of heartbreak, meltdowns, and even guilt. As one foster mom said, "I wish I could take back all the times I pushed him to do things he couldn't, while not noticing the amazing things he can do."

Expectations

While we want to be sensitive to the differences and needs of the autistic child, we also want to see them for more than just their autism. It's easy to be so wrapped up in the diagnosis that we miss out on interests and other aspects of their identity.

While assessment tools like neuropsychological evaluations can be useful in identifying learning styles, strengths, and weaknesses, they don't determine the child's potential. Many autism parents will tell you their child has accomplished a wide range of things from their "will never be able to do" list. For example, an autistic adolescent may not read or write but does meal preparation and laundry. Another child may excel academically, but can't tie their shoes.

As parents, we must balance recognizing limitations while not underestimating capabilities.

Communication

There are a variety of factors that can complicate communication for someone on the spectrum. Some autistic brains tend to focus more on concrete details than on interpreting abstract instructions or figurative language. For example, an autistic child may be overwhelmed with a directive such as "clean your room." What is more effective is step-by-step instructions, such as "start by picking up any toys on the floor and putting them in the toy box ...". Another helpful tool is a visual chart where the child can "check off" tasks one at a time in an established order. Once it becomes routine, they will know all the tasks involved in "cleaning" their room.

Simple language, visual supports, play, and the use of assistive communication devices are just a few of the many strategies that can be helpful, particularly for the nonverbal child. Additionally, speech and

occupational therapy, especially early in child development, can substantially help maximize communication skills.

Some on the autism spectrum also use “scripting” as their means of verbally communicating, self-regulating, or engaging in social situations. Scripting is the repetitive use of words or phrases, either made up or taken from TV, movies, books, songs, or other people. For example, when meeting someone new, seventeen-year-old Michael will use the catch phrase of “How you doin’?” from Joey’s character on “Friends.” When he feels overstimulated, he will self-soothe by rocking and repeating “Calm down. Breathe deep. Count to ten.” Scripting can be an invaluable tool for the autistic individual to express thoughts, feelings, or needs outwardly.

Predictability & Structure

The autistic brain craves predictability and routine to feel safe, secure, and regulated. A consistent structure helps individuals on the spectrum better understand expectations and transitions, reducing anxiety and distress. Whenever possible, give advance notice of schedule changes or upcoming activities such as appointments or social events. When a change is unavoidable, encourage a calming activity and allow the individual time to process.

Inclusivity/Social Skills

Navigating social situations can feel like being dropped into a foreign land where you don’t speak the language or understand the cultural norms for someone on the spectrum. This doesn’t mean, however, that individuals on the spectrum don’t want friends or to be included.

Many schools, therapists, and organizations, such as the Autism Society of WI, now offer social groups for autistic children and youth to connect with and practice social skills. Additionally, community-based autism-friendly social events are becoming increasingly popular. Special interest groups and activities, such as game nights, chess clubs, anime conventions, and collector’s groups, are an excellent way for autistic youth to comfortably connect with others who share similar interests.

Conclusion

Although the autism spectrum is vast and diverse, we all share a universal need to be recognized, valued, included, and loved. It is essential that we be aware of and sensitive to the individual needs of those on the spectrum. Equally important is also focusing on the unique talents, strengths, and contributions of the autistic children and youth we care for. Keeping this in mind and practicing autism-friendly strategies can help us to get past the stigma and see the person.

Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *Cup of Comfort for Parents of Children with Autism: Stories of Hope*, by Colleen Sell
- *Sundays with Matthew: A Young Boy with Autism and an Artist Share Their Sketchbooks*, by Matthew Lancelle and Jeanette Lesada
- *Everybody is Different: A Book for Young People Who Have Brothers or Sisters with Autism*, by Fiona Bleach
- *The Bully Blockers—Standing Up for Classmates with Autism*, by Celeste Shally
- *Unmasking Autism: Discovering the New Faces of Neurodiversity*, by Devon Price, PhD
- *The Survival Guide for Kids with Autism Spectrum Disorders (and their parents)*, by Elizabeth Verdick and Elizabeth Reeve, M.D.
- *Since We're Friends—An Autism Picture Book*, by Celeste Shally
- *Parenting Without Panic: A Pocket Support Group for Parents of Children and Teens on the Autism Spectrum*, by Brenda Dater
- *Keisha's Doors—An Autism Story*, by Marvie Ellis
- *Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew*, by Ellen Notbohm

Additional Resources

- [Autism Society Wisconsin](#)
- [Wisconsin Early Autism Project](#)
- [The 3 Levels of Autism](#)
- [Strategies to Support Individuals with Autism in Foster and Post-Adoptive Context](#)
- [An 8-Step Checklist to Help a Child with Autism Succeed at School](#)
- [National Autism Association](#)