



how to support your child with autism

17 TOOLS THAT WORK!

INTRODUCTION

Being a parent is challenging at the best of times. From the moment we bring our little bundle of joy home from the hospital, we are plagued with worry, and while things have a tendency to get easier as our children learn and grow, dealing with children with autism is an entirely different ball game.

Autism and parenting is not for the faint of heart, and figuring out how to help your child reach her fullest potential – whatever that potential may look like – can sometimes feel overwhelming. Sensory sensitivities can make a simple trip to the grocery store excruciatingly painful, unanticipated breaks in routine can lead to an explosive meltdown, and ongoing sleep challenges can leave the entire family feeling impatient, on edge, and desperate.

But parenting and autism isn't all bad. Yes, there will be challenging days, but you will also experience some pretty amazing experiences along the way, and with so many different therapies and support options available, there is help for autistic children.

You just need to know where to find it and how to get started.

I decided to create this guide – '17 Tips to Help Support Your Child with Autism' – after reading some pretty incredible stories online. I was struggling to come to terms with my own daughter's autism diagnosis at the time, and while doing some research, I had what Oprah would describe as an 'Aha Moment'.

I was so caught up in my own thoughts and fears about autism that I failed to see the world through my daughter's eyes.

The purpose of this guide isn't to bombard you with recommendations on dietary changes, my views on the gut-brain relationship, and all of the different biomedical therapies available. I feel quite strongly about the benefits of each of those things, but I wanted to provide something more concrete – a list of tools you can start implementing TODAY to change your relationship with your child for the better.

17 WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR CHILD WITH AUTISM

1. Don't ignore warning signs.

While autism isn't typically diagnosed until 18 to 24 months – and oftentimes much later – research has consistently shown that early intervention is key in helping a child with autism improve her functional skills and maximize her progress. And as tempting as it is to ignore all of the warning signs, waiting for your child's pediatrician or teacher to come to you with their concerns can cause serious setbacks in your child's prognosis. If you sense something isn't right, educate yourself and take action. There are heaps of online screening tools you can use as a starting point (Autism Canada has a great one, which you can access [HERE](#)), and while these tools alone are not sufficient to diagnosis your child with autism, they serve as a good basis in helping you pinpoint areas of concerns to facilitate a deeper conversation with her doctor.

2. Advocate for your child.

If your child is exhibiting signs of autism, but her pediatrician refuses to entertain the idea ('she talks too much', 'she has good eye contact', 'she's too intelligent'), don't be afraid to get a second opinion. Many doctors feel that autism is over-diagnosed and aren't educated on the ins and outs of the disorder, and while it can be comforting to hear a professional tell you nothing is wrong with your child and all of your worry has been in vain, you must remember that you know your child better than anyone. If you have a nagging fear that something isn't quite right, it is up to you to advocate for your child to ensure she gets the treatment she needs (and deserves).

Keep in mind that an autism diagnosis isn't something that happens overnight. Depending on where you live and what your financial situation is, your child could be on a waitlist for 12 months or longer, so the sooner you take action, the better.

3. Grieve

Receiving an autism diagnosis for your child is nothing short of devastating, and while friends and family members will try to encourage you to see the bright side and hold onto hope, it's important to take the time to grieve the loss of the hopes and dreams you had for your child. Does that mean those hopes and dreams won't come to fruition? Not necessarily. But sometimes you need to assume the worst – and come to terms with what that means – before you can allow yourself to have a renewed sense of hope that is aligned with your child's abilities.

Also?

It's okay to be angry! You will experience a range of different emotions in the days, weeks, months, and even years after your child is diagnosed with autism, and anger will definitely be one of them. Allow yourself time to digest the news, and do your best to use your feelings in a positive way. Write them down, talk to a therapist, go for a run to clear your head, or do something else to help you calm down so you don't lash out at others. But take the time to feel all the feels so you can put it all behind you and move forward.

4. Don't compare your child to others

Dr. Stephen Shore once said, **'If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism,'** and while you may find it difficult to resist the urge to compare your own experience with autism to that of other parents, please try not to. While educating yourself on the different therapy, dietary, and biomedical options available is excellent use of your time, setting expectations based on others' experiences is not. No two cases of autism are the same, and the key to successful treatment is to focus on your child's individual needs without getting wrapped up in what does and doesn't work for others.

5. Be consistent and stick to a schedule

Children with autism tend to thrive best when their life follows a regular routine with consistency across the board. While this isn't always possible – and some would argue you should help your child adapt to change – maintaining a consistent routine wherever possible will be helpful to your child. Talk to her therapists and teachers to ensure you are working in tandem, and when events threaten to disrupt your daily schedule (i.e. travel, school holidays, etc.), give your child as much advance warning as possible.

6. Get a handle on sensory sensitivities

While some children with autism spectrum disorder have lowered sensitivity to environmental stimuli, others can be extremely sensitive to things like noise, light, temperature, tastes, and textures, which can make everyday living overwhelming. Occupational therapy can do wonders in helping your child make sense of her world by identifying her specific challenges and exposing her to stimuli in a fun yet challenging way, but it's important that you take the time to understand – and sympathize – with your child's sensory sensitivities as well so you can continue to support her in other areas of her life.

The **Sensory Smarts website** is a fabulous resource for parents and teachers of children with sensory processing disorders. The website was created by Lindsey Biel and Nancy Peske, co-authors of the book, 'Raising A Sensory Smart Child', and it offers all kinds of helpful tips and tools, including practical tips to help with daily challenges like tooth-brushing, bathing, and potty training, to sensory 'diet' activities you can implement in conjunction with your OT to help address your child's individual sensory needs.

7. Reward good behavior

Positive reinforcement – the act of reinforcing desirable behavior immediately after it occurs to increase the likelihood that it will happen again – is a fabulous strategy to help encourage good behavior in children with autism. This is often achieved via something called a ‘token economy’. Using this system, children earn tokens for completing tasks or behaving in a certain way, which they can use at a later date to ‘buy’ an activity or item they desire. These are called back-up reinforcers.

Reward systems are highly effective in encouraging positive behavior in children with autism, and you can personalize your approach to make it more desirable. For example, you might reward your child through stickers, popsicle sticks, or monopoly money, and you can work together to choose activities or items for purchase based on her individual interests.

8. Learn your child's meltdown triggers

Most, if not all, parents of children aged 2 and older have experienced a temper tantrum in their lifetime, but few people truly understand the difference between a tantrum and an autistic meltdown. On the surface, they look pretty similar, but while temper tantrums are often goal-driven behaviors that are fueled by an audience, autistic meltdowns typically occur in response to feelings of overwhelm and occur with or without spectators.

A meltdown typically begins with warning signals called ‘rumblings’, which are characterized as a build up of emotions that cause screaming, stimming, pacing, and other behaviors that indicate the person is about to lose control, and if not redirected in time, can lead to an explosive rage.

Knowing what your child's triggers are and how to recognize warning signs of an impending meltdown can help lessen the severity, and having a ‘calm down box’ filled with a collection of tools to help regulate your child's emotions and promote a sense of calm and relaxation can make a huge difference when big emotions threaten to take over.

For more strategies to deal with autistic meltdowns as well as suggested tools to include in your child's calm down box, check out our free guide [here!](#)

9. Figure out your child's learning style

Not everyone learns in the same way. Some are visual learners, others are auditory learners, and still others learn best through hands-on instruction, and while neurotypical individuals can work with a combination of these techniques, there is some evidence to suggest that those with autism rely on only ONE learning style. Parents, teachers, and therapists should work closely with a child to determine how she learns best, and education should be adjusted to meet these needs.

10. Adjust your expectations

As parents, we have dreams for our children. We want them to graduate at the top of their high school class, go to university, get married, and have children, and while it's not a bad thing to hold onto hope that your child will reach one or many of these milestones, it's important that you adjust your expectations. The reality is that your child may not be capable of achieving the things you once dreamed of for her, but that doesn't make the things she does achieve any less meaningful or exciting.

Try to remember that, even though your child struggles to form meaningful relationships with her peers, meet the same educational milestones as her classmates, or experience the same things as other kids her age, it doesn't mean she doesn't want those things. Chances are she wants them more than you do, so remember to keep yourself in check and focus on the things she CAN do instead of the things she can't.

11. Make sleep a priority

We all know that chronic sleep deprivation can lead to chronic health problems (think: heart disease, high blood pressure, and stroke) as well as weight gain, forgetfulness, lack of patience, and feelings of depression, and since lack of sleep can also exasperate autism symptoms, it can feel like cruel and unusual punishment when impairments of the body's circadian rhythms, abnormalities in melatonin levels, an inability to understand social cues, feelings of anxiety, sensory processing issues, etc. make sleep next to impossible for your child with ASD.

Unfortunately, there is no magic formula to help ensure you and your family benefit from restorative sleep each night, but there are certain things you can do to help:

- Avoid foods and beverages that contain caffeine and sugar
- Set regular wake and sleep times, and never deviate from them
- Remove stimulating activities (TV, video games, etc.) an hour before bedtime and opt for relaxing activities (reading, soothing music) instead
- Establish and follow a predictable bedtime routine to help prepare your child's body for sleep
- Remove sensory stimuli from your child's bedroom
- Use props like a sound machine (to block noise) or a weighted blanket (to instill a sense of calm) to make the sleep environment more conducive to sleep
- Invest in black out blinds to block out light

While these techniques are helpful, sleep can be a real challenge for individuals with ASD. Talk to your child's pediatrician and/or psychologist about Melatonin (note: **ONLY** use Melatonin under the guidance of a doctor) and consider trading off with your spouse to ensure you are both getting ample rest to help deal with the challenges you face each day.

12. Celebrate milestones

Remember to take time out to celebrate your child's wins – no matter how big or small they may be. You know firsthand how difficult it can be for your child to master a new skill or overcome a situation that causes her stress and anxiety, and since excitement is contagious, spur-of-the-moment celebrations are a great way to not only celebrate your child, but also recognize the ongoing support you continue to provide to help turn her dreams into a reality. Tell your child how proud she's made you, and allow yourself a little self-recognition as well.

13. Create a safe home environment

While autism can be difficult for you – the caregiver – it's important to recognize that it's even more difficult for your child. She didn't ask to be born with ASD, and her world is stressful and difficult every single day. She probably yearns to be like her neurotypical peers and tries hard to hold it together all day, making it all the more important that you create – and maintain – a safe place for her to come home to. Keep stress to a minimum, be mindful of overwhelming sensory stimuli, embrace positive reinforcement rather than negative consequences, and give your child the things she longs for. Encourage her. Play with her. Be her friend.

14. Take time for yourself

One of the best things you can do for your child after she is diagnosed with autism or any other developmental challenge is to make time for yourself. I realize this may seem virtually impossible when you're driving to and from BT, OT, and SLP several times a week while also juggling school drop-offs and pick-ups as well as a full-time job. And let's not even get started on all of the other things, like cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, doing laundry, and finding the time to spend with your other kids. But when you're the glue that's keeping your family together, it is ESSENTIAL that you find the time to take care of yourself. Join a gym, go for a massage, get your nails done, call a friend...do something to help keep your spirits up so you feel refreshed and better able to handle all that life keeps throwing at you.

15. Focus on your relationship with your spouse

I once read that a staggering 80% of marriages that have a child with autism end in divorce, and while that number may seem surprisingly high, anyone who has experienced the stress of raising a child with ASD can understand the toll it can put on your relationship. But here's the thing: your spouse is the only other person in this entire world who truly understands the ins and outs of your child's autism, and one of the best gifts you can give your children is to maintain a strong parental bond. Know when to put your marriage first, and make a commitment to make time for one another.

16. Seek respite care

One of the hardest things about being a parent is finding ways to get a break, and when your child has challenges that require special care, it can sometimes feel downright impossible. But guess what? It's not. There are various respite care options available that offer help to parents of children with developmental challenges. Whether you opt for an offsite program, or decide to hire a caregiver to come to your home, you can rest assured your child will be left in the capable hands of someone who is certified and trained to deal with her individual needs.

17. Stop feeling guilty

Being the parent of a child with autism can bring on some pretty intense feelings of guilt. Did you cause her autism? Are you investing in the right therapy options? Is she undergoing too much therapy, or not enough? Are you advocating for her enough? Do you really deserve a break? What will happen to her when you're no longer around to provide for her? Are you giving enough to your other children? To your spouse? The list goes on and on. And while I wish there was something I could say to erase all of those feelings for you, the truth is that you are going to feel guilty about lots of things throughout your child's life. It's just human nature. But if I can impart one piece of wisdom on you, it's to stop. Your child's autism is NOT your fault. The decisions you've made are the right ones, simply because you were the one to make them. And you are most definitely doing enough simply by being there for your child day in and day out.

Daniel Nayeri once said, '**Guilt is a useless feeling. It's never enough to make you change direction – only enough to make you useless.**' Along those same lines, Terri Guillemets also said, "**Guilt is always hungry, don't let it consume you.**'

In other words, don't waste your time feeling guilty when you can direct that energy at something more positive, like supporting your child!

A FINAL NOTE

Autism is a lifelong condition, and your child's quality of life is very much dependent not only on the various therapies you organize throughout her childhood, but also on the supports you put in place for the rest of her life. And as nice as it would be to look into a crystal ball to see what the future has in store for her future, the reality is that you will never know.

Being the parent of a child with autism is a marathon, not a sprint. You need to find the stamina to hold a steady pace for a long time so you can help your child reach her fullest potential. Try not to get discouraged by the setbacks, and celebrate the hell out of every single win.

I'll leave you with a quote by John Elder Robinson:

'Our duty in autism is not to cure but to relieve suffering and to maximize each person's potential.'

Makes you stop and think, doesn't it?



