

# Helping Your Child with Autism Thrive

## Parenting Tips, Treatments, and Services That Can Help



There are many things parents can do to help children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) overcome their challenges. But it's also important to make sure you get the support you need. When you're looking after a child with ASD, taking care of yourself is not a luxury or an act of selfishness—it's a necessity. Being emotionally strong allows you to be the best parent you can be to your child in need. These parenting tips can help by making life with an autistic child easier.

## A parent's guide to autism treatment and support

If you've recently learned that your child has or might have autism spectrum disorder, you're probably wondering and worrying about what comes next. No parent is ever prepared to hear that a child is anything other than happy and healthy, and an ASD diagnosis can be particularly frightening. You may be unsure about how to best help your child, or confused by conflicting treatment advice. Or you may have been told that ASD is an incurable, lifelong condition, leaving you concerned that nothing you do will make a difference.

While it is true that ASD is not something a person simply "grows out of," there are many treatments that can help children acquire new skills and overcome a wide variety of developmental challenges. From free government services to in-home behavioral therapy and school-based programs, assistance is available to meet your child's special needs. With the right treatment plan, and a lot of love and support, your child can learn, grow, and thrive.

### Don't wait for a diagnosis

---

As the parent of a child with ASD or related developmental delays, **the best thing you can do is to start treatment right away.** Seek help as soon as you suspect something's wrong.

Don't wait to see if your child will catch up later or outgrow the problem. Don't even wait for an official diagnosis. The earlier children with [autism spectrum disorder](#) get help, the greater their chance of treatment success. Early intervention is the most effective way to speed up your child's development and reduce the symptoms of autism over the lifespan.

### When your child has autism

**Learn about autism.** The more you know about autism spectrum disorder, the better equipped you'll be to make informed decisions for your child. Educate yourself about the treatment options, ask questions, and participate in all treatment decisions.

**Become an expert on your child.** Figure out what triggers your kid's challenging or disruptive behaviors and what elicits a positive response. What does your child find stressful or frightening? Calming? Uncomfortable? Enjoyable? If you understand what affects your child, you'll be better at troubleshooting problems and preventing or modifying situations that cause difficulties.

**Accept your child, quirks and all.** Rather than focusing on how your autistic child is different from other children and what he or she is "missing," practice acceptance. Enjoy your kid's special quirks, celebrate small successes, and stop comparing your child to others. Feeling unconditionally loved and accepted will help your child more than anything else.

**Don't give up.** It's impossible to predict the course of autism spectrum disorder. Don't jump to conclusions about what life is going to be like for your child. Like everyone else, people with autism have an entire lifetime to grow and develop their abilities.

### Helping your child with autism thrive tip 1: Provide structure and safety

Learning all you can about autism and getting involved in treatment will go a long way toward helping your child. Additionally, the following tips will make daily home life easier for both you and your child with ASD:

**Be consistent.** Children with ASD have a hard time applying what they've learned in one setting (such as the therapist's office or school) to others, including the home. For example, your child may use sign language at school to communicate, but never think to do so at home. Creating consistency in your child's environment is the best way to reinforce learning. Find out what your child's therapists are doing and continue their techniques at home. Explore the possibility of having therapy take place in more than one place in order

to encourage your child to transfer what he or she has learned from one environment to another. It's also important to be consistent in the way you interact with your child and deal with challenging behaviors.

**Stick to a schedule.** Children with ASD tend to do best when they have a highly-structured schedule or routine. Again, this goes back to the consistency they both need and crave. Set up a schedule for your child, with regular times for meals, therapy, school, and bedtime. Try to keep disruptions to this routine to a minimum. If there is an unavoidable schedule change, prepare your child for it in advance.

**Reward good behavior.** Positive reinforcement can go a long way with children with ASD, so make an effort to “catch them doing something good.” Praise them when they act appropriately or learn a new skill, being very specific about what behavior they're being praised for. Also look for other ways to reward them for good behavior, such as giving them a sticker or letting them play with a favorite toy.

**Create a home safety zone.** Carve out a private space in your home where your child can relax, feel secure, and be safe. This will involve organizing and setting boundaries in ways your child can understand. Visual cues can be helpful (colored tape marking areas that are off limits, labeling items in the house with pictures). You may also need to safety proof the house, particularly if your child is prone to tantrums or other self-injurious behaviors.

## Tip 2: Find nonverbal ways to connect

Connecting with a child with ASD can be challenging, but you don't need to talk—or even touch—in order to communicate and bond. You communicate by the way you look at your child, by the tone of your voice, your body language - and possibly the way you touch your child. Your child is also communicating with you, even if he or she never speaks. You just need to learn the language.

**Look for nonverbal cues.** If you are observant and aware, you can learn to pick up on the [nonverbal cues](#) that children with ASD use to communicate. Pay attention to the kinds of sounds they make, their facial expressions, and the gestures they use when they're tired, hungry, or want something.

**Figure out the [motivation behind the tantrum](#).** It's only natural to feel upset when you are misunderstood or ignored, and it's no different for children with ASD. When children with ASD act out, it's often because you're not picking up on their nonverbal cues. Throwing a tantrum is their way of communicating their frustration and getting your attention.

**Make time for fun.** A child coping with ASD is still a child. For both children with ASD and their parents, there needs to be more to life than therapy. Schedule playtime when your

child is most alert and awake. Figure out ways to have fun together by thinking about the things that make your child smile, laugh, and come out of her/his shell. Your child is likely to enjoy these activities most if they don't seem therapeutic or educational. There are tremendous benefits that result from your enjoyment of your child's company and from your child's enjoyment of spending unpressured time with you. Play is an essential part of learning for all children and shouldn't feel like work.

**Pay attention to your child's sensory sensitivities.** Many children with ASD are hypersensitive to light, sound, touch, taste, and smell. Some children with autism are "under-sensitive" to sensory stimuli. Figure out what sights, sounds, smells, movements, and tactile sensations trigger your kid's "bad" or disruptive behaviors and what elicits a positive response. What does your child find stressful? Calming? Uncomfortable? Enjoyable? If you understand what affects your child, you'll be better at troubleshooting problems, preventing situations that cause difficulties, and creating successful experiences.

### **Tip 3: Create a personalized autism treatment plan**

With so many different treatments available, it can be tough to figure out which approach is right for your child. Making things more complicated, you may hear different or even conflicting recommendations from parents, teachers, and doctors. When putting together a treatment plan for your child, 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.

#### **A good treatment plan will:**

- Build on your child's interests
- Offer a predictable schedule
- Teach tasks as a series of simple steps
- Actively engage your child's attention in highly structured activities
- Provide regular reinforcement of behavior
- Involve the parents

Source: *National Institute of Mental Health*

Your child's treatment should be tailored according to his or her individual needs. You know your child best, so it's up to you to make sure those needs are being met. You can do that by asking yourself the following questions:

**What are my child's strengths** - and his or her weaknesses?

**What behaviors are causing the most problems?** What important skills is my child lacking?

**How does my child learn best** - through seeing, listening, or doing?

**What does my child enjoy** - and how can those activities be used in treatment and to bolster learning?

Finally, keep in mind that no matter what treatment plan is chosen, your involvement is vital to success. You can help your child get the most out of treatment by working hand-in-hand with the treatment team and following through with the therapy at home. (This is why your well-being is essential!)

### Choosing autism treatments

---

When it comes to autism treatment, there are a dizzying variety of therapies and approaches. Some autism therapies 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 questions. But keep in mind that you don't have to choose just one type of therapy. The goal of autism treatment 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 autism treatments include behavior therapy, speech-language therapy, play-based therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and nutritional therapy. But keep in mind that the routine is important and the program should be designed in a way that can be sustained. You should think about what skills and behaviors are most essential and treat those first. It may not be possible to tackle everything at once.

### Tip 4: Find help and support

Caring for a child with ASD can demand a lot of energy and time. There may be days when you feel overwhelmed, stressed, or discouraged. Parenting isn't ever easy, and raising a child with special needs is even more challenging. In order to be the best parent you can be, it's essential that you take care of yourself.

Don't try to do everything on your own. You don't have to! There are many places that families of children with ASD can turn to for advice, a helping hand, advocacy, and support:

**ADS support groups** - Joining an ASD support group is a great way to meet other families

dealing with the same challenges you are. Parents can share information, get advice, and lean on each other for emotional support. Just being around others in the same boat and sharing their experience can go a long way toward reducing the isolation many parents feel after receiving a child's diagnosis.

**Respite care** - Every parent needs a break now and again. And for parents coping with the added stress of ASD, this is especially true. In respite care, another caregiver takes over temporarily, giving you a break for a few hours, days, or even weeks.

**Individual, marital, or family counseling** - If stress, anxiety, or depression is getting to you, you may want to see a therapist of your own. Therapy is a safe place where you can talk honestly about everything you're feeling—the good, the bad, and the ugly. [Marriage or family therapy](#) can also help you work out problems that the challenges of life with an autistic child are causing in your spousal relationship or with other family members.

## Free U.S. government services for children with autism

Under the U.S. federal law known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), children with disabilities—including those with ASD—are eligible for a range of free or low-cost services. Under this provision, children in need and their families may receive medical evaluations, psychological services, speech therapy, physical therapy, parent counseling and training, assisted technology devices, and other specialized services.

Children under the age of 10 do not need an autism diagnosis to receive free services under IDEA. If they are experiencing a developmental delay (including delays in communication or social development), they are automatically eligible for early intervention and special education services.

### Early intervention services (birth through age two)

---

Infants and toddlers through the age of two receive assistance through the Early Intervention program. In order to qualify, your child must first undergo a free evaluation. If the assessment reveals a developmental problem, you will work with early intervention treatment providers to develop an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). An IFSP describes your child's needs and the specific services he or she will receive.

For autism, an IFSP would include a variety of behavior, physical, speech, and play therapies. It would focus on preparing kids with ASD for the eventual transition to school. Early intervention services are typically conducted in the home or at a child care center.

To locate local early intervention services for your child, ask your pediatrician for a referral or use the resources listed in the Resources section at the end of the article.

## Special education services (age three and older)

---

Children over the age of three receive assistance through school-based programs. As with early intervention, special education services are tailored to your child's individual needs. Children with ASD are often placed with other developmentally delayed kids in small groups where they can receive more individual attention and specialized instruction. However, depending on their abilities, they may also spend at least part of the school day in a regular classroom. The goal is to place kids in the "least restrictive environment" possible where they are still able to learn.

If you'd like to pursue special education services, your local school system will first need to evaluate your child. Based on this assessment, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) will be drafted. An IEP outlines the educational goals for your child for the school year. Additionally, it describes the special services or supports the school will provide your child in order to meet those goals.

### Know your child's rights

As the parent of a child with ASD, you have a legal right to:

- Be involved in developing your child's IEP from start to finish
- Disagree with the school system's recommendations
- Seek an outside evaluation for your child
- Invite anyone you want—from a relative to your child's doctor—to be on the IEP team
- Request an IEP meeting at any time if you feel your child's needs are not being met
- Free or low-cost legal representation if you can't come to an agreement with the school

### Where to turn for help

Find support and advocacy services:

- **In the U.S.:** [Autism Source](#)
- **UK:** [The National Autistic Society: Services](#)
- **Australia:** [Early Intervention Services](#)
- **Canada:** [Autism Canada: Navigating Services](#)
- **New Zealand:** [Autism New Zealand Inc.](#)

## Recommended reading

[The Autism Revolution](#) - Whole Body Strategies for Making Life all it can be (Harvard Health Books)

[Living with Autism](#) - Including how to cope with stress on the family, make the home safe, and deal with sibling issues. (Autism Society of America)

[Life Journey Through Autism: A Parent's Guide to Research](#) (PDF) - Guide to choosing treatments for your children. (Organization for Autism Research)

[Parent Guide to IDEA](#) - Guide to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the U.S. (National Center for Learning Disabilities)

[Individualized Education Plans \(IEPs\)](#) - Learn all about IEPs in the U.S. for kids with autism and other developmental issues. (KidsHealth)

[How is Autism Treated?](#) - Therapies and treatments. (Autism Speaks)

Authors: Melinda Smith, M.A., Jeanne Segal, Ph.D., and Ted Hutman, Ph.D. Last updated: September 2018.

Ted Hutman, Ph.D. is Assistant Clinical Professor in Psychiatry at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA and a licensed clinical psychologist practicing in Santa Monica, CA.