

# Autism Spectrum Disorder

## Tips from One Parent to Another



Understanding your child's needs is such an important part of parenting. Knowing this, can help us provide the tools, accommodations, and support that can help our autistic loved ones thrive.

Here are some ideas for how you can support your child:

**Communicate.** We all communicate in many different ways. For example, speaking, gesturing, emailing, texting, phone calls, written letters, eye contact, or facial expressions. While some autistic people have difficulty with verbal speech, many are very communicative through their body language and gestures. Honoring all forms of communication will help to build trust and support, which will decrease anxiety they may experience around communication. If your child does have difficulty with verbal speech, seek out other options that will help them find their own voice. Communication is much more than requesting, it's also about connecting and sharing ideas.

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) is an umbrella term that encompasses the communication methods used to supplement or replace speech or writing for those with impairments in the production or comprehension of spoken or written language. AAC can be the bridge your child needs until they are able to speak and converse, or it can be their voice for the rest of their lives.

Your child probably understands much more than it may appear. If it seems your child is overwhelmed, try to decrease the number of words you are using. It can also help to pair verbal speech with visuals, which is another advantage of AAC. All children need to be supported and informed regarding where they are going, who they are seeing etc. This too, will help them to feel more calm and secure.

**Use Visuals.** As you will see from this handy visual, visuals provide many benefits! Think of all of the ways visuals help YOU! (Grocery lists, street signs, recipes, etc.) Visuals can make a world of a difference.

- **Visual Schedules** – Uses images to explain steps needed for a task, when activities will occur, and in what sequence.
- **Pictorial Narratives** – Descriptive stories to help children understand social situations, expectations, social cues, new activities, and/or social rules.

**Engage in Joint Attention.** Joint attention is the shared focus of two individuals on something. It can be a struggle for children with autism to attend to a task at the same time as another person. To get and maintain attention use high energy, cause and effect toys, to get your child's attention. Bubbles, pop up toys, goofy hats or comic glasses are great ways to get and hold joint attention.

**Teach "First, Then."** This concept uses a visual display of a less preferred activity that your child needs to do in order to do a more or highly preferred activity. Teaching this concept can also help with transitions. Initially this can be taught using visual images paired with the verbal prompt of "first", "then". When teaching this concept, a picture of the activity or task that needs to be completed is placed under the "first" side of the board and a picture of something fun and motivating is placed on the "then" side of the board. An example is "first" bathtub, "then" music.



**Understand Sensory Needs.** Most children on the spectrum have some degree of difficulty regulating and integrating sensory information, meaning they have difficulty processing the constant flow of sensory input all around us (movement, sound, light, smells, etc.) For example, some children are sensitive to sound. A ceiling fan, background music, noisy overhead lighting, or a lawn mower that you may not notice may be a source of anxiety. It is important to identify things that can create stress for your child so not only can you help them cope, but so that they can recognize for themselves when they need to ask for help. Once you've identified stressors, you can find ways to make accommodations. Some common and easily portable sensory accommodations your child may find helpful include sunglasses, headphones, music, electronic devices, fidgets, and weighted lap pad or vest.

**Help Your Child With Transitions.** Due to their processing differences, transitions from one activity or setting to another can be difficult for autistic children. Giving countdowns or providing a comfort item can help to ease potential discomfort around these times.

- **Countdowns.** Let your child know that they will be moving on to something else in a few minutes. For example telling him or her "5 more minutes", "2 minutes", "last minute" before ending an activity helps them understand that the activity will be ending and provides time to process the change. You can give the verbal warning or try using a visual such as a timer.
- **Comfort Items.** Having something to hold that gives your child comfort can help them to feel grounded and safe. It may be something as simple as a favorite toy or sensory item, or you can even try softly singing one of their favorite songs.

**Use Rewards.** Everyone likes to hear that they are doing a good job and children affected with autism are no different. Acknowledge the things your child is doing that you like and would like to see more of by giving targeted and specific praise (for example, "I like how you are playing quietly when I am on the phone). Make a big deal out of desired behaviors with things like verbal praise, high fives, a lollipop for a successful trip to the grocery store, time on an electronic device for good behavior during a doctor's appointment, etc.

**Model Calm.** Your own behavior plays an important role especially during times of stress. Try to be mindful of your tone of voice and speak softly to your child. Your calm and supportive response will help your child feel calm as well.

**Share Joy.** Play with your child in ways that are meaningful to them. Joining your child in their interests is a wonderful way to share experiences and connect. Some examples could be singing their favorite songs, playing with toys in ways they enjoy, or just sitting with them to spend time. Don't worry about what the play looks like or if it's different from how others play, just enjoy the connection and feel the beauty of your relationship.



Developed by Family Faculty in collaboration with staff. Children's Specialized Hospital does not endorse any commercial products or services.