

# My child was just diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. What do I do now?



With so much information to wade through, this can be an overwhelming and stressful time for parents. Here are some tips that may help.

**Start with Health Care Professional Recommendations.** You will hear many opinions about how to support your child. Remember that autism presents differently in each person and any therapies or supports need to be individualized. Start with the recommendations from your child's medical team who made the diagnosis. This may include having more evaluations to determine what therapies or services will be helpful for your child as well as possible testing to rule out medical conditions that can be associated with autism. It is normal to feel overwhelmed as there is a lot of information. If your feelings continue, reach out to your health care provider as they can be of great support to you.

**Give Yourself Time to Adjust.** Try to understand that you'll be parenting the same child you always were. Having this new information about your child will empower you to get the supports he/she needs, and direct your parenting approach. As with any difference, you and your child may need to work to understand each other and connect. You will need to learn what things might cause discomfort for your child and ways to help accommodate him or her. Your relationship may look different than it does with other "typical" family members, but it can be equally as loving. Additionally it's crucial to realize that many of the challenges you and your child may face can be due to lack of understanding or different ways of processing, not because of autism.

**Find Support from Fellow Parents and the Autistic Community.** Connect with other parents who have autistic children. All parenting is hard but it can be comforting to talk to other parents who understand the different challenges that come with parenting an autistic child. Autistic brains and thinking processes can be very different from non-autistic brains. Learning to recognize and understand these differences may take time and practice. What can be helpful is learning from autistic adults, as they are the true experts on what it's like to experience the world through an autistic lens. It's possible that some of the feelings you may have about the diagnosis is a result of the way autism has been portrayed in the past and even now. While you can't change the messages you've heard, it can help you to look toward people like your child who will help you to see beyond those outdated ideas. Many wonderful advocacy groups have been created by autistic adults as well as books, social media pages, and blog posts. They want to promote acceptance and push for needed services for themselves and our kids. By listening to their experiences, including the types of supports that helped them or not, you can help your child to live their best life.

**Build a Team of Experts for Your Child.** This includes (therapists, doctors, teachers, family members, etc.) These people care about improving the quality of your child's life. Know who to go to for what and have contact information for each so when questions or concerns come up, it is easy to reach them. Children's Specialized Hospital also offers support groups as well as full-day workshops for families of newly-diagnosed children.

There are many children with autism who have more significant communication challenges, experience unsafe or challenging behaviors, have difficulty performing everyday tasks and personal care, or have co-occurring intellectual disabilities or mental illnesses such as anxiety, OCD, or depression. As these difficulties can be demanding, you can get help from others including people with autism and their families, healthcare providers, social workers, counselors, local emergency responders, caring family and friends, and others. Work together to find appropriate and respectful supports and services such as alternative communication devices, adaptive tools in your home, visual aids, therapeutic interventions, and medicines.

**Manage Your Time.** Managing supports for your child can be time consuming but it's important to enjoy family time. Not every minute needs to be therapeutic. There is so much pressure on parents to fit it all in but remember that your child needs time to just be a child. Do what you can when you can but allow for down time and know that with your support your child will continue to grow and learn throughout his/her life, and according to his/her own timeline. Being thoughtful about your time will lead to a happier and more peaceful experience for all.

**Presume Competence.** Presuming competence means assuming all people are inherently capable – some may need more supports and systems to help them succeed. Presuming competence isn't wishful thinking or idealism and it's not about overlooking the challenges a person faces. It's about giving someone a chance and helping them take that chance in any way you can.

**Prioritize Communication.** Autistic people have varying abilities when it comes to speech but everyone communicates! Just because someone cannot produce verbal speech does not mean they don't have anything to say. Those who do have verbal speech may find it difficult to speak in times of stress. Your communication goals for your individual child should be to find the optimal communication strategy and style for him/her, whether that's speech, a symbol-to-speech device, a picture exchange communication system, sign language, or something else. Research shows that augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) supports speech development and can reduce the severity and frequency of challenging behavior. All people deserve their own voice, no matter how that voice is expressed.

**Find Credible Resources.** The more you can learn about autism and your child's individual differences, the more you'll be able to advocate for proper supports to ensure they have the most opportunities throughout life. When researching anything autism related for your child, you want to make sure you have reliable sources that promote acceptance and understanding.

The fact that those with autism don't fit the mold doesn't mean they're the wrong shape. It means that we need a more flexible mold and we must strive to make sure our loved ones feel supported, accepted, and loved for who they are.

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