

How to Talk to your Child about an Autism Diagnosis

Keep a positive attitude. Talk about how everyone in the family has their own unique abilities, features, personality, and preferences. Remind them that each person is important and special, and each of you your family.

Be comfortable using the word autism/autistic. It is not a bad word, it is a neurological difference. Your attitude about your child's autism creates his/her inner voice, and the way you talk about autism is the way you teach the world how to treat your child. You want to help your child to understand their needs and to be proud of who they are. This will begin the process of your child becoming their own best advocate as they grow and develop.

Be honest. Your child may know they are different, but not know why. If you hide the information or act as if it's something to be upset about they will pick up on that. Honesty is important. Self-knowledge is the foundation of well-being and resilience, but you can't have that knowledge if you're denied access to a part of who you are.

Give an explanation. Provide your child with information in a way they can understand. For example, you could tell your child that autism is something they were born with and it means their brain works a little differently. They need supports for some things, but they are really good at others. If possible, talk about activities and strategies that could be helpful. Older children may be open to a more detailed discussion about the characteristics associated with autism and different therapeutic and educational options. In addition, they might be interested in greater involvement in decisions about their own care.

Present information to your child in preferred, meaningful, and developmentally appropriate ways. What will work best? Books, videos, and websites can all be valuable. Not all resources are created equal so think about and preview your choices before presenting to your child. You want your child to have positive messages about the way their brain works.

Find role models for your child. If your child doesn't know anyone like himself/herself, they may feel alone and isolated. As much as you love and accept your child, if you aren't autistic, you should help your child find their tribe. There also are many resources online where you can read firsthand from self-advocates including websites like Ollibean, Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), Judy Endow, The Mighty – Autism Spectrum Disorder, and a YouTube series called Ask an Autistic. As your child grows there are many autistic role models they can look up to and you will also learn better ways to connect with your child by listening to others who experience the world similarly.

Persevere. Discussing autism and neuro-diversity (the natural, individual variation in human brains) with your child is an ongoing process. Few individuals, of any age, immediately understand what it means. You and your child will have many conversations throughout your child's life. Planting the seeds for open, honest dialogue will help your child as they go through all the various transitions of life and grow into adulthood.

Be proud of your work as a parent. You are having meaningful, ongoing conversations with your child about their health and who they are. Autism is a part of who they are. Your positive approach and support will help your child now and in the future.

