

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Tips from One Parent to Another

Once your child receives a diagnosis of autism, your doctor may recommend they start various therapies. This can include occupational therapy, speech therapy, physical therapy, and behavioral intervention. Sometimes your doctor will recommend all of these therapies as well as others. With all the running around these new appointments bring, your focus may become getting to the appointments rather than learning and applying what is being taught during each one.

In thinking back to the early years of my son's diagnosis, I now realize the importance of incorporating the strategies learned during therapy into our everyday routine. As my husband and I learned various methods to help our son's challenges, our daily routine became more predictable. For children affected with autism it's the consistency and repetition of these strategies that encourage real change. The following are strategies that are a part of our everyday routine and have helped my son reach his full potential. I pass these along to you in hopes to make your journey on the autism spectrum easier.

Always Communicate – Just because your child may not be using words yet does not mean that they don't understand what is being said. Talk to them as if they do. For children who have limited language skills (e.g. a child who is nonverbal or has limited receptive understanding), it is helpful to keep it simple or use a picture schedule. Make sure to let your child know what is going on. It is important to explain what is happening, where they are going, who they will see, etc. Using pictures to explain is often more effective than words alone.

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, fist bumps, possibly a lollipop for a successful trip to the grocery store, or time on the iPad for good behavior during a doctor's appointment.



Help Your Child With Transitions – Transitions from one activity or setting to another can be difficult for children with autism especially if they are moving on from something they enjoy to something they don't want to do. Giving countdowns, using a motivating distractor, and teaching the “first, then” concept are strategies that have been helpful for my son.

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 to understand the activity will be ending. You can give the verbal warning or try using something visual such as an egg timer, microwave timer, or download a timer app to your phone. If you have a younger child that you don't think is able to grasp this concept yet, still give it a try. Remember consistency is the goal here. It's what's done on a regular basis that your child is going to respond to.

Teach the “First, Then” Concept – This concept uses a less preferred activity that your child needs to complete in order to do a more preferred activity. Initially this can be taught using visual images paired with the verbal prompts 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” put toys away, “Then” bubbles. Once your child understands the concept prompts can be given verbally without pictures.



Distractors* – When transitioning to something that your child does not prefer, it can be helpful to have something to distract them while switching to the activity. The distractor has to be something the child looks forward to and enjoys. For example, my son had a light up toy phone that he loved. I kept that toy in my purse for times he had difficulty transitioning. If after the countdown he still didn't want to move on, I would use the toy phone to distract him as we left the activity.

** It is important to note that distractors and rewards should be things that are highly motivating to your child that are not otherwise easily accessible. Also, it is likely that they will change over time. Use unhealthy foods sparingly and if food is the real motivator, try using dried fruit or healthier options to help with transitions.*



Aim for 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 your child's attention using high energy and cause and effect toys can be helpful. Bubbles, pop up toys, goofy hats, exaggerated facial expressions, singing, or comic glasses are great ways to get and hold joint attention.

Help, Don't Hover – When you are teaching a new skill, try using the “Hand over Hand” method to engage your child in the environment. Place your hand over the child's hand when working on an activity. By holding their hand you can gently guide him or her through the activity such as puzzles, crafts, baking, and appropriately playing with toys. Watch for opportunities for your child to do things with less of your physical assistance.

Identify Sensory Stressors – Many children with autism have sensory challenges, meaning their senses have difficulty processing what is going on around them. For example, some children with autism are extremely sensitive to sound. A ceiling fan, background music, or a lawn mower that you may not be noticing because your sensory system is able to filter out the sound may be upsetting for a child with autism. It is important to identify things that can create stress and anxiety for your child. Once you've identified stressors, you can find ways to desensitize your child and eventually learn to cope with them.

Make it Visual – Many children with autism are considered to be visual learners. This means they learn concepts by using images. Some easy to make visual tools that help children with autism learn concepts are:

Choice Boards – Uses images to help a child make a decision.



Visual schedules – Uses images to explain when activities will occur and in what sequence.



Social stories – Descriptive stories one can create to help children understand social situations, expectations, social cues, new activities, and/or social rules.



Consistency - Many children with autism thrive in highly structured environments. The predictability and consistency of what comes next is comforting to them. Remember that consistency is key!

Keep in Mind - Increased problem behaviors can be a sign or signal of an illness or other medical condition. Whenever there is a significant change in your child's behavior such as increased aggression, self-injurious behavior, head banging, etc. rule out possibilities such as an ear infection, toothache, GI issues, etc.

Please note all visual aids on this tip sheet can found in Google Images.

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