



Explaining the Diagnosis of Autism to Family and Friends

- No matter what reaction parents have to their child's diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), it's important to give sufficient time to come to terms with what the diagnosis means to them and their family. Parents should educate themselves about the disorder and discuss what information they feel comfortable sharing with family and friends.
- The diagnosis can be a challenging experience for parents as they may fear that they may not be accepted or included as they were in the past. Honesty is usually the best policy. Initially, it can be easier for parents to tell others about specific symptoms, rather than the full diagnosis. For example, a parent may initially choose to say that the child is receiving speech therapy for a speech delay before disclosing the full diagnosis.
- When ready to disclose the diagnosis to others, provide information specific to the child. Autism is a spectrum disorder and affects every person differently. Find trustworthy information which describes the characteristics of autism and offer information specific to the child's challenges. Comprehensive information for family and friends can be downloaded from www.childrens-specialized.org/KohlsAutismAwareness.
- Family members and friends will have their own feelings about the child's diagnosis. It's all right to share these feelings together. Even after they learn of the diagnosis, they may not know how to respond to or help the child. Parents should take the time share suggested ways to communicate, interact, respond, to and care for their child.
- Let friends and relatives know that it is important to be treated like other family members and friends, and not excluded.
- ASD symptoms may be subtle. Family members and friends may not realize that the child may have difficulty tolerating lengthy visits, being touched by others, or involved in social demands. Parents should prepare family and friends as well as the child; communicate needs; and establish rules and boundaries, so that gatherings can be more pleasant.
- To help improve the child's social interactions and play skills, it's important to get cooperation and support of family members on a regular basis, . Grandparents and other family members may have more time and energy to engage with the child and help with a parent's demanding schedule.
- Family members may not understand special techniques or interventions that are being used for the child. Many types of early intervention programs are structured to engage the child and family together in the home or a familiar environment. This provides opportunities for other family members to participate in these techniques and get exposure to the therapist working with the child. These interactions can help to demystify some of the interventions that parents use to help their child, by learning directly from the professional. As a result, family members and friends can better support the development of the child's skills.

