

# What to do if you think your child may be Autistic

## Things to consider:

- **Adapt how you communicate with your child.** Learn about their communication style, whether verbal and non-verbal and encourage this to help them build their own language if needed.
- **Be consistent.** Children with autism thrive from routine. Even when things get tough, try to stick to the schedule as much as possible or spend a good amount of time supporting your child to adjust to a change.
- **Be kind to yourself about your efforts and don't be afraid to seek support.**

If your child has been diagnosed with autism or is showing signs of autism, you may feel unsure about how you can help. Being told that autism is incurable can often leave parents feeling concerned that there is nothing they can do – however, although autism is incurable, there are many things you can do to support your child and help them thrive.

**Below are 10 tips on how to help your child with autism to reach their potential, from helping them to communicate better and manage their emotions to minimising sensory overload and more.**

## 1. Learn about your child's condition

To help your child thrive, start by understanding their autism. Although autism presents itself uniquely from one child to another, try to learn about how autism impacts your child specifically, in their physical, behavioral, and emotional development.

### Do your research

The internet offers a plethora of information regarding autism in children, and across different resources, you will find varying autism presentations, some of which may fit your child. It's important that you take your time with your research – one resource may not answer all your questions, but snippets from different resources should help you build a better picture of what your child is experiencing. You can also find short [online child autism tests](#) which can help you understand signs of autism.

### Speak to school

Schools are starting to become much better equipped with supporting children with autism and their parents – research suggests 70% of children with autism are taught in mainstream schools. Speak to your child's teachers to ensure you are continuing to learn about your child's needs, preferences and progress even when you are not with them.

## Speak to your child's doctor

If you have any questions, speak with a medical professional. Autism can feel like a complex disorder, particularly when it presents with other conditions such as mental health difficulties. Let a professional help break things down for you and support you with how to help your child. If your child has suspected signs of autism, then getting an [autism assessment from a specialist psychiatrist](#) or psychologist can help them get on the right path for a holistic treatment plan.

## Speak to other parents

Connect with other parents who have a child with autism. They are learning too, and are likely to welcome support from peers. Although your children's presentations of autism may differ, you may nonetheless gain some valuable knowledge that can help you to better support your child. Speaking with other parents may also help grow your child's social circle. If your child is attending a mainstream school, they may welcome having some time to connect with other children with autism outside of school.

# 2. Build a routine and be consistent

For most children with autism, having a routine can be very soothing as sudden changes can trigger anxiety. Try to build yourself a routine that supports your child's routine, and is consistent. Be sure to communicate the schedule clearly to your child and remind them of it regularly so that they know what to expect.

## Make a schedule

Draw out a schedule for your child in a way that is engaging for them. Use colours and textures that they like and display it somewhere visible and accessible. Remind your child of the schedule regularly. Some children like to go through their schedule every morning, or even at different points throughout the day to remind themselves of what to expect.

## Prepare for changes

If you have planned changes coming up, try and communicate this to your child as soon as you can, and remind them of the upcoming change regularly. If possible, show them pictures of the change. If there is an unplanned change, again try and communicate this to your child and expect to take more time with helping them transition into the change.

## **Give choices**

To help them cope better with change, give your child regular choices. For example, when going through the schedule for the day, let the child choose between two activities at different times. You might ask them 'play inside or play outside' or 'green crisp packet or blue crisp packet'. Giving them choice will help them to exercise some flexibility. However, it is important to note that this might not be the case with every child with autism.

## **3. Learn to engage non-verbally**

Children with autism, as with many of their other traits, will exhibit varied abilities when it comes to verbal and non-verbal language. Often, even those that have some verbal language skills may prefer to communicate non-verbally, particularly when in new or uncomfortable situations.

## **Watch your child's behaviour when they communicate with you**

Certain motions or actions your child uses whilst speaking can give you a deeper insight into what they mean if you pay careful attention and try to learn more about them. Try to notice patterns in their movements and how they relate to different temperaments.

## **Exaggerate your voice and use your body**

Use physical gestures, eye contact and your voice to help the child build a form of language to communicate with. Ensure that these gestures are simple enough for the child to learn and imitate. For example, when you want the child to look at something, use an exaggerated voice and point in the direction you want them to turn to. Equally, when they use similar non-verbal language, respond enthusiastically, and look in the direction they point to reinforce their communication. If they point at an object, then pick it up and give it to them. Similarly, if you want something, point at it before proceeding to pick it up.

## 4. Understand your child's sensory needs

Many children with autism experience sensory sensitivity. This means that they can often feel over or under-stimulated by their senses. To help your child cope better with such sensitivities, get to know what soothes them and what might trigger sensory overload.

### Diarise what you notice

Keeping a diary of your child's sensory overload triggers can be helpful in supporting you to manage their anxiety. For example, if you have noticed that your child becomes distressed when in busy areas (sometimes signalled by and places their hands over their ears), you might find that giving them ear defender headphones can support your child and allow them to continue to engage with these activities without experiencing the distress that comes with sensory overload. Keeping a diary can also help you monitor changes with your child – as they grow, their sensory needs may change, and your diary will help inform you of new adaptations or old ones that are no longer needed.

### Create a safe space

Agree a safe space that your child can use to calm down when they are feeling overwhelmed or anxious. It can help for the safe space to contain certain objects, smells and textures that your child finds comforting. For example, if a child has a favourite soft animal, they may respond well to soft, furry textures when feeling distressed. In such cases, it might be important to have these textures available in the safe space.

## 5. Find out where to get support

While it can sometimes feel overwhelming, remember you are not alone in being a parent of a child with autism. Having the right support can make a huge difference to yours and your child's life.

### Join support groups

Online you will find lots of support groups that can help connect you with other parents via forums or local, in-person groups. The support forums can also be found on social media.

## **Seek financial support if necessary**

Your local council can give you financial support if your child is under 25 years old. Enquire about the “local offer” scheme to help with special education needs. The local council can also be helpful in guiding you towards additional support services within the community.

## **Get a specialist autism assessment for your child**

Having an expert assess your child with care and consideration can help you get a specific diagnosis, as well as a tailored treatment plan that encompasses all areas of your child’s life and professionals involved in their support. An expert-informed treatment plan can give your child the best chance at thriving and meeting their potential.

## **6. Talk about autism**

Letting people know about your child’s autism can help them a great deal. If they and others are able to understand your child’s autism, they can sensitively make adjustments to help them cope better with different situations.

### **Let your child know about their autism**

Explaining autism to your child can be empowering for them. If they are able to understand their needs better, it can encourage independence in seeking out aids and adaptations they need which can be a useful skill going into adulthood.

### **Let your other children know about autism**

If your child has siblings, involve them in understanding the needs of your child with autism. This can not only provide you with support but also build a more compassionate relationship amongst the siblings.

### **Talk to school about your child’s autism**

Keep an open dialogue between yourself and the school, and continue to update them with any changes your child displays. Through regular updates, together you can ensure you are providing consistent support for your child. Equally, keeping the dialogue open gives school the opportunity to update you on any changes too.

## 7. Get to know their tantrums

Understanding emotions and communication can be challenging for children with autism. This can lead to tantrums as the child becomes overwhelmed with stress, anxiety or fear, and cannot regulate their emotions or express them in a socially acceptable manner.

### Try to understand the motivation behind a tantrum

It is natural to feel upset when you are not being understood, and in children with autism this is no different. When children with autism have tantrums, it is their way of communicating their frustration to you. Try to keep your cool and don't be tempted to put the fire out immediately. Give them a little time to express themselves, as too many stimuli at once can add to their frustration. Go through what just happened and try to understand the trigger.

### Use time to help them prepare for a transition

When a child with autism is engrossed in something or is really enjoying themselves, it can become challenging to get them to stop or leave. Giving your child minute warnings to help them understand what to expect can guide them through that transition with more ease. For example, you might tell your child they have 5 minutes before you leave, then give them 1-minute warnings as you count down. This may not be successful straight away, but if you are consistent with this, they will begin to learn what the warnings mean.

### Use a “first/then” chart

Many tantrums can be driven by your child not getting what they want. To help a child with autism learn to wait, using “first/then” can be helpful. Create a visual chart that suits the needs of your child, title the first box “first” and the second box “then”. In these boxes you can write or draw what activities to expect, or you can add photos if they are available. Using the “first/then” chart is a simple way to help provide structure for your child as well as helps them follow directions.

Focus on what you would like them to do, not what you want them to stop doing.

Go against your instinct when you want to use the words “don't” and “stop”. Such words can be confusing for an autistic child, so offering an alternative is a much simpler way of communicating.

*For example, saying “don’t stand on the chair” might not be understood as simply as “only sitting on the chair please”.*

## **8. Adjust how you talk to your child**

When communicating with a child with autism, relying on conversational methods that you would use with typically developing children can be challenging. Many children with autism experience a marked deficit in verbal language skills and often rely on non-verbal communication.

### **Pick the right time to talk to them**

Be mindful of timing when choosing to communicate with your child. Many children with autism have a specific schedule and routine, and when they are engrossed in something on that schedule, they may not welcome being disturbed. If your child is already distressed by something, this may not be the right time to talk to them either, as too many stimuli at the same time can lead to sensory overload. Try to find a quiet time to talk to them.

### **Talk about what they like**

Many children with autism can have highly focused interests. These interests can vary from colours to fictional characters to certain historical time periods. If you notice such an interest, you can use it to engage your child in a conversation. They may often change this interest, or have several interests, so be sure to take note of these and use these to help keep your conversation varied.

### **Use simple sentences and be clear**

With verbal children, carefully consider how you construct a sentence. Try to avoid complex structures that include metaphors, rhetorical questions, or sarcasm; be simple and direct.

With non-verbal children with autism or those with limited verbal language, learn more about how they communicate. Try to understand patterns in their communication behaviour to help you gauge what they are communicating. Use physical gestures, eye contact and your voice to help the child build a form of language to communicate with. Ensure that these gestures are simple enough for the child to learn and imitate.

### **Use writing and pictures**



Children with autism tend to think visually, so if you feel you are struggling to get through to them verbally, get a pencil and paper and start to write or draw pictures. If initially they didn't understand what you said, the pictures and writing can help make this clearer for them.

## **9. Use rewards and consequences**

Behaviour management is not about punishing your child, but teaching them boundaries through nurturing communication. This can be particularly challenging with a child who has autism but with the appropriate adjustments and patience, it can work well.

### **Pay attention to what a reward or consequence would be for them**

When considering rewards and consequences, try to use consequences that are as natural and connected to the behaviour as possible (e.g. if they pour their drink on the floor, take the drink away), however account for your child's autism. For example, using a time-out for a child with autism might not be a consequence, but a reward, because they enjoy time away from others.

### **Offer an alternative behaviour**

If your child is engaging with undesirable behaviour, such as being aggressive and physical you when they want something, try to focus on gradually working on this behaviour by modelling an alternative behaviour. You might point in the direction of the object they want, then lift their arm and get them to point, before getting up and giving the object to them.

## **10. Believe in yourself and your child**

### **Don't give up when things get tough**

Things will undoubtedly get tough at times, but try not to give up. When you believe in your child, it can empower them to believe in their own potential and reach their goals. If you give up, it can lead to difficult behaviour being ignored and vital skills being unlearned. This can be particularly problematic growing up, and will likely cause difficulties in adulthood. One day when you look back, the sense of



accomplishment you will get from seeing your child with autism learn and grow will outweigh memories of a stressful day at home.

## **Praise and encourage your child**

When your child has put in effort or has accomplished something, be sure to reward and encourage them with something they will respond well to. In children with autism, this can vary greatly as each child may have varying special interests and may not necessarily like the smell or taste of a sweet treat, for example.

## **Acknowledge your wins**

Having an autistic child can be just as rewarding as it is challenging. . Sometimes, however, just when you think you've made progress, something might set you back. Try not to focus on days when things haven't gone so well – except to briefly reflect so that you can understand why it went that way. Acknowledge your own accomplishments, whether it's learning something new about your child or seeing your child learn something you have taught them. Allow yourself to bask in those joyful moments -you both deserve it.

If you would like professional support for your child's autism, our highly experienced child autism specialist can help guide you from getting your child the right diagnosis to creating a holistic treatment plan tailored to your child's needs. Take our private ASD assessment to see if your child could benefit from professional support.