

# Supporting an Autistic Child:

## A Guide for Parents



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## What is Autism?

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition, not an illness. Autism can affect how a child communicates with and relates to other people, as well as how they experience the world around them.

An Autistic child may experience difficulties initiating and sustaining reciprocal social interaction and social communication, as well as a range of restricted, repetitive and inflexible patterns of behaviour and interests.

It is unknown what causes Autism – it is thought to be a combination of genetic and environmental factors affecting brain development and function. Traits can often be seen in family members, so it is thought that it can be passed down genetically. Autism is not caused by bad parenting, vaccines or a poor diet.

## Signs of Autism

Autistic children may share some characteristics, and they might have strengths and weaknesses in different areas. An Autistic child may:

- have difficulty understanding how others think and feel
- have difficulty making friends and socialising
- have difficulty expressing their own feelings
- have a need for rituals or repetitive behaviours
- experience anxiety over changes to routines
- frequently repeat words and phrases
- have anxiety over unfamiliar situations or social events
- have delayed or absent speech
- have difficulty listening, concentrating and understanding
- not respond to their name
- find it hard to relate to children their own age and therefore prefer interacting with adults or younger children
- have a very keen interest in a certain subject or activity
- stim (self-stimulatory behaviours such as repetition of words and sounds, rocking, spinning, jumping, hand movements, rubbing skin and chewing)
- become dysregulated or anxious at disliked tastes, smells, sounds, textures or sights
- have a very literal understanding of language
- not understand jokes

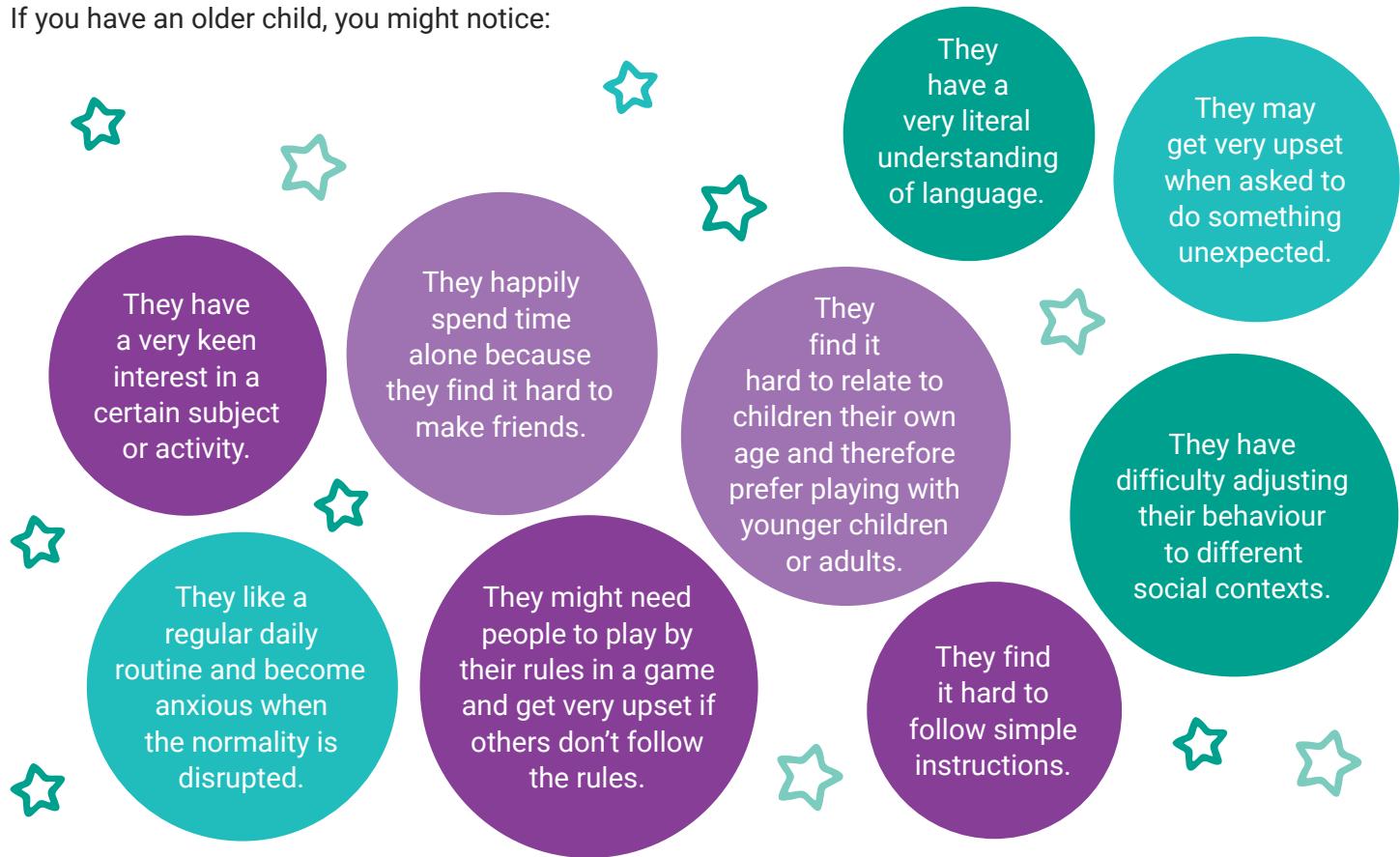


It's important to remember that every child is different and may display some of these behaviours, but not be diagnosed as Autistic, just as an Autistic child might not display these behaviours. It all depends on the individual.

If you have a young child, you might notice some of these:



If you have an older child, you might notice:



## Diagnosis

A diagnosis of Autism means that support can be put into place to effectively help your child cope with everyday demands and to support them in living a full and happy life.

Some children display some of the signs of Autism from an early age, while others do not display signs until later on.

If you feel that your child may be Autistic, keep notes of the signs that you see and when you see them. It will be important to talk to your child's school or childcare setting so that they can observe too. Talk to your child's teacher and SENDCo (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator) too – they might complete some more formal observations of your child.

To seek a diagnosis, begin by consulting your local authority's Local Offer website or NHS page for information on the diagnostic process in your area.

It can also be beneficial to visit your GP, who can guide you on the next steps. In some regions, a GP can refer your child for an Autism assessment.

While awaiting the assessment, discuss with your child's school what support can be implemented in school to help.

The Autism assessment team typically includes a paediatrician, an educational psychologist, a speech and language therapist and a CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) team.

Professionals will complete a range of activities in order to make a diagnosis. These include:



Once the assessment is complete, you will receive a report detailing the team's findings. This may be provided directly by the team or sent to you via post.

The report will include:

- a confirmation of whether your child has been given an Autism diagnosis, potentially worded as "meets the criteria for autism spectrum diagnosis";
- identification of areas where your child may require support, such as social interaction, communication, behaviours, or sensitivities to lights, colours and sounds;
- a summary of your child's strengths.

Given that the report may contain professional terminology, it can sometimes be challenging to understand. Don't be afraid to ask questions to find out exactly what it means and how it will support your child.

Your child will also be offered a follow-up appointment a few weeks or months later to discuss the report with a member of the assessment team.

As Autism is a lifelong condition, this report will be a valuable reference throughout your child's development into adulthood.



## The Next Steps

Remember, Autism is not an illness; there is no cure. It is something you are born with and will have for your whole life.

If your child receives an Autism diagnosis, you can find out what support is available in your local area by looking up your council's 'Local Offer', which sets out what they can do for you.

If your child's school has not already started the process, talk to them about an EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plan). This is a document that describes your child's needs and sets out the support that can be expected for your child to make progress academically, socially and emotionally.

You will be able to discuss your child's difficulties with school staff and other involved professionals, who will make suggestions for how to best support your child so that they are able to thrive.

## Reaching Out for Support

There are many local and national charities that can offer helpful advice, information and ideas. From phone lines for parents to special services, there's a lot of knowledge and support out there for both you and your child.

[National Autistic Society](#)

[Ambitious about Autism](#)

[Autism Central](#)

## Supporting an Autistic Child

Every Autistic child is different – what works for one child might not work for another – and as your child grows and develops, their preferences will change. Here are some strategies that can help support them.

### Work With Your Child's School

Communicate regularly with teachers and school staff to create a consistent approach. Forging strong relationships with your child's school will help to keep lines of communication open and enable you to share ideas about what is working for your child. You might need to explain your child's processing differences, triggers and regulation strategies in more detail – every Autistic child will have a different experience and teachers will find what works for some children might not work for others.



## Be Clear

Try to be aware of the sounds in the environment. Is the TV on when you're trying to talk to your child? Are you facing your child so they can see you talking? How long is the sentence you are saying? All these things can affect how your child processes information, instructions and questions. Use simple, direct words and break down instructions to make them easier to follow. Instead of "Get up, go and get a cup and fill it with water" which has three separate instructions, break it down by giving your child one instruction at a time, offering the next when they're ready.

## Allow for Processing Time

Some children may need more time to process something (an instruction or question, for example). You might ask your child to do something and it might seem like they are ignoring you, but actually they are processing what you have said.

## Use Visual Supports

Visual timetables, 'Now and Next' boards and symbols can help support your child's communication and understanding, allowing them to express their thoughts and feelings.

## Respect Your Child

There might be things that dysregulate or upset your child and they might seem insignificant to you. You might even think of them as 'silly'. They're not. They are extremely important to your child and they can't just 'get over' them. Children with sensory processing differences require respect for their needs and wishes and an understanding that their brain works in a different way. You're not there to judge their actions and reactions to things; you're there to support them.

## Reduce the Unknown

Many Autistic children like routine – not knowing what is going to happen next or at a particular point during the day can be daunting, as can visits to unfamiliar places or new people. As far as possible, you can help your child to overcome some of their anxiety by talking them through their day. If there's a visit to a doctor on the cards, talk about how you'll get there, what the waiting room is like, how you'll book in and what the doctor might ask or do. Use visual timetables and 'Now and Next' boards to help your child see what their day looks like and deal with transitions between activities.



## Model Clear Communication

If your child is having difficulties with communication, model to them what good communication looks like. To get their attention, say their name. Speak slowly and clearly so that your child understands what you have said. Use language they know. If your child is finding it hard to communicate, you could use some sort of visual clue to help. Visual support cards can be used to help manage behaviour too.

These types of visual clues can also help them to communicate with others. Give them time to process what has been said rather than expect an answer or an action straight away.

Try to use one voice when giving instructions; multiple people talking at the same time can be confusing and overwhelming.

## Celebrate Every Success

It's easy to concentrate on negative traits when you have an Autistic child, but look at what is in front of you – your child will do amazing things every day which demonstrate growth and success. Celebrate those small things that other parents might take for granted – your celebration acts as an encouragement to your child to keep going and will motivate them to recognise their own successes.

## Educate Yourself and Others

You'll likely want to read as much as you can about Autism and how it can present in different ways for different people – this is a natural reaction. However, despite so much media attention on Autism in recent years, many people still do not really know what it is. Most people will not have the understanding or experience that you have. You may come across individuals who wrongly believe that your child is just being awkward deliberately or that they need telling off if they have an extreme reaction to something. Don't accept that these individuals are just poorly educated in Autism; if you are able to, explain the difficulties your child has so that they understand a little more.

You can try to make sure that any adults your child comes into contact with are aware that they are Autistic. Giving them some information about your child's needs will help that person to support your child and give your child a better overall experience.



## Be Prepared to Have Realistic Boundaries

Make sure you set boundaries for your child so that they understand what is acceptable and what is not. Those boundaries need to be consistent so that your child understands your expectations. Your child is likely to thrive on having boundaries in place because otherwise, they may feel out of control and overwhelmed.

Be prepared that the boundaries need to be realistic for your child, for example, Autistic children may show self-stimulatory behaviours such as repetition of words and sounds, rocking, spinning, jumping, hand movements, rubbing skin and chewing. Expecting your child not to show any of these behaviours and sit perfectly still and quiet is not realistic, but you can set the boundary of what behaviours are acceptable and support your child in finding regulation techniques to help them in situations.

## Be flexible

Life might look a little different from how it did before – and that's not a bad thing, it just requires a degree of flexibility. Special days (such as birthdays, Halloween, Bonfire Night and Christmas) might need to be adjusted in order for your child to feel comfortable and that's fine. Things don't have to be as perfect as they look on social media; they just need to work for you and your child.

If you're attending a party together, for example, your own expectations about arriving at a certain time, playing rowdy games, dancing and eating food together might not work for your child. You might find that arriving at the start of a party is too overwhelming for them, so you might suggest arriving slightly later.

Similarly, with party games and dancing, you might realise your child finds these uncomfortable due to loud noises and lights. That's okay – have a chat to the party host to see if there's a quiet place your child can retreat to. If your child uses noise-reducing headphones, they might like to take them along. Eating unfamiliar foods with lots of noisy children might be very challenging, so you could bring along a few foods you know they'll enjoy, too. Just because your child's experience of the party is different, it doesn't mean they'll enjoy it any less.



## Find Patterns in Their Behaviour

You might find that your child reacts to things in different ways; they may become dysregulated by loud noises, different textures or tastes or maybe changes in routine. Observe carefully to see if there are any patterns so that you can start to plan and support your child in finding regulation strategies that they can use when they become dysregulated.

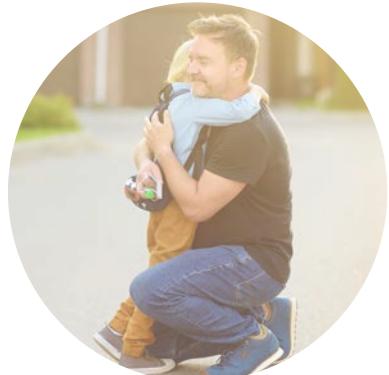
## Be an Advocate for Inclusion

If you're ever told that your child can't participate in something because they'll find it hard, you can challenge this and ask, **"How can it be adjusted to make this activity accessible for my child?"**

Your child should never be excluded from taking part in an activity because of their differences. Extra support might need to be put into place for them to take part, or a risk assessment completed to work out ways to keep them safe. Your child has just as much right to participate in activities as other children.

## Love and Accept Them

Ensure you show your child that you love them and tell them often, even if they might not reciprocate. Your child does not need to be changed – this isn't the intention of a diagnosis. They just need some support to overcome challenges and thrive in the world around them.



## Support Yourself

Caring for an Autistic child can be an absolute joy. It can also be an all-consuming job, where nothing is easy and everything feels like a fight. It's easy to let it overtake your life and feel like you've lost your identity, but it's important not to let this happen. Remind yourself it's OK to have 'bad' days and it's OK to feel frustrated or upset – you don't have to love every part of every day. Allow yourself to feel all your emotions and find healthy ways to let them out. Make time for you. Do things that help you relax or let you think about something else: it might be a sport, a hobby or simply getting together with friends to have a drink and put the world to rights. You might need to plan these opportunities in advance, but once they're in the diary, protect that time. Sometimes it's hard to see the good in what you're doing. It can feel like you're doing and saying the same thing day in, day out and it can feel joyless at times. Every day, try to think of something positive that has happened and then do something you love. A cup of tea alone in the garden, a warm bubble bath or giving yourself permission for an afternoon nap can help place emphasis on your own needs and recognise that what you're doing is amazing.



We hope you find the information on our website and resources useful. This resource includes information generally found to benefit educators/parents learning more about Autism, and features content to support Autistic learners. Our resources follow guidance created after consultations with representatives from the Autistic community. Our resources use 'identity first' language. It is important to acknowledge that every learner's needs are different. Some elements of these resources may not be applicable in relation to specific Autistic learners; you will find editable alternatives on all of our Autism specific resources to enable you to edit and amend them for individual needs and preferences. Twinkl is an international company and therefore some resources may feature terminology that is appropriate in some countries but not others - in such cases, you are able to request an alternative version specific to your country's approach.

These resources are those which we have generally found to be of benefit to learners with SEND. However, every learner's needs are different and so these resources may not be suitable for your learner. It is for you to consider whether it is appropriate to use these resources with your learner.

We hope you find the information on our website and resources useful. This resource is provided for informational and educational purposes only. It is intended to offer general information and should never be taken as medical advice. As medical information is situation-specific and can change, we do not warrant that the information provided is correct. You and your children should not rely on the material included within this resource and we do not accept any responsibility if you or your children do. It is up to you to contact a suitably qualified health professional if you are concerned about your health or the health of your children.

We hope you find the information on our website and resources useful. This resource contains potentially sensitive and/or upsetting topics that may emotionally impact on children due to their experiences in their past. It is your responsibility to consider whether it is appropriate to use this resource with your children. If you do use this resource, it is your responsibility to ensure that appropriate support is available for anyone affected.

