



When your child has autism: Tips for parents

By Claire Allen, National Education Facilitator, Autism South Africa

April is Autism Awareness Month, a time where South Africa and the world alike, unite to raise much-needed support for autism. While we are actively engaging in awareness campaigns, the people who need our support are often the parents of children with autism.

As a parent, discovering that there is something different with your precious bundle of joy can be difficult. However, when it comes to autism, early diagnosis usually between 18-36 months – makes a significant difference in the foundation years of a child's development and growth. There are also many things we can do to help children with autism overcome their challenges, make daily life easier, and have a successful future. By learning all you can about different autism spectrum disorders, and the latest intervention methods available, you'll be able to make a big difference in your child's life.

Autism South Africa is here for you and shares these helpful tips for raising a child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

1. Learn about autism

The more you know about ASDs, the better equipped you'll be to make informed decisions for your child. Educate yourself about appropriate intervention options, ask questions, and participate in all intervention and therapy discussions. The internet can be a great source of information, but it is often difficult to wade through all the 'misinformation' out there. Visit our website, www.aut2know.co.za or the National Autistic Society on www.nas.org.uk . Also educate your family and friends about autism.

2. Don't wait for a diagnosis

As the parent of a child with autism or related developmental delays, the best thing you can do is to start intervention as soon as possible. Don't wait to see if your child will catch up later or outgrow the problem. The earlier children with autism receive help, the greater their chance is for an independent life. Early intervention is the most effective way to speed up your child's development and reduce the impact of autism on their life.

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3. Early detection of autism is up to parents

As a parent, you're in the best position to spot the earliest warning signs of autism. You know your child better than anyone and observe behaviours and quirks that a pediatrician, in a quick 15 minute visit, might not have the chance to see. The key is to educate yourself and know what's normal and what's out of sorts.

There are four main areas of development in which 'Red Flags' may be noticed which are:

- a. Communication– If there is no babbling by 11 months, no single words by 16 months, loss of speech/language at any age, limited or no eye contact
- b. Social – Limited or no eye-contact when interacting with others, more interested in looking at objects than at people's faces, prefers to play alone
- c. Behaviours – odd or repetitive ways of moving fingers or hands
- d. Sensory processing – over or under sensitive to certain sounds, textures or lights

4. Accept your child, quirks and all

Enjoy your kid's special quirks and celebrate their small successes. Don't compare your child to others. In the words of Temple Grandin: "As a person with autism I want to emphasize the importance of developing the child's talents. Skills are often uneven in autism, and a child may be good at one thing and poor at another. I had talent in drawing, and this talent later developed into a career in designing cattle-handling systems for major beef companies. Too often there is too much emphasis on deficits and not enough emphasis on talents. Abilities in children with autism will vary greatly, and many individuals will function at a lower level than me. However, developing talents and improving skills will benefit all. If a child becomes fixated on trains, then use the great motivation of that fixation to motivate learning other skills. For example, use a book about trains to teach reading, use calculating the speed of a train to teach math, and encourage an interest in history by studying the history of the railroads." Albert Einstein also famously said that if you try to teach a fish to walk he will seem extremely disabled, but in the right environment that individual will thrive!

5. Never give up

It's impossible to predict the course of an ASD. Don't jump to conclusions about what life is going to look like for your child. Like everyone else, people with autism have an entire lifetime to grow and develop their abilities. So stick with it, and trust your instincts.

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6. Autism support networks

Joining an autism support network is a great way to meet and relate with other families facing the same challenges. Parents can share information, get advice, and lean on each other for emotional support. Just being around others in the same boat and sharing their experience can go a long way towards reducing the isolation many parents feel after receiving a child's autism diagnosis. Social networks like Facebook is a great way to meet and chat with other parents.

7. Social interactions can be difficult for the child

In some instances, it may look like children with autism don't want to play with the other kids on the playground, but it may be as simple as not knowing how to start a conversation to join in. Take the time to teach them how to play with others. Try and find social groups like brownies, girl's guides, cubs, tennis, drama or dance to encourage friendships and peer interaction. www.do2learn.com is a great website filled with social interaction activities.

8. Take note of sensory overload

Many people with ASD have difficulty processing everyday sensory information such as sounds, sights and smells and may be over sensitive or under reactive to these senses. It can have a profound effect on your child's life. Your child may struggle to deal with all this information and may be likely to become stressed or anxious, and possibly feel physical pain. Seeking the advice of a sensory integration trained occupational therapist will help him to regulate himself.

9. Stay positive

Children with autism can't learn in an environment where they are constantly belittled. Avoid trying new things that could lead to criticism, no matter how "constructive" you think you're being. Look for strengths in your child and capitalize on them. Remember, there is more than one right way to do most things. Care for the Carer is just as important as care for your child. When you feel at the end of your tether, try to find a time-out for yourself too, even simple techniques such a deep breathing may assist. Find what works for you.

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10. Become an expert on your child

Identify the triggers that lead to your child's difficult behaviours and find out what elicits a positive response. If you understand what affects your child, you'll be better at troubleshooting problems and preventing situations that cause difficulties. Keep an updated list of motivators and rewards that are effective for your child.

Every parent of an autistic child needs help and support. If you are one, don't be afraid to find an autism support network or school near you that can assist you in being the best parent you can be, to a child with autism.

As the national body for people with autism, Autism South Africa aims to ensure a meaningful quality of life for people with an ASD. The organisation can help you find a support close to you. For information and assistance, please visit www.aut2know.co.za

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