

Autism - suggestions for parents

Parenting is a difficult job, but a child with autism – also known as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) – poses extra challenges. The following suggestions may help.

See your doctor, autism professionals or autism associations for more information and advice. Remember that other parents of children with autism can be a goldmine of tips and suggestions, so raise any issues you have with your support group.

After the diagnosis

An initial period of panic, which could include a fruitless search for the 'cure', is completely normal. This reaction settles down once the shock of the diagnosis has passed. You may like to consider the following ideas:

- Counselling to help manage your own feelings about your child's diagnosis.
- There are many different approaches to the management of autism. You may like to research them yourself to find the best approach for your child and family. Good starting points also include your doctor or paediatrician.
- Other parents who have children with autism can be excellent sources of information. Contact an autism support group for further information, support and guidance. Autism Victoria has a service directory with contact details for support groups in your area.
- When searching the Internet for information on autism management programs, be aware that not all information on the Internet is reliable. Check with your doctor or autism professionals, and be wary of any website that claims a 'cure' for autism.
- You could try using the online (Internet) Raising Children Network's 'Guide to Therapies'. This trustworthy guide can help you find reliable information about a wide range of therapies and interventions for children with autism. Each parent guide sets out what the research says about the therapy, and the approximate time and costs involved. For more, visit: www.raisingchildren.net.au

Choosing a management program

Suggestions include:

- Seek advice from your doctor, autism professionals and autism organisations. It may be worth collecting information on an intervention program you're considering and discussing it with the medical or paramedical team (or both) involved in your child's care.
- Only choose management programs that are based on sound, scientific principles (evidence-based practice).
- Carefully consider the validity, value and risk of experimental programs. Consult with your doctor or autism professionals for guidance.
- Make sure the people offering the program are properly qualified. You may wish to ask questions about staff qualifications, their participation in ongoing professional development and their experience in working with people with autism.
- Make sure the program deals with all aspects of autism.
- Find out about the time, effort and cost involved – for example, you may not have the time or resources to devote to an intensive program because of other children or work commitments.
- The program may be for children with particular abilities or who are a particular age, so check that it is appropriate for your child.
- Be wary of programs that claim to work for everyone with autism – their approach may be too broad to be useful.

Around the home

Parents are used to childproofing their homes, but children with autism may need extra precautions. However, it is important to find a balance between keeping your child secure and making sure your home is still safe and easy to get out of in an emergency (like a fire). Talk to a locksmith and other parents who face similar issues. Suggestions include:

- Some children with autism are experts at escaping the most secure homes. Talk to a locksmith about installing lockable security doors on all exterior doors and window locks – but make sure you can still get out quickly in an emergency.
- Use key-lock door knobs (or bolts or chains installed high on interior doors) to keep your child in their room at night, or to block access to certain rooms.
- Fences and gates are a good idea for both your front and back yards. Some are more easily scaled, or opened than others, so consider this when choosing or installing them.
- Window blind cords can be dangerous to children who put their head inside the loop. Perhaps cut through the loop, shorten the cords, install a hook on which to wind the cord, or remove it all together.
- If your child likes listening to the sound of breaking glass, you may want to try using acrylic plastic in place of glass, use shatterproof glass or in extreme cases reinforce, protect or board up your windows. In some cases, you can install foam. Use picture frames with plastic instead of glass.
- Try to keep these safety precautions low-profile so that you or other family members do not feel confined in your own home.

Personal hygiene

Suggestions include:

- Contrary to popular belief, it's not necessary to bathe children daily unless there are special medical or sanitary reasons to do so. If your child resists bathing, aim for one or two baths per week – at other times, clean them as best you can with a damp cloth. A flexible shower hose can be very useful for washing the hair of children who are afraid of the big shower.
- The fear of water may be overcome by the novelty of swimming pools, showers, jumping over lawn sprinklers, or appealing bath toys.
- Some children with autism dislike getting their fingernails and toenails cut. You could try teaching the child to do it themselves (with nail clippers rather than scissors), but ensure age is considered and appropriate safety precautions are taken. Curved toenail clippers are larger and easier to operate than smaller fingernail clippers, and can do both jobs passably. Another option is to perform the task while the child is asleep.
- If your child is sensitive to getting their hair cut at the hairdressers, try hugging them in your lap. Regularly brushing your child's hair, reading them a social story, or role-playing with your child the procedure of having a haircut may assist to 'desensitise' them to getting their hair cut. Perhaps try cutting their hair yourself. If this is too difficult, cut their hair as best you can while they are asleep.

Clothes

Some children with autism do not like wearing particular kinds of clothes or fabrics. To help manage this, you could:

- Ask your child **why** they want to take their clothes off. They may be able to tell you what's irritating them.
- Your child may be overly sensitive to the feeling of clothes against skin. Consult with your occupational therapist for help to develop a 'desensitisation' program.
- Choose soft fabrics, preferably cotton.
- Avoid clothing with tight waistbands, collars or cuffs.
- Remove clothing tags that may rub against their skin.
- If a child frequently takes off their own clothes, you could try dressing them in clothes that are difficult to remove, such as overalls or jumpsuits.
- Choose shirts, dresses and pants that button at the back.
- Replace zippers, velcro, buttons and other easily opened fasteners with more complicated options.
- If your child constantly removes their nappy, check that it's comfortable. Try switching from cloth to disposable (or the other way around) or try a different brand.
- You may need to wash clothing several times before your child starts wearing them. This may help to remove any unfamiliar smells, soften the fabric and reduce possible irritation.

Going out

Suggestions include:

- Plan the outing or trip. Prepare your child before leaving home – for example, verbal reminders, visual cue cards or the use of a timetable outlining 'today's activities'.
- Try to have another adult with you to help out if needed.
- Choose 'family friendly restaurants' or chain restaurants that don't expect perfect behaviour from young patrons.
- Take books, pens and toys for your child to play with.
- When eating out or shopping, try to choose times when it will not be busy.
- Reinforce good behaviour with plenty of praise.
- Try to avoid delays. For example, book the first appointment when visiting the doctor or dentist so that your child doesn't have to sit for too long in the waiting room.
- Remember to reward your child for good behaviour, such as praise, encouragement, tangible rewards.
- Alert cards may also be useful. These small cards are designed to tell other people about autism and ask them to show respect and tolerance. They can be easily carried in a wallet or purse and handed out as appropriate. Alert cards are available from Autism Victoria.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Autism Victoria trading as amaze Tel. (03) 9657 1600 or 1300 308 699
- Statewide Autistic Services – Respite, Residential and Recreation Services Tel. (03) 9773 6044
- Asperger Syndrome Support Network Tel. (03) 9845 2766

Things to remember

- Parenting is a difficult job, but a child with autism poses extra challenges.
- See your local GP, autism professionals, autism associations or other parents at your support group for more information and advice.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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