

My Child Has Autism – What Should I Do?

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Receiving an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis for your child can be a deeply unsettling experience. It's natural to feel a range of emotions, from shock and disbelief to fear and uncertainty.

You may question the best course of action, grapple with conflicting advice, or worry about your child's future.

It's important to remember that while ASD is a lifelong condition, early intervention and ongoing support can significantly improve outcomes.

From autism therapy options and communication with your child to taking care of yourself as a parent, we'll cover what you need to know in this article.

What to Know About Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a **developmental disorder** that affects how individuals perceive and interact with the world. The severity of symptoms can vary widely, ranging from mild to severe.

Early signs of ASD often emerge in childhood and may include difficulties with social interaction, communication, and repetitive behaviours.

While the **exact causes of ASD remain unknown**, researchers believe that a combination of genetic and environmental factors may influence ASD.

Children with ASD may struggle with eye contact, prefer solitary activities, and exhibit intense focus on specific interests. These challenges can sometimes strain relationships with others.

Talking to a Health Professional

Timely intervention is crucial for children with ASD or developmental delays.

If you suspect your child may be experiencing developmental challenges, don't hesitate to seek professional help, as **early intervention offers the best chance of improving your child's development** and mitigating the impact of ASD over their lifetime.

Before your appointment, consider **jotting down specific concerns or behaviours** you've observed in your child. This could include:

- Lack of social interaction like difficulty making eye contact or not understanding social cues.
- Delayed speech development or repetitive language.
- Repetitive behaviours.
- Over- or under- sensitivity towards sounds, light, touch, or taste.

To make the most of your appointment, **consider asking these questions** with the doctor:

- What does the diagnosis mean?
- If autism is a spectrum, where does my child's specific needs and challenges fall on it?
- What are the recommended treatment options and their potential risks and benefits?
- How will this condition affect my child's daily life, such as school, activities, and social interactions?
- What is the long-term outlook for my child's condition?
- Are there any special precautions or lifestyle changes we should make?

It is important to avoid waiting for a formal diagnosis or hoping that the issue will resolve on its own.

Taking the first step if your child exhibits autistic signs or symptoms is important so you can provide your child with the support they need to reach their full potential.

Exploring Autism Support & Therapy Options

Every child with autism is unique, and their specific needs will vary. Fortunately, there are several effective therapies and support strategies available at Island Hospital's clinical psychology to improve the quality of mental health:

1. Speech Therapy

While kids with ASD may face challenges in communication and social interaction, speech therapy offers hope and effective strategies to improve their abilities.

It helps children develop essential communication skills, such as speaking clearly, understanding language, and engaging in meaningful social interactions.

In this type of session, therapists may focus on nonverbal cues like eye contact, turn-taking, gestures, or other alternative communication methods such as pictures, sign language, or computer-assisted communication, to empower autistic kids to express themselves effectively.

Island Hospital provides comprehensive speech therapy services with an emphasis on research accustomed to aiding children with ASD to unlock their true potential in the long run.

2. Play Therapy

Children with autism **often approach play differently.** They might focus on specific parts of a toy, like the wheels of a car, rather than the toy as a whole, which makes it harder to engage in imaginative play or prefer solitary activities.

However, play is a powerful tool for autistic children, especially when they can express themselves using toys and actions while fostering learning, social connections, and emotional development.

It is a therapeutic approach that harnesses the power of play to address the specific needs of autistic children. Through play, therapists can help them to:

- **Develop cognitive flexibility:** Stimulate creative thinking and problem-solving.
- **Enhance social skills:** Encourage interaction and cooperation.
- **Improve communication skills:** Facilitate language development and nonverbal communication.
- **Promote emotional development:** Help children identify and express their emotions.

3. Parent Training Skills in Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA)

Parent training in applied behaviour analysis (ABA) is a crucial component of a comprehensive treatment plan, and it empowers parents with the knowledge and skills to implement ABA strategies at home.

Research indicates that early, intensive ABA therapy can lead to significant and enduring improvements for children with autism spectrum disorder.

This therapy uses positive reinforcement by motivating your child through praises, toys, or activities while teaching new skills to consistently strengthen desired behaviours.

The treatment goals are tailored to each child's unique needs and provide multiple benefits for your child’s development.

Play therapy is a therapeutic approach that uses play to help kids express their feelings, thoughts, and experiences in a safe environment. Explore how this helps children and adults in our article on *[include Play Therapy article title here].*

Communicating With Your Child

While there's no one-size-fits-all approach to communicating with children with ASD, these tips have proven helpful for many families. Here are some tips to help you communicate effectively:

1. Be Patient and Understanding

To support your child with ASD, consider slowing down the pace of conversations and allowing for moments of silence. This extra time can help them process information more effectively.

Parents should be aware that children with ASD may exhibit unique emotional responses. Therefore, patience and understanding are key to navigating these differences.

2. Encourage Healthy Expression of Emotions

Suppressing emotions can be challenging for anyone, but it's especially difficult for children with ASD. Encouraging open expression of feelings can help them develop healthier emotional regulation skills.

Parents can empower children with ASD by teaching them healthy coping mechanisms to express anger and frustration. Validating their feelings can help them understand and manage their emotions more effectively.

3. Practise Positive Reinforcement

Spending quality time playing with your child can strengthen your bond and create lasting memories.

While these shared moments are essential for your child’s emotional and cognitive development, it also let them know they are loved and valued.

4. Respect Personal Boundaries

As parents of children with ASD, understanding and respecting their unique needs is paramount. One of the most effective ways to foster a strong, positive bond is by prioritising their comfort and autonomy using clear and straightforward language.

Children with ASD are often hypersensitive towards touch, so it is best to respect their personal space and seek your child’s consent before forcing physical affection, even if well-intentioned. This simple act empowers them and builds trust.

Parents should also pay close attention to their non-verbal cues, as they may express discomfort or preference through body language and facial expressions.

You can build a strong, positive, and trusting relationship with your child by respecting their boundaries and communicating openly.

5. Show Love and Support

Love and support are not mere sentiments; but the lifeblood of meaningful relationships. For children with ASD, these elements are central for them to feel safe, valued, and understood.

Patience and empathy are essential tools in navigating the complexities of their emotions. Remember, their challenges in expressing themselves may stem from neurodiversity, not a lack of feelings.

As every individual on the autism spectrum is a unique masterpiece woven with extraordinary talents and perspectives, embracing their individuality allows you to unlock a world of potential for them.

Helping Your Child Thrive in Their Daily Life

Helping your autistic child navigate day-to-day life involves a combination of understanding, patience, and tailored strategies. Here are some do's and don'ts to help you support your child:

Do's	Don'ts
Use **simple and clear language** when communicating while **speaking slowly**.	Use jargon, complex sentences, rush, or raise your voice.
Use **visual aids** such as pictures, symbols, or simple sign language to support what you're conveying.	Rely solely on communication.
Always be **patient and understanding**.	Get frustrated, angry, or impatient.
Establish a **consistent routine** that aligns with their comfort and prepares them for early transitions.	Disrupt their routines without warning and spring surprises on them.
Identify their sensory sensitivities and create **sensory-friendly environments**.	Ignore their sensory needs and overwhelm them with sensory stimuli.
Model appropriate social behaviours by encouraging social interactions in supportive settings.	Expect them to instinctively understand social cues and force them into overwhelming social situations.
Teach coping mechanisms for managing emotions.	Dismiss or invalidate their feelings.
Celebrate their strengths and	Focus solely on their challenges.

achievements no matter how big or small.	

Remember, **you and your child are a team** on this unique journey! Adapting these tips to your child's individual needs and offering patient, understanding support will help them navigate their path and reach their full potential.

Taking Care of Yourself

Caring for a child with autism can be incredibly demanding, often taking a significant toll on both physical and mental health.

Remember the airline safety advice: "Put on your own oxygen mask first." Similarly, **taking care of yourself is essential before you can effectively care for others**.

Self-care is crucial for caregivers, so here are some practical tips you can do to help you maintain your well-being:

1. Physical and Emotional Self-Care

Physical self-care is essential for overall well-being.

To provide the best care and love to your autistic child, prioritise **adequate sleep**, nourish your body with **healthy meals and hydration**, engage in **regular physical activity** like walking or yoga, and **practise mindful relaxation techniques** such as deep breathing or meditation.

These practices can help you maintain your energy levels, reduce stress, and improve your overall mental and emotional state, allowing you to be more patient, understanding, and supportive towards your child.

2. Build a Support Network

Parents can **reach out** to other families, professionals, and friends for online and offline support.

A strong support network can provide invaluable advice, understanding, and emotional support while helping you connect to peers dealing with the same unique challenges.

3. Seek Professional Help

Seeking professional help, such as **individual, marital, or family counselling**, can provide invaluable support and guidance, especially for significantly stressed parents with emotional strain.

Therapists can help parents understand and manage their emotions, develop effective coping strategies, and improve family communication while offering advice on parenting techniques, behaviour management strategies, and accessing appropriate resources.

This helps parents to build resilience, reduce stress, and create a more supportive environment for both themselves and their child with autism.

4. Take a Break: Explore Respite Care

Respite care, where another caregiver temporarily takes over your child's care, is crucial for parents of autistic children, especially those with intense needs.

This allows you **much-needed breaks to recharge**, pursue personal interests, or relax. To find reliable respite care, consider reaching out to friends, family, or other parents for potential support networks.

Consult with your child's healthcare providers, therapists, or teachers for recommendations or referrals, such as a trusted teacher's aide. Additionally, explore community resources like newspapers, online platforms, religious organisations, or nearby colleges and universities for potential caregivers.

Remember to thoroughly check references. Joining a support group for parents of autistic children can provide valuable insights and connections with others who understand your situation.

Does your **child struggle with restlessness, inattention, or hyperactivity**? These behaviours, often misattributed to naughtiness, might signal ADHD. Check out our guide to learn the symptoms and treatment options!

Hope and Support for Your Family Starts Today

Learning from your child’s unique lens can broaden your own understanding and foster empathy by believing in their potential and empowering them to reach new heights to help them thrive.

Island Hospital's expert team, combining clinical psychology and paediatrics, offers tailored care to address your child's unique needs through blended years of clinical experience.

Early intervention can help children with autism develop important skills and make it easier for them to function in school and in the community.

By nurturing their potential and celebrating their abilities, we can help them reach their full potential and lead fulfilling lives.

Schedule a consultation with us today to learn more about our therapy options.

FAQ

Can a child go from normal to autistic?

No, a child cannot go from normal to autistic. Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that is present from birth. It is not something that develops later in life.

However, there is a condition called **regressive autism**, where a child appears to develop normally for the first few months or years of life, but then begins to lose skills like speech and social interaction.

Can a child with autism be normal?

The term "normal" is subjective and can have different meanings for different people. However, many people with autism can lead fulfilling and productive lives.

With **early intervention**, **therapy, and support**, many children with autism can develop strong social skills, communication abilities, and independence.

It's important to remember that autism is a spectrum disorder, meaning that the severity and presentation of symptoms can vary widely from person to person.

Ultimately, the goal is to help kids with autism reach their full potential and live happy, meaningful lives.

How do children with autism express love for their caregivers?

Children with autism **express love in a variety of ways**, often unique to their communication styles and sensory preferences. Some common ways they might show affection include:

- Hugging, cuddling, giving high-fives, or simply sitting close to their loved ones.
- While some children with autism may avoid eye contact, for others, it can be a sign of deep connection and affection.
- A genuine smile, even a small one, can be a powerful expression of love and happiness.
- Some children with autism may give small gifts, like a favourite toy or a drawing, as a token of their affection.
- Sharing a particular interest or activity can be a way of bonding and expressing love.
- Some children may show love by helping with tasks or chores, even if they don't always do them perfectly.
- Children may also show love through gestures, sounds, or repetitive behaviours that have a special meaning to them and their caregivers.

How do I discipline my child?

Consistent discipline is essential for the safe and effective management of autistic children. Their preference for routine and sameness makes structured discipline particularly beneficial.

This consistency can also help alleviate common anxiety associated with autism. The strategies that can be effective for this include:

- Implementing time-outs to redirect negative behaviours.
- Rewarding positive behaviour, no matter how small, with praise, stickers, or other incentives.
- Setting clear and simple rules and expectations and being consistent in enforcing them.
- Instead of focusing on the negative behaviour, redirect your child's attention to a more appropriate activity.

A child psychologist, behaviour analyst, or other specialist can provide guidance and support tailored to your child's specific needs, as every child is unique.