

AUTISM MUM SUPPORT

When Nobody Else Seems to Understand Your Child

When you can see the overload, masking, fear or communication underneath what other people call behaviour.

There is a particular loneliness in understanding your child differently from the people around you. You may recognise that a refusal is fear, that silence is shutdown, that anger followed hours of coping, or that a seemingly tiny change has used the last of your child's capacity. Yet somebody else may see rudeness, manipulation, poor parenting, laziness or a child who 'just needs firmer boundaries'.

Being the person who keeps translating your child's experience can become exhausting. You may explain the same sensory need to relatives, the same pattern to school and the same history to professionals. Eventually you can begin to question yourself: Am I making too much of this? Am I accommodating too much? Why does nobody else see what I see? This resource is about holding onto curiosity and evidence without feeling that you must convince every person you meet.

You see the whole child, not one snapshot

A teacher sees your child in school. A grandparent may see them for two hours. A clinician may see them in an appointment. You see patterns across mornings, nights, weekends, meals, transitions, illnesses, school days and recovery. None of these perspectives automatically contains the whole truth. Different environments can produce very different presentations.

Your knowledge as a parent is valuable, but it also helps to stay curious. Instead of needing one account to defeat another, ask what the difference tells you. If your child appears settled in school but collapses after returning home, what effort might be required to maintain that presentation? If they cope beautifully with a grandparent for a short visit, what is different about the demands, environment or duration?

The sentence that hurts: 'They're fine with me'

This can land as criticism even when it was not intended that way. It may imply that the difficulty only occurs because of Mum or because boundaries are different at home. But behaviour is context-dependent. A child may be able to maintain control temporarily, may have fewer demands in one setting, may feel able to release distress only with a trusted person, or may simply have had a better-capacity day.

Respond with information rather than defending your entire parenting history: 'I'm glad today went well. At home we are seeing significant recovery after these situations, so I need us to consider both parts of the picture.'

WHEN YOUR CHILD MASKS

What people see may not show what it costs

Masking can include suppressing stimming, copying peers, forcing eye contact, rehearsing responses, staying silent rather than asking for help, hiding confusion or holding distress in until a safer environment is reached. Not every autistic person masks in the same way, and apparent competence should not automatically be assumed to be masking. The important question is whether there is a repeated mismatch between what is visible and the effort or recovery required.

Look for patterns around exhaustion, headaches or stomach aches, increased rigidity, sleep disruption, reduced speech, irritability, meltdowns, shutdowns, loss of skills or a strong need for isolation after demanding environments. These observations can help others understand impact without relying on labels alone.

Describe rather than diagnose the moment

When explaining your concern, concrete observations are often stronger than interpretation. 'She cried for two hours after school and could not tolerate conversation' gives useful information. 'School is traumatising her' is a much larger conclusion and may lead people to debate the wording instead of the experience.

A simple structure is **what happened + what you observed + how long recovery took + what you are asking to change**. This keeps communication focused and creates a clearer record.

When behaviour is communication

Behaviour can communicate pain, sensory overload, uncertainty, fear, unmet communication needs, demand, fatigue, hunger, loss of control or many other things. It can also be ordinary childhood behaviour. Autism should not become the explanation for everything. Curiosity means asking what function or need may sit underneath rather than deciding in advance.

Boundaries and understanding can coexist. A child can be overwhelmed and still need adults to keep everybody safe. The goal is not to excuse harmful behaviour; it is to respond to the cause as well as the visible outcome.

A translation table

OTHERS MAY SAY	TRY EXPLORING
'They are refusing.'	What feels unsafe, unclear, painful or too demanding?
'They were fine all day.'	What happens before and after the visible period of coping?
'They need to get used to it.'	Is repeated exposure building capacity or repeatedly overwhelming them?
'They're attention seeking.'	What need is the child trying to get noticed?
'You give in too easily.'	Is this an accommodation, a safety decision, or an avoidable demand?
'It's just bad behaviour.'	What happened immediately before it, and what helped afterwards?

WHEN FAMILY AND FRIENDS DO NOT GET IT

Unwanted parenting advice

Advice can be painful when it assumes you have not tried obvious things. 'Just take the tablet away.' 'Make them eat what everyone else eats.' 'Stop letting them avoid things.' 'They'll never learn if you keep changing everything.' The person offering advice may not understand sensory processing, interoception, communication, executive functioning, anxiety or the cumulative effect of demands.

You do not have to deliver an autism seminar every time. Choose a response that matches your energy: 'We are following what works for their needs.' 'There is more happening here than you can see.' 'I appreciate that you want to help, but we are not looking for parenting advice.'

When relatives think accommodations are indulgence

An accommodation removes an unnecessary barrier; it is not automatically the same as avoiding every challenge. Headphones can make a supermarket accessible. A visual plan can reduce uncertainty. A safe food can allow somebody to eat. Leaving an event early can prevent overload. The useful question is whether the support increases safety, access, communication or sustainable participation.

At the same time, accommodations should remain individual. Something helpful for one autistic child may be unnecessary or unhelpful for another. Your child's actual response matters more than somebody else's rule about what autistic children 'should' need.

You can set boundaries around commentary

If somebody repeatedly criticises your child or parenting, boundaries may need to become more direct. 'Please don't discuss his behaviour in front of him.' 'We are not forcing food.' 'If the noise becomes too much, we will leave.' 'You don't have to agree, but I need you to respect the plan.'

A boundary is not an attempt to make another person understand. It is a statement about what you will allow, request or do next. This distinction can save enormous emotional energy.

Protect your child from becoming the family discussion

Autistic children can hear far more than adults realise. Be mindful of repeated conversations about their difficulties, particularly when they are nearby. Necessary adult conversations can be held privately. When speaking in front of your child, include strengths, preferences and the child's own perspective rather than allowing their identity to become a list of problems.

Where communication allows, involve the child in deciding what information they want shared and how they would like their needs explained.

WHEN PROFESSIONALS SEE SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Home and school can both be telling the truth

A discrepancy between settings should trigger investigation rather than disbelief. Consider sensory load, class size, predictability, social expectations, demand level, staffing, communication style, transitions, hunger, sleep and the amount of recovery available. Ask school what happens immediately before and after difficult periods, not only whether a visible incident occurred.

If your child masks, ask about subtler signs: perfectionism, reluctance to ask for help, copying peers, frequent toilet visits, headaches, staying unusually quiet, rigid rule-following or appearing exhausted. These signs are not proof of masking by themselves, but they may add context.

Bring patterns, not mountains of paperwork

When you feel unheard, it is tempting to collect everything. A concise chronology can sometimes communicate more clearly than dozens of pages. Record dates, context, what was observed, impact afterwards, what helped and what you are requesting. Include relevant reports where necessary.

If a professional disagrees, ask: 'What evidence would help you understand the concern?' 'What else could explain this pattern?' 'What can we trial and review?' This keeps the conversation practical without requiring you to surrender what you know.

Trust yourself without closing the door to new information

Parent expertise and professional expertise can complement one another. Trusting yourself does not mean assuming you can never be mistaken. It means taking your observations seriously while remaining open to evidence, your child's voice and alternative explanations.

Sometimes the most powerful advocacy position is not 'I know exactly what this is' but 'I know this pattern is affecting my child, and I need us to investigate it properly.'

My child's pattern

What other people usually see: _____

What I see before or afterwards: _____

What my child communicates about it: _____

What seems to increase difficulty: _____

What genuinely helps: _____

The one thing I need others to understand: _____

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO CONVINCE EVERYBODY

Choose where your energy matters

Some people need information because they have responsibility for your child: school staff, health professionals, carers or family members providing regular support. Other people may simply have an opinion. You do not need equal energy for both groups.

Ask yourself: Does this person need to understand in order to keep my child safe or support them well? Are they open to learning? Will this conversation change anything? If not, conserving your energy may be the healthier choice.

When being misunderstood affects Mum

Repeated invalidation can make you hyper-alert, defensive and unsure of your own judgement. You may begin rehearsing explanations before anybody has even questioned you. Notice when advocacy has followed you into every relationship. Having at least one place where you do not have to prove anything can be important: a trusted friend, partner, peer group, therapist or another parent who understands.

If the stress is significantly affecting your sleep, mood, functioning or physical health, seek support for you as well as your child. The parent carrying the advocacy also deserves care.

UK support starting points

National Autistic Society: autism information and resources for autistic people and families.

Contact: information and support for families with disabled children.

SENDIASS: local information, advice and support around SEND for families in England.

IPSEA: information about special educational needs and disability law in England.

Carers UK/local carers services: information and support for unpaid carers.

Your GP: a starting point if the pressure is affecting your own wellbeing or your child's health.

Processes and services differ across the UK and can change. Check current official information for your nation and local area.

A reminder to carry with you

I do not need everybody to agree with me before my child's experience matters.

I can describe what I see without exaggerating it.

I can listen to other perspectives without abandoning my own observations.

I can change my mind when new information appears.

I can set boundaries with people who repeatedly criticise.

I can stop explaining when the conversation is no longer useful.

Message from Maggie

One of the hardest things can be seeing your child struggling while somebody else tells you there is nothing wrong because they did not see it. You can start to feel as though you are constantly translating a language nobody else wants to learn. Keep hold of what you know, but keep curiosity beside it. Notice patterns. Listen to your child. Write things down. Ask questions. You do not have to turn every conversation into a battle, and you do not have to persuade every person who has an opinion. Sometimes supporting your child means explaining. Sometimes it means setting a boundary. And sometimes it means quietly knowing: I see you, even when they don't.

Space to Breathe Therapy