

AUTISM MUM SUPPORT

Being Judged for Your Child's Behaviour

When other people see a moment, but you know the needs, overload and history sitting underneath it.

A public meltdown, a child hiding under a table, headphones in a restaurant, leaving a party after twenty minutes, a safe food brought from home, a screen used to regulate, a child who cannot answer a stranger, or a sudden refusal in the supermarket can attract attention. Sometimes the hardest part is not the situation itself. It is feeling other people's eyes on you while you are trying to keep your child safe and regulated.

Judgement can come from strangers, relatives, other parents and professionals. It can be spoken directly or communicated through staring, sighing, unsolicited advice and the familiar suggestion that a child simply needs firmer discipline. Over time Mum can begin parenting for the audience: pushing a child further because leaving might look like 'giving in', removing an accommodation because somebody may disapprove, or apologising repeatedly for needs that are not wrong.

A snapshot is not the whole story

Other people usually see the visible moment. They may not see the poor night's sleep, unexpected timetable change, sensory build-up, hunger, communication effort, anxiety, pain, school day, masking or ten previous demands. They also do not see how much planning may have gone into getting there at all. This does not mean every behaviour is caused by autism, but it does mean that quick moral conclusions are rarely useful.

You have more context. Use that context to guide your response rather than allowing the reaction of an observer to become the most important thing in the room. Ask what your child needs now, what keeps people safe and what will reduce rather than increase overload.

Meltdown is not a parenting performance

During overload, your priority is safety and reducing demand, not demonstrating discipline to strangers. Long explanations, consequences, eye-contact demands or public lectures may increase distress. If leaving is the safest option, leaving is not automatically 'letting the child win'. It may simply be responding to capacity.

Once everybody is regulated, there can be space to understand what happened, repair any harm and consider what might help next time. The middle of a crisis is rarely the best moment to prove a parenting point.

What might be sitting underneath the visible behaviour?

Consider sensory overload, pain, illness, fatigue, hunger, communication breakdown, uncertainty, transition, fear, social demand, loss of predictability, executive-function overload, a demand that has exceeded current capacity, or accumulated stress from earlier in the day. Sometimes there will be several factors at once. Sometimes the cause will not be obvious.

The aim is not to find an autism explanation for every difficult moment. It is to replace instant judgement with curiosity. When adults understand the conditions around behaviour, they have more options than punishment alone.

Before you respond to the audience

Pause and ask: Is anybody unsafe? What is my child communicating? What demand can be reduced? Do we need to move somewhere quieter? Is an explanation to anybody else actually necessary? What would I do if nobody were watching?

THE PUBLIC MOMENT

Stares, comments and unsolicited advice

A stranger might say, 'I wouldn't let mine behave like that,' or somebody may tell you that the child is too old for headphones, a buggy, a comfort object or a particular coping strategy. You are not obliged to disclose a diagnosis or provide a detailed explanation. Your child's personal information is not the price of being allowed to use an accommodation.

Choose the smallest response that protects your energy. You might say: 'We're managing it, thank you.' 'They need some space.' 'This is what helps them.' Or you may say nothing at all. Silence is also a boundary.

You do not have to apologise for existing in public

There is a difference between repairing genuine impact and apologising for your child's presence. If somebody was accidentally bumped, belongings were damaged or another person was frightened, an appropriate acknowledgement may be useful. But repeatedly saying sorry because your child makes noise, moves differently, needs extra time or uses an accommodation can quietly teach both of you that difference is something shameful.

Try replacing automatic apology with information where appropriate: 'Thank you for waiting.' 'We need a little more space.' 'We'll be leaving shortly.' 'They communicate differently.' This keeps dignity intact while still recognising other people.

The supermarket test

Supermarkets combine lights, noise, smells, people, queues, decisions and unpredictable obstacles. If your child becomes distressed, the goal is not to complete the shopping at all costs. A shorter trip, headphones, a predictable list, online shopping, quieter hours, a snack, a visual plan or leaving before checkout may be sensible accommodations.

If somebody interprets that as poor parenting, they are seeing the adaptation without seeing the barrier it addresses. Success may mean buying three items and leaving regulated rather than completing a full trolley while everybody reaches crisis.

Restaurants, cafés and waiting rooms

These spaces can combine waiting, smells, unfamiliar sounds, social expectations and little control over timing. Bringing familiar food where permitted, choosing a quieter table, using a device, taking movement breaks, checking menus beforehand or waiting outside may make participation possible. An accommodation that looks unusual can be the reason your child is able to be there.

Quick responses you can keep ready

COMMENT	POSSIBLE RESPONSE
'They need discipline.'	'We're responding to what they need right now.'
'You're giving in.'	'We're reducing overload, not rewarding it.'
'Why are they wearing headphones?'	'They help with the environment.'
'They're too old for that.'	'It helps them access this safely.'
'They seem fine to me.'	'You are seeing one part of their day.'
'What's wrong with them?'	'They need some space, thank you.'

When you need to leave

Leaving early can feel like failure when you had hoped the outing would work. Try reframing the decision: you noticed capacity and acted before distress escalated further. Afterwards, note what helped and what made the environment harder. That information can shape the next attempt without turning the day into a verdict on your child or your parenting.

WHEN JUDGEMENT COMES FROM PEOPLE YOU LOVE

Family criticism can cut deeper

Comments from relatives can carry more weight because you want your child to be understood and accepted by the people closest to them. 'We never had all these diagnoses in my day.' 'They behave for me.' 'You're making allowances.' 'All children are like that.' Even when intended as reassurance, these comments can leave Mum feeling dismissed.

You can acknowledge intention without accepting the conclusion: 'I know you're trying to reassure me, but when you say all children do this, it makes it harder to explain the level of impact we're seeing.'

Set boundaries before the difficult event

If family gatherings repeatedly create problems, talk beforehand rather than trying to negotiate in the middle of overload. Explain what helps, what you will not force and what may mean you leave. For example: 'We may arrive later, he will bring his own food, nobody needs to persuade him to eat, and if the room becomes too much we will leave without making it a big issue.'

A clear plan protects your child and reduces the number of decisions you must make while everybody is already stressed. It can also give relatives something practical to do: keep one room quieter, avoid surprise physical contact, tell you before singing or candles, or allow your child to enter gradually.

Food judgement

Food can attract particularly strong opinions. An autistic child or a child with ARFID or significant sensory differences may have a very restricted range of foods. Pressure, bribery, hiding foods or removing safe foods can increase distress for some children. Feeding concerns deserve individual assessment rather than moral judgement.

You do not have to debate your child's plate at the table. A simple boundary might be: 'We are not discussing their food while they are eating.' If intake, growth, nutrition, swallowing or physical health is a concern, seek appropriate medical or dietetic support.

Screens and regulation

A screen can be entertainment, communication, predictability, focused interest, social connection or a way of reducing environmental demand. That does not mean all screen use is automatically beneficial or that limits are never appropriate. It means the function matters. Someone seeing a tablet in a café cannot know why it is being used.

Make decisions from your child's needs and your family's circumstances rather than from fear of how the table next to you interprets it. Review screen use as you would any support: what function does it serve, what happens without it, and is it helping participation or creating another difficulty?

Clothing, comfort objects and age expectations

People can become surprisingly invested in what a child 'should have grown out of'. Sensory-friendly clothing, a familiar toy, a hood, sunglasses or another comfort item may support regulation. Development is not a public performance. Where something is safe and genuinely helpful, age-based embarrassment from observers does not have to decide whether it is used.

Your child is listening too

Be cautious about defending your child in ways that accidentally describe them as a burden. If you repeatedly say, 'He can't help it,' 'She's impossible when she's tired,' or list difficulties in front of them, the defence can still become painful. When possible, move adult conversations away from the child and use respectful, specific language.

A family boundary you can adapt

'You do not have to understand every decision we make, but I need you not to criticise our child or our parenting in front of them. If you are worried about something, speak to me privately. During visits we will use the supports that help them participate safely.'

WHEN JUDGEMENT GETS INSIDE YOUR HEAD

Parenting for the audience

After enough criticism, you may start imagining judgement before it happens. You may feel watched in shops, cafés, school gates and family gatherings. This can change your decisions: staying too long, demanding speech, refusing an accommodation or correcting harmless behaviour simply so other people can see that you are 'doing something'.

Ask: **If nobody else were watching, what would I believe my child needs right now?** That question can bring your attention back from the audience to the child.

Shame after a difficult incident

Once you are home, you may replay the faces, comments and your own response. Your nervous system may still be activated long after the event. Separate the incident into three parts: what your child experienced, what you did, and what other people thought. Only the first two are useful for learning.

If you wish you had handled something differently, identify one specific change. Avoid turning a difficult ten minutes into a global conclusion about your parenting. 'Next time I will leave earlier' is actionable. 'I cannot take my child anywhere' is an exhausted conclusion, not necessarily a fact.

When you do need to repair

Understanding autism does not mean ignoring harm. If your child hit somebody, broke something or used hurtful language, safety and repair still matter. The response should take account of developmental level, communication and regulation. Repair may involve an apology, replacing an item, checking another person is okay, changing an environment or teaching a safer way to communicate.

The aim is accountability without shame. A child can be supported to understand impact without being labelled bad. Likewise, Mum can acknowledge a parenting response she regrets without deciding that one response defines her.

The difference between accommodation and avoidance

This question often sits underneath judgement. Accommodation changes a barrier so a person can participate more safely or sustainably. Avoidance may reduce short-term distress but can sometimes narrow life when fear is the main driver. In real families the distinction is not always simple. Consider the child's current capacity, why the situation matters, what support is available and whether demands can be built gradually without repeatedly overwhelming them.

There is no universal rule that says pushing through is brave or leaving is avoidance. The useful question is what the child is learning from the experience and what the cost is.

A judgement reset

What happened before the behaviour? _____

What need or overload may have been present? _____

What did I do that helped? _____

Is there anything I would change next time? _____

What part of my distress came from other people's reactions? _____

What would I have done if nobody had been watching? _____

Build confidence from evidence

Confidence does not require believing every decision you make is perfect. It grows from observing your child, noticing what helps, reviewing what does not, listening to their communication and being willing to adjust. You can be confident and still ask for advice. You can set a boundary and still reconsider it later.

Notice what went right

After a difficult outing, deliberately record one thing that worked: you noticed an early sign, your child used a communication strategy, you found a quiet space, a sibling coped with the backup plan, or you recovered more quickly afterwards. Without this, the brain can store only the crisis and miss evidence that your family's skills are growing.

STAYING GROUNDED IN WHAT YOUR CHILD NEEDS

Accommodations are not a competition

There is no prize for making an autistic child appear less autistic in public. The goal is access, wellbeing, communication, learning, relationships and increasing autonomy in ways that are sustainable. Sometimes support can gradually change as skills, confidence or environments change. Sometimes an accommodation remains useful long term.

Judge it by function: Does it reduce an unnecessary barrier? Does it help the child participate? Does it improve safety or communication? Is there a less restrictive way to achieve the same goal? These questions are more useful than whether somebody else thinks it looks unusual.

Teach your child that difference is not shameful

Where appropriate to their age and communication, explain why you use supports: 'The headphones help when sound hurts.' 'We leave early because your body is telling us it has had enough.' This helps accommodations become tools rather than evidence that something is wrong with them.

Also help children understand other people's boundaries. Neurodiversity-affirming support does not mean one person's needs always override everybody else's. Families can hold both accommodation and mutual respect.

Prepare without expecting disaster

Planning can increase confidence: know where exits and quieter areas are, carry useful sensory or communication supports, consider food and waiting time, tell your child what is likely to happen and have a backup plan. The purpose is not to predict every possible crisis. It is to reduce the number of decisions you must make under pressure.

Afterwards, review the environment rather than only your child's behaviour. Was it louder than expected? Was the wait too long? Did hunger matter? Was there enough recovery before the next activity? Environmental information can be more useful than deciding your child simply 'couldn't cope'.

UK support starting points

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

Contact: support and information for families with disabled children.

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

SENDIASS: local information and advice around SEND in England where school-related misunderstanding is part of the difficulty.

Your GP or appropriate clinician: if behaviour has changed suddenly, there may be pain, illness, sleep or other health factors worth exploring.

Services, eligibility and processes vary across the UK and can change. Check current information directly with the relevant organisation or service.

Words to carry into the next difficult moment

I do not have to parent for strangers.

I can focus on safety before appearances.
I can use accommodations without apologising for them.
I can repair genuine harm without shaming my child.
I can leave an environment that has become too much.
I can answer a comment briefly or not at all.
I can trust what I know and still remain open to learning.

Message from Maggie

People can make a judgement in seconds about a situation you have been living for years. They see the headphones, the screen, the child on the floor, the food brought from home or the parent leaving early. They do not see everything that came before it, everything you tried, or the recovery that may come afterwards. I want you to remember that you do not have to turn your child's hardest moments into a public demonstration of good parenting.

Keep them safe. Reduce what is overwhelming them. Repair what genuinely needs repairing. Learn from what happened. Keep listening to your child and to yourself. But do not carry every stranger's expression home with you or allow it to become another voice telling you that you are failing. Their snapshot is not your whole story, and it is not your child's whole story either.

