

# AUTISM MUM SUPPORT

## When Your Child Only Wants Mum

**When you are your child's safest person, being needed can feel deeply loving and completely exhausting at the same time.**

Some autistic children become strongly reliant on one parent, very often Mum, for regulation, comfort, food, bedtime, appointments, communication, transitions and recovery after distress. Mum may be the person who can interpret a tiny change in expression, knows exactly how a safe food must look, understands which words will make things worse and can sense overload before anybody else notices.

This closeness is not automatically a problem. Familiarity and trust are powerful forms of safety. Difficulty arises when Mum becomes the only person who can do almost everything, the child becomes distressed whenever she is unavailable, and Mum cannot rest, work, attend appointments or spend time with anybody else without the family system struggling.

### Why Mum?

Your child may associate you with predictability. You may use fewer words, recognise sensory distress earlier, understand their communication, avoid unnecessary demands or know how to repair a difficult moment. If other adults respond differently, your child may reasonably prefer the person whose response feels safest.

Anxiety, separation difficulty, previous distress with other carers, communication differences and a need for sameness can strengthen this preference. Sometimes the pattern is also practical: Mum has simply done the task hundreds more times than anybody else.

### Being the safe person can become a trap

The more distressed your child becomes with somebody else, the more likely you are to step in. The more you step in, the fewer opportunities the other person has to learn. Eventually everybody concludes, 'Only Mum can do it.' This cycle can develop without anybody choosing it.

Breaking the cycle does not mean withdrawing Mum suddenly. It means creating supported opportunities for another trusted person to become safe too.

### Notice exactly what Mum does

Instead of saying, 'They only settle for me,' look closely at what you actually do. Do you lower your voice? Stop asking questions? Dim lights? Sit nearby without touching? Offer the same phrase? Wait longer? Bring a particular object? Give information in a certain order? These details can be taught.

### What Mum does that helps

**When my child starts becoming overwhelmed, I notice:** \_\_\_\_\_

**The words or tone I use:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Things I deliberately do not do:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Sensory supports that help:** \_\_\_\_\_

**How I know they are beginning to recover:** \_\_\_\_\_

# WIDENING THE CIRCLE OF SAFETY

## Relationship first, responsibility second

If another adult only appears when Mum leaves, they may become associated with separation and demand. Build positive contact while Mum is still present. The other person can join a preferred activity, share an interest, sit alongside without pressure, or become responsible for something enjoyable before attempting bedtime or a difficult transition.

The aim is for the child to develop their own relationship with that person, not for the person to imitate Mum perfectly.

## Start below the child's panic point

A first step might be Mum staying in the room while another adult makes the snack. Next time Mum sits farther away. Later she goes into another room briefly. Progress can be much smaller than people expect.

If every attempt ends in extreme distress, the step may be too large. Reduce it rather than assuming the child is manipulative or the other adult is incapable.

## When your child rejects Dad, a partner or grandparent

Rejection can feel personal. The other adult may think, 'They don't love me,' while Mum feels guilty for being preferred. Try to frame the behaviour as information about safety, familiarity and expectation rather than a verdict on the relationship.

Avoid making the child responsible for the adult's feelings. 'Daddy is sad because you won't let him help' can add emotional pressure. Instead, let the adult build connection through consistency and shared experiences.

## Do not turn the handover into a debate

Long persuasion can make a transition feel increasingly dangerous. Use clear, predictable language: 'Mum is having a shower. Dad is staying with you. Mum will come back after the timer.' Then keep the promise wherever possible.

Visual schedules, timers, photographs, transition objects and a clear return point may help some children understand what is happening.

## A gradual handover ladder

| STEP                  | EXAMPLE                                                   |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Together           | Mum and trusted adult both join a familiar activity       |
| 2. Adult leads        | Trusted adult takes one small role while Mum stays nearby |
| 3. Mum steps back     | Mum remains visible but does not manage the activity      |
| 4. Brief absence      | Mum leaves for a predictable few minutes and returns      |
| 5. Extend slowly      | Increase time only when the earlier step is manageable    |
| 6. Different routines | Trusted adult gradually learns other parts of the day     |

## Different can still be safe

Another adult may sing a different bedtime song, cut toast differently or use another route. If the difference is manageable, allowing it can help your child learn that safety does not require every person to behave exactly like Mum. Keep essential accommodations consistent while allowing harmless personal differences.

# WHEN MUM NEEDS SPACE

## Needing a break is not rejection

Being constantly required can create a complicated mix of love, tenderness, irritation, guilt and exhaustion. You may adore the closeness and simultaneously crave an hour in which nobody touches you, calls your name or needs you to interpret something.

Those feelings can coexist. Wanting another trusted person to help is not an attempt to weaken your bond. It is an attempt to make the family safer and more sustainable.

## When you cannot even go to the bathroom alone

For some mums, the dependence reaches every part of the day. Your child follows you from room to room, waits outside the bathroom, cannot sleep without you or becomes distressed when you speak to somebody else. Before treating this as behaviour to stop, consider what the child believes will happen when you are unavailable.

Build predictability around tiny separations. Use the same words, a visible timer or a familiar activity. Return when you said you would. Repetition can teach that absence has an ending.

## The guilt of hearing your child cry for you

It can be extremely difficult to remain away while your child is distressed with another safe adult. There is no rule that says you must ignore escalating distress to prove a point. Equally, returning instantly at the first sign of protest may make it difficult for a new relationship to develop.

Use judgement. Is your child protesting a change while still able to engage with the other adult, or are they moving into overwhelming panic? Supported separation should not become repeated flooding.

## Protect some parts of Mum's life

If possible, begin with one predictable protected period: a shower, walk, appointment, exercise class, coffee or half-hour behind a closed door. Predictability can help the child and Mum. It is often easier to understand 'Mum goes out every Saturday morning and comes back before lunch' than unpredictable requests for space.

Where there is no second parent, consider whether a relative, trusted friend, support worker, activity or carers service could gradually become part of the support circle.

## Mum's capacity check

The time of day I feel most depleted: \_\_\_\_\_

The task I most need somebody else to learn: \_\_\_\_\_

A small period of protected time I need: \_\_\_\_\_

Who might realistically build this relationship? \_\_\_\_\_

What would make the first step feel safer for my child? \_\_\_\_\_

## Do not wait until burnout

If support is introduced only when Mum has reached crisis, everybody is learning under pressure. Where possible, widen support while things are relatively stable. A child learning that another person can help is a protective skill for ordinary life as well as emergencies.

If Mum's physical or emotional health is deteriorating, seek support rather than treating complete availability as the price of being a good parent.

# WHEN THE PATTERN IS MORE COMPLEX

## School may say, 'They are fine without you'

A child coping at school does not prove they should cope equally at home without Mum. They may be masking, using substantial energy, following a highly structured routine or releasing distress only when they reach their safest person. Compare environments before drawing conclusions.

At the same time, evidence that your child can build trust with a teacher or support assistant can be encouraging. Ask what that person does that works and whether any of those conditions can transfer.

## Demand avoidance and control

For some autistic children, loss of control or uncertainty can sharply increase anxiety. Another adult taking over may feel like a major loss of predictability. Offering meaningful choices, reducing unnecessary demands and explaining what remains under the child's control can help.

Avoid turning every handover into a compliance test. The goal is not to prove that the child will obey somebody else. It is to build another safe relationship.

## Communication differences

A child may prefer Mum because she understands communication that others miss. If speech becomes less available during distress, create ways for other adults to recognise and respond to gestures, AAC, signs, scripts, behaviour or silence. Record what common signals mean without assuming every behaviour always has one fixed meaning.

## Health, pain and sudden increases in dependence

If a child who previously separated comfortably suddenly becomes extremely clingy or distressed, consider what has changed. Pain, illness, sleep disruption, bullying, school stress, bereavement, frightening experiences, medication changes or other difficulties can increase the need for safety.

A sudden or marked change deserves curiosity and, where appropriate, medical or professional assessment rather than simply increasing separation practice.

## When safety is involved

Some children have significant risks around wandering, self-injury, seizures, eating, medication or communication. In these situations, another adult may need specific training before Mum can step away. Widening support should never mean handing responsibility to somebody who does not understand essential safety needs.

## Support-circle map

People my child already accepts: \_\_\_\_\_

People they enjoy but do not yet accept care from: \_\_\_\_\_

One person who could learn more: \_\_\_\_\_

One enjoyable activity they could share: \_\_\_\_\_

One essential safety skill that adult needs: \_\_\_\_\_

Our smallest realistic next step: \_\_\_\_\_

## Progress may not be linear

Illness, school stress, developmental changes or a difficult experience may temporarily increase reliance on Mum again. This does not erase previous progress. Return to an earlier successful step and rebuild from there.

# MUM CAN STAY THE SAFE PERSON WITHOUT BEING THE ONLY PERSON

## A wider circle protects the relationship

When Mum is the only person who can help, every need lands on the same relationship. Widening support can create more room for Mum and child to enjoy each other rather than every interaction becoming regulation, administration or crisis management.

Your child does not need to replace you. They need additional safe people, at a pace they can manage.

## UK support starting points

**National Autistic Society:** autism information and family resources.

**Contact:** support and information for families with disabled children.

**Carers UK/local carers services:** information and support for unpaid carers, including carers assessments.

**Local authority children's services:** information about assessments, short breaks or support that may be available locally.

**SENDIASS:** education-related SEND information and advice in England.

**Your GP or relevant clinician:** if dependence has increased suddenly or anxiety, sleep, pain, eating or health concerns may be contributing.

Availability, eligibility and service arrangements vary across the UK and change over time. Check current information directly with the relevant organisation or local authority.

## This week's tiny step

The person we are building safety with: \_\_\_\_\_

The activity they will share with my child: \_\_\_\_\_

What I will tell them about how my child communicates: \_\_\_\_\_

How long I will step back: \_\_\_\_\_

How my child will know I am coming back: \_\_\_\_\_

What would count as enough progress for now: \_\_\_\_\_

## Message from Maggie

Being the person your child wants can feel like the greatest sign of trust, and sometimes it can feel like you cannot move. Both can be true. You can treasure being their safe person and still need somebody else to be able to make the toast, sit beside them when they are upset, take them somewhere or stay with them while you rest.

I would not start by taking Mum away. I would start by looking at what Mum knows. What does she notice? What does she say? What does she never say? How does she change the room, the demand, the food, the timing or her voice? Those things are part of the safety your child recognises, and some of that knowledge can be shared.

Then let another person build their own connection slowly. Not as a replacement Mum. Not by forcing your child to cope. Just another person who becomes predictable, familiar and safe. Your bond does not become smaller because your child's circle becomes bigger. It gives both of you more room to breathe.

Space to Breathe Therapy