When You Feel You're Not Doing Enough

Managing expectations, emotional exhaustion and finding balance

The invisible work you carry

Supporting an autistic child often involves work nobody sees: anticipating sensory demands, preparing for transitions, arranging appointments, explaining needs to professionals, checking school communications, advocating for adjustments and helping your child recover after difficult days. Much of this work happens before anyone else notices a problem. When you measure yourself only by what remains unfinished, you overlook the enormous amount you are already doing.

Why “I should be doing more” can become relentless

There may always be another form to complete, strategy to research, meeting to request or activity you think you should provide. Social media, conflicting professional advice and comparisons with other families can turn care into an impossible checklist. Your child does not need every intervention at once. Support is most useful when it fits their needs, capacity, preferences and the family’s actual resources.

Separate responsibility from control

You can offer predictability, safety, advocacy, connection and opportunities for your child to communicate. You cannot control every sensory trigger, school decision, distressing interaction or difficult day. A meltdown, shutdown, missed appointment or unsuccessful strategy is not evidence that you have failed. Ask: “What was within my control today, and what was not?” This helps place responsibility where it belongs.

Notice the cost of constant vigilance

Being alert to potential difficulties all day can leave little room for rest. You may find yourself replaying conversations, anticipating tomorrow’s challenges or feeling unable to switch off when your child is settled. This is a sign to examine the demands on you, not a reason to criticise yourself. Rest, practical help and time without decisions are legitimate needs, not rewards for finishing everything.

The pressure to get every decision right

Parents are often asked to make choices with incomplete information: whether to pursue an assessment, challenge a school plan, change a routine or seek additional support. Instead of asking “What is the perfect decision?”, ask “What is the most informed, compassionate and workable next step with what we know today?” Decisions can be reviewed. Changing course after learning more is thoughtful parenting.

Your child is more than a list of needs

When life becomes centred on difficulties, it is easy to spend every conversation discussing problems to solve. Make room for your child’s interests, humour, preferences and ways of connecting. Notice what helps them feel comfortable and understood. A calm shared moment, respecting a boundary or enjoying an interest together can matter just as much as completing a task or practising a skill.

What to do when guilt spikes

Pause before responding to the thought “I am not doing enough.” Name what triggered it: a comment, a school message, a hard morning or comparing your family with someone else’s. Then identify one fact that challenges the thought. Try: “Today was difficult, and I still helped my child feel safe,” or “I cannot solve this tonight; I can choose one step tomorrow.” Aim for accuracy rather than forced positivity.

A realistic three-part priority check

Divide demands into three groups. FIRST: what is urgent for safety, health or essential daily care? NEXT: what would meaningfully improve your child’s access, comfort or support this week? LATER: what can wait, be delegated or be left undone? Revisit the list when circumstances change. A short, achievable plan is often more supportive than an ambitious plan that leaves everyone exhausted.

Practical steps towards a more sustainable balance

Advocating without carrying everything alone

Keep a concise record of concerns, what has been tried and the adjustment you are requesting. Ask schools and services to explain decisions in writing, identify who is responsible for each action and agree a review date. Where possible, bring a trusted person to meetings or ask for notes afterwards. Advocacy is important, but professionals and services retain responsibility for delivering the support they are required to provide.

A gentler way to measure progress

Instead of asking “Did I do enough?”, consider: “Did my child have moments of safety or connection? Did I notice and respond to a need? Did I protect any capacity for tomorrow? What support should not be mine to provide alone?” Progress may look like a shorter recovery after a difficult day, a clearer request to school or a parent taking a needed break. Small changes count.

Repair matters more than perfection

Every parent sometimes becomes frustrated, misreads a need or reacts in a way they wish they had handled differently. When things are calmer, acknowledge what happened in an age-appropriate way: “I was overwhelmed and raised my voice. I’m sorry. I’m working on taking a pause.” You can offer repair without asking your child to comfort you. Reconnection teaches that relationships can be safe even when moments are difficult.

When extra support would help

If guilt, anxiety or exhaustion are persistent, interfere with sleep or leave you feeling unable to cope, consider speaking with your GP, a therapist or a trusted professional. You can also ask local parent-carer networks about practical and advocacy support. If you are worried about immediate safety, seek urgent local help. Asking for support is not a failure of commitment; it is part of sustaining care.

Protecting your own capacity

Look for practical ways to lower the load: repeat simple meals, reduce optional commitments, prepare one transition at a time, use visual reminders if they help, and ask others to take ownership of specific tasks rather than offering vague help. If you have a partner or wider support network, share the planning and follow-through, not just the final jobs. Your needs deserve attention alongside your child’s.

A reflection to take away

Write down three things you have already done for your child this week, including the unseen work. Name one expectation you are willing to loosen and one task someone else could share. Finally, choose a sentence to return to when guilt rises: “My child needs support, not a perfect mum.” You can care deeply and still have limits. Both can be true.