Being Judged for Your Child's Behaviour

AUTISM MUM SUPPORT | Understanding judgement, protecting your child and caring for yourself

When other people only see the behaviour

A child who shouts in a supermarket, runs away from a queue, refuses to enter a classroom or becomes overwhelmed at a family gathering may attract staring, criticism or unsolicited advice. People often see a brief moment without knowing what happened before it: noise, uncertainty, painful sensory input, exhaustion, communication difficulty or a build-up of demands. The same behaviour can have very different meanings for different children. A parent may be working hard to recognise distress and keep everyone safe while a stranger assumes they are not setting boundaries.

Being judged can feel particularly painful because you may already be managing appointments, school conversations, sleep difficulties and the emotional work of anticipating your child's needs. A remark such as "They just need discipline" can leave you questioning yourself long after the moment has passed. It is understandable to feel angry, embarrassed, exposed or depleted. Those feelings do not make you less committed to your child.

Behaviour is information, not the whole story

Autistic children are not all alike. Some become visibly distressed, while others withdraw, freeze, mask their discomfort or become very quiet. Meltdowns are not simply deliberate misbehaviour; they can happen when the demands on a child exceed their capacity to cope. Equally, not every difficult moment is a meltdown. Curiosity about the individual child, the environment and their communication gives a more useful starting point than assumptions.

You might notice patterns: busy lighting, an unexpected change, hunger, a delayed journey, confusing instructions or the effort of coping all day. Where possible, use this knowledge to adjust expectations and prepare supports. This is not about removing every boundary. It is about making boundaries understandable, achievable and responsive to the child's developmental and sensory needs.

You do not owe strangers an explanation

Your child's diagnosis and personal information belong to your family. You may choose to explain, but you do not have to justify yourself to every onlooker. A brief sentence such as "My child is overwhelmed; we need some space" can be enough. Sometimes the most protective response is to say nothing, move somewhere quieter and focus on what your child needs. Safety and connection matter more than convincing an audience.

If your child can hear comments, remember that they may absorb the message that they are "bad" or a burden. A calm reassurance later—"That was a hard moment, and I am here to help"—can separate the child's worth from what happened.

Responding in the Moment

First, support regulation and safety

When a situation escalates, reduce the number of demands if you can. Use fewer words, a calm tone and physical space. Check immediate risks such as roads, exits or unsafe objects, and move to a safer place where practical. Offer familiar sensory supports or a quiet break if these help your child. Do not insist on eye contact, explanations or apologies while they are overwhelmed. Reflection and repair can happen later, when both of you have capacity.

Simple responses to criticism

To a stranger: “We are handling this. Please give us space.” Or, “My child needs support right now, not comments.” These are complete responses. You can also walk away.

To a relative: “I know it may look different from what you expect. We are responding to what helps our child feel safe. Please avoid discussing their behaviour in front of them.” If the person wants to learn, offer to talk at another time.

To school or another professional: “Can we look at what happened before, during and after the incident, and what adjustments might prevent it?” Ask for specific observations rather than labels such as “attention-seeking” or “naughty”.

When the judgement comes from people close to you

Comments from family and friends may hurt more than those from strangers because you hope these people will understand. Some may hold outdated beliefs about autism or interpret accommodations as “giving in”. You can be clear without entering an argument: “We are using an approach that fits our child’s needs. I need you to respect that.” Where criticism continues, it is reasonable to shorten visits, choose quieter meeting places or set boundaries around conversations.

If a relative genuinely wants to help, give them a practical role: offer a quiet room, allow a flexible arrival time, avoid commenting on food or eye contact, or follow the child’s preferred way of communicating. Specific actions are often more useful than a long explanation of autism.

Afterwards: repair rather than replay

Once the immediate situation has passed, check in with your child in a way they can access: spoken words, pictures, writing, AAC or simply calm company. You could say, “That place was too much today. What might make next time easier?” Do not force a conversation if they are still recovering. Later, consider whether there was a trigger you can plan for, or whether the setting needs to make an adjustment.

Give yourself the same permission to recover. A drink of water, ten quiet minutes, a supportive message to someone who understands or a change of plans can help. You do not need to turn every difficult outing into a lesson or prove that you managed it perfectly.

Protecting Your Confidence and Your Child

The emotional cost of being watched

Repeated judgement can make parents avoid shops, parties, transport or community activities. You may start rehearsing what others might say before you even leave home. This vigilance is exhausting and can gradually shrink family life. If this is happening, it may help to identify one setting that feels more manageable and rebuild confidence in small steps. Choose quieter times, plan an exit route, bring a trusted person or contact a venue about reasonable adjustments. Your family deserves access to ordinary life without having to earn it through perfect behaviour.

Help your child build a positive understanding of themselves

Children notice how adults speak about them. Describe their experiences without shame: “Crowded places can be painful for you,” rather than “You always cause a scene.” Notice their strengths and preferences as well as the things they find difficult. When they are ready, help them identify what support they want others to know about. An older child may prefer to explain their own needs; another may want you to speak on their behalf. Respect their privacy and choices wherever possible.

Practical ways to make outings more manageable

Before: Explain what is likely to happen, including changes and waiting. Consider visual information, headphones, familiar items, food, rest and a flexible plan. Ask your child what has helped before.

During: Look for early signs of overload and offer breaks before distress becomes intense. Share a simple signal for “I need to leave”. If an outing must end early, that is useful information, not a failed parenting test.

After: Notice what worked, not just what went wrong. Keep expectations realistic: sometimes success means entering for five minutes, asking for a break or recognising that today was not the right day.

A small reflection for mum

Think of one recent moment when you felt judged. What was your child communicating or struggling with? What did you do that was caring or protective? What could another adult or the environment have done to help? Finally, what would you say to a friend who had experienced the same thing? Try offering yourself that same kindness.

When to seek additional support

If your child’s distress is frequent, increasing or creating safety concerns, discuss patterns and possible supports with appropriate professionals, such as their GP, school SENCO or a clinician familiar with autism. If fear of judgement is affecting your wellbeing or keeping the family isolated, speaking with a trusted professional or supportive parent community may also help. You do not have to carry the emotional impact alone.

Your child does not need to appear comfortable to deserve compassion, and you do not need to look like everyone else’s idea of a parent to be doing meaningful, attentive work.