

Early Years, Under 6

Autism Support Recommendations

Support for Early Years Children and Their Families. Aimed at Children Under 6 Years Old.

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We have included lots of information in this leaflet, covering many areas, so you can revisit as needed and your child's needs develop.

You don't need to read it all at once but can refer to this booklet or sections of it, now and in the future.



SECTION 1

Where to begin

Finding out your child is autistic can be a life-changing moment for many parents/carers. Remember: all autistic children are different, with different strengths and needs. Some will need additional support, some will need little or no support. Your child's needs are likely to change over time.

You may have a lot of questions, concerns and emotions. It's important to remember that you are not alone in this journey, and there are resources and support available to you and your child.

- National Autistic Society (NAS) is a charitable organisation which provides help, support and services to autistic people and their families. <http://www.autism.org.uk/>
- Autism Central aims to make it easier to learn more about autism and services available to you. <https://www.autismcentral.org.uk/>
- Ambitious About Autism are a national charity providing services, raising awareness and understanding and campaigning for change. The charity has developed the Right from the Start toolkit which contains a wealth of straightforward information and practical tips to guide parents and carers through their child's journey in the early years. It also provides signposting to sources of support or additional information. You can download the toolkit for free by visiting: <https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/information-about-autism/early-years/parent-toolkit>

We also recommend the following videos made available by an NHS Trust in Leeds:

<https://www.leedscommunityhealthcare.nhs.uk/our-services-a-z/complex-communication-and-autism-ican/>

The toolkit of video links is designed for families of children with complex communication needs or autism. Each video lasts between 20 minutes and 40 minutes and covers topics such as:

- "Understanding complex communication and autism"
- "Developing communication - Interacting"
- "Developing communication - use of visuals to support communication/interaction"
- "Developing communication - Expression"
- "Supporting your child with daily activities and sensory challenges"
- "Supporting your child with behaviours that challenge"
- "Supporting your child with feeding, sleep and toileting"
- "Social and financial support for you and your family"

Talking to your child about Autism

As parent carers, you are best placed to judge how and whether these conversations are right for your child in the future. When appropriate, it's important for children to know that they're autistic because it helps them understand who they are, particularly in relation to their peers. They need to know they are not alone; they are part of a larger diverse autistic community. However, there is no "best" time to start talking to your child. Be guided by when you feel ready and when your child is starting to ask questions.

You may also notice other signs that your child is ready to learn more, such as negative self talk, comparing themselves to others and asking questions like, 'Why am I different?' You can find out more about negative self talk here: <https://www.todayparent.com/family/parenting/how-to-build-your-childs-self-esteem/>

Here are some suggestions on how to explain to your child about their differences and some things to keep in mind moving forward:

- **Talk positively about differences generally first.** Discuss family members' unique traits - their likes, dislikes, strengths and challenges they face. Read books that celebrate differences such as 'The Same but Different' by Molly Potter and more general books that celebrate difference such as 'Giraffes Can't Dance' by Giles Andreae and Guy Parker-Rees or 'Simon Sock' by Sue Hendra and Paul Linnet.
- **Explain differences in a factual manner** when the child has a basic grasp of simple examples of difference. Statements such as "Mummy has glasses and Daddy does not have glasses" or "Bobby likes to play ball and you like to read books" are examples.
- **Talk about the idea of 'neurodiversity'** - that there are many different types of brains in the world, that are often wired differently and this can affect the way different people experience the world. Using visuals can help, such as the "Amazing Things Happen" film example in the resources section below.
- **Explain how differences in brain types** means that some people can find certain skills and activities easier, whereas others can find the same tasks more challenging. They may have noticed that certain activities are more difficult or easier for them than for other children, or that they like to do things in a different way, and that's okay. Let them know that there are ways to make things easier.
- **Give examples of their strengths**, for example; they may be great at building with Lego, playing a musical instrument, or taking objects apart and putting them back together. Discuss their passions and special interests, which may be different from other children of their age, and that differences are to be celebrated.
- **Look at the bigger picture** - how having different brains and skills in the world has been helpful in making progress for society as a whole, such as understanding how the world works and the invention of new things, such as computers, films, toys and art.
- **Avoid telling your child everything at once:** give small amounts of information and allow them to come back and ask questions at a later stage.

Keeping the conversation going

As your child gets older, keep the conversation going and encourage your child to learn more about their diagnosis as they develop the skills to be able to do this. Watch some videos from autistic individuals, encourage your child to be themselves and give them the choice of if they want to tell their friends.

We also recommend the following resources to support conversations about Autism:

- Leo and the Octopus by Isabelle Marinov and Chris Nixon.
- Through the Eyes of Me by Jon Roberts
- The Superhero Brain: Explaining Autism to Empower Kids by Christel Land
- My Awesome Autism: Helping Children Learn About Their Autism Diagnosis by Nikki Saunders
- Just Right for You by Melanie Heyworth
- Remarkable Remy by Melanie Heyworth and Nathaniel Eckstrom
- A Day With No Words by Tiffany Hammond - this shares what life can look like for families who communicate in a nonverbal way, utilising tools (like tablets) to embrace their unique method of communicating.
- The Brain Forest by Sandhya Menon
- This video from NAS (National Autistic Society) website: [Amazing Things Happen](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbwRrVw-CRo) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbwRrVw-CRo> is a recommended resource for autistic children themselves, other children around them, and friends and family. It is a short animated video which provides an uplifting introduction to Autism. The video explains how every brain works and processes things differently and encourages embracing difference.
- The Curly Hair Project website offers alternative ways to explore Autism along with some helpful tips: <https://thegirlwiththecurlyhair.co.uk/>
- 'Neurowild' Emma Hammond on Instagram and Facebook.

Sleep

Autistic children can often have trouble sleeping. There are a range of reasons for this including differences with relaxing or winding down, transition between day and nighttime routines and differences in melatonin levels. Advice on sleep can be found at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sonl2vTxoCg>

<https://cerebra.org.uk/get-advice-support/sleep-advice-service/>

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/physical-health/sleep>

<https://www.scope.org.uk/family-services/sleep-right>

The Scope website also offers further support through their 'Sleep Right' programme.

Siblings, feeding and toileting

Support for Siblings

Siblings will also benefit from jointly exploring and understanding autism. Having an autistic sibling can be a positive experience as they can share their unique qualities and outlook on life. Below are some links for further information, including recommended books:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/family-life-and-relationships/family-life/siblings>

<https://www.sibs.org.uk/supporting-young-siblings/parents/>

Feeding and Eating

An autistic child might be avoiding and/or restricting their food for a number of different reasons. The most common is that they might be very sensitive to the taste, texture, smell, or appearance of certain types of food, or only able to eat foods at a certain temperature. This can lead to sensory-based avoidance or restriction of intake.

Common challenges with eating amongst autistic children may include the following:

- Only eating a limited range of foods
- Refusing new foods/textures
- Not being able to eat outside the home
- Going long periods of time without eating
- Under/over eating
- Not interested in/able to feed themselves
- Subtypes of ARFID (Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder)
- Pica (eating non foods)

Advice on understanding and how to support can be found at: 'Supporting your child with feeding'

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jn5ezTXF_Z4

More information regarding ARFID and ARFID type presentations can be found here:

<https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/get-information-and-support/about-eating-disorders/types/arfid/>

Toileting

Some autistic children may find language and communication around toileting confusing and not know when or how to communicate when they need to go. Others may have sensory differences, which mean they do not recognise the signs they need to use the toilet, or they find the sounds and smells in the bathroom overwhelming.

Advice on toilet training can be found at: <https://www.autismcentral.org.uk/guidance/toileting> and

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8DoX5I9IPQ>

Communication and Interaction

One of the main areas of difference in autism is 'social communication and social interaction'. Differences will vary greatly, so you will most likely have individualised recommendations on your child's assessment report or from a Speech and Language Therapist if your child has seen one.

Not all autistic children will need speech and language therapy. If you would like your child assessed you can normally refer directly to your local NHS Speech and Language Therapy department.

This is a helpful video explaining the importance of recognising behaviour as a form of communication. Understanding the link between communication and behaviour: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASMQwVETDCY> (taken from NHS ELFT Specialist Children and Young People's Services in Newham)

Connecting with your child is key to their overall well-being, their relationships with others and their development. There are a number of ways adults can approach this, including physically getting down to their level, following their interests, avoiding placing demands or asking questions, and responding to them at their level.

Intensive interaction is a well known approach which encourages connection, mutual interest and respect. It can support positive relationships and is therefore helpful for all key adults in your child's life, both at home and at nursery. The approach can be used throughout everyday life, taking opportunities any time of day. Here is a video from NHS ELFT Specialist Children and Young People's Services in Newham: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pt1byvYHEa4>. There is also the Intensive Interaction website which is <https://www.intensiveinteraction.org>

Another way to connect with your child is to focus on their interests. For some children, this will mean watching them play and working out what they enjoy about an object or activity. Do they enjoy watching items as they fall after throwing them? Do they enjoy the sound the object makes when it hits the ground? Or is it the feel of the slime between their fingers? Considering this might help you to think of different ways of playing that will be interesting to your child. Remember there is no such thing as the 'right' way to play, children are learning however they play!

Your child might have a favourite toy or topic, or a special interest. Showing an interest and encouraging this, whatever it is, shows you respect them. This will support a positive relationship, as well as providing opportunities for learning and developing a range of skills within their interests.

Bilingualism

Some facts:

- Multilingualism is the global norm, it is a cognitive advantage and connects to identity and culture.
- Research shows that these same benefits apply to autistic children. Exposing your child to more than one language will not confuse your child.
- Codeswitching (or language mixing) is when a person uses two different languages at the same time, this may be different for different sentences, or may be within the same sentence. This is normal, and does not indicate confusion or an impairment.
- It may take up to 7 years to develop proficiency in their second language (language spoken outside the home such as English which is spoken at school)-please be patient.
- Research shows that children who have a strong foundation in their home language more easily learn a second language. Parents therefore do not need to worry if their child is starting school without strong skills in English.
- Bilingual children are at risk of losing the home language if it is not continually used at home.

The best way to help your child learn language is to use whichever language, or languages, you feel most comfortable using (don't worry if this is not English). Your child will have opportunities to learn English in school or nursery. Singing songs and looking at books using your home language can be really helpful.

Further information on helping your child learn more than one language can be found at: Watch video <https://youtu.be/oPctNHggQJI> taken from <https://autism-bilingualism.com/families/> and <https://literacytrust.org.uk/early-years/bilingual-quick-tips>



Emotional Regulation

Your child will benefit from support with his/her emotional awareness. This may include reading books about different emotions, and explicitly making reference to the emotions of others (for example, of characters on TV, or in books).

Parents/carers are encouraged to comment on how their child is feeling there and then; "I can see you're upset...happy....angry", and perhaps show the matching picture as a visual symbol of the emotion, to further support children to understand and communicate their emotions.

The Incredible 5 Point Scale is a resource aimed at teaching self-regulation and self-management of emotions and interpersonal abilities. Further information can be found at: <https://www.5pointscale.com>. This scale can be adapted and reduced in size for example to a 3 point scale if needed.

General strategies which autistic children may find helpful are:

- Flexibility within the school / nursery timetable and length of day
- Slow transitions which are agreed and predictable (so as to reduce uncertainty)
- A focus on building feelings of trust and safety with staff
- The use of clear, specific language and for staff to allow time for possible processing delay (e.g. giving the individual more time to respond to questions)
- The use of visual materials such as a visual timetable
- For large tasks to be broken down into smaller chunks
- To think about alternative ways for the young person to communicate if they need help with something, as they may find it difficult to independently ask for help
- A quiet space for the child to withdraw to if needed
- Alternative areas to go to at break or free play times if the child does not feel able to interact with their peers.

Suggested book for children: 'The Colour Monster' by Anna Llenas

Books for parent carers: 'How to Raise Happy Neurofabulous Children' A parent's Guide book by Katy Elphinstone. Written by an autistic parent who's experienced herself the wonders and the challenges of raising two children, one of whom is autistic this resource is a recommended practical resource on the do's and don'ts of parenting to consider when it comes to neurodiverse children. Also 'Love in Love Out: A Compassionate Approach to Parenting an Anxious Child' by Dr Malie Coyne.

Visual Resources

Visuals are used often in everyday life, they help communicate information quickly and easily - e.g. packaging on food labels, signs for a toilet, calendars and diaries. Autistic children can have strengths in visual processing, so using visuals with your autistic child can be very helpful.

Visuals help us to understand information, they can be helpful when we don't understand the spoken word, or when we are not in an emotional state to understand, such as during times of emotional dysregulation. Visuals are also often more permanent than spoken words, allowing us to refer back to them.

Depending on your child, the recommendation is often to say the word or phrase at the same time as showing the visual, and this can help children learn to understand spoken words. However some children will respond better to seeing the visual only, without hearing the words.

Visuals come in many different forms - objects, photographs, pictures in colour/in black and white, signs (such as Makaton), line drawings, and written words. There is no such thing as a perfect visual. Different children will benefit from the use of different visuals, AND different words/concepts can benefit from different visuals, e.g. your child might use a cup to represent 'drink', and they might use a picture of a toilet for 'toilet'.

Some forms of visuals are thought to be easier to understand such as objects that represent things. For example showing a child a bar of soap to indicate it is time to wash their hands. The child may or may not then progress to using photos such as a photo of the sink to indicate it is time to wash hands and then these may or may not change over time to pictures, rather than photos as their understanding progresses. For example a picture of a sink to represent it is time to wash hands. Ensure the visuals the child trials are in line with their needs and current stage of development.

Once you introduce a type of visual support (for example, timetable, schedule, now and next boards, cue cards), use it consistently so they become used to it.

Other considerations with visuals:

- How easy are they to make? For example printing symbols might be difficult without access to software programme.
- How easy are they to use across settings? For example printing the same photos/pictures might be easier than teaching everyone Makaton
- How portable are they? For example, objects can be difficult to carry around, whereas photos could be saved to your phone.
- Can they be taken too literally? For example, a photo of a toilet might lead to a child wanting to use that specific toilet.

In summary, it's important for you and those supporting your child to work together to decide which types of visuals to try. If one type doesn't work straight away, keep on trying it. If it still doesn't work, try a different type.

Education and **Childcare**

Choosing your child's nursery/pre school/school setting can be daunting. The 'Ambitious About Autism' checklist has free downloadable checklists ('choosing child care checklist' and 'school open day checklist') to consider that may help with making this decision.

<https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/understanding-autism/early-years/parent-toolkit>

If your child is already in childcare/starting school we would recommend that the child's setting is informed of their diagnosis and a meeting is held to discuss plans for additional support, as new adjustments may be necessary. Please see link for further information on extra help in your child's nursery/school: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/education/extra-help-at-school/england>

Autistic children who attend nursery can access SEND Inclusion Fund (SENDIF) to ensure they are fully included in their setting. Below is a link to the guidance document for a more detailed explanation on how nursery settings can apply for SENDIF and what this funding can be used for:

<https://www.leedsforlearning.co.uk/Page/17032>

Whether it's starting nursery or school for the first time, or moving to a new nursery or school, it can be difficult. There are lots of things you can try to help make the transition as smooth as possible.

Before your child joins the setting:

- Decide how soon you want to start preparing your child for the move. This is very individual and it can be helpful to consider their ability to communicate/talk to you about the move.
- Talk to the new setting well in advance, ask about opportunities for 'transition visits', discuss anything you think your child might need additional help with - e.g. how they communicate, sensory aversions, or toileting needs. Remember settings need to make 'reasonable adjustments', so for example if your child starting school is not yet toilet trained, the school needs to try to accommodate.
- Do (at least one) practise run journey to the new setting with your child, this will help to make the route more familiar for your child, and give you an opportunity to talk about what they might see or hear along the way. Take a photo of the entrance to the new setting.
- Having photos of the new setting and key staff your child will interact with is really helpful. Sometimes you can view these on the website, sometimes the setting can send them out to you (via email or via an app), and sometimes the setting might give you permission to take your own photos. You can then show your child these photos in the lead up to starting, or in the morning before nursery/school.
- If your child has to wear a uniform, make sure you have tried it on a few times, checking for any labels that might need to be taken out, and also consider washing it a few times to soften the material and make it smell more familiar to your child.

Education continued and Sensory Differences

Consider jointly creating a 'Communication Passport' for your child with their new setting. These are typically used when a child is being cared for by others, e.g. at nursery, with a childminder or at school. They can be any length (sometimes shorter is better). They are an opportunity for you to share important information with others who care for your child on how they communicate (which might not be clear to others - e.g. my child does not use conventional communication methods, if he cries try offering him...) You can also include your child's likes and dislikes. It's best to create these with others (such as nursery staff). Remember to date it and update it!

If getting out of the house in the morning might be a challenge, consider using a visual timetable or visual checklist, as well as other things such as sand timers.

Sensory Differences

Many autistic children have differences in the way they perceive and process sensory information. It is important to remember that sensory differences can impact significantly on play and learning, as differences in interpreting sensory information can have an impact on how an individual feels, thinks, behaves or responds. This may affect how the child is able to focus and engage in play and learning opportunities at any given time. 'Sensory Profiles' can be devised by nurseries/schools outlining adaptations that are needed to the school/nursery environment. Liaison with parent carers is needed to create a helpful sensory profile.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Occupational Therapy Team have produced some free eLearning videos around supporting children with sensory processing differences. This website also provides questionnaires which can be completed by parents/carers and can help inform Sensory Profiles.

<https://www.nhsggc.org.uk/kids/life-skills/joining-in-with-sensory-differences>

Where possible, seeking your child's voice by completing a picture based 'Talking Mats' activity with them about the different aspects of school / nursery can also help inform their Sensory Profile. Talking Mats supports children to share their views on school or other aspects of their lives using symbols or photographs depending on the age and cognitive ability of the child.

For pre school/schools they are a way of hearing the voice of children who find it hard to access and articulate their feelings, including some autistic children. The facilitator gives picture symbol headings that represent the following, such as: No problem, little problem, big problem; or Yes, don't know, no; or I like it, I don't know if I like it, I don't like it; or Ok, not ok — and the child is given a picture of a certain aspect of the school routine and they are asked to place it under the subheading that best suits.

Sensory Differences — continued

Sheffield Children's Hospital website hosts some excellent sensory resources too:

<https://www.sheffieldchildrens.nhs.uk/services/child-development-and-neurodisability/sensory-processing-difficulties/>

More information on understanding sensory behaviour can be found at:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world.aspx>

'Sensory Circuits' can be a useful way of providing some of the sensory feedback your child might be seeking. The circuit should be an active, physical and a fun activity that children enjoy. It provides a sequence of activities done repeatedly to provide the child/young person with the right type of sensory input in order to calm and organise them for the day ahead, ready for daily activities. The idea is to start with something alerting, move to an organisation stage and then finally to a calming phase. Ideally it should be completed first thing in the morning, and after lunch if possible. Some children may require more circuits throughout the day.

Your child may also benefit from trialling the use of sensory tools, for example, fidget toys, wiggle seat, sensory room, sensory box full of sensory toys, chewelry, ear defenders, access to a trampoline.

Further resources

- 'Answers to questions teachers ask about sensory integration' by Carol Kranovitz, this has lots of checklists and profiling type tools for sensory processing disorder.
- Kent Community Health Trust provide a free 3 part workshop about sensory processing for parents: <https://www.kentcht.nhs.uk/childrens-therapies-the-pod/occupational-therapy/sensory-processing/>
- 'Sensory Trauma: Autism, Sensory Difference and the Daily Experience of Fear' by Dr Rorie Fulton, Emma Reardon and Kate Richardson.
- 'Wiggles Stomps and Squeezes Calm my Jitters' by Lindsay Rowe Parker. This is a story about sensory differences and how some children experience their world, told from a child's perspective.

Financial Support

Some autistic children require additional support on a daily basis, if this is the case for your child, you can check your child's eligibility for the Disability Living Allowance - <https://www.gov.uk/disability-living-allowance-children/eligibility>

The Family Fund offers means-tested grants for families raising children with additional needs. The grants can be used for anything from kitchen appliances to play equipment or family days out. The Family Fund also offers wider support, including information and resources on where to go for help with money and benefits, your child's education, mental health and wellbeing, digital training and creative workshops. For more information and to apply for a grant visit their website: <https://www.familyfund.org.uk/>



More questions?

If you have any questions about these recommendations, please get in touch — we are happy to help.

Contact Us ↗