

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

To My Fellow Parents,

I salute your untiring dedication to parenting your children!

I often find it helpful to remind myself: Each child on the autism spectrum is unique in relation to other children on the spectrum. There will also be commonalities, of course.

Below are some questions I am often asked —along with some answers that contain useful ideas for dealing with challenges.

How do I engage my child in more play?

Imitation is important in play! Imitate them in any of the play activities they do. Be persistent —even if you don't think they are noticing you. Talk about what you are doing and what they are doing. If possible, use words that describe feelings.

Utilize your child's special gifts/interests to encourage them to practice fine or gross motor skills, academic skills, and speech, as well as to promote playing.

Remember an autistic child's play may look very different from more 'standard play' we see amongst neurotypical peers. This type of play should not be stopped but encouraged as this brings them joy and THIS is also play! For example, an autistic child lining his cars up should not be prevented from doing so.

What fine motor skills can we practice together?

Work with your school/outpatient occupational therapist for guidance regarding home activities such as:

- Cutting with scissors and paper.
- Writing, drawing, and coloring.
- Using glue. Glitter glue is especially fun!
- Picking up small objects with a two-fingered pincer grasp. (You can use clothespins, too.)
- Placing small objects into jars.
- Using hole-punchers and pegboards.
- Completing lacing activities.

How about language skills?

Address any issues you have with your child's speech therapist. Especially for younger verbal children, echolalia and scripting is a way to learn and expand their language, so it should NOT be discouraged. Most Autistic kids are Gestalt Language Processors and with continuous speech therapy, they will naturally progress to flexible and functional language.

How do I improve my child's social skills overall?

As with any child (on the spectrum or otherwise), build on day-to-day experiences. This approach can help reduce a child's fears or anxiety when they go to places outside their usual routine. As a family, visit places like the zoo, museums, the beach, restaurants, homes of family and friends, and a variety of outdoor parks. Also, consider going traveling!

For children with sensory overload, occupational therapy may help. Your child can learn to use self-soothing strategies and sensory-blocking aids. At times, you may want to take them out of an over-stimulating environment. Examples of sensory-blocking or calming aids include playing white noise, using weighted blankets, chew toys and introducing specific breathing techniques. Dealing with sensory overload requires an individualized plan customized for your child.

Should I consider dietary changes?

Consult with your pediatrician or child nutritionist. In some cases, dietary changes for children have noticeably improved their behavioral symptoms. However, keep in mind that many experts do not consider dietary changes an evidence-based approach at this time.

How about potty training?

Again, consult with your pediatrician and talk to your ABA team to formulate a plan. From personal experience, I find that there are not enough resources—especially reading material focused on potty training for young children on the spectrum. However, general potty-training books could be helpful. At some point, you might find you have already done as much as you could do. In that case, if you feel your child is ready, you can consider a private potty consultation. Yes, they do exist!

What are some general principles to keep in mind?

Always remember: As with any child, children on the autism spectrum have big feelings! Love them endlessly, care for them thoughtfully, and teach their siblings to do the same. Of course, part of caring is showing extra patience. Responding while acknowledging the child's communicated needs will also help expand their language and social skills.

If you notice they have a strength or interest in a particular hobby, pursue and encourage it. Maintain a positive attitude as much as possible around your child and that will lead to increased confidence, independence, and success for your unique loved one!