

## **PARENTING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM**

**Primary Reader:** Parents of children with autism

**Intended message:** positive parenting of children with autism

### **Introduction:**

Parenting is an exciting process that is hoped for by many couples looking forward to having children of their own. However, sometimes it becomes a challenge when parents realize that their children seem to be different from other people's children or their other children.

Autism is a neurological disorder, meaning you are born with it. It affects the way the brain develops. Autism has a few other names—sometimes called infantile autism or autistic disorder. But regardless of what you call it; autism is something a person is born with and something that they will live with for the rest of your life. While a child is born with autism, it is typically not officially diagnosed until the child shows clear outward signs, usually around age 3 or so.

According to the [US Center for Disease Control](#), autism is estimated to affect an estimated 1 in 250 births. In Uganda, this would mean almost 130,000 children and adults are on the autistic spectrum.

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are a group of developmental disabilities that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges.

### **Signs of autism:**

#### ***What are the symptoms of autism?***

While every person with autism is a unique individual in his or her own way, there are some common traits of autism. These include:

- Poor social skills and difficulties interacting with others
- Difficulties with communication
- Repetitive actions or restricted interests
- Abnormal response to sensory issues such as sound, touch, light even smell
- Some show aggressive or self-injurious behavior such as head banging or biting themselves

#### ***Autism Symptoms Checklist***

The autism symptoms below typically are those that we look for in toddlers but they can apply to older children as well.

1. **Failure to respond to their name.** If you call your young child's name, and he or she does not respond, this is not a good thing. At a certain age, your toddler or young child should recognize and respond, when you call their name.

2. **Avoidance of eye contact.** This can show up very early, it can even be one of the autism symptoms recognized in infants. Babies, later diagnosed with autism, often avoid eye contact with their mother. In addition, many autistic babies do not want to be held or cuddled. The mother may wonder if she is doing something wrong and may not realize—until much later—that autism is to blame, not her. Along with this is the tendency to not watch people's faces when your child does speak.
3. **Unresponsiveness.** We do not know a lot about autism causes, but luckily we are getting better at recognizing the symptoms—both mild autism symptoms as well as the signs of more severe autism. One symptom of both is often a general unresponsiveness to people. Your child might not notice someone else is in the room, or if he does, he will not try to interact with them or respond to any attempts to try to engage him.
4. **Obsession with specific objects or things.** Many children with autism will focus intently on one item to the exclusion of everything else. For example, they may watch the sun hit the window endlessly, or have a favorite toy that they will never give up.
5. **Focusing on details and blocking out all else.** One example of this is a young child who plays with a toy car, but focuses all his attention on the spinning wheels. Perhaps he spins them over and over and doesn't play with the car in the way another child might.
6. **Repetitive actions or activities.** Does your child perform the same actions over and over again? Obsessively playing with a piece of string? Going through certain motions or a sequence of motions that they can't quite break out of? Having very set routines with their toys that you can't break or else it will cause a huge meltdown? This is another sign.
7. **Watching the same videos over and over again.** Autistic kids are famous for this. Disney movies are a special favorite. *Many kids with autism feel reassured by sameness*, and it makes them feel secure to watch the same movie over and over or the same part of the movie over and over. Since they know what is going to happen, there are no surprises. This makes the world feel safer to them.
8. **Repetitive movements.** Rocking or twirling are other common early autism signs. This is what is known as a self-stimulatory behavior. It is often used to try to shut the world around them out when they are overwhelmed. This way, they can focus on the internal stimuli of rocking instead of all the other emotions that come along with being overwhelmed.
9. **Self-injurious behavior** is, unfortunately, another common sign of autism. This can often take the form of banging one's head or hand-biting. It is done out of frustration and as a way to focus on the stimuli from this behavior instead of the feelings inside.
10. **Delayed speech.** While this is a common sign of autism it is not a common sign of Asperger's syndrome, a milder form of autism. Kids with autism will often not talk until they are 3, 4, 5 or older. Some people with autism will never speak.

If your child has any of these autism signs, it is worthwhile to take your child to a doctor or psychologist for an evaluation. Remember, early detection is critically important, so be sure to schedule an appointment if you suspect anything, even mild autism symptoms. This autism symptoms checklist is not comprehensive, but covers the most common symptoms of autism, especially for toddlers and

younger children. And remember, help is available. Recent advances in therapy and treatment for autism can help your loved one overcome many of the challenges of autism.

### **Behavioral characteristics of the autistic child:**

This information will go a long way in enabling the parents and care givers of children with autism understand how autistic children think, work and learn.

### **The problem:**

Many times, parents of children with autism are tired, frustrated, angry and confused about how to help their autistic child or other loved one cope with autism. The challenge sets in for lack of knowledge and skills to handle the issue.

Parenting a child is a tough job. It's especially tough given that you have a special needs child; one with autism. There are so many emotions that go along with parenting that it can be very difficult to sort them out.

As a parent with an autistic child you constantly ask yourself questions like, why is my child behaving different from the other children? What happened to this child at birth? Why can't they do certain things by themselves? But no one knows a child better than the parent. No one else knows the things you can do to cause them to become irritated, violent, happy or reserved and withdrawn.

### **The Possible solutions:**

#### **Parenting strategies:**

As a parent of an autistic child you need to **know all these little details** about your child. You may have to learn the basics about handling your child for him/ her to be able to become as independent as possible which will make your experience of raising and nurturing this child a memorable one.

Parents of autistic children need to try to **understand how their child's brain works**. When parenting an autistic child, the more you understand about why the child acts the way he/she does, the more you can find ways to help them. The more you understand, the better your relationship will be and the more successful you will be parenting this child.

The parent of the child with autism needs to learn that managing this child calls for **understand that he/she needs routine**. Otherwise without knowledge on the details of autism, it may seem as if the child is simply trying to get their way, or even trying to manipulate others, but routine is indeed a critically important part of life for the child with autism.

Anger is a temporary feeling caused by frustration, while aggression is an act often meant to hurt someone or destroy something that someone owns. Anger is okay, but aggression is not.

The following tips can help in parenting your autistic child when they become aggressive.

1. **Positive reinforcement:** Catch the child being good. Make sure to reward and acknowledge whenever you see your child with autism doing a behavior that you like. We often forget to notice or appreciate it when things are running smoothly; the trick is to notice when things are going right, and verbally acknowledge what your autistic child is doing right so he will be more motivated to repeat these behaviors in the future. Positive reinforcement is a powerful factor and a key to parenting autism successfully.
2. **Ignore bad behavior aimed at getting attention:** Those who have mastered parenting an autistic child realize the importance of ignoring bad behavior, when possible. That is, if the child with autism is acting out to get attention, don't give him the attention. If he is doing something to deliberately provoke you, don't let him have the satisfaction. Those who have been successful at parenting an autistic child say that this is one of the most important lessons to learn.
3. **Provide outlets for physical activity:** Any child, but especially a child with autism, needs to have opportunities to run around and let off steam, to have some kind of movement or play, both at home and at school. Due to sensory issues, many autistic kids get overwhelmed resulting in frustration. Physical activity can allow your child with autism to "let off steam" and calm down.
4. **Avoid troubling situations:** Don't put kids with autism in situations that seem like they will lead to troublesome behaviors. For example, intensely competitive activities for a child that is too aggressive and doesn't respond to competition well; or any activities where the child might be judged harshly for a child who does not respond well to criticism.
5. **Human contact:** Closeness and touching can often curb angry impulses in some kids with autism. We all crave human contact to different degrees, and young autistic children especially crave adult attention from their parents in their activities.
6. **Show interest:** If you show interest in what your autistic child is doing, his focus will be on that, and not as much on what he is feeling inside. He will be calmed by the interest you express in him. This is very important in parenting an autistic child. Children with autism need to know and feel they are important to, and have a connection with, parents and other adults. Be clear in how you show and express your interest.
7. **Sometimes all we need is a hug!** This is an easy and simple thing to remember; showing affection to a kid with autism when he is angry can loosen him up and relax him. Give him a hug, a shoulder rub, or a big smile. This may not work as well for kids with more serious emotional issues who have trouble accepting affection.

Parents of autistic children as well as professionals tasked with teaching children with autism often struggle with how to discipline a child with autism. But mastering these principles is important to parenting autism successfully.

### **Places to seek support**

The Komo Centre for Understanding Autism

The [US Centers for Disease Control](#) has a very complete set of web pages on autism, with many links to other organizations and to scientific information.

### **Summary:**

Therefore the autistic child's world is filled with lots of uncertainty and fear. They never know exactly what is going to happen next. Parenting autism requires an understanding of why this occurs.

Parenting autism successfully requires parents to both provide a safe place for their child to grow up, and also know when it is time to push them out of their comfort zone gradually. For parents of autistic children, this is a tough line to walk, but it can be done.

It is very important for children with autism, to have some manner of routine, for them to function.

### References:

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