

Exploring Being Autistic with a Child or Young Person

It can be difficult to know how best to tell an autistic child about their diagnosis. This information sheet gives some tips on how to approach this topic.

Some families and professionals can be reluctant to talk to a child about their autism. However, many autistic adults have explained they knew they were different at a young age and gaining an understanding of why would have been/was helpful. This is not to say that being told you are autistic is always received well and understood, but it does suggest it is the best thing to do rather than ignore questions like: “Why doesn’t my brain work properly?”

Trying to understand your own autism can be quite a challenge but then fitting into a neurotypical world that does not make sense to you is also a tremendous challenge. Improved self-understanding can lead to increased self-value which can lead to effective self-advocacy.

How to start

It is advisable to start talking to your child at an early age with good careful timing, planning and sensitive delivery. How you approach it should be based on your knowledge of the child and their own unique circumstances. Avoid telling your child everything at once, give small amounts of information and allow them time to process and to come back and ask questions at a later stage.

Some parents find it easier to start talking about differences, individual strengths, and difficulties and about being unique without introducing autism specifically at first. By explaining neurodiversity early on, you can try to prevent the child beginning to misunderstand their needs and differences or accept inaccurate negative labels that others may apply to them.

Helping your child feel good about themselves

We all need to be helped to feel good about ourselves. It is important to be aware of the low self-esteem that autistic people can often experience. They need help to know that they are valued, and their gifts and abilities are worth just as much as others.

Praise can be more important for autistic children to hear than others, though take care how it is given. Some autistic children do not like to be praised if they themselves do not think they are worth it. Praise can sometimes seem like an extra demand. Self-worth can be a struggle for many children, and it is important that we support autistic children to recognise their own self-worth, but we may need to find ways of doing this that work for each individual child.

It is important that the support to help someone understand their autism is continuous, even if in the background. There will be questions to ask at different stages in life. We always have more to learn about ourselves whether we are autistic or not. The danger is that we forget that for autistic people.

Highlight their strengths

It is important to identify and build on an autistic child's strengths. Sometimes this may involve reframing autistic characteristics and drawing out positives that may have been overlooked or misunderstood in the past.

Explain their difficulties and help them decide the support needed

It is important to help an autistic child understand their unique difficulties and to explain them in relation to how they personally experience and process the world differently. This may involve rejecting neurotypical norms and adopting a deliberate neuroaffirming approach to understanding differences, as well as identifying the person centred and person led support that is appropriate for that autistic child.

Consider sharing support profiles

It may be helpful to help an autistic child to think about communicating their individual autistic profiles to others in a way that works for them. This could be through using a visual or written resource or it could be verbally communicated through the child themselves or a trusted advocate. It would be helpful to include information about their unique differences, strengths, and difficulties and what support they need. These can then be given to the people who are there to support them in life such as relatives, friends, teachers, and other professionals. Examples of support profiles can be found in the resource list.

Suggested Resources

<https://reframingautism.org.au/about-me-a-downloadable-template-for-your-childs-new-teacher/>

<https://ausometraining.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/AUsome-Kids-Passport.pdf>

<https://ausometraining.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/AUSOME-Exploring-Being-Autistic-with-My-Child.pdf>

https://neuroclastic.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Brain-is-autistic-neuroinclusive-story.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3BDIz3bm_UcnG3yk29K4VIJu5cYvHTUQN_7zM2SQIvzBjATv_dRxBfVrs&fbclid=IwAR25X6OB_S503gMgawWQFMNzyDf8vK38UL1keZmdy9ImUaDAZd1tep_zsrE

<https://autismunderstood.co.uk/>

Autism Acceptance 2022 The Neuro bears on YouTube

Autism Education Trust YouTube. Why autism is a difference, not a deficit.