

Paducah, Kentucky

Autism Community & Surrounding Areas Resource Guide

Welcome to this Autism Resource Guide.

Whether you are a parent, caregiver, educator, newly diagnosed individual, or someone exploring the possibility of an autism diagnosis, this guide was created with you in mind. Autism can bring questions, uncertainty, and sometimes overwhelm—but it can also bring clarity, self-understanding, and community. No matter where you are on this journey, you do not have to navigate it alone.

Autism is not a one-size-fits-all experience. Every autistic person has unique strengths, challenges, communication styles, sensory needs, and ways of interacting with the world. This guide is designed to honor that individuality while offering practical tools, trusted resources, and supportive information to help you move forward with confidence.

For many families and individuals, the path after diagnosis can feel confusing. You may wonder:

- What does this mean for daily life?
- Where do I find support?
- How do I advocate for myself or my child?
- Who understands what we're going through?

The truth is, there is a broad and growing community of professionals, advocates, educators, and autistic individuals who are ready to share knowledge and support. Organizations such as Autism Speaks and the Autistic Self Advocacy Network offer information, advocacy tools, and community connections. Local support groups, therapy providers, schools, and online communities can also become part of your support system.

Most importantly, this guide exists to remind you that support is available. Asking questions is encouraged. Seeking help is a strength. Building a team—whether that includes family, therapists, teachers, medical providers, or peer networks—can make the journey more manageable and empowering.

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference, not a journey meant to be walked in isolation. With the right information, meaningful support, and a connected community, you can move forward with clarity, confidence, and hope.

You are not alone—and you don't have to figure this out by yourself.

Community: Paducah / McCracken County

Last Updated: February 2026

Compiled By: LeeAnn Henry, Operations Manager *(using Google, ChatGPT and existing resources)* at **The Lori Center for Autism**, a part of **Easterseals West Kentucky**.

How to Use This Guide

This guide highlights local, regional and state resources supporting autistic individuals, families, and caregivers in and around Paducah, Kentucky.

Because services, eligibility, and availability may change:

- Contact each provider directly for the most current details.
- Ask about eligibility requirements.
- Confirm insurance acceptance (Medicaid/private insurance).
- Verify referral requirements and waitlists.

Emergency & Crisis Support

If someone is in immediate danger, call 911.

- **911** – Emergency services (fire, police, medical)
- **988** – National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (call or text)

Local Crisis Support

Four Rivers Behavioral Health

- Crisis Line: 270-442-7121
- Toll-Free: 866-442-7121
Provides mental health crisis support and assessment services.

Community Navigation & Support Organizations

Families on the Spectrum

Nonprofit community organization supporting families impacted by autism in Western Kentucky.

Services Include:

- Family meetups and outings
- Community networking
- Local support and shared resources

Best For: Peer connection and community engagement

Contact: info@familiesonthespectrumky.org

Therapy, Clinical & Developmental Services

The Lori Center for Autism


Part of Easterseals West Kentucky

Services:

- Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy (approximately ages 2–12)
- Parent training
- Skill-building services

Notes:

- Formal autism diagnosis required
- May have a waitlist
- Accepts Medicaid and private insurance


 270-444-7898

 <https://westkentucky.easterseals.com/>

Easterseals West Kentucky Adult Services

Services:

- Adult day supports
- Case management & waiver application assistance
- Community living supports
- Employment connection programs

 270-444-9680


 <https://westkentucky.easterseals.com/>

Sensory Solutions KY, LLC

Provides speech therapy, occupational therapy, and sensory-based services.

Services:


- Sensory integration therapy
- Occupational therapy
- Daily living skills support


 270-443-5712

 <https://sensorysolutions.org/paducah-ky-location>

Bloom Behavior Therapy

Behavioral support and therapy services including intervention and skills development.

 270-908-0461


 <https://www.bloombehavior.com/>

Atlas Health

(Ages 12 and under)

Services:

- Speech Therapy
- Occupational Therapy
- Physical Therapy
- ABA Therapy

 270-443-0681


 <https://www.h2health.com/pediatric-aba-therapy/>

Surpass Behavioral Health

(All ages – Murray location)

Services:

- ABA Therapy
- Autism testing
- Assessment for intellectual disability, ADHD, mood and anxiety disorders, and conduct/impulse disorders

 (888) 227-7212


 <https://surpassbehavioralhealth.com/locations/murray-ky/>

Associates of Pediatric Therapy

(Ages 3+ who qualify)

Services:

- Speech Therapy (ST)
- Occupational Therapy (OT)
- Physical Therapy (PT)

 270-279-7470

 <https://kidtherapy.org/locations/murray-pediatric-therapy/>

Regional Diagnostic & Evaluation Support

(Some providers are outside Paducah but serve regional families.)

Kentucky Advisory Council on Autism

Statewide autism resource directory and guidance.

☎ 859-447-7792

🌐 kyaca.org/contact-us/

Norton Children's Autism Center

Multidisciplinary autism diagnostic and support services.

☎ 502-588-0736

Murray State University Assessment Center

☎ 270-809-3885



<https://www.murraystate.edu/academics/CollegesDepartments/CollegeOfEducationandHumanServices/coehsacademicunits/EducationalStudiesLeadershipandCounseling/cac/assessmentcenter.aspx>

The Pennyroyal Center

- ABA therapy
- Diagnostic testing

☎ 877-473-7766

Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt

☎ 615-936-0249

Dr. Aloha Romay


(Through Four Rivers Behavioral Health)

Services:

- Diagnostic testing (ages 6–18)
- ABA therapy
- Mental health therapy

Important Notes:

- Referral required if not already a Four Rivers patient
- Approximate testing waitlist: 14 months
- Summer ABA continuation available if school-based during year

 270-442-4121


Early Intervention & Children's Supports


Purchase Area Point of Entry – First Steps

Early Intervention services for children birth to age 3.

Serving Counties:

Ballard, Carlisle, Calloway, Fulton, Graves, Hickman, Livingston, Marshall, and McCracken

 270-442-6223

 800-648-6599

Education, IEP & School Resources


McCracken County Public Schools

Special Education Office

 keile.phillips@mccracken.kyschools.us

Paducah Public Schools

Special Education Office

 270-444-5600 ext. 1021

Families on the Spectrum may also provide informal IEP guidance and peer support.

Social, Recreation & Community Engagement

McCracken County Public Library

Community Support Advocate: Katie Glisson

☎ 423-451-2068 (call or text)

Additional opportunities:

- Community events through Families on the Spectrum
- Adaptive and inclusive recreation connections through Easterseals

Family, Caregiver & Peer Support

Virtual Grief Support Groups

🌐 <https://find.griefshare.org/find>

Search by: Paducah, Kentucky (Virtual option available)

Local caregiver networks and community support groups provide connection opportunities for parents, caregivers, and siblings.

State & National Resources

Kentucky Autism Training Center

🌐 <https://louisville.edu/education/kyautismtraining/>

Protection and Advocacy


🌐 <http://www.kypa.net/>


Commonwealth Council on Developmental Disabilities


Statewide advocacy and information.


 <https://ccdd.ky.gov/Pages/index.aspx>

Cabinet for Health and Family Services – Office for Children with Special Health Care Needs

 Paducah: 800-443-3651 or 270-443-3651

 Louisville: 800-232-1160 or 502-429-4430

 Owensboro: 877-687-7038 or 270-687-7038

 Bowling Green: 800-843-5877 or 270-746-7816

<http://chfs.ky.gov/ccshcn>

MyKY Resource Finder

 <https://myky.info/#/>


Inpatient Behavioral Healthcare for Children


Local / Regional Facilities

Mercy Health - Behavioral Health, Inpatient Services

May provide inpatient psychiatric stabilization.

Confirm pediatric/adolescent availability

 *Inpatient: 270-444-2365*

 *Outpatient: 270-444-2250.*

Mercy Health-Lourdes Hospital

Hospital with behavioral health services.

Call to confirm child/adolescent admissions.  270-444-2444

Specialized Inpatient Psychiatric Hospitals (Referral Required)

Cumberland Hall Hospital

Child & adolescent inpatient psychiatric care (approx. ages 4–17)

☎ 270-886-1919

UofL Health – Peace Hospital

Comprehensive youth inpatient behavioral health programs

☎ 502-451-3330

Norton Children’s Hospital – Ackerly Child Psychiatric Unit

Acute inpatient psychiatric care for children and adolescents

☎ 502-629-6000

Other Statewide Inpatient Options

- RiverValley Behavioral Health Hospital ☎ 270-689-6500 (Owensboro)
- Rivendell Behavioral Health Hospital ☎ 270-843-1199 (Bowling Green)
- The Ridge Behavioral Health System ☎ 859-269-2325 (Lexington)
- Lincoln Trail Behavioral Health System ☎ 270-351-9444 (Radcliff)

Important Notes Before Contacting Inpatient Facilities

- **Referral Required:** Most child/adolescent inpatient units require referral from an emergency department, pediatrician, psychiatrist, or mental health provider.
 - **Emergency First:** If a child is in crisis or experiencing thoughts of self-harm, call 988 or go to the nearest emergency department.
 - **Insurance Verification:** Confirm Medicaid/private insurance coverage and pre-authorization requirements.
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Accessibility & Inclusion Statement

Paducah and McCracken County support inclusive community participation. Individuals across the autism spectrum deserve dignity, accommodations, and access to services regardless of age or ability.

Feedback to improve this guide is welcome.

Suggestions & Updates

To suggest updates or additions:

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Review Schedule: Annually (January)



Your Child's Autism Diagnosis

An Approachable Guide for Families

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A Note to Families

Navigating a New Autism Diagnosis

If your child or loved one has recently been identified as Autistic, you might be feeling a mix of emotions—uncertainty, relief, overwhelm, or even confusion about what to do next.

Your child is still the same person you've always known and loved. This new information isn't a limitation—it's an opportunity to better understand how their brain processes the world in its own unique way. Being identified as Autistic can offer valuable insight for both you and your child, helping them learn more about themselves, their strengths, and how they navigate the world. It doesn't change who they are; it simply gives them the language to describe their experiences and the tools to advocate for their needs.

You don't have to figure everything out on your own. Connecting with other families, finding reliable information, and seeking out supportive spaces can make a big difference.

A Diagnosis Can...

Getting a diagnosis can bring clarity and open doors to support for both you and your child. It can:

- Offer insight into your child's development and behavior
- Provide an explanation for challenges you've encountered in parenting
- Help you access individualized support and services at school
- Open the door to therapy services covered by insurance
- Highlight key skills to focus on for meaningful intervention
- Connect you with local and online resources as your child grows

Here are some things you can do now

- ~ [Learn about Autism](#)
 - ~ [Start therapies & school evaluations](#)
 - ~ [Try supportive behavior strategies](#)
 - ~ [Find support](#)
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Understanding Autism & Neurodiversity

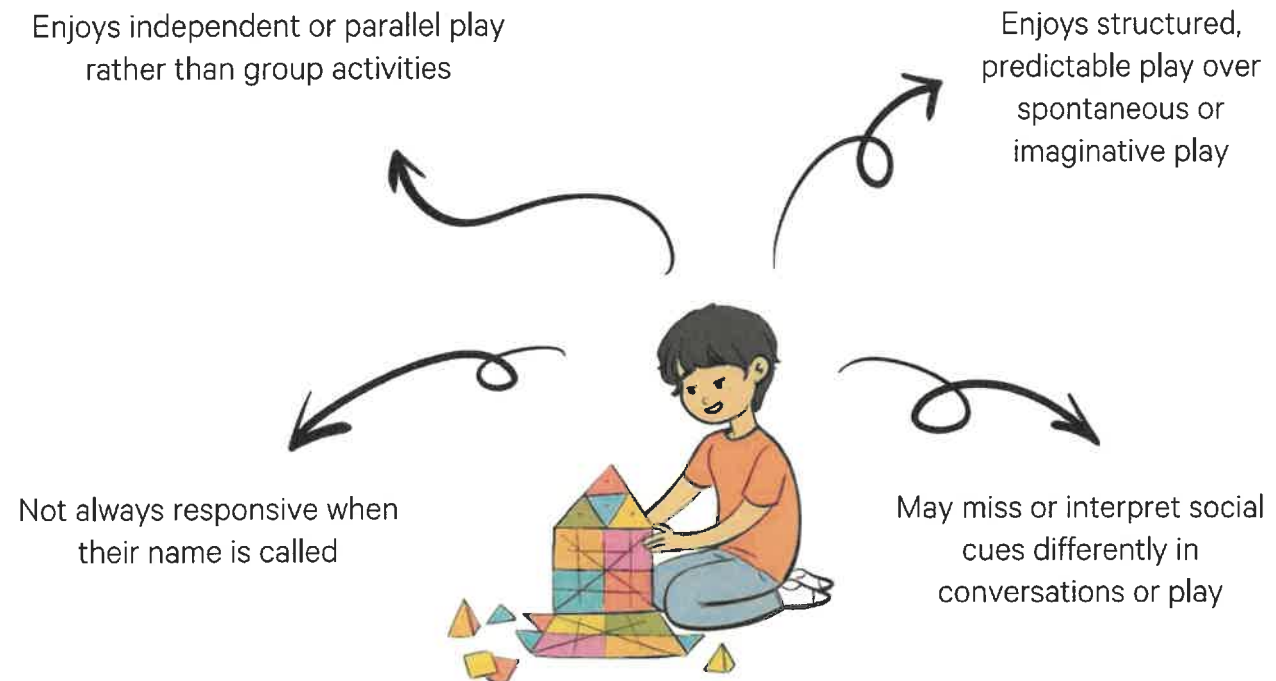
What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that affects how a person experiences the world, including communication, social interactions, relationships, and self-regulation. Since Autism is a spectrum, every individual will have their own unique combination of strengths and challenges—no two Autistic people are exactly alike. Some may need significant support in certain areas, while others may navigate daily life with more independence.

There isn't a single known cause of Autism, but identifying it early can help individuals access support, services, and resources that align with their specific needs. Understanding that Autism presents differently in each person allows for a more personalized approach, helping Autistic individuals thrive in their own unique ways.

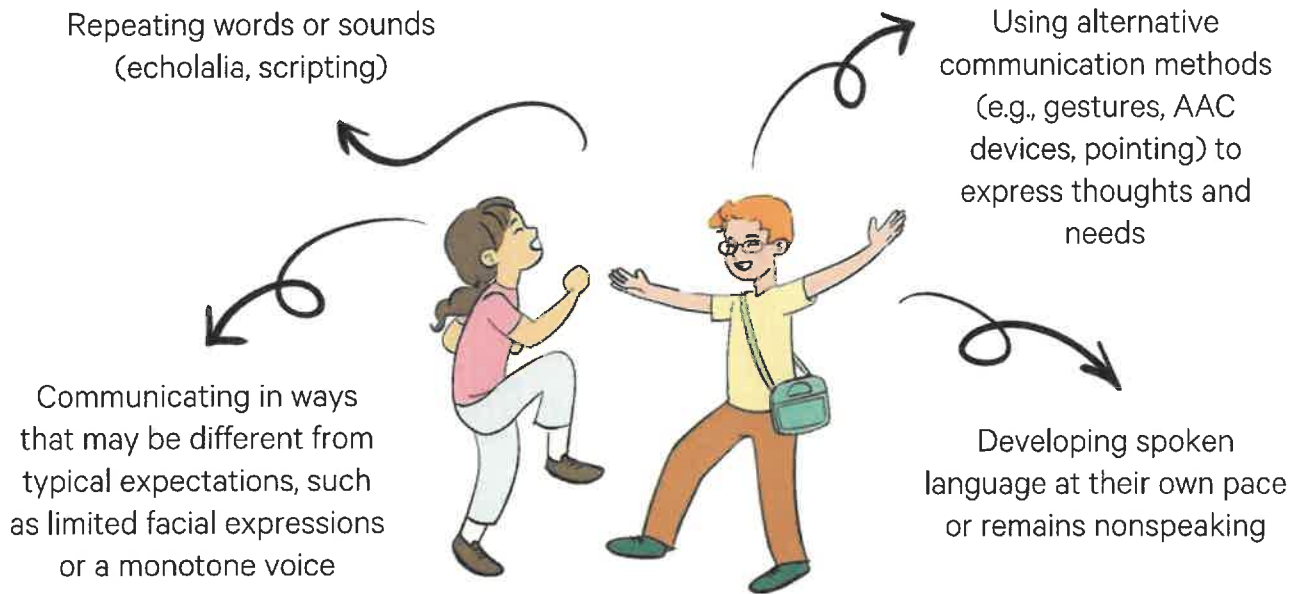
What can Autism look like?

While Autism varies widely from person to person, there are common traits and patterns that may be observed. These characteristics can vary in intensity and may change over time.

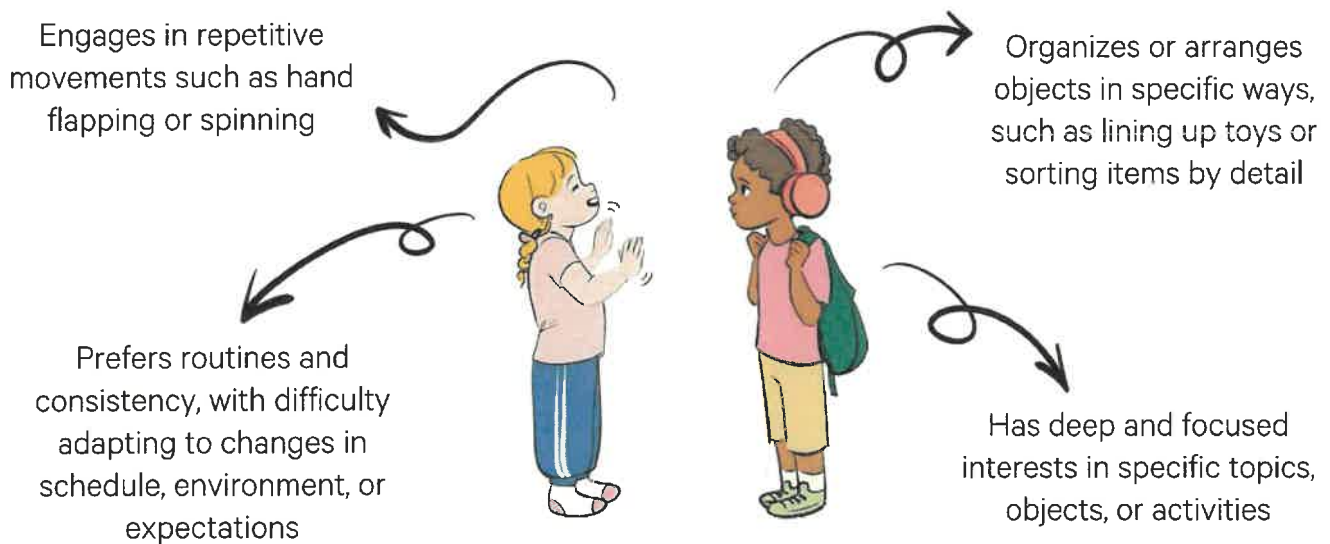


Signs of Autism - Social Behavior

Understanding Autism & Neurodiversity



Signs of Autism - Communication



Signs of Autism - Repetitive Behavior & Passionate Interests

Understanding Autism & Neurodiversity

Notices or reacts strongly to certain sounds, textures, or visual details

May seek or avoid specific sensory experiences, such as movement, touch, or bright lights

Adjusts eye contact based on comfort and sensory preferences rather than social expectations

Experiences emotional regulation differently, which may impact responses to frustration or change



Signs of Autism - Sensory Experiences

How common is Autism?

With increased awareness and a better understanding of Autism, more individuals are being identified and accessing support. Here are some key statistics from the CDC about Autism in the United States:

- 1 in 36 children are diagnosed with autism.
- Autism affects all ethnic and socioeconomic groups.
- Boys are 4 times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with autism.
- Over 7 million individuals in the U.S. are on the Autism spectrum.

Understanding Autism & Neurodiversity

Let's talk about the "Spectrum" in "Autism Spectrum Disorder."

Picture it as a line stretching from one impact level to another, marked by designations such as "low-functioning" at one end and "high-functioning" at the other.

Terms like "low-functioning" or "high-functioning" can inaccurately depict an individual's reality. These labels bring with them preconceived notions and oversimplifications, often causing more harm than good to those they seek to define.

Instead of thinking of the Autism spectrum as linear from "less autistic" to "more autistic," we encourage you to view it more like a spectrum color wheel!

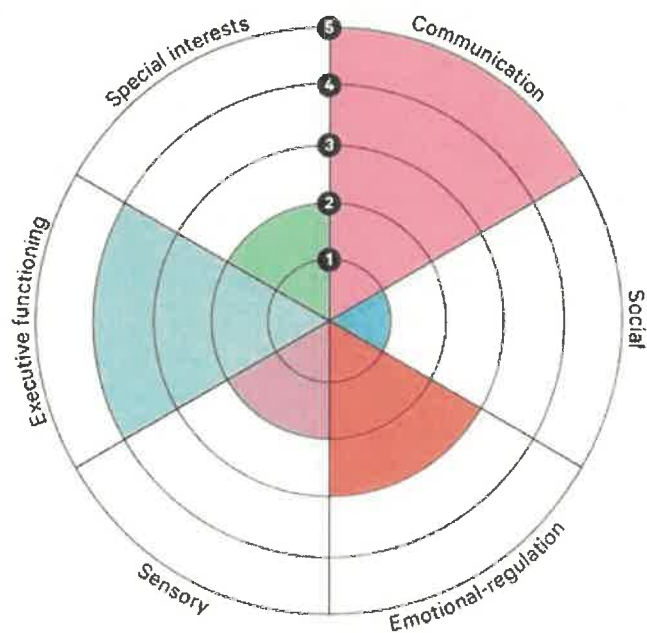
In the Resources section of BIP Visualized, you'll find a "My Autism Spectrum Template." This tool can help your Autistic learners express their experiences, guiding you in understanding where they need support. There's also a "My Spectrum of Support" template that is not diagnostic-specific, but allows learners to self-reflect on their strengths and areas they'd like more support.



Instead of this

Think of the spectrum like this

(Colors are filled in based on level of impact in each area of Autism)



"We all come in all shapes and hues. This is art."

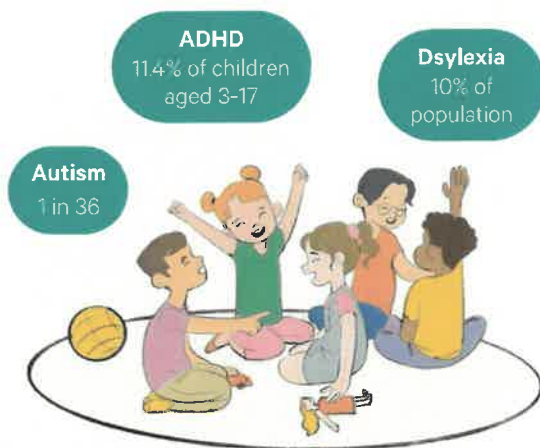
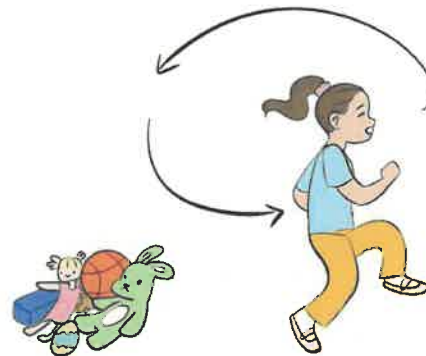
- Alex Baughns, Autistic self-advocate

Understanding Autism & Neurodiversity

What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is a concept that embraces differences in the human brain as being natural, normal, and not “less than” those without these differences.

This framework celebrates individuality, and many self-advocates express pride in their neurodiverse ways of thinking and behaving!

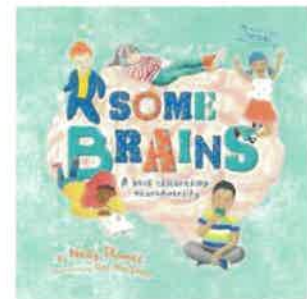
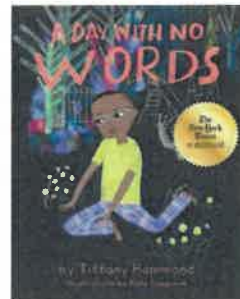
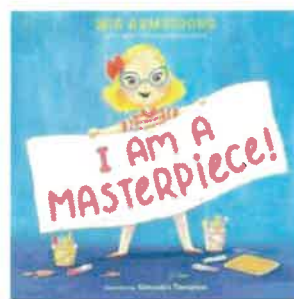
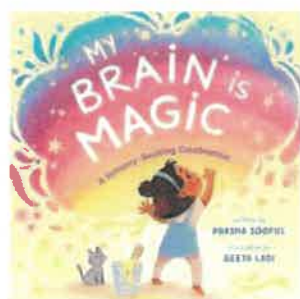


How common is neurodiversity?

While there is no official statistic of how many people are neurodivergent, many academic and advocacy circles estimate the number of people with neurodiverse disorders to be 15-20% of the population.

The current prevalence of Autism is 1 in 36 children.

Recommended picture books that celebrate neurodiversity



* [9 Neurodiversity-Affirming Behavior Essentials Resource](#)

Start Therapies & School Evaluations

Advocating for your child

There are many supports and therapies that can help your child as they grow. It's important to explore your options, ask questions, and choose what feels right for your child and family.

No single therapy works for everyone, and support should come from trained professionals who respect your child's individuality. The right interventions should focus on recognizing your child's strengths, building self-advocacy, family involvement, community inclusion, and improving quality of life.

If you're unsure where to start, the [M-CHAT screening assessment](#) can help identify early signs of autism. Parents can complete it on their own and share results with their pediatrician.

Finding the right therapies

Therapies can take place in various settings, including your home, a specialized center, or at school. Some programs also involve caregiver training, allowing you to support your child's learning under the guidance of a professional. Many families choose to combine multiple therapies to best meet their child's developmental needs.

Insurance coverage for therapies varies by provider and plan - check with your provider can clarify costs and coverage. The insurance process typically includes a referral for evaluation, prior authorization if required, approval, and then therapy begins, with periodic reassessments.

Your child's pediatrician, developmental pediatrician, psychologist, or social worker can help guide you in prioritizing therapies based on your child's strengths and areas where support may be beneficial. Many children benefit from receiving multiple therapies in a consistent learning environment. Some common interventions include:

- Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy
- Speech-language therapy
- Occupational therapy (OT)
- Physical therapy (PT)
- Social skills groups
- Parent-led interventions



Start Therapies & School Evaluations

Advocating for your child

ABA Therapy

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is a structured approach that helps children learn skills through positive reinforcement and step-by-step teaching. Depending on the child's needs, therapy may take place in homes, clinics, or community settings. ABA supports communication, daily routines, social interactions, and helps reduce unsafe behaviors or those that may interfere with learning. Because it is highly individualized, strategies are tailored to your child's specific goals. Parent involvement is essential, as caregivers play a key role in helping children practice and apply their skills in everyday life.



Speech-Language Therapy

Speech-language therapy helps children develop communication skills, whether through spoken words, sign language, or AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication). It can focus on expressive language (using words to communicate), receptive language (understanding others), and social communication skills like taking turns in conversation.

Occupational Therapy (OT)

Occupational therapy supports children in building everyday skills needed for independence, such as dressing, eating, handwriting, and self-regulation. OT can also help with sensory processing, coordination, and fine motor skills, making daily tasks easier and more comfortable.



Start Therapies & School Evaluations

Advocating for your child

Your child's rights to services

Navigating services for your child can feel overwhelming, but knowing their rights can help you access the support they need. Under federal law, children with developmental delays and disabilities, including Autism, are entitled to services that can support their growth and learning. These services vary based on age, needs, and location, but here's what you should know.

Early intervention services (for children under 3)

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures that children under the age of 3 who have developmental delays can receive Early Intervention (EI) services. EI includes a range of supports designed to help children build skills during their early years when development is most rapid.

Early intervention may include: Speech-language therapy, Occupational therapy, Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), or Psychological evaluations. Families may also have access to counseling and training to learn strategies to support their child's development.

To receive services, your child must first have an Early Intervention evaluation. If they qualify, you will work with a team to develop an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP), which outlines the services and goals tailored to your child.

Special education services (for children aged 3-22)

Once your child turns 3, their educational needs fall under special education services, which are also protected by IDEA. However, an Autism diagnosis alone does not automatically qualify a child for special education. Schools must conduct an evaluation to determine eligibility.

If your child qualifies, they will receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) through an Individualized Education Program (IEP). This plan outlines your child's strengths, challenges, and learning goals, as well as the supports they need in school, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, or a structured learning environment.

If your child does not qualify for an IEP but still needs accommodations, they may be eligible for a 504 Plan, which provides modifications and supports to help them succeed in a general education setting.

Start Therapies & School Evaluations

Advocating for your child

How to get services started

Before your child can receive Early Intervention or special education services, they will need assessments to determine their needs. These may include:

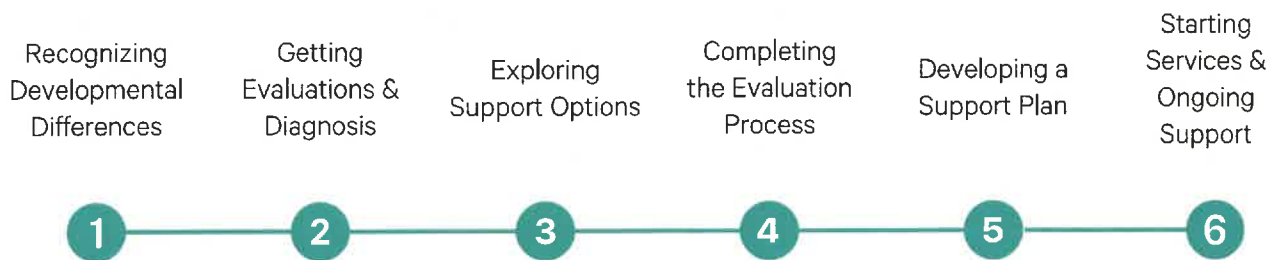
- Observations of your child's play and interactions
- A developmental evaluation
- A speech-language assessment
- A behavior evaluation, including home and/or classroom observations
- A parent interview or questionnaire
- An assessment of daily living skills

For children under 3, contact your local Early Intervention agency ([find your state's here](#)) to request an evaluation. For children 3 and older, request an evaluation from your school district's special education office—this request may need to be made in writing.

Your child's pediatrician can also be a helpful resource. They can provide guidance, discuss concerns, and give referrals for therapies such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, or Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). These therapies can sometimes begin before school-based services are in place.

Waiting for evaluations and services can be frustrating, especially with potential waitlists. Starting the process early can help ensure your child gets the support they need as soon as possible.

Path to diagnosis and support



Start Therapies & School Evaluations

Advocating for your child

What to say when requesting services

Reaching out for services can feel overwhelming, but having a script can make it easier. Here are some examples of what you can say when asking for evaluations and support:

My child was recently diagnosed with Autism, and I want to make sure they are getting the right support. Can you provide referrals for speech therapy, occupational therapy, or ABA?



I have some concerns about my child's development, and I'd like to discuss an evaluation. They seem to be struggling with [speech, motor skills, social interactions, sensory sensitivities, etc.]. Can you refer us to a specialist or therapy services?

Talking to your pediatrician

Hello, I'd like to request an Early Intervention evaluation for my child. I've noticed some delays in [communication, movement, social interaction, etc.], and I'd like to see if they qualify for services. How do we begin the process?



My pediatrician recommended an evaluation for my child through Early Intervention. What are the next steps to schedule an assessment?

Requesting an early intervention evaluation

Start Therapies & School Evaluations

Advocating for your child



I'd like to request a special education evaluation for my child. They have been struggling with [specific challenges], and I want to understand what services might be available to support their learning and development.

Requesting a school district evaluation

Note: Always submit requests to schools in writing and follow up conversations with an email.

Subject: Request for Special Education Evaluation

Email: Hello, my name is [Your Name], and I am the parent of [Child's Name], who is [Child's Age] and currently [attends school at ___ / is not yet enrolled]. I am requesting a comprehensive special education evaluation to determine their eligibility for services under IDEA. My child has been experiencing challenges with [communication, social skills, learning, sensory regulation, etc.], and I believe they may need additional support in the school setting.

Please let me know the next steps for initiating this process. I appreciate your time and look forward to your response.

One of the most important roles a family plays is being an advocate for their child. If you have concerns, speak up. If you have questions, ask. There are many professionals—pediatricians, therapists, teachers, and support staff—who are ready to guide you through the process.

You know your child best, and your voice is essential in ensuring they receive the services and support they need. Trust your instincts, stay informed, and don't hesitate to push for what feels right for your child.

5 Behavior strategies to do at home

Small changes, big impacts

Small, intentional changes embedded into your daily routines can have a big impact on your child's confidence, communication, and overall success. These strategies are versatile, effective, and especially helpful for Autistic children. They create predictability, support communication, and encourage independence.

We've included linked visual resources to help you put these strategies into practice in your home!

1 Use visuals

Many Autistic children process information better visually rather than through spoken language. Pairing words with visuals can make communication clearer and reduce frustration.

Ways to incorporate visuals

- Use pictures or icons to show schedules, routines, and expectations.
- Demonstrate actions rather than only verbally explaining them.
- Use a timer to show how long an activity will last.
- Use visuals to teach new skills (e.g. self-regulation strategies, steps to brushing teeth, etc.)



Printable visual resources

- [First, Then visual](#)
- [Visual schedule](#)
- [Calming techniques poster](#)
- [Breathing techniques posters](#)

5 Behavior strategies to do at home

Small changes, big impacts

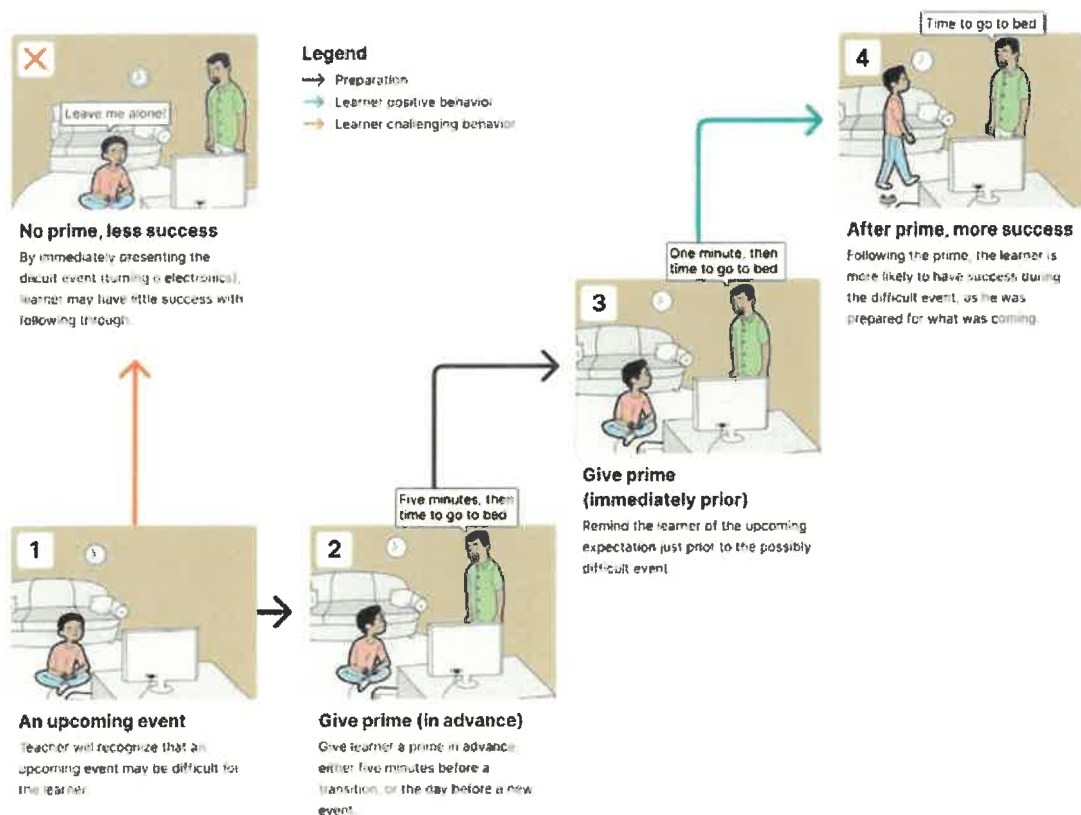
2 Increase structure

Predictability and routine can help children feel more secure and confident. A structured environment does not mean rigid—it means creating clarity and consistency in daily life.

Ways to add structure

- Use a visual schedule with pictures or words for daily activities.
- Create a simple list of house rules/expectations with visuals.
- Establish consistent morning, bedtime, and after-school routines.
- Give advance warnings before transitions and upcoming changes in routines.

Visual strategy from the ABA Visualized Guidebook



5 Behavior strategies to do at home

Small changes, big impacts

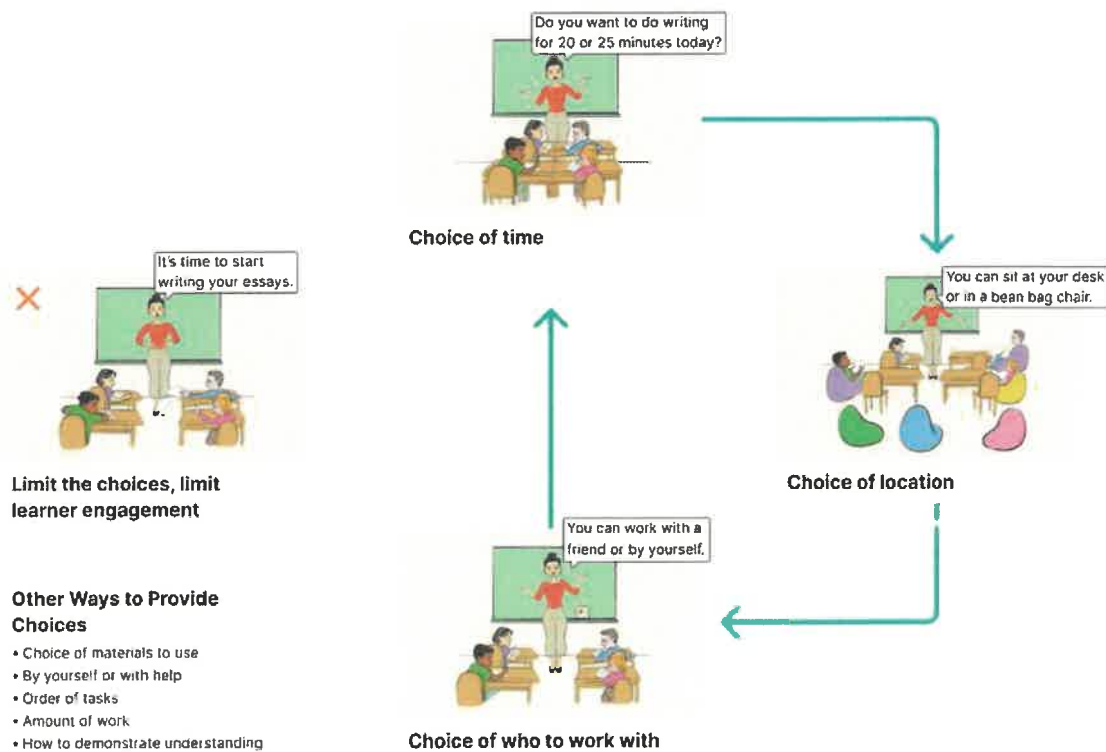
3 Provide choices

Empowering children with choices can reduce frustration and encourage independence. Even small choices give a sense of control while still maintaining necessary structure.

Examples of choices to give at home

- Getting dressed: “Do you want to wear the blue shirt or the red shirt?”
- Mealtime: “Would you like apple slices or grapes for a snack?”
- Transitions: “Do you want to clean up your toys now or in five minutes?”
- Daily routines: “Would you like to brush your teeth before or after putting on pajamas?”

Visual strategy from BIP Visualized



5 Behavior strategies to do at home

Small changes, big impacts

4 Follow their lead

Child-led play is a simple yet powerful way to strengthen connection, encourage communication, and support engagement. Instead of directing play, observe what your child is interested in and join them on their terms. This approach makes learning more natural and enjoyable while building confidence and independence.

How to follow their lead

- Watch and learn – Notice what captures their attention and engage with it.
- Comment more than you question – Instead of asking, “What are you building?” try, “Wow, that’s a tall tower!”
- Be silly, enthusiastic, and fun! – Play is a great way to connect, so embrace their world with joy.
- Let them take the lead – Avoid giving instructions and allow them to explore play in their own way.
- Incorporate their interests – Use what they love (e.g., trains, dinosaurs, music) to make play and learning more engaging.



Just 5 minutes a day of following your child’s lead in play can lead to

- ✓ A stronger parent-child relationship
- ✓ Improved attention and engagement
- ✓ Better communication skills
- ✓ More creativity in play
- ✓ Fewer challenging behaviors at home

* [Watch a video example of child-led play](#)

5 Behavior strategies to do at home

Small changes, big impacts

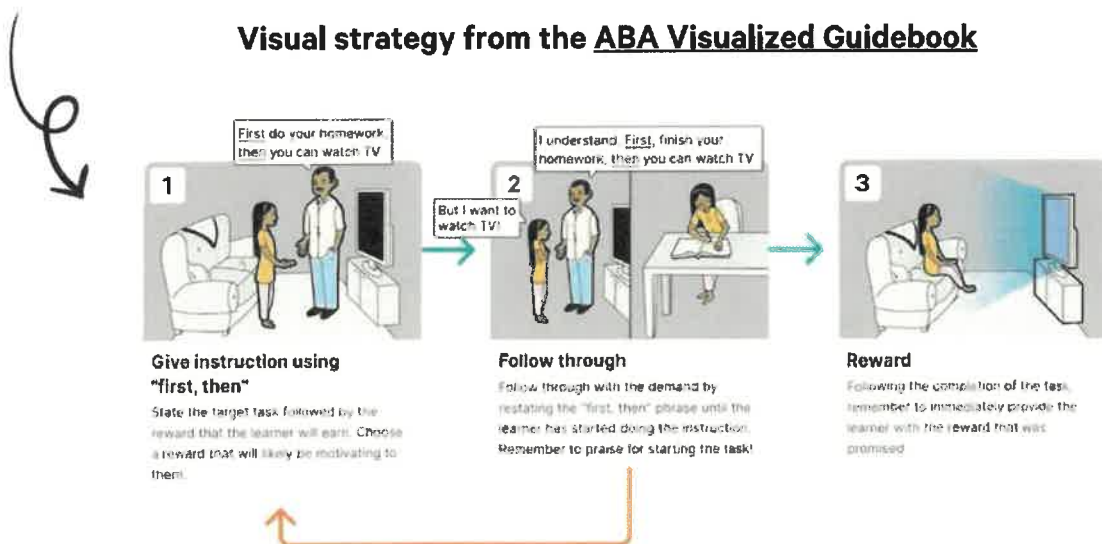
5 Build motivation

Throughout the day, there are necessary tasks that children may not be highly motivated to complete. These can include morning and bedtime routines, completing homework, going to school, cleaning up toys, sharing with siblings, transitioning off electronics, and more. When these moments feel challenging, building motivation can help make instructions easier to follow and reduce frustration.

Here are some ways to increase motivation for difficult tasks

- Be flexible – Ask yourself
 - ~ Can they have an extra minute with a preferred activity before transitioning?
 - ~ Can you adjust the instruction to make it easier or offer to help?
 - ~ Can the task be completed later or in a different location?
- Use a star chart or token board – Recognize engagement in the moment and offer a larger reward when the task is completed.
 - * [Print an ice cream cone token board](#)
 - * [Print a train token board](#)
- Set clear expectations with “First, Then” to keep instructions simple and set a clear reward.

Visual strategy from the ABA Visualized Guidebook



Finding support

You're not alone

Receiving an Autism diagnosis for your child comes with a lot of emotions, questions, and new information to take in. It can feel overwhelming at times, but you don't have to navigate this alone. Connecting with other parents, support groups, and professionals can help you process this journey, reduce feelings of isolation, and give you a place to turn when you need guidance.

Building a support system can help you

- Learn from others who have been in your shoes.
- Share experiences and feel understood.
- Get practical advice on navigating services, therapies, and education.
- Access resources that can make daily life easier.

Recommended resources & places to go for support

- ~ [Stanford's Autism Parent Support Group](#) offers monthly group meetings and parent education classes.
- ~ [Parenting with ABA Community](#) Facebook group offers expert guidance from a BCBA and opportunity to connect with other families.
- ~ [Family Voices](#) is a national network that connects families with children who have special healthcare needs to peer support, resources, and advocacy. They provide guidance on navigating healthcare systems, insurance, and accessing services.



Finding support

You're not alone

Recommended resources & places to go for support (con't)

- ~ [COPAA](#) is a nonprofit organization that helps families understand their child's educational rights & connects parents with advocates and attorneys who specialize in special education law.
- ~ [Center for Parent Information and Resources](#) is central resource for parents looking for information on special education services, IEPs, 504 Plans, and state-specific support. They provide links to Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) in every state.
- ~ [Autism Society](#) is a nationwide organization offering advocacy, education, and community-based resources. The Autism Society has local chapters across the U.S. that provide in-person and online support, events, and family assistance programs.
- ~ [ASAN](#) is a nonprofit organization run by Autistic individuals that promotes disability rights, self-advocacy, and policy change. They provide neurodiversity-affirming resources for families.
- ~ [Understood](#) is a comprehensive website offering expert advice, tools, and resources for parents of children with learning and thinking differences, including Autism, ADHD, and dyslexia.
- ~ [The Center for Autism and Related Disabilities \(CARD\)](#) provides support and resources for individuals with autism and their families, including training, consultations, and outreach programs to improve the quality of life for Autistic individuals.
- ~ [ADDitude](#) is a trusted source for ADHD information, offering expert advice, strategies, and resources for parents, educators, and individuals with ADHD. They provide articles, webinars, and community forums to support learning and executive functioning.
- ~ [US Autism Association](#) offers education, training, and support for families, educators, and professionals. They provide online resources, annual conferences, and expert guidance on navigating an autism diagnosis.

Finding support

You're not alone

Recommended resources & places to go for support (con't)

- ~ [First Words Project](#) focuses on early identification of communication delays and autism risk signs. Their 16 by 16 program highlights key developmental milestones and provides resources for parents and professionals to support early intervention.
- ~ [Wright's Law](#) is a resource for special education advocacy, providing legal and practical guidance on IEPs, 504 Plans, and parental rights in the special education system.
- ~ [ECHO Autism](#) (Extension of Community Health Care Outcomes) is a telehealth-based program providing expert guidance for families and professionals on autism-related topics such as anxiety, behavior, communication, education, sleep, and safety.
- ~ [Autism Parenting Summit](#) hosts virtual sessions featuring professionals, experts, and Autistic individuals sharing insights on a variety of autism-related topics. They offer both free and paid sessions throughout the year.

- ~ [State-Specific Autism Grants](#) – Many states offer funding for autism-related services. For example, Washington's Ben's Fund provides up to \$1,000 for therapies or special equipment. Check with local autism organizations for state-specific grants.

Recommended books

- [Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger's](#) – John Elder Robison
- [Life Animated](#) – Ron Suskind
- [NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity](#) – Steve Silberman
- [Uniquely Human: A Different Way of Seeing Autism](#) – Dr. Barry Prizant
- [The Reason I Jump: The Inner Voice of a Thirteen-Year-Old Boy with Autism](#) – Naoki Higashida
- [Turn Autism Around: An Action Guide for Parents of Young Children with Early Signs of Autism](#) – Mary Lynch Barbera
- [Parenting Rewired: How to Raise a Happy Autistic Child in a Very Neurotypical World](#) – Danielle Punter & Charlotte Chaney

Meet my child!

A quick guide for teachers & providers

About Me

My preferred communication style is

Getting to Know Me

Some of my favorite activities are

~
~
~

I like when

~
~
~

I can do these activities by myself!

~
~
~

My Support Needs

I may need help with

~
~
~

Items and supports I should always have

~
~
~

When I need help, you can support by

~
~
~

Navigating Challenges

I don't like when

~
~
~

How I show that I'm frustrated or need help

~
~
~

When I'm upset, _____ helps me feel calm.

Therapy planning worksheet

Helping you navigate options, goals, & next steps

Therapies I'm considering

- Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy
- Speech-language therapy
- Occupational therapy (OT)
- Physical therapy (PT)
- Social skills groups
- Parent-led interventions
- Other:

My top 3 priorities

The top areas where I'd like therapy to provide support:

~

~

~

Questions for school & providers

Q

A

Q

A

Q

A

Insurance notes

~ My insurance provider:

~ Therapies covered:

~ Prior authorization needed?

~ Estimated co-pay/out-of-pocket cost per session: \$



9 Neurodiversity- Affirming Behavior Essentials

*Strategies & language
for respectful support*

Created by Morgan van Diepen, M.Ed., BCBA in collaboration with
Autistic self-advocates Michelle Vinokurov and Alex Baughns

What does it mean to be neurodiversity-affirming?

Being neurodiversity-affirming means recognizing and valuing differences in thinking, communication, and behavior, valuing each individual's unique strengths without seeing these variations as deficits and areas to be "fixed." There's beauty in the way each of us experiences and processes the world differently.

It also means actively listening to and learning from the neurodiverse community to ensure that behavior support is grounded in the most compassionate and respectful approach possible.





9 Neurodiversity-Affirming Behavior Essentials

- ~ Use strength-based language
- ~ Recognize stimming as self-expression
- ~ Allow natural eye contact preferences
- ~ Offer meaningful choices
- ~ Respond with compassion
- ~ Honor all communication
- ~ Presume competence
- ~ Avoid physical prompting for compliance
- ~ Respect withdrawals of assent

1 Use strength-based language

“ Remind students what makes them special, unique, and capable of succeeding rather than focusing on challenges or barriers. Continue to highlight their successes, especially when someone is feeling the weight of the challenges that may be around them. ”

- Denis Yudin, *Autistic self-advocate*



Instead of saying this

Use this strength-based language

Rigid

Passionate, dedicated, and persistent

Restricted interest

Knowledgeable and curious about

Off in their own world or spacecadet

Imaginative and creative

Weird or nerdy

Fascinating, eccentric, and individualistic

Hyperactive

Animated

As suggested by Alex Baughns, Autistic self-advocate

1 Use strength-based language

Autism

Let's talk about the "Spectrum" in "Autism Spectrum Disorder."

Picture it as a line stretching from one impact level to another, marked by designations such as "low-functioning" at one end and "high-functioning" at the other.

Terms like "low-functioning" or "high-functioning" can inaccurately depict an individual's reality. These labels bring with them preconceived notions and oversimplifications, often causing more harm than good to those they seek to define.

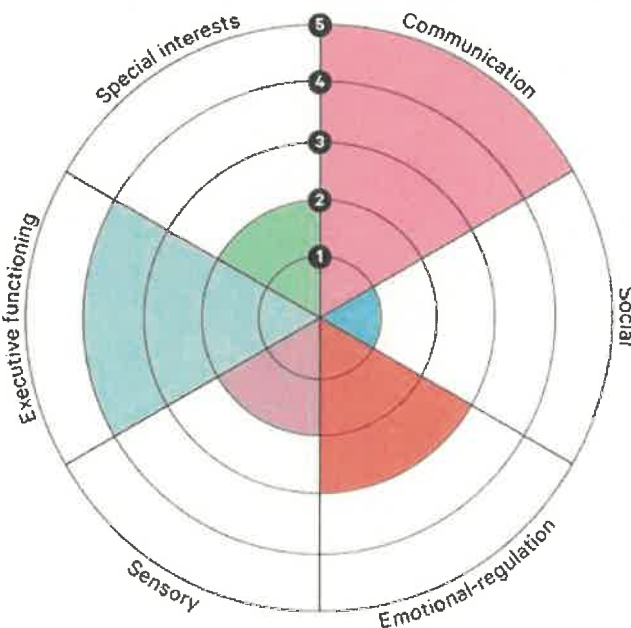
Instead of thinking of the Autism spectrum as linear from "less autistic" to "more autistic," we encourage you to view it more like a spectrum color wheel!

In the Resources section of BIP Visualized, you'll find a "My Autism Spectrum Template." This tool can help your Autistic learners express their experiences, guiding you in understanding where they need support. There's also a "My Spectrum of Support" template that is not diagnostic-specific, but allows learners to self-reflect on their strengths and areas they'd like more support.



Instead of this 

Think of the spectrum like this 



"We all come in all shapes and hues. This is art."

- Alex Baughns, Autistic self-advocate

2 Recognize stimming as self-expression

Problems with aiming to reduce stimming

Many individuals with ASD report that their stims are automatic and uncontrollable

It can be a form of self-regulation and coping with a 'sensory overload'

It can be a form of emotional expression

Suppressing stims makes some individuals feel "more on edge" and "without an outlet"

Instead, try this!

Act as an advocate when discussing programming recommendations with family, teachers, and other providers

If the stim is causing harm, teach alternative ways to self-regulate or express emotions safely

If the stim is impeding learning, introduce sensory accommodations and allow breaks

Normalize stimming with group "movement breaks" where everyone engages in sensory activities

If stimming is impeding learning, it's our responsibility to make the learning environment / activity more engaging.

- Dr. Jonathan Tarbox



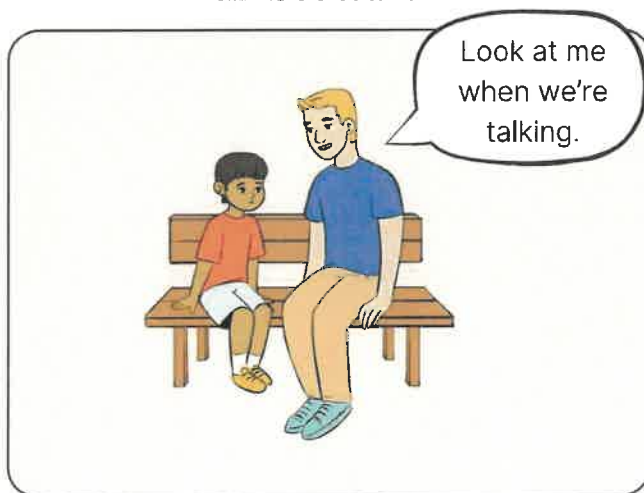
3 Allow natural eye contact preferences

Rethinking engagement


For many neurodivergent individuals, making direct eye contact can feel overwhelming, distracting, or even uncomfortable. Requiring eye contact as a measure of attention or respect disregards these natural differences and can lead to unnecessary anxiety or stress. Instead, respect each learner's unique comfort level with eye contact, recognizing that engagement and understanding are not dependent on where someone looks.

In classrooms, we can move away from the expectation that "listening" means sitting still and facing forward. Many neurodivergent individuals actually focus best when allowed to wiggle or move. To check for engagement, try inviting them to participate in the lesson or observe if they follow directions once the activity begins. Offering inclusive sensory accommodations that support self-regulation is another way to create a neurodiverse-affirming environment, allowing each learner to engage in ways that work best for them.

Instead of



Consider

What is the actual skill you are teaching? 

Whether it is having a conversation or attending to the teacher's lesson, eye contact is likely not even needed to demonstrate that skill. We should allow our learners to be comfortable, especially when learning!

4 Offer meaningful choices

Ways to offer choices

choice of location

choice of time

choice of who to work with

choice of order of tasks

choice of materials to use

by yourself or with help

amount of work

how to demonstrate understanding

Proven impacts

increased motivation and engagement

improved academic outcomes

better overall classroom management

increased self-esteem



Offering choices allows learners to engage in ways that feel comfortable and authentic to them.



5

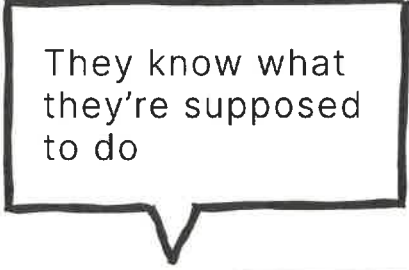
Respond with compassion

Let's talk extinction 

Have you ever instructed someone to ignore a child who seems distressed?

Phrases like “They know what they’re supposed to do,” “Ignore them,” or “They’re doing this for attention” reflect a traditional approach to behavior that can overlook a learner’s immediate needs. “Planned ignoring” is often misinterpreted as ignoring all challenging behavior, regardless of its purpose or context, especially without consistent, high-quality training.


A neurodiverse-affirming approach instead focuses on understanding the reason behind the behavior. Rather than assuming it’s “attention-seeking,” we recognize that every action communicates something real and immediate. Even if a learner has shown a skill before, struggling now may mean they need support. When someone is struggling, they need help—not to be ignored.



They know what they’re supposed to do



Ignore them



They’re doing this for attention

A look at the ethics of extinction 

Behavior analysts have an ethical responsibility to use least restrictive procedures.

- Behavior Analyst Certification Board Code 2.15

Behavior analysts have an ethical responsibility to minimize or eliminate physical guidance.

- Association for Behavior Analysis International

Behavior analysts have an ethical responsibility to treat others with compassion.

- Behavior Analyst Certification Board Core Principle 2

5 Respond with compassion

Are you looking for a more compassionate way to respond to challenging behaviors?



Try this 3-step approach!

Visuals from “Behavior Essentials, Visualized: A teacher’s visual guide to supporting students with diverse needs”



Pause

Pause by remaining calm, addressing immediate safety concerns, validating their emotions, and modeling self-regulation skills to de-escalate the situation.

Redirect

Redirect the learner to try again using the strategies that you have been proactively teaching (e.g. communication, self-regulation, self-advocacy, etc.).

Reward

Once the learner returns to the situation calmly and tries again using the better behavior, provide recognition for their efforts.

6 Honor all communication



All communication is equal 🌅

A neurodiverse-affirming approach values all forms of communication equally, focusing on ensuring that every learner has a voice—whether through an AAC device, sign language, spoken words, or other forms.

This means that when learners communicate with us, we should honor and respond to their message, even if it's through gestures like hand-pulling, pointing, or other nonverbal signals.

By acknowledging their initial communication, we prevent the frustration that comes from asking them to repeat or alter their expression, which can make communication feel like a task rather than a natural interaction. This approach respects their efforts to connect, ensuring that communication remains meaningful and accessible.

Instead of



Try this

Create a natural teaching moment by modeling communication.

In this scenario, the mom could say, "You want up!" before picking her son up. She can also model this phrase in her son's preferred communication mode, such as using sign language, a core board, or an AAC device, depending on what's readily available.

7 Presume competence



To presume competence means believing that every learner has the ability to understand and learn, creating an environment where each individual's potential is recognized and valued.



8 Ways to presume competence

Trust that learners understand us, regardless of their ability to speak

Encourage them to learn in their own ways

Believe in everyone's ability to learn

Avoid discussing learners in their presence out of respect

Provide opportunities that may challenge them

Celebrate all forms of progress

Avoid talking down or simplifying language unnecessarily

Allow them to learn through making mistakes



8

Avoid physical prompting for compliance

Respecting autonomy

Physical prompting, such as guiding a learner's hand to complete a task, can feel invasive and disempowering, especially for neurodivergent individuals who may be more sensitive to touch or physical boundaries. Requiring compliance through physical prompts prioritizes task completion over the learner's comfort and autonomy, which can diminish their sense of agency and trust.

While we aim to promote independence and choice, there are some essential expectations that all children and students need to learn to follow, such as going to school, brushing their teeth, and participating in academics. If learners are resistant to these tasks, rather than physically guiding them to "force compliance," we can consider ways to make the expectation more motivating or approachable.


Try strategies like

Prioritize building a genuine, trusting connection over compliance

Offering choices within the task to give a sense of control

Incorporating their preferences & special interests into daily activities

Offering to help get started as a form of gentle support

 Using an "easy, easy, hard" approach to build confidence and momentum

Breaking the task into smaller, manageable steps

By honoring a learner's "no" (whether verbal or nonverbal), we communicate that their words and actions have value. Ignoring their attempts to set boundaries can set a dangerous precedent, suggesting that their consent isn't important—

a message that can have serious implications as they grow into adults. Instead, by showing respect for their comfort and autonomy, we promote self-advocacy and help them feel secure, both now and in the future.

9 Respect withdrawals of assent

What is assent?

Vocal or nonvocal verbal behavior that can be taken to indicate willingness to participate in research or behavioral services by individuals who cannot provide informed consent (because of age or intellectual impairments).

What behaviors may indicate a withdrawal of assent?

Moving away from a task, person, or activity

Physically turning or looking away

Saying "no," "stop," or similar refusals

Becoming visibly distressed (e.g., crying, frowning, tensing up)

Engaging in self-soothing or self-stimulatory behaviors

Showing signs of discomfort or avoidance (e.g., crossing arms, fidgeting, covering ears)

Decreasing engagement or responsiveness

Withdrawing physically (e.g., hiding, moving to a quieter space)

Using gestures or AAC to communicate a desire to end the activity

Displaying increased agitation or frustration, such as vocal protests or fidgeting



Assent may look like



Entering the workspace without coercion or prompting

Smiling, laughing, engaged with task without prompting

Saying "yes" in their preferred communication mode when asked if they want to participate

How should you respond when your client is showing signs of withdrawing their assent?

Stop what you're doing

Ensure safety

Validate feelings

Provide space, break, comfort

Honor any attempts at communication

How can we be more prepared?

By asking about assent & withdrawal behaviors during initial intake! Ask parents what behaviors their child does when they like/don't like to do something. Explain to parents how & why we will honor their child's withdrawal during assessment & services.

Why does assent matter?

Our clients are human. They deserve dignity. They deserve choice. They deserve to decide what is happening to them & to be taught how to advocate for themselves.

9 Respect withdrawals of assent

Problems with compliance-based therapy

Clients may have little or no input in decisions regarding their priority treatment goals or on the procedures used to teach them

Long-lasting impact on not respecting "no"

4 tips for gaining assent

Use schedules/visuals to explain activities planned for the day

Ask, "What would you like to do first?"

Explain expectations & ask if ready to begin

Maximize choices in every activity

Instead, try this

Incorporate client preferences in materials used, order of tasks, teaching style, and what skills are taught

Provide choices / prioritize shared control in your sessions

Teach choice-making skills

Includes teaching clients how to identify their own preferences

Teach self-advocacy skills



“ If you were being televised during your sessions, would you be proud of what people watched? ”

- Dr. Greg Hanley





To promote socially significant change, it is essential to listen to and incorporate the voices of those we serve, honoring their preferences, lived experiences, and dignity.

Thank you to our neurodiverse collaborators for sharing your knowledge and experiences with us. It's truly a privilege to learn from you and to amplify your voices in our work.