

## Understand the behaviour

Try to work out the reasons for your child's difficult behaviour before attempting to deal with it. Children can thrive and will get the best outcomes when parents (and teachers) focus on creating a suitable environment.

## Support emotional wellbeing

Support your children's emotional wellbeing by focusing on their many positive qualities as well as supporting them with areas they find difficult. Tell them that they're valued for who they are and that it's OK to be different. Regularly remind them that they're loved. Support your child's interests rather than trying to impose on them what you feel they should be doing, and speak positively about them to other people.

## Help others understand

Consider making a friendly, positive booklet about your child, sometimes known as 'personal portfolios' or 'communication passports'. They are useful when your child is starting a new school or meeting people for the first time, going for respite or having hospital visits. The charity Cerebra ([cerebra.org.uk](http://cerebra.org.uk)) provides a free service to help create a personal portfolio.



When it comes to your children, there are no experts! So above all, have confidence in your own parenting.

**Katharine Hill**



Care for the Family creates resources that help to build firm foundations for family life and support those who face family difficulties.

### Resources

**Attend** a local *Time Out for Parents – Children on the Autism Spectrum* course  
**[cff.org.uk/courses](http://cff.org.uk/courses)**

**Visit** the Additional Needs section of our website and sign up for the Additional Needs Support newsletter  
**[cff.org.uk/additional\\_needs](http://cff.org.uk/additional_needs)**

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# Top Tips For Parents

## Raising Autistic Children



**Parenting an autistic child can be both challenging and rewarding. Here are some tips to help you as you care for your child.**

## Stay positive

An autistic child's brain is wired differently<sup>1</sup>, resulting in differences in sensory processing, communication, thinking, doing and learning. These are differences, not deficits. Neurodivergent brains are not inferior to neurotypical brains; neither are better nor worse, they are just different. Many autistic children grow up to live very fulfilled and happy lives, although some aspects of life may always be a challenge for them.

## Why is my child autistic?

The causes of autism are still being looked into. Many experts believe that there isn't one specific cause, and that there are genetic factors. There is no link between autism and vaccines. The theory that parenting styles or social circumstances are responsible has long been disproved. By learning about the neurodivergent brain and making adjustments for them, you will be showing your autistic child that they are loved.

## Help them communicate

Add visual prompts when you talk, using objects and pictures, to reduce your child's anxiety and help them express their feelings. You can use a visual timetable to show your child what's going to happen that day and the order in which it will happen. Try not to raise your voice or talk quickly, as your child will find it harder to communicate if they are stressed. Count to six in your head before expecting an answer. Keep instructions short and simple to ensure your child understands.

## Signs of anxiety

Anxiety is a huge issue for autistic individuals and often the reason behind 'difficult behaviour' in children. Every child is different, but some signs of anxiety include rocking, pacing, tenseness, headaches, tummy aches or school avoidance. You can lessen anxiety by preparing your child for what is coming next. 'Now we get dressed, next we eat breakfast.'

## Masking and meltdowns

Trying to make an autistic child behave more like a neurotypical child may cause harm. 'Masking' is when autistic children work out what they must do or not do in order to fit in at school and be accepted by their peers. 'Masking' takes a huge amount of energy, leaving a child exhausted. Once in the safety of home this child may have a meltdown. Like the contents of a shaken bottle of a fizzy drink, their feelings of overwhelm, confusion and frustration explode, pouring out in distressing and sometimes aggressive ways on parents and siblings. A meltdown is not a tantrum. It is a response to an external stimulus overload which leads to an emotional explosion. Some autistic children simply shut down. They are unable to speak and withdraw completely into their own world.

A child who is experiencing a meltdown is feeling huge anxiety and overwhelming distress. In the middle of a meltdown they will have limited access to the part of their brain that makes judgements, controls impulses, listens to reason, or responds to requests. The behaviour management strategies you use with neurotypical children just won't work. The best way to cope with a meltdown is to get the child to a safe place, where they can regain control.

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<sup>1</sup> Spectrum News, 'Autism brains show widespread alterations in structure', 4 June 2018.

## Pathological demand avoidance

Oppositional behaviour can be a feature of autism and those diagnosed with pathological demand avoidance (PDA) feel driven to excessively avoid demands and expectations. Underpinning this avoidance is a high level of anxiety about social demands and not being in control of the situation. If your autistic child has PDA you will need to research what it means and adapt your parenting accordingly, as the advice given for parenting autistic children doesn't work with PDAers. A couple of helpful strategies include giving them time to process requests and using indirect demands, such as saying 'Race you to the bathroom – I bet I can wash my face before you!' instead of 'Wash your face'.

## Sensory processing

An autistic child may easily become overwhelmed by noise, crowds, lights, smells, and the feel of clothing. Provide ear defenders and dim lights, offer support in crowded places, and be aware of any strong smells or different textures. A seam or shirt label may cause a lot of discomfort, making it almost impossible to concentrate on anything else. Learn about how your child experiences the world and provide the support and resources they need.

