

# Autism Parenting Magazine



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# Parent's Survival Guide to Autism Diagnosis and Treatment

By LaTrese KINNEY, BS, MMFT



**F**acing a new autism diagnosis or treatment plan for your child can be scary, particularly when that plan involves care at a residential treatment program. Your treatment team understands that parenting children with autism can be challenging and exhausting, and they are ready to help. Working together with your treatment team will result in better success for your child at home and school. Here are some tips for parents facing an autism diagnosis and treatment:

## 1. Become Your Child's Biggest Advocate

Read, learn, and continue to research as much as you can about autism and your child's specific diagnosis. Seek out respected organizations to do your research. When you are knowledgeable about your child's diagnosis, you will be able to ask insightful questions about your treatment team and maximize your time with them.

Ask your family physician to refer you to autism specialists who can work with your child and the entire family. Remember, your child's autism affects every member of the family. Finding the right therapist for your family is also important. When searching for a therapist, look for someone who is patient with your child and with you, providing ample time to ask questions and learn from one another. Your family physician also should be armed with good resources, such as identifying the best Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapist or group that is right for your child. The more tools in your tool belt, the better you will be able to advocate for your child.

## 2. Early Intervention Starts at Home

Early intervention is key. With early diagnosis and intervention, negative behaviors can be redirected to positive communication skills.

Children with autism are unique. We must learn to understand and manage their uniqueness. However, where parents often struggle is when those special characteristics manifest into negative behaviors. Avoid falling into thinking that you cannot or should not teach children with autism right from wrong. In other words, do not use the diagnosis as an excuse to allow negative behaviors to persist. For example, if your child is prone to having an outburst in public, addressing the issue early will lead to a greater chance of success in eliminating that behavior instead of falling into bad habits that are hard to reverse later. As children grow older and stronger, changing negative behaviors will become more challenging. A behavioral therapist can give you the tools you need to achieve success.

### 3. Get the Entire Family Involved in Therapy

To have good function in the family, the entire family should be involved in therapy. Maladaptive behaviors affect the entire family—from personal interactions to rules and schedules, but the course of treatment will also affect and be affected by the whole family. It's important for siblings, for example, to share their experiences with the therapist so that their point-of-view is heard. A sibling may have a different experience with his/her sibling who has ASD than the parents and other caregivers. Conversely, a child's therapist may give siblings and family members 'homework' to reinforce lessons learned in therapy. Parents should be sure to heed the treatment team's advice, setting recommended boundaries and consequences at home. If you have multiple children, remember that good social interactions and behaviors are important lessons for the entire family to learn. The behavior plan must encompass all children in the family.

### 4. Trust the Process With Your Family Therapist and Treatment Team

Once you have the right therapist for your family and a solid treatment plan in place, be consistent but also open to trying new techniques. Don't be too discouraged if the plan does not produce perfect results in the first few trials. Continue with the plan, practicing good habits

repeatedly. Consistency is crucial to changing negative behaviors. Remember, each child is unique; share your successes and failures with your therapists so the approach can be slightly modified for better success for a specific child at home and school. Not only will the child with autism need to adapt to some changes, but so too will the entire family. Your treatment team may recommend a new routine, schedule, or even tone of voice to encourage success.

### 5. Reinforce Success at Home

Use the tools you have been given to help your child. Again, adding more tools to your tool belt will lead to a greater chance for success. If the method you have been using is no longer helpful, allow your treatment team to give you new ideas, or "tools," so your family can continue working to become more functional. The key is to be consistent—provide consistent guidelines and consequences for negative behaviors so the child knows there will be a consequence and what it will be. By the same token, also consistently reinforce positive behavior with a desirable consequence or reward. Work with your treatment team to develop a plan that is right for you and your family.



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