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# Autism Parenting Magazine

ISSUE 190

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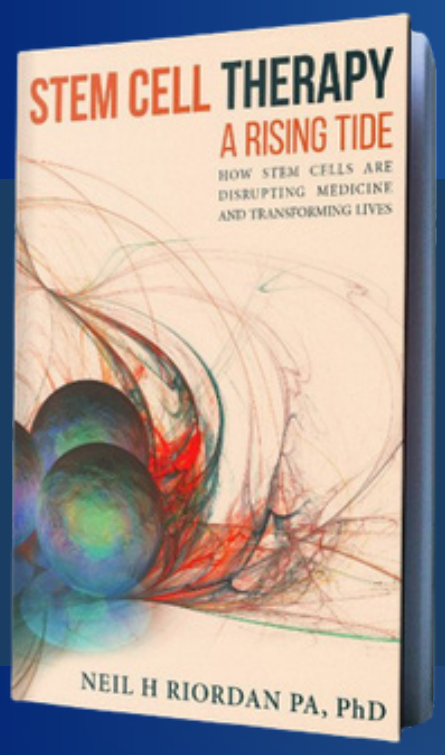


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# Editor's Letter

Dear Readers,

April is Autism Acceptance Month, also called Autism Awareness Month. While many people are aware that autism exists, some may not be as accepting of it. They may not know enough about it. They may also believe they don't know anyone on the spectrum. Chances are, they probably do.

Our theme this month is "Finding Strength in Diversity," and while we are each unique in our own way, not all forms of diversity are embraced. We all know times when we have given a sideways glance to someone or something outside of the ordinary, and we have also been the recipient of one of those glances. Yet we all need to do better. Educating others about autism: what it is, what it means specifically to those we love, and what it might mean for someone else.

We hope the articles we provide each month offer you insights and talking points to help you spread the word and the love. We need to uphold one another and be a voice when someone can't or isn't sure how. Be the strength for someone who is trying to find theirs.

Happy reading!

*Sharon Longo*

Editor
Autism Parenting Magazine

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# Finding Your Tribe: Supporting Social Connections

By **Alicia Cohen**

## Meaningful connections help your child feel safe and understood.

Academics and therapies often dominate discussions of special needs education, but the importance of friendship and belonging cannot be overstated. Every child deserves to feel connected, valued, and part of a community.

For my child, finding his place socially has happened on his own timeline. I have watched him stand alone on the playground, seen birthday party invitations dwindle, and felt that ache of seeing your child struggling to connect.

I have also witnessed moments of genuine connection, unexpected friendships that bloom across year levels, and the joy of finding peers who accept them just as they are.

I have learned that social connections for children with additional needs often develop differently. They may form more slowly, follow uncommon patterns, or look nothing like the friendship groups we remember from our own school days.

Finding a tribe is more than having lots of friends. It's having meaningful connections where your child feels safe, understood, and appreciated.

## Understanding friendship development takes time

Neurodivergent children often process social situations more slowly than neurotypical peers.

Many will find playground interactions too quick to follow, and the constantly changing “rules” of children’s games can be overwhelming to learn consistently.

Many children with additional needs tend to play by themselves or move between groups. Many parents talk about their children’s struggles during recess and lunch breaks, which are normal.

Friendships take time for everyone; they just take even longer for children with additional needs to make and keep.

## Key tips for finding your tribe

Here are a few ways parents and their children can find their tribe:

### Be proactive with school class placements

One of the most effective strategies is being proactive about classroom placements. Give the school a list of your child’s buddies or friends, not just one name, but several options.

Many schools formally request this information before class placements, but if they don’t, reach out anyway. Advocate for your child by explaining why certain friendships are important for their sense of security and adjustment.

Help your child understand how friendship works, explaining that it takes time to develop and is usually based on shared interests.

> “One of the most effective strategies is being proactive about classroom placements. Give the school a list of your child’s buddies or friends, not just one name, but several options.”

Be upfront with them that it’s normal for friendship dynamics to change or for friends to ebb and flow.

There are practical ways to support your child’s social development:

- Organize playdates.
- Attend suitable events.
- Invite other children and their parents over.
- Visit the local park after school and invite others to join.

### Attend and consider hosting inclusive celebrations

It hurts when your child doesn’t receive birthday party invitations. It will happen. Prepare now for disappointment, but know that there are strategies to help navigate this challenging part of childhood social life.

In Pre-K or primary school grades, the whole class or year level may be invited. When this happens, I recommend attending if you can.

Some parties will be challenging. Your child may not have much party experience, and all-class celebrations are big and busy. Go anyway. These events are great opportunities to get to know everyone and often start positive trends for the year.

Consider hosting an all-year or all-class party for your child if this is common in their class. Choose venues that work well for groups: parks during warmer months or play centers in winter.

As your child gets older, all-class parties will happen less frequently, and invitations will naturally decrease. That's okay.

Parties will also evolve from simple park gatherings to more structured activities, such as bowling and roller skating. We prepared our child for a bowling party by taking him to ten-pin bowling during school breaks first, so when the party took place, he knew what to expect.

## Diversify your child's friendship opportunities

Clinical psychologist Andrew Fuller suggests that children should have friendship groups with connections from various backgrounds. This diversity supports their adaptability and reduces the possibility of negative peer influence in later years.

I believe this is important for children with additional needs, and I actively encourage our child to develop friendships with neurodiverse and neurotypical children.

Visiting the local park after school has been highly effective in helping our child meet new friends and diversify their social circle.

> "Your child may not have much party experience, and all-class celebrations are big and busy. Go anyway. These events are great opportunities to get to know everyone and often start positive trends for the year."

He's made friends with children from other year levels. While he's older than his peers, he also enjoys playing with younger children at a similar developmental level.

We deliberately choose activities within his interest areas, such as water play and climbing, to help him meet other children who share those interests.

## Build your own parent support network

Parents also need supportive connections with other parents. While this takes time, you will find parent friends.

You'll quickly identify fellow parents of children with additional needs at school. They often linger until the bell rings to ensure their child enters with everyone else. They also typically wait patiently at day's end, when the school's responsibilities conclude.

These brief encounters at drop-off and pick-up can evolve into meaningful friendships.

One effective way to meet other parents is to volunteer for school excursions, class representative roles, or fundraising events. These opportunities are excellent ways to meet other parents while contributing to your school community.

The special-needs journey often brings parent friendships. Once a term, I meet two other parents of children with additional needs for coffee and breakfast. These catch-ups feel more therapeutic than actual therapy sessions.

Also, look for formal and informal support networks. Local support groups, both face-to-face and online, can provide invaluable understanding that others cannot.

Online groups specific to your child's diagnosis can be lifelines during challenging times, offering advice and resources, along with a place to share frustrations with people who truly understand.

## Moving forward with hope

Social connections for children with additional needs often develop in their own time and in their own way, and that's okay. Different doesn't mean less.

Focus on quality and meaningful connections rather than popularity, and authentic acceptance over forced inclusion.

Be patient with both yourself and your child. Support them in simple, practical ways, such as organizing playdates and explaining friendship dynamics.

Choose social situations carefully and encourage diverse friendships while also building your own support network along the way.

> Focus on quality and meaningful connections rather than popularity, and authentic acceptance over forced inclusion.

Most importantly, celebrate the small victories:

- Your child finds one genuine friend who accepts them as they are.
- Your child successfully navigates a social situation.
- You connect with another parent who understands your experience.

These moments matter.

Finding your tribe takes time, patience, and intentional effort, but the connections built along the way are often deeper and more meaningful because of the journey.

Your child deserves to feel valued and included. With your support and advocacy, they can find their place in the world.

## Reference:

Fuller, Andrew. (2024). Tricky kids: A survival guide for parents. Amba Press. https://www.amazon.com/Tricky-Kids-Survival-Guide-Parents/dp/1923215507

**Alicia Cohen** is an educational publisher and mother of two, whose advocacy journey began when her child was diagnosed with additional needs. Alicia has combined her professional background and lived experience to write the book, Mainstream Primary Schooling Your Special-Needs Child. It is the resource she wished she had while supporting a child with additional needs in a mainstream school setting. Through her work, she aims to help other families navigate the complexities of inclusive education and to build strong, supportive communities for both children and parents.

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# Autism and Assertiveness: When Bossy Is Misunderstood

By **Holly Blanc Moses, MS, LCMHC, LPA**

**Help your child communicate effectively without losing their own voice or strength.**

As an autistic child, I was called rude, disrespectful, selfish, and bossy. I eventually learned: Your words don't matter. You aren't worth understanding. How you say things matters more than what you're trying to say. You're the problem.

So I stopped explaining, asking for help, and telling adults when something was wrong. I learned that my natural way of communicating wasn't safe, so I buried it.

Now, as an autistic adult psychologist working with autistic children and their families, and a parent of an autistic child, I see this pattern repeat.

Correcting your child's tone or labeling their words as "bossy" or "rude" instead of listening to them does not teach respect. It teaches silence.

## What's really happening

Many autistic children communicate very directly, saying exactly what they mean, without softening their words or adjusting their tone to fit social expectations.

They might say "That's not fair" or "We need to do it this way" without the social skills to make it sound like a gentle suggestion.

For adults who rely heavily on tone, facial expression, and indirect language, this directness can come across as controlling or harsh, even if the child is simply trying to be helpful.

What appears "bossy" is often a child trying to communicate needs or solve problems clearly or efficiently. When an autistic child says, "I need you to stop talking" or "That's too loud," they're not being rude. They're stating a sensory or emotional need, the only way they know how.

It usually means their brain is focused entirely on the content of the message, not on managing how it will be received.

When we assume rudeness, disrespect, or controlling behavior, we miss what the child is actually trying to communicate.

As a child, I tried to help, solve problems, ensure fairness, and communicate my needs. Adults only heard my tone, not my intent or genuine attempts to contribute. My directness was punished rather than understood. Eventually, I stopped trying.

## When your nervous system takes over

Your child says something in a tone that triggers an immediate reaction. Your shoulders tense. Your jaw tightens. There's a flash of heat in your chest. Before you've even processed what your child has said, your nervous system has already decided: That was disrespectful.

Your discomfort when your child is direct or uses an unexpected tone is often about your nervous system and cultural expectations, not about their intent.

Many of us were raised in environments where a child's tone and expressing needs directly were seen as entitled or demanding. "Because I said so" was the final word, and any firmness or clarity from a child was treated as defiance that needed to be shut down immediately.

Those experiences are triggered when our children communicate in ways that our nervous system interprets as threatening or demanding.

But your child isn't trying to be demanding. They're speaking directly and clearly in that moment, without the usual social softening that wraps needs into apologies and extra wording.

When my own autistic child says "Right now" without "please" or explanation, the old training kicks in: That's too demanding. I must pause and recognize: This is my history reacting, not my child's intent. They're asking for what they need. I want them to feel safe doing this.

## The autistic child's perspective

Autistic children often experience the world as genuinely unfair or illogical in ways that neurotypical adults have learned to accept or overlook.

- Rules that make no sense
- Constantly shifting expectations
- Genuinely painful or overwhelming sensory experiences

When an autistic child says "That's not fair," "That doesn't make sense," or "I need you to stop," they're often stating an observable truth or a genuine need that others have learned to ignore or suppress.

"Bossiness" or "being demanding" may actually be a desperate attempt to create predictability in unpredictable environments or to communicate urgent sensory or emotional needs.

When a child says, "We have to do it this way," they may be expressing what genuinely feels necessary for them to participate, rather than trying to control others. Direct communication can be the most efficient and honest form of interaction.

Autistic children speaking directly are often communicating with remarkable clarity. From the autistic child's perspective: I said exactly what I meant and told you what I need. Why is everyone mad at me?

## When good intentions go wrong

Here's what makes this so challenging: Most parents are doing exactly what the school told them to do.

- "Work on tone."
- "Teach your child to ask nicely."

Educators add it to IEP goals. Therapists add it to treatment goals. Parenting books warn against raising entitled, demanding children. Family members question whether you're being "too soft."

The problem is that the guidance itself misunderstands autistic communication.

When autistic children are overwhelmed, their tone often reflects their dysregulation, not their intent.

The following can affect how words come out:

- Sensory overload
- Difficult transitions
- Confusion
- Anxiety or frustration

Assuming the behavior is disrespectful or unreasonably demanding, rather than a sign of distress, misses the point and makes the situation worse.

Children learn that adults are listening for mistakes, not meaning, monitoring tone, neurotypical politeness markers, and whether requests sound appropriately hesitant and apologetic. Children learn that stating their needs is bad.

When children repeatedly feel misunderstood, many begin to mask and speak less. They experience more anxiety, monitoring every word for how it might be received. They've learned that making themselves as small and quiet as possible is the safest way to exist.

Parents may notice their child struggling to self-advocate and avoiding seeking help from others. Rather than reflecting a lack of social skills, this change may be related to numerous daily corrections over the years. They learned that expressing their needs often leads to punishment or criticism.

I became adept at silence, making myself small and agreeable by swallowing my words and my needs. It took decades to find my voice again, trusting that what I have to say matters, that speaking clearly isn't a character flaw, and that having needs doesn't make me bad or demanding.

Neither of us wants that for your child.

## Assertiveness is a strength to protect

Many autistic children get labeled as bossy or demanding when they are actually demonstrating

- Strong self-awareness
- Clear communication of needs
- Natural problem-solving skills
- A healthy sense of justice

These are strengths, not deficits.

Being able to say “This doesn’t feel fair,” “I need help,” “That won’t work for me,” or “I need this to stop,” is necessary for independence, emotional safety, and healthy relationships.

These skills will help your child set boundaries and protect themselves from harm throughout their life.

When adults assume positive or neutral intent first, and recognize that this isn’t being demanding, children learn that their words are worth understanding and that their needs and voices matter.

The goal is to help children communicate effectively while keeping their own voice and recognizing that their needs are legitimate.

## A tool for the moment

When you feel the impulse to correct your child or think “that’s disrespectful,” try these actions:

- **Notice your body’s sensations.** My chest is tight. I feel defensive.
- **Name the story you’re telling yourself.** I’m assuming disrespect or entitlement. I’m telling myself my child is being demanding. People will think I’m a bad parent.

- **Get curious instead of furious.** What else might be true? What do they need right now? Is this really demanding, or is it clear?
- **Respond to the need, not the tone or delivery.** “I care about you and want to help.”

This pause, or brief moment of self-awareness, can mean connection and learning to trust, rather than silencing your child’s voice.

## Responding supportively

Instead of reacting to how something sounded or labeling directness as demanding, focus on what your child might mean:

- “It sounds like this is really important to you.”
- “It sounds like you may be trying to solve a problem.”
- “Can you show me what is bothering you?”
- “I can hear that you need something. I want to help you.”

Before correcting tone, ask yourself:

- What is my child actually trying to communicate?
- Are they overwhelmed, frustrated, or anxious?

- Am I reacting to the tone or directness, or to the meaning?
- Is this actually demanding, or is it just clear?

## When you get it wrong

Like me, you'll get this wrong sometimes. You'll correct your child's tone or tell them they're being bossy instead of listening to their needs. Old patterns run deep.

When it occurs, repair is more important. Tell your child:

- "I reacted instead of listening to the words you said. That wasn't fair. Can we try again?"
- "I called you demanding when you were just telling me what you needed. I'm sorry. Your needs matter."

These words teach your child:

- Mistakes can be repaired.
- Adults can be wrong and own it.
- Your voice still matters, even when I mess up.
- Having needs and stating them clearly doesn't make you demanding or bad.

## The long-term stakes

Daily moments of being corrected and dismissed, rather than being heard and understood, accumulate.

I learned that my needs and perspective didn't matter as much as other people's comfort. My silence made me easier to manage. It also made me more vulnerable to abuse as a child and as an adult.

You can help change your child's story:

- Be curious rather than corrective.
- Regulate your own nervous system before responding to your child's tone or directness.
- Look for the meaning and need beneath the words.

You'll teach your child:

- They are valued and worth understanding.
- Their voice matters.
- They can trust themselves and you.

That foundation of trust and self-worth changes everything.

**Holly Blanc Moses, MS, LCMHC, LPA,** is a mom and neurodivergent therapist (AuDHD) who has supported autistic and ADHD individuals for 28 years. She hosts the popular podcast, The Autism ADHD Podcast; provides monthly online parent workshops on essential topics such as anxiety, social interaction, and emotional regulation; facilitates online parent coaching groups; and offers continuing education for neurodiversity-affirming therapists. Holly is the owner of Crossvine Counseling, a private practice specializing in supporting neurodivergent children, teens, and adults with mental health therapy and evaluations in Raleigh, NC. Most importantly, she's the mother of two neurodivergent boys.

www.crossvinecounseling.com; www.hollyblancmoses.com

https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-autism-adhd-podcast/id1485255815

# Q&A With Dr. Temple Grandin

**This month, Dr. Temple Grandin answers questions about nonverbal communication and aggression.**

Judi of New York asks: “What is the most important thing I can do to help my nonverbal autistic child communicate and feel understood?”

First, I need to know the child’s age. I’m not sure if the child is producing language sounds, and I’d like to ask a few more questions.

If you’re working with a young child, such as a three-year-old, always encourage the use of words. I didn’t speak until I was four years old.

Some individuals who are nonverbal can learn to type using communication boards or tablets. Many individuals have learned to type even if they can’t speak. This needs to be encouraged.

One area where they might struggle is attention shifting. For example, on a desktop, the keyboard is located at the bottom, but the print appears way up on the screen, making it very difficult to shift attention.

This is why a tablet is recommended, because the print appears right next to the keyboard.

Years ago, an innovative teacher placed the portable keyboard high on the front of the monitor,

so the print appeared right next to the top of the keyboard.

There are several good books on the topic of nonspeaking autistic individuals, including “Carly’s Voice,” “The Reason I Jump,” and “How Can I Talk if My Lips Don’t Move?”

The sequel to “The Reason I Jump” is a much better book because Naoki, the boy who wrote it, is older. He discusses problems such as difficulty controlling movement, trembling, and the visual system.

Those books are must-reads for parents of older, autistic, nonspeaking individuals.

However, if the child is younger, let’s say around three, you want to work on teaching them some words and speaking clearly and slowly.

When the grown-ups spoke too quickly, the conversation became gibberish. I actually thought that adults had their own special adult language.

So when I was three, the emphasis was on my program, and there was no forced eye contact. It was on learning words and being encouraged to use them.

There was also a lot of emphasis on turn-taking games. Learning to wait and take turns in games is important, as well as daily living skills such as getting dressed, combing one’s hair, using a spoon and utensils**,** and other similar tasks.

It depends on the child’s age.

**Q** Tanya of Bulgaria asks: “How do you think aggressive behavior can be prevented in a nonverbal child with autism at the age of 10, during puberty, and for the future?”

**A** We need to look at what is triggering the aggressive behavior. One of the first things to rule out is a hidden, painful medical problem such as acid reflux, constipation, an ear infection, a toothache, heartburn, or a urinary tract infection.

There have been horrendous cases of untreated severe urinary tract infections and other terrible, hidden, painful medical conditions that were not treated.

Does the person grab their stomach? Maybe they have constipation or acid reflux. These things all cause pain, and you need to make sure they don’t have those types of medical problems.

They can’t express that they’re in pain, but they’re going to act out in some way, so these things have to be ruled out.

Then, you need to consider the next factor: frustration. If an individual cannot communicate, they must be given a way, even if it is as simple as a picture board or another means of communication.

Then is it sensory overload? Are they more likely to get aggressive in the middle of a super busy, noisy train station? You need to look at where it's happening and then rule out those factors.

There are some individuals who, once you rule out those three things, get aggressive and manipulate. I've heard of situations where individuals are perfect at school but behave badly at home, or behave well at home but badly at school.

What is needed is for there to be consequences and for the parents and the school to work together as a team.

If I was aggressive when I was about 10, I had to go without television for one night, and the same rule applied at school.

Start by ruling out any hidden medical issues. Then, make sure they have a way to communicate.

Watch and see if sensory overload or frustration is triggering the behavior. Also, remember that consequences must be consistent at home and school.

**Temple Grandin, PhD,** is a Distinguished Professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University. Many companies worldwide use facilities she has designed to handle livestock. She has also been instrumental in implementing animal welfare auditing programs used by McDonald's, Wendy's, Whole Foods, and other corporations. Temple has appeared on numerous television shows, including 20/20 and Prime Time. Her books include Thinking in Pictures, Livestock Handling and Transport, and The Autistic Brain. Her books, Animals in Translation and Visual Thinking, have been on the New York Times Bestseller List. Temple was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in September 2017. In 2022, she was named a Colorado State University Distinguished Professor, and in 2023, she was inducted into the Colorado Authors' Hall of Fame.

# Helping My Adult Child with Social Cues

By **Maggie McGarvie, SLP**

**Parents can help their older children recognize social cues for better interactions.**

A student once sincerely told me I was “halfway to pretty” while his teacher was “all the way to pretty.” It was not meant to be an insult, and he had no idea he had offended me.

He was confused and upset when his teacher reprimanded him for being “mean.”

Just because we “teach” social skills does not mean that children or adults understand them.

If you are concerned about your child’s social skills, know that you play a crucial role in supporting their social skills development, no matter how old they become.

Research shows that up to 80% of autistic children experience significant difficulties with interpreting nonverbal social cues. Despite this, social communication is often assumed, rather than taught, leaving many students misunderstood or isolated.

These students grow into adults, believing they are “wrong” or do not fit in. We have failed these individuals as a society, and that needs to change.

Social communication can be divided into two subgroups: verbal and nonverbal. Let’s look at each one more closely.

## Verbal communication

Verbal communication refers to the actual words people say. On the surface, it may seem more straightforward for some autistic individuals to learn because words can be concrete and teachable.

Yet, in real-world conversations, verbal communication is often anything but simple. Everyday speech is filled with nuance—sarcasm, idioms, exaggeration, rhetorical questions, and small talk—which can all be confusing and overwhelming for individuals who process language more literally.

For example, when asking "How are you?" most people expect a brief, polite response such as "Good, thanks," rather than a detailed explanation.

An autistic person may feel compelled to share exactly how they're feeling. "I'm tired because I didn't sleep well, and I'm also kind of hungry." This could create misunderstandings or feelings of rejection if their honesty is dismissed or ignored.

One of the most effective strategies is to model clear, concrete language and explain figurative expressions as they arise in everyday life. Using visuals and role-playing conversations, and breaking down common social scripts (such as greetings or small talk), can also help.

Let your child know it's okay to ask questions when something doesn't make sense, and that communication is a skill that everyone learns over time.

When a child feels safe to practice language and explore misunderstandings, parents can build their confidence and ability to connect with others more comfortably.

## Nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication includes all the ways we communicate without words: facial expressions, body posture, eye contact, gestures, tone of voice, and even personal space.

> Depending on the person or situation, a smile can mean happiness, politeness, nervousness, or even sarcasm. A shift in tone of voice might signal annoyance, but without clear context, that cue can be missed or misinterpreted.

These subtle cues often can carry as much meaning as spoken language, sometimes even more.

Yet, for many autistic individuals, interpreting and using nonverbal communication can be especially challenging. Unlike words, these cues can be more abstract, highly variable, and dependent on context.

Depending on the person or situation, a smile can mean happiness, politeness, nervousness, or even sarcasm. A shift in tone of voice might signal annoyance, but without clear context, that cue can be missed or misinterpreted.

Eye contact, which many people expect during conversation, might feel uncomfortable or overwhelming for some autistic individuals. This could lead others to misread their intentions or level of interest.

These challenges don't mean your child doesn't care; it simply means they process the social information in a different way. Nonverbal cues are often unspoken expectations in communication, which can be difficult to identify and respond to appropriately.

Parents can help by gently drawing attention to nonverbal cues during everyday interactions. Pointing out, "Did you notice how her face changed when she got excited?" can help build awareness over time.

Using video modeling, mirrors, or photos to explore facial expressions and gestures can also make these abstract concepts more concrete. Practicing social scenarios together in a low-pressure environment can boost your child's confidence and understanding.

Importantly, honoring your child's own nonverbal communication style, whether that includes less eye contact or unique ways of moving and expressing themselves, fosters self-acceptance while still supporting growth.

## Empathy and the double empathy issue

One misconception is that autistic individuals don't express empathy. However, many autistic people experience deep emotional understanding and care for others. They may express it differently or struggle to read the social cues that neurotypical individuals rely on.

This communication difference can create a disconnect that's often mistaken for a lack of empathy.

This is where the Double Empathy Problem enters. The concept suggests that social misunderstandings between autistic and non-autistic people are not one-sided. Instead, they stem from both groups having different ways of experiencing and interpreting the world.

Just as autistic individuals may find it hard to read neurotypical social signals, neurotypical individuals may also struggle to understand autistic communication, behaviors, and emotional expression.

Despite this, social skills training often focuses solely on teaching autistic individuals how to "fit in" with neurotypical norms. Rarely are neurotypical peers, teachers, or family members taught to better understand and adapt to autistic communication styles.

Real connection happens when both sides work toward mutual understanding. Parents can

help bridge this gap by supporting their child in learning social skills and educating siblings, peers, and others about autistic communication.

Encouraging neurotypical children to be curious, open-minded, and respectful of different communication styles promotes empathy in both directions. This lays the foundation for more authentic, inclusive relationships.

## Masking and creating a neurodiversity-affirming society

Parents must help autistic individuals navigate social communication and build meaningful skills. They should also teach them not to mask to hide their natural ways of thinking, feeling, and interacting just to appear more "neurotypical."

Masking might include forcing eye contact, suppressing stimming behaviors, or mimicking social scripts without true understanding.

While this can sometimes lead to short-term social acceptance, long-term masking has been linked to increased anxiety, exhaustion, depression, and a diminished sense of self.

The goal of social communication support should be to empower an autistic person to connect with others in a way that feels comfortable, authentic, and sustainable. Supporting self-advocacy, emotional regulation, and mutual respect, rather

than conformity, helps autistic individuals build relationships without compromising who they are.

Parents, caregivers, and professionals can model this by valuing authenticity over appearance and by focusing on communication that works for the individual, not what society expects.

## Seek support for help with social connection

Parents are encouraged to seek professional support to nurture social connections in meaningful ways. This might include speech-language pathologists, therapists, social coaches, or support groups for both your child and you.

These resources provide practical tools and guidance, as well as spaces to connect with others who truly understand your experiences.

Surrounding yourself with a community of support makes it easier to learn, grow, and advocate for your child and for a more understanding and inclusive society.

## Reference:

Milton, D., Gurbuz, E., & López, B. (2022). The 'double empathy problem': Ten years on. Autism, 26(8), 1901-1903. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221129123

**Maggie McGarvie, SLP,** is a neurodiversity-affirming pediatric speech-language pathologist with 16 years of experience, specializing in helping families connect with and understand their autistic child(ren). She shares insights on sensory needs, language, play, and behavior on her YouTube channel to help families who are feeling lost.

https://www.instagram.com/yourathomeslp/

https://www.youtube.com/@YourAtHomeSLP/playlists

# **Success Story:** Becoming Stronger Together

**Barbara Vokatis shares what she and her daughter have learned on their autism journey. Have a success story you want to share? Click here.**

When my daughter, Kalina, turned 18 in January 2025, I thought about sharing our journey and the challenges of parenting an autistic child. This seemed the perfect moment to share what we both learned with other parents, especially those just starting their journey and seeking guidance.

While writing this, I reflected on what we both can celebrate. It became clear that we had become different people, and our connection deepened. This becoming is what I see as a successful outcome.

## Learning, observing, and understanding

My child was diagnosed with autism 12 years ago. At the time, I did not know anything about autism, viewing it as something not very positive. I worried about an autistic label lowering expectations for my child.

At the same time, I knew these labels were necessary to receive services. From the beginning, I saw how hard it was to get everything my child needed.

I consider myself lucky because I was given the chance to see how an extraordinary autistic mind develops and matures throughout the years. While some parents wish their children did not grow up so quickly, my feelings are different.

I find myself drawn to the curiosity of discovering how my child's artistic talents will continue to develop. I have also become the learner and observer of every detail, artistic choice, and inspiration. I have learned to cherish the different ways of thinking, seeing the world, and interacting with it.

I have learned, as a mother and educator, how critical it is always to ask the child why they act in certain ways so that we can understand first.

My child grew as well, understanding where their talents and interests lie and where they can shine. They now have a clearer direction for the future after high school, having become more self-aware of their potential.

## Lessons in resilience

In our becoming, we learned resilience. For me, it is also the way I look at obstacles and setbacks. I see them as opportunities to be curious, activate myself for a new solution, and persevere with what I'm trying to achieve.

Learning how to do hard things in life is no small skill, and I learned that through many obstacles and setbacks on this journey. If something takes so long, you eventually develop a set of skills and self-care strategies that help you survive while facing frequent challenges.

> "Today, Kalina understands the value of originality, realizing that sometimes speaking extensively about interests might not be the best idea."

> "My child grew as well, understanding where their talents and interests lie and where they can shine."

Today, I truly value these experiences and the skills they taught me. These lessons in resilience shaped me deeply. Kalina also developed resilience in their own way, along with a better understanding of their autistic being.

## Advice for others

When Kalina was small, they didn't understand that children did not like the way they tried to make friends by sharing a lot about their interests. Kalina thought they were rejected simply for being different.

I explained that it might be intense for others to hear so much about one's interests. The real issue, however, was that those children had not learned about the value of different minds and that it's okay to make friends in different ways.

Today, Kalina understands the value of originality, realizing that sometimes speaking extensively about interests might not be the best idea. Therefore, it is better to regulate it.

Kalina wants others to look for strength within themselves and to be patient when making new friends.

What once felt like a difficult journey has become a story of resilience, growth, and connection. Autism, once a source of fear for me, is now a lens through which I see strength, creativity, and hope.

Our becoming is the true success—a story still unfolding, meant to inspire others to see what is possible.

# Strategies for Understanding and Supporting Nonverbal Cues

By **Susan Berkowitz, MS, CCC-SLP, Ret., MEd**

**Here are strategies to help support your nonverbal child's communication.**

Every child communicates, although it may not always look traditionally "social." Many autistic children understand and use information in different ways from those observed in neurotypical children. These processing differences often shape how they rely on both verbal and nonverbal cues.

When you understand why your child communicates the way they do, you're better equipped to meet them where they are and support their interactions in ways that feel natural and respectful.


## Understanding the why

A helpful starting point is to recognize that many autistic children experience the world with unique auditory processing patterns. This doesn't mean they can't understand language. Hearing words and interpreting meaning may take several steps.

### Hearing and meaning happen separately

Processing spoken language can take longer. The brain must sort through details, organize information, and filter out distractions before

responding. A child might hear every word you say clearly, but may need more time to understand what they heard and plan a response.

Conversations are often rapid, and everyday environments are filled with background noise or unexpected interruptions that can be demanding for the brain. When this happens, a child may seem disengaged or inattentive when they may actually be working through a demanding processing load.

## Sensory overload

Sensory overload adds another layer of complexity. Many children navigate environments in which lights, movement, sounds, textures, or emotional energy compete for their attention. When the nervous system is managing multiple sensory inputs, fewer resources may be available for interpreting and responding to language.

Many autistic children hear individual words or sounds rather than catching the broad idea first. That can be a strength for precision tasks, but it can make fast-paced conversation harder to follow.

During these moments, nonverbal communication such as movement, facial expressions, gaze shifts, gestures, or posture changes often becomes a more comfortable and effective way for them to stay connected.

Gestures, pictures, objects, written words, or AAC systems often provide the brain with another way to interpret meaning. For many autistic children, multimodal input can be clearer and more predictable than speech alone.

## Neurological reasons

Nonverbal communication can feel natural for many autistic children for neurological reasons. Some individuals are strongly attuned to visual patterns or physical movement. Others absorb information best through routines, actions, or shared activities rather than spoken instruction.

Recognizing this, it becomes easier to see their communication as something rooted in a different,

equally valid way of processing the world. A child may need a longer pause before responding. That pause is not avoidance, defiance, or confusion; it's processing time.

When adults slow down and build in extra space, communication becomes more successful and less stressful for the child.

## Core strategies

You can support your child by intentionally modeling communication strategies that align with their strengths:

- Use clear, purposeful gestures to support your words. (Pat the seat beside you when saying "Come sit," or tap the object you're talking about.)
- Pause after giving information to allow your child to process without feeling rushed.
- Match your child's communication mode. (If they glance at a snack, point to it and label it: "Crackers. You want crackers?")
- Incorporate visuals to reinforce understanding (objects, photos, or written words).

### Reduce sensory load to support comprehension

You can also support your child's comprehension by reducing sensory distractions when sharing important information.

- Turn off background noise when giving directions.
- Dim lights.
- Move to a quieter space.
- Use short, direct statements paired with a gesture or visual if your child is overwhelmed.
- Create small "communication-friendly" spaces in your home, such as quiet corners with softer lighting where connection feels easier.

When using these strategies, remember that your child is not overlooking communication cues. They communicate in ways that align with how their brains take in and organize the world.

Recognizing and responding to these cues creates a connection that feels comfortable, predictable, and respectful.

## Supporting your child's natural communication style

Most children have a communication style that already works for them. Your role is to understand and support it. Children share information in many ways:

- Eye gaze
- Movement
- Facial expressions
- Gestures
- Stimming
- Vocalizations

Each of these reflects an attempt to express needs, regulate emotions, or stay connected.

For example, stimming often helps a child stay focused or grounded. It may convey excitement or stress, or help them organize their thoughts.

Here are some ways to support your child's natural communication:

- **Link their nonverbal cue with meaningful language**. When your child looks toward something they want, walk with them, touch or hold the item, and model a simple phrase or AAC button press.
- **Acknowledge their feelings**. If your child expresses excitement through movement, jumping, pacing, flapping, say, "I see you're excited. Want to show me what you're looking at?"
- **Offer choices**. Hold up two objects or pictures. Many children process visual information more comfortably than speech alone.
- **Build predictable pauses into routines**. When preparing a snack, open the container, pause, and wait for any signal, such as an eye gaze, gesture, or vocalization, before taking the next step.

- **Narrate what you see in a calm, straightforward way**: “You’re looking at the door. Ready to go outside?” This validates their communication while providing language that matches the moment.

## Supporting nonverbal strengths with AAC or other tools

AAC, gestures, signs, or written language are equally valid ways toward meaningful interaction. Encourage your child to show you what they want by pointing, leading you by the hand, or bringing an item, and respond as if they were using words. This is how they learn their communication works.

Keep AAC available at all times, not only during structured activities. Use it yourself to model comments, requests, or shared observations. Modeling demonstrates how AAC works without creating pressure to imitate.

Affirm or confirm what it is your child is trying to communicate. Then you can model the use of an alternative mode.

Photos of real items can help connect spoken words with meaning, though symbol systems often offer clearer, less visually cluttered options.

When you treat these methods as meaningful, you show your child that their communication matters. This builds confidence, reduces frustration, and creates a foundation for more complex communication over time.

## Finding the right pathway

There isn’t one “correct” way to communicate. What matters is discovering what helps your child feel understood and ready to engage.

Notice when communication seems easiest for them. It may occur during predictable routines, movement-based activities, quiet environments, or when they have access to AAC. These patterns tell you where to focus.

When you build communication around your child’s strengths rather than expectations, language develops more naturally and without pressure. You create a communication environment that honors who they are and supports steady growth over time.

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# Dispelling Nonspeaking Myths: The Resilience of My Voice

By **Navreet Kulkarni**

**A nonspeaking man on the autism spectrum dispels myths and offers hope to others.**

‘Nonspeaking is nonthinking’ is a misconception; a myth I wanted to change in society. I am a nonspeaking autistic, but my voice is more powerful.

People believe that gesturing is the only mode of communication, and others relate my gestures to a behavioral disorder. My feelings and emotions were judged in the wrong way, labeling me with anxiety disorder and tantrums.

## An explanation of speech

My ear was filled with more thoughts, but decoding them through speaking was very challenging and complex. Speech is a motor action, and communication is a cognitive action. Combining these two forms creates an oral way of communication.

The connection between the left and right hemispheres of the brain is important for speech and language development. However, when a person is dealing with complexity, channeling the right and left hemispheres of the brain affects their speaking abilities.

I had unlimited thoughts, waking up at midnight and walking like a fox to deal with them. My gestures were limited to only need-based communication. Nightmares held my mind, trying to escape the trap because I was unable to express my dreams through gestures.

## Self-advocacy and helping others

Being a nonspeaker was not my fault, but being noncommunicative made me a ghost, my tree of knowledge buried under emojis. Having been rescued from others' brutal behavior, I am now able to fight for my own self-advocacy.

RRR is my icon: **R**evolving towards building inclusive communities, **r**escuing nonspeakers from harassment, and **r**ecreating a holistic approach.

I am helping the community by sharing my insights so others can know more about nonspeaking autistics. "Acceptance is not just saying I am there for you. Acceptance is dealing effectively with diversity."

More than understanding, I wish people would respect me as I am. Once people start respecting neurodivergent individuals, then the real inclusion begins.

## Changing the mindset

Some people believe that nonspeaking autistics are not meant to learn academics because they cannot speak or write. I have proven that wrong.

When I was around eight, my mother taught me functional academics using flash cards and educational apps. Writing was a big challenge, as I struggle with motor challenges.

My mother introduced me to typing to help me learn academics. Slowly, that emerged into communication. I began expressing my day-to-day needs, feelings, and emotions by typing on a tablet and pointing at a letter board I created and customized to my needs.

> Communication is the complete process of understanding language and interpreting it in both verbal and nonverbal modes. Society should know that communication doesn't only occur through speech.

My wisdom of words evolved into a powerful voice for promoting the inclusion of AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication). The author within me came out, bringing forth unique perceptions, thoughts, and spiritual knowledge through beautiful articles and poems.

Teaching verbal education provides nonspeakers with freedom of speech, and I desperately want them to receive education. As a nonspeaker, I make my gestures with my hands and read with my mind.

My reader in my mind is always in a hurry to decode information, but my fingers are a little slow to express it. This is the sad reality. I want people to understand the way nonspeakers communicate through AAC. My interpretation of "AAC" is "Allow All To Communicate" because communication is a right of every human being.

## Understanding the differences between speech and communication

Speech is a form of communication in which a person uses oral motor skills to express their thoughts and needs.

Communication is the complete process of understanding language and interpreting it in both verbal and nonverbal modes. Society should know that communication doesn't only occur through speech.

A person who uses words to describe an action, orally or in writing, is called verbal; people should know the difference between nonspeaking and nonverbal.

## Tips and encouragement for nonspeakers

Here are some tips I would like to suggest for AAC users:

- Don't feel that using AAC is stopping you from speaking orally.
- Grow with AAC through multimodal communication.
- Connecting with people using AAC is more comfortable than speaking orally.
- Make your life easier with communication.

Last but not least, I want to let nonspeakers know that communication is the key to exposure. Don't lose hope with others who are skeptics. People will see our talents when we become more expressive.

**Navreet Kulkarni** is a writer who uses the wisdom of his words to spread neurodiversity inclusion. He is a nonspeaking autistic and uses AAC for communication. He has created his own letter board for communication, with his parents' support, reaching out to many nonspeaking autistic families and providing customized letter boards for each child's needs. He has published several books and written numerous articles and stories, aiming to help many people overcome their challenges and to change people's mindsets toward individuals with special needs. He has won several awards for his work.

# Before Sending That Email: A Parent-Teacher Advocacy Perspective

By **LaRaesha Kugel, MEd**

**A former teacher explains how she advocates for her son at school with a thoughtful, collaborative approach.**

I have written countless emails to my son's teachers, but I haven't sent most of them. Over the years, I've learned an important lesson: Advocating for my autistic child requires understanding the school system and trusting it.

Before becoming a mom, I was a teacher, which shaped the kind of mother I have become. I always felt confident as an educator, but taking on the parent role has required a shift in perspective.

It's not always easy to remove my "teacher hat" when advocating for my child, but I've learned it is essential for supporting my son and his teachers.

## Trust the process even when it's hard

As a teacher, I worked to build trust with my students' families, hoping they knew I was doing my best to support their children. I wanted parents to feel comfortable communicating with me and to trust my expertise and judgment.

Now, as a parent, I remind myself that my son's teachers deserve that same level of trust. Yet, trusting the process isn't always easy.

When your child comes home from school and struggles with an assignment or feels frustrated or misunderstood, the immediate instinct is to fix

it. We want to shield our children from discomfort and advocate when we sense something is wrong.

Yet, I've learned that not every challenge requires immediate intervention. Some moments are opportunities for my son to develop resilience, communication skills, and self-advocacy.

## Write an email, but don't send it immediately

When I feel concerned or think I know the whole story, I write an email, but I don't send it right away. First, I take two important steps to ensure my message is constructive:

- **I leave the "To" field blank**. This prevents me from sending the email impulsively and gives me time to reflect.

- **I reread the email from the teacher's perspective.** This helps me determine whether my message is truly helpful.

Taking this pause often changes my approach. Sometimes, I realize the issue isn't as urgent as it initially felt. Other times, I change my wording to make my message collaborative rather than confrontational.

## Questions to ask before hitting send

Before finalizing an email, I ask myself three key questions:

### Is it helpful?

Does my insight help solve a problem for my child? Will this email strengthen collaboration with the teacher? Am I offering information that truly adds value, or am I venting frustration?

### Is it necessary?

Is this an issue I need to address, or is it an opportunity for my son to practice self-advocacy? Is the teacher likely already aware of and handling the situation?

### Is it kind?

How might my tone be perceived? Have I stuck to the facts, or has emotion taken over? Would I feel comfortable receiving this message as a teacher?

If I can't confidently answer "yes" to all three, I step away instead of sending it.

## Building a partnership with teachers

My goal is to advocate and to build a partnership. I want my son's teachers to see me as a team player, not an adversary. I want them to know that I respect their work and trust their judgment.

Reserving my emails for the moments that matter creates a more effective support team for my son, benefiting him more than a hastily sent message ever could. This doesn't mean I never speak up. Advocacy is still an essential part of parenting a child on the spectrum. However, I've learned that how I advocate is as important as when I advocate.

The more thoughtfully I approach communication with my son's teachers, the more successful our collaboration becomes.

If you ever hesitate before hitting "send," give yourself the grace to reflect.

Trust the teachers who are working with your child every day. Then, when the time comes to advocate, do so in a way that builds bridges, not barriers.

**LaRaesha Kugel, MEd,** has 15+ years in education and a decade as an autism mom. LaRaesha offers a unique, honest approach to supporting all children, especially those on the spectrum. She founded A Spectrum of Support to share her story, insights, and resources with others.

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A Spectrum of Support

# Learning in Nature's Classroom

By **James Watts, PhD**

## Can nature offer more calm and less stimulation for those who experience traditional classrooms differently?

Parents of a child with autism know that the traditional classroom isn't always the right fit. The space can have bright lights, noise, and often rigid expectations that don't fully respect the child's unique personality.

Nature offers something different: calm, space, and freedom to grow at one's own pace.

For many children on the autism spectrum, each with unique sensory needs, communication styles, and learning rhythms, nature-based learning can offer relief, as well as transformation.

## Why nature helps children with autism thrive

Nature-inspired learning respects how your child experiences the world. Some children have sound or texture sensitivities. Some need to move often or retreat into quiet. Nature allows for all of this.

A breeze doesn't overstimulate. Trees don't demand eye contact. The forest doesn't rush. Outdoors, learning feels less like pressure and more like discovery.

Studies show that natural settings help regulate stress, improve focus, and support emotional well-being, all of which are essential for children with autism.

## A gentler sensory world

Fluorescent lighting, echoing hallways, and crowded classrooms can be overwhelming.

Nature, by contrast, offers a sensory-rich environment that feels safe and predictable. The rustle of leaves, birdsong, or the feel of cool grass can gently ground your child in the present moment.

Outside, your child has more control. They can move, sit in silence, or walk alone without being singled out. This freedom supports self-regulation and reduces the likelihood of sensory overload or meltdowns.

## Following your child's fascination

Many children with autism have special interests that they are passionate about. In nature, these passions can become learning pathways.

A child who is curious about birds might track migration patterns, draw feathers, or build a feeder. Fascination isn't a distraction; it provides engagement across subjects like science, art, and language.

Rather than forcing a curriculum to fit your child, nature-inspired learning invites the curriculum to grow from your child's interests.

## Social growth without social pressure

For children who find group interaction challenging, traditional classrooms can feel socially exhausting. Outdoor environments change this dynamic.

There are fewer face-to-face demands and more opportunities to work side by side, such as planting a garden, collecting rocks, or building a shelter. These shared activities build connection naturally, without the pressure of eye contact or conversation. Communication becomes

action-based, easing anxiety and helping real friendships grow.

## A philosophy of belonging

This approach holds a simple but powerful belief: Your child does not need to change to learn. They already belong.

A nature-inspired teaching method treats nature as a wise co-teacher: responsive and patient. It emphasizes growth over compliance and curiosity over correctness.

In this philosophy, a quiet child is not behind; they are listening. A child who wanders is not off track; they are exploring.

Learning is not about fitting in; it's about growing into who they are and being seen.

## What to consider

Nature-based learning isn't without challenges. Outdoor settings can be unpredictable, with weather, accessibility issues, or a shortage of trained staff creating barriers.

Less structure doesn't work for every child, and not every school is well-equipped to support this model. That's why thoughtful design matters.

Outdoor programs must prioritize safety, accessibility, and consistent support to serve neurodiverse learners effectively.

## A different kind of learning and a different kind of hope

Nature-based learning is not meant for escaping challenges. It's facing them by supporting and being there for your child, with patience, providing them hope.

It offers an environment where your child can explore and grow into their own rhythm.

In the rustle of trees, the texture of moss, and the open sky, your child isn't asked to be different; they're invited to be exactly who they are.

That's not just education; that's transformation. Every child deserves that chance.

**James Watts, PhD,** is a principal and teacher with an MEd from McGill University and a PhD from Concordia University in Montréal, where his work focuses on nature-inspired pedagogies. He is the founder of Education Plus, an alternative high school in Montreal, created for students who experience the world differently. His innovative contributions to education have been recognized with prestigious honors, including the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence and the Roger Bider–Ecomuseum Zoo Natural History Award. Outside of his professional life, James and his wife have raised two young adults and now share in the wonder of their new granddaughter. In his free time, he enjoys running, biking, kayaking, and exploring forests—always welcoming the chance to get a little lost in nature.

# Raising a Child with Autism

By **David Quel, MDiv, EdD**

## One dad describes the challenges of parenting a child on the spectrum.

My wife and I have raised and are continuing to raise three autistic young men: Jake, 23, Andy, 19, and Stephen, 16.

Raising an autistic individual can be lonely and exhausting, sometimes feeling like you have given up your own life to give your child their best life.

Every day, my wife and I hear the same words from different sources. “I don’t know how you do what you do!”

## Challenges of parenting a child on the spectrum

Growing up, our parents tried to teach us how to be responsible with money, how to get a good education, how to get a job, how to do laundry, etc. Yet no one taught my wife or me to navigate the life we have journeyed through with these boys. It can be a challenge for even the strongest of hearts.

As we grow up, we have dreams and hopes and aspirations of what we want our lives to be or what we think they should be. I’ve had dreams of becoming a college professor or full-time pastor for years.

I enjoy the academic challenges of teaching: opening people’s minds to new concepts or the mysteries of life we uncover. I’ve had to adjust that dream and teach online so my wife can work full-time, and my dreams may not happen.

I sometimes feel as if I’ve lost the life I wanted for myself, but I also feel that my sons will never experience the life that most young men their age are able to experience. That reality has brought me to my knees again and again.

However, I realize that what was lost was what I wanted for myself and believed was the best for each of my sons.

We do this as individuals. We plan and gather information so we can bring our dreams to life. This life, though, doesn't fit in a nice little package and never goes as planned.

It can be difficult knowing the child you love needs you to be there at all times, and it can be a challenge when your life changes in ways you never expected.

## Handle each day unto itself

Did I want my life to be different? Absolutely! My wife and I have been given this life, and our children did not choose to be autistic. If they could speak, though, I am 100% positive they would say they choose to be loved and accepted. If the world would just give them each that chance.

I know all too well the feelings that are wrapped up in caring for a child who will need you for your whole life. You don't have to feel ashamed because you feel alone, frustrated, or like you want to quit.

Each day must be a day unto itself: the good and the bad, the victories and the setbacks. In the end, your reward will far exceed the life you think you may have lost.

You've ensured your child was cared for and knew they were loved and valued just as they are, not as everyone else expects or wants them to be.

## Appreciating and accepting each wonderful individual

These young men have changed our lives forever. They opened a whole new world to us when they were diagnosed, and they continue to challenge us every day. Each day is a victory to get through it and see them safely tucked into their beds.

I hope you each find strength within your families and see that these young men and everyone in the autistic community are beautiful and wonderful individuals.

The world just needs to give them a chance and see them for who they are and how wonderful they are, inside and out!

**David Quel, MDiv, EdD**, is passionate about ministry and the special-needs community. He has worked in ministry for more than 25 years as a youth director and in pastoral care. In addition to a master's degree in education from Slippery Rock University, he earned a master's certificate in autism studies from Seton Hill University, a Master of Divinity from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and a doctorate in education from Liberty University. He continues to search for new ways to help the autistic community be more welcome within the church community and is eager to share these methods with others through online courses.

# Ask Dr. Malcolm

By **Ronald I. Malcolm, EdD**

**Dr. Malcolm answers parents' questions and concerns about their autistic children. You can submit your questions here.**

**Michelle of Newcastle upon Tyne asks:**

**My autistic 11-year-old boy will be starting secondary school in September. He is called Aiden, and he is already having extra visits to get a better feel for his new surroundings and teachers through SENCO. Aiden says he is looking forward to it, which I tell him I'm happy that he is, though deep inside I'm terrified of how he will cope.**

**Under reasonable adjustments in his primary school, he is allowed a hoodie with the hood up, as he suffers a lot in school with SPD [sensory processing disorder]. Obviously, in secondary school, he won't be allowed this. I think the hood also helps him mask.**

**I'm worried about school refusals as he has PDA too, and the demands at secondary school and strict rules I feel will have him eventually refusing school. My question is, what can I do as his mother to help his transition be as easy as possible?**

**Thank you.**

## Transitioning

Transitioning to a secondary school can be a difficult time for any student. This can be especially true for students with autism. Extra visits are a great way to begin introducing your child to this new environment.

An added layer of comfort for your child is having these extra visits with teachers. This may allow them to recognize a familiar face during the first couple of days in their new environment.

## Involving your child

Ask your child what things may be of concern. Many times, as parents, we worry about certain things that we feel may pose a problem for a child with autism.

However, you may discover that the issues that were of concern for you were not of concern for your child.

Allow your child to develop positive experiences at school and begin addressing their own concerns daily.

## Physical education

Involvement in physical education class may be very stressful for your child. Children entering secondary school suddenly become aware that they may have to undress or even shower in front of their peers. This may make your child experience anxiety or even attempt to miss school on days when physical education occurs.

If loud and noisy environments impact your child, then the gymnasium may also pose significant concerns for them.

## Involve a peer

Many schools have begun offering a “peer buddy” for students entering secondary school. This is an excellent way for your child with autism to meet another student and make a friend on their first day.

You can also pre-arrange a meeting between your child and their new peer buddy.

## Visual schedule

Students with autism transitioning to secondary school must deal with many immediate changes in their daily routines. They may not have had to switch from class to class in the past, which can cause initial confusion. Parents can assist with all these changes by developing a daily visual schedule.

The student can carry their visual schedule in their backpack or binder to help them successfully navigate their school day. The visual schedule can also include a map of the school showing the locations of important places such as restrooms, the nurse’s office, and the cafeteria, as well as how to locate the principal, the school counselor, and other key staff.

## Social story

Parents and their children with autism can work together at home to develop an appropriate social story. Since your child also has pathological demand avoidance (PDA), you can practice what to do in situations that cause undue stress or anxiety.

Social stories are a great way to review rules, especially the social rules that many students with autism may struggle with. Understanding the consequences of these rules can also be introduced into your child’s social story.

## Involve your child’s teachers

Don’t assume that all teachers at your child’s school will have a firm understanding of their autism. You may need to explain necessary modifications, specifically to ensure they succeed in school.

In addition, you’ll need to provide information to everyone or work with your child’s special education teacher on how to address the pathological demand avoidance concerns successfully. Staff may view resistance to certain tasks and demands from authority figures as defiance when the child actually requires flexible supports and strategies to comply.

Your child with PDA may also need additional time to process the requests being made to them before beginning them.

> “Social stories are a great way to review rules, especially the social rules that many students with autism may struggle with.”

## School cafeteria

The school cafeteria can cause undue stress, which often manifests as emotional dysregulation during the school day. Some students with autism will attempt to avoid the cafeteria due to the noise they encounter. Others are overwhelmed by the idea of locating a place to sit or engaging in social conversation with peers.

You may discover that your child is not eating during the school day. Having a copy of the school menu at home may assist you, especially if your child is a picky eater. There may be days when your child is comfortable eating in the school cafeteria and other days when you may need to pack a lunch for them.

Easing your child into the daily routine of going to the cafeteria may also need to be addressed. Some students with autism will not want to enter the cafeteria at all. They may prefer to stay in a classroom and eat.

Rather than allowing them to sit alone in a room without peer interaction, ask the teacher whether a few peers can also stay with your child in the classroom to eat lunch. Some schools refer to this as a "lunch bunch." It can be an excellent way to begin motivating your child to move towards eating lunch in the cafeteria with their peers.

## Safe places; safe people

Many parents may be employed full-time. There may be situations that arise at the school that cause your child concern. Due to your work-related situations or the distance from your place of employment to the school where your child attends, it may not always be reasonable for you to leave your job.

Work with your child with autism to make a list of safe places and safe individuals they can approach if they are feeling overwhelmed or anxious. This will help your child manage stressful situations better. This information would also be valuable to share with your child's teachers in case they need to assist your child during a meltdown or when your child becomes dysregulated.

## Counseling

Work with your school counselor. Let them know about your child's autism and their pathological demand avoidance. They can work with your child to develop self-advocacy strategies.

If the school counselor is offering small groups addressing stress and anxiety, it may benefit your child to participate. It will allow your child to understand that others often experience stress and anxiety, even if they don't have autism.

**Dr. Ronald I. Malcolm, EdD,** is an Assistant Director of Student Services and Special Education for a public school district. He is an Associate Faculty Member with the University of Phoenix and a Special Graduate Faculty Member at the University of Kansas. He holds bachelor's degrees in English and special education, and master's degrees in counseling, special education, and school administration. His doctorate is in educational leadership, and his post-graduate degrees are in positive behavior supports and autism spectrum disorders. He has worked with students ages 3-21 with autism and various medical needs in school- and community-based settings for the past 41 years.

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# Teaching an ASD Individual to Navigate Commuting

By **Jeremy Brown**

**Learning to navigate commuting can promote independence and confidence.**

Everyone must commute somewhere. Each style of commuting, personal vehicle, walking, or public transportation, comes with its own unique challenges.

For individuals with autism spectrum disorder, it may be harder to navigate commuting. Yet, doing so can promote independence and confidence while making the world more inclusive for them.

## Understanding the challenges

Many challenges can make commuting more difficult for autistic people. These include sensory sensitivities, anxiety, difficulty understanding schedules, and safety concerns.

### Sensory sensitivities

Many autistic people may have heightened sensitivities to sensory input such as loud sounds, bright lights, or unusual smells.

Underground trains or subways, such as those in New York City and Boston, can often be very loud due to echoes where people wait for the next train or trolley.

Subways and buses may also have bright lights that can trigger sensory overload.

Even the smells from public transportation can be overwhelming for individuals with sensory sensitivities.

### Anxiety

Relying on public transportation can cause anxiety for everyone. That can be heightened if the commuter is autistic. Travel is often unpredictable, even with scheduled stops, because unforeseen circumstances could arise.

Anything out of the routine can lead to more anxiety, making commuting troublesome.

### Difficulty understanding schedules

Public transit systems can be difficult to navigate due to schedules or directions that are hard to understand. Each system is different, and even if an autistic person learns one system's schedule and directions, they may still struggle if they must use a different one.

### Safety concerns

There are also valid safety concerns when an autistic person must try to navigate commuting. There is a risk of getting lost while trying to find your destination. It may require social interaction with strangers, which can be difficult for people who prefer routine and comfort.

## Assessment before starting

Assess the autistic person's readiness for commuting. Some will be able to commute independently, while others will always need someone with them to help them find their way. There are three important readiness tests for commuting: functional, cognitive, and emotional readiness.

Once those tests are done, aids and collaboration can go a long way toward helping navigate commuting.

Visual aids and social stories show what steps they need to follow. Plus, role-playing can help them become more comfortable in travel settings.

Caregivers can also work with therapists and educators to get tips on navigating commuting and making it comfortable for autistic people.

From a personal standpoint, my oldest son will be able to use public transit independently as he gets older. He can walk, is verbal, and can hold a conversation. He can also read the schedules. Right now, his mother and I are always with him, but that will change as he ages.

In contrast, his younger brother will never be able to go anywhere without us. He's an elopement risk who doesn't understand danger and can't speak. Although he uses an AAC device to communicate, he may not respond to questions. He will always need help commuting.

## Steps to teach commuting

Parents and caregivers can help make navigating easier for an autistic person:

- **Start small** with familiar routes under supervision to help increase comfort.

- **Create visual supports** to help guide an autistic person on their journey. These can include step-by-step cards, maps, or apps with pictures or icons to guide them.

- **Use technology,** such as apps, to help guide them. This can include GPS, route planners, and transport apps with real-time updates.

- **Build routine,** since many autistic people are creatures of habit. Using constant routes and schedules can remove triggers and reduce stress for everyone involved.

- **Provide safety training** to help your loved one know who to contact in an emergency and how to recognize landmarks if they get lost.

Gradual independence is the goal for many. Using these support steps can help your autistic loved one learn how to navigate the travel system independently.

## Tips for parents and caregivers

Navigating the commuting system can be anxiety-inducing for an autistic person and the parents and caregivers sending their neurodivergent loved ones out into the world. Here are tips for parents and caregivers to help loved ones navigate commuting.

Address everyone's anxieties from the beginning to help parents and loved ones be comfortable with commuting.

It's also important to foster gradual progress. While you're with your child, help them understand the system before sending them on a familiar route by themselves. Eventually, you'll be able to trust them to use the system wherever they need to go.

Patience and consistency are key. Don't rush your child into something for which they aren't ready. Keep a consistent route for a while. This makes them comfortable before expanding the route once everyone is ready.

Involve your loved one in the planning so they feel empowered while commuting. They shouldn't feel like they are doing what they are told. This will help them feel more willing to live independently.

Keep the lines of communication open so your loved one can reach you to share what happened after each commute, at least at first. This can help them navigate the world more easily.

Celebrate the small wins. If you are with them and they can lead the way, or if they take a short trip on their own, celebrate that. They will be more likely to try again.

## Commuting to confidence

Commuting by vehicle, public transit, or walking requires much navigation. Adding in neurodivergence like autism can multiply those struggles. Yet, navigating commuting doesn't have to be a scary prospect for our autistic loved ones.

Parents and caregivers can work with their loved ones and their therapists to find the best ways to commute. Some individuals may never commute independently, but others may be able to navigate travel, especially within their own communities.

The world may be a scary place, but it's becoming more inclusive and accepting, especially for autistic people. Help your loved ones recognize what they must know to experience the world independently.

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**Jeremy Brown** is a writer, editor, podcast co-host, Emmy-winning local news producer, husband, and father. His work in local TV news left him with a yearning for a more creative outlet, and the coronavirus pandemic and his wife's caregiver burnout presented him with the opportunity to stretch his creative muscles while also helping others. Jeremy and his wife, Sarah, launched the podcast Caregiver Chronicles together in August 2020. While Sarah is the lead, Jeremy is a co-host for many episodes and edits every episode of Caregiver Chronicles.

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# Autism Warrior: Boy Scout Hero

By **Michael W. Michelsen, Jr.**

## A boy with autism saves his father and brother while hiking.

Dealing with autism makes heroes out of many people, but in St. Louis, MO, one young man truly earned that title.

On September 2, 2023, Louis Miklovic, then 12, went on a hike with his father, Josh, and his brother, Peter, 8. Their hike took place in the Washington State Park, which encompasses more than 2,000 acres of awe-inspiring vistas, hiking trails, and campsites.

It was getting dark, and not wanting his sons to strike out on their own, Josh accompanied the boys on their hike.

During their hike, the trio stopped at a family favorite cave situated beside an 80-foot cliff.

### Free falling

“We were just stopped there when Peter lost his footing and started to fall down the cliff,” Josh said. “My first reaction was to grab him and stop him from falling, but that didn’t happen.”

Seconds later, Josh found himself holding Peter while tumbling down the face of the cliff.

“I remember grabbing Peter in a bear hug and yelling, ‘We’re going down, hold on, it’ll be okay,’” Josh said. “The next thing I knew, I was waking up at the bottom of the cliff.

"We went from the top of the cliff to the bottom in no time," Josh recalled. "And, thankfully, Peter wasn't seriously hurt, but I had broken my back and my neck and gotten lots of cuts and bruises all over. I knew right away I wasn't going anywhere. After I came to, my first thought was to look around and ask, 'Where's Louis?"

## Springing into action

Thick brush and leaf-laden trees covered the area where Peter and Josh lay, but Louis could hear them calling. That's when he sprang into action.

After seeing his father and brother fall, Louis ran through the woods in an attempt to return to the family's camping area. Instead, he happened upon a roadway, where a Missouri State Parks Ranger was driving by and waved him down to help.

"I told the ranger that my dad and brother Peter fell off a cliff," he said.

Immediately, the ranger contacted his supervisor, Captain Chris Crider, as both men tried to determine exactly where the fall had occurred and how best to rescue them.

"Without Louis's help, we weren't going to be able to get them in time," said Crider. "This would have been a body recovery at that point without Louis's assistance."

## Rescue accomplished

By that time of year, trees in the area were full of leaves, which often made search-and-rescue procedures a daunting task. However, with Louis's ability to find and return to where the accident happened, rescuers saved countless hours looking for the pair, Crider explained.

"As thick as the woods were in that area, we would probably have had a very hard time finding them and being able to get them out of there in a timely manner," Crider said.

Peter was able to be carried to the top of the overlook, where first responders were waiting. Josh, who had suffered a severe concussion and

broken back, would require a more strategic approach.

"We put him on a backboard and had to clear about 100 yards of brush to create a path to get them down to the bottom of the cliff," said Crider. "There was a river there, so about that time, some locals happened to be passing by on a boat, so we asked them if they would help us get Josh to an open area where we could call for a helicopter to get him to a hospital."

After several days in the hospital, both Josh and Peter returned home to recover. Josh required multiple surgeries and 150 stitches to close a 9-inch head wound, while Peter had a minor head wound that required nine staples.

## Putting scouting knowledge to work

"How he communicates with others is a challenge, but that day he was at the top of his game; it was all clear," said Miklovic. "I am deeply indebted to Louis. He saved my life, pure and simple. I'm over the moon proud of him."

Louis's autism makes his communication skills difficult, especially when he tries to speak with someone he doesn't know. Miklovic said he's

grateful that his son was able to put his Scouting knowledge to work to find his way out of the woods and clearly articulate to the ranger what happened and where.

"With Louis, you never know how things will work out," he said. "I did not know. It's a coin flip in any moment of any day on what could have happened with him. He had to focus, which is a challenge for him to focus and know. Fortunately, in this case, he was able to find and get the help we needed, and it's great, it's a great story for him."

Captain Crider credits Louis's time as a Boy Scout for helping him navigate the heavily wooded terrain in his effort to find help.

"Seeing all the merit badges he's earned, you can tell that young man has a lot of smarts and can keep his wits about him when the going gets tough," said Crider. "So, his ability to navigate the terrain, find his way out of the woods, and recognize the ranger was there to help him, and explain the situation, given his limited abilities, it's extremely remarkable. I don't know of any way he could have performed better than he did."

## Accolades

Soon afterward, Louis was nominated and was awarded the Medal of Merit, a lifesaving award presented by the Boy Scouts of America. The award was presented to Louis at his district's roundtable meeting with all adult Scouters present.

The Missouri State Park Rangers nominated Louis for the Public Safety Civilian Partnership Award due to his efforts. The award is for civilians who have "provided valuable or courageous assistance to members of a Missouri public safety agency in an emergency". In September, Louis received the award, presented by Governor Mike Parson during a once-a-year ceremony for first-responder heroes from the previous year.

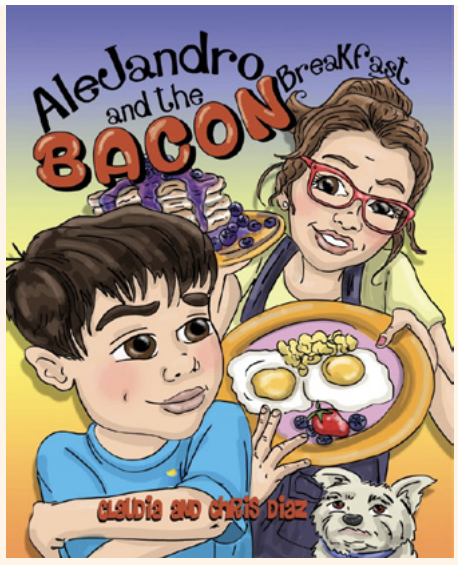
Louis, now 13, is still working on his Eagle Scout award, which he expects to complete next year. Fortunately, he has already proven himself worthy of the honor.

"The Missouri State Park Rangers nominated Louis for the Public Safety Civilian Partnership Award due to his efforts. The award is for civilians who have 'provided valuable or courageous assistance to members of a Missouri public safety agency in an emergency'."

**Michael W. Michelsen, Jr**. is a freelance writer who lives with his wife and two Jack Russell Terriers in Riverside, California. Writing stories like Louis's is a passion for him, since he's an Eagle Scout too, although much older than Louis.

# What's New
# On The Bookshelf?

## Alejandro and the Bacon Breakfast




By **Chris and Claudia Diaz**

### A children's book that traveled to the International Space Station.

Alejandro and the Bacon Breakfast is a funny, heartfelt, and deeply relatable children's book. Written by Chris and Claudia Diaz, the book was inspired by real-life mornings with their son, a picky eater whose love for bacon knows no limits.

Every day, Alejandro wants the same thing for breakfast: just bacon. His loving parents try everything: new foods, new ideas, new flavors, but Alejandro is determined. Will they ever break the bacon routine, or will Alejandro's breakfast dreams win again?

What begins as a lighthearted family struggle becomes a tender celebration of childhood rituals, patience, and the special bond between parents and their sensory-seeking child. Families navigating picky eating, sensory preferences, and routines that feel impossible to change will see themselves reflected on every page. Children giggle at Alejandro's stubborn love for bacon, while parents smile knowingly at the familiar morning negotiations.

In 2024, this humble and joyful story made history when a copy of Alejandro and the Bacon Breakfast traveled to the International Space Station, becoming a children's book that truly went out of this world. Readers love this book for its laugh-out-loud moments, warm, expressive illustrations, touching portrayal of patience and love, and meaningful representation for sensory-seeking children and families.

Whether you're a parent, teacher, therapist, or simply someone who enjoys heartfelt stories, this book is a charming addition to any home or classroom library.

**Chris and Claudia Diaz** are the authors of Alejandro and the Bacon Breakfast. They are a husband-and-wife creative team from Texas and proud parents of Alejandro, the real-life inspiration behind the story. Chris is a retired DEA Special Agent who now teaches first responders nationwide about autism awareness, communication, and de-escalation. His professional work is deeply informed by both years of service and lived parenting experience. Claudia is an acrylic artist whose creativity is influenced by culture, family, and the beauty found in everyday moments. While she did not illustrate the book, she contributed concept sketches and artistic direction that helped shape the visual feel of Alejandro's world. Together, Chris and Claudia wrote Alejandro and the Bacon Breakfast as a joyful tribute to parenting, perseverance, and connection, one small family story that reached all the way to space.

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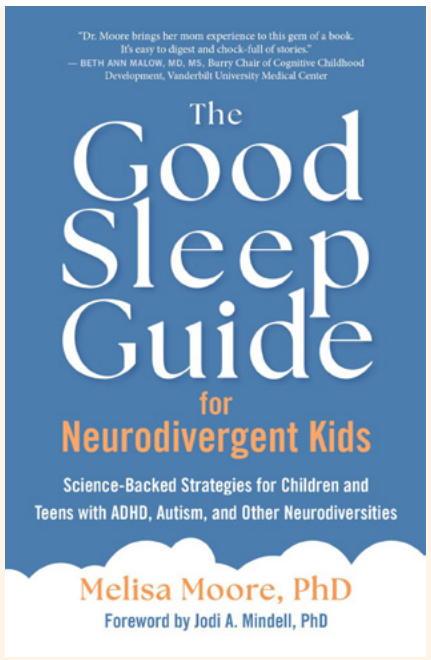
# What's New
# On The Bookshelf?

## The Good Sleep Guide for Neurodivergent Kids

### Science-Backed Strategies for Children and Teens with ADHD, Autism, and Other Neurodiversities

By **Melisa Moore, PhD**




**A compassionate guide to improving sleep in children and teens with neurodiversities.**

When Dr. Melisa Moore realized her son had autism and ADHD, she already had a decade of experience helping families navigate sleep issues. Still, nothing had prepared her for the reality of managing sleep in her own household. The advice she had learned felt too rigid, unrealistic, or simply ineffective for kids like hers. What she needed was a different kind of guide, so she set out to create one.

With humor, validation, and true empathy, Moore offers a multifaceted framework that blends evidence-based science with real-life parenting wisdom. She breaks down the myths about sleep training and redefines "healthy sleep" for neurodiverse families. A toolkit is provided for finding what works for your child, in your life, right now, even if it doesn't look the way anyone told you it should.

As Moore shows, consistently better sleep is possible, and The Good Sleep Guide for Neurodivergent Kids will get your family there.

Jennifer Waldburger, MSW, and Jill Spivack, LCSW, coauthors of The Sleepeasy Solution, are enthusiastic about the book. "[This] is the comprehensive sleep guide parents of neurodivergent children have been waiting for," they say. "Dr. Moore helps families understand both what's at the root of their child's sleep challenges and the steps they can take to help the whole family get the rest they need."

The Good Sleep Guide for Neurodivergent Kids is published by New World Library and available at Amazon, Amazon (UK), Barnes & Noble, Waterstones, and wherever books are sold.

**Melisa Moore, PhD**, is a clinical psychologist who is board-certified in behavioral sleep medicine and works for the Sleep Center at Rady Children's Hospital, San Diego. She also has a practice in the Los Angeles area, working with children, teens, and young adults across the country with a variety of sleep and mood issues, specializing in neurodiversity.

DrMelisaMoore.com