

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

Many families, teaching and support staff are often reluctant to talk to a child about their autism and what it means. If we read books by autistic people, we soon see a very similar picture: they knew they were different and gaining an understanding of why was helpful. This is not to say that being told you are autistic is always received well and understood, but it does suggest it is very much the best thing to do rather than ignore questions like:

“Why haven't I got six friends like Jake”?”

“Why doesn't my brain work properly?”

Trying to understand your own autism can be quite a challenge but then fitting into a neurotypical world that does not make sense to you is also a tremendous challenge.

## How to start

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

There is no “best” time to start talking to your child, be guided by when you feel ready and when your child is starting to ask questions. Some authors suggest around primary school age is a good time (Tony Attwood and Peter Vermeulen). Some parents find it easier to start talking about differences, individual strengths, and difficulties and about being unique without mentioning autism at first. By starting early, you can prevent the child beginning to misunderstand their needs and differences or accept inaccurate negative labels that others may apply to them.

There are lots of useful books around to help the process including stories where one of the central characters is autistic. There are also TV programmes featuring characters on the autism spectrum such as ‘the Big Bang Theory’. Visit the website of the publisher Jessica Kingsley, the leading publisher of books on autism <http://www.jkp.com/> whose range includes story books for children and many books written by autistic people about their own experiences.

Although negative reactions need to be taken into consideration, they are not necessarily a reason to not share the diagnosis with the child. Some autistic children may need time to process or have difficulty understanding the abstract nature of autism.

## **What if my child also has a learning disability?**

If your autistic child has an associated learning disability, do not let this prevent you from being honest about the autism. Autism can often mask ability and with support and help to understand you may be surprised by how the increased self-awareness can help in other areas. Although there will be some individuals for whom the severity of their learning disability means they will not be able to understand, they may still have a sense of their 'difference' so work on self-esteem is just as vital.

## **Helping your child feel good about him/herself**

We all need to be helped to feel good about ourselves. It is important to be aware of the low self-esteem that autistic people can experience: They need help to know that they are valued, and their gifts and abilities are worth just as much as others. Praise is probably more important for autistic children to hear than others, though take care how it is given. Some autistic children do not like to be praised if they themselves do not think they are worth it. Self-worth can be a struggle for many children, and it is important that we support autistic children to recognise their own self-worth but we may need to find ways of doing this that work for each individual child. When they are more confident and at ease with the knowledge of their own autism and abilities, they may be ready to find ways of explaining it to other people.

## **Living with autism**

A key issue is that the autism does not go away and waking up in the neurotypical world every day can be a real challenge. It is important that the support to help someone understand their autism is always around, even if in the background. There will be more questions to ask at different stages in life. There are some autism specific websites organised by autistic people offering opportunities to share experiences and these may prove helpful for some people.

It is true to say that we never really know ourselves; we always have more to learn whether we have autism or not. The danger is that we forget that for autistic people.

## Resources

- [Autism: How to raise a happy autistic child](#) by Jessie Hewitson (2018)
- [All About Me: A Step-by-Step Guide to Telling Children and Young People on the Autism Spectrum about Their Diagnosis](#) by Andrew Miller (2018)
- [My Awesome Autism: Helping children learn about their diagnosis in a positive, nurturing way](#) by Nikki Saunders (2019) (for young children)
- [Autism: I See Things Differently](#) by Pat Thomas (2015) (for young children)
- [Can I tell you about Autism? A guide for friends, family members and professionals](#) by Jude Welton (2014) (for readers 7 years plus)
- [Different Like Me: My Book of Autism Heroes](#) by Jennifer Elder (2005)
- [www.wrongplanet.net](http://www.wrongplanet.net) - a web community for people with autism and those that support them:
- <http://www.jkp.com/> Jessica Kingsley, the leading publisher of books on autism