

A Parent's Guide to

Autism

by Dr Vanessa von Auer

Tips in parenting **A**mazing, **U**nique, **T**otally **I**nteresting, **S**ometimes **M**ysterious children



DO YOU HAVE an Amazing, Unique, Totally Interesting, Sometimes Mysterious child? I have had the honour of working with hundreds of such children for the past decade, and I have accrued an invaluable set of parenting tools, which any parent can add to their parenting toolbox with ease! Before we discuss these tools, let's explore autism a little further.

What is autism?

Autism is a complex childhood disorder. Those with classical autism experience difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and the display of repetitive behaviours. In simpler terms, children with autism may not be particularly interested in playing with other children their age; or if they are – they may not know how to initiate and/or maintain a friendship as would be expected for their age. They may have trouble expressing themselves verbally and may not be able to decipher subtle nonverbal cues. Children with autism may also engage in eccentric repetitive behaviours, for example, hand-flapping or spinning on the spot.

Although exact statistics are not available for Singapore, the Autism Resource Center (ARC) conservatively estimates that more than 31,000 individuals have autism here. Internationally prevalence research in America, Australia, and the United Kingdom has indicated that autism statistics can be as high as 1% of the population. These figures demonstrate that autism is no longer a 'rare' childhood disorder. Thus, the more parents know about autism the more effective their parenting.

What causes autism?

For a long time, the answer to this was "We just do not know", and even though we now know that there is no single cause for autism (just like most conditions in life), there is still room for scientific growth and research. However, over the past five years, researchers have identified rare genetic

changes and/or gene mutations linked to autism. Additionally, environmental factors in early childhood development may increase a child's risk especially those which occur before or during birth. Some of these environmental factors include the parents' ages at time of conception, maternal sicknesses during pregnancy, and complications (i.e. oxygen deprivation) at birth.

 **Important:** Environmental factors alone do not cause autism! Usually, it is a "genetic predisposition and environmental combination" which appears to increase the risk of autism

What does autism mean to parents?

Parents new to autism will go on an exciting, enlightening, sometimes confusing or frustrating rollercoaster ride. It is important that parents see the best in their experiences and not to dwell on the "not-so-fun" parts of parenting. Trust me – every parent has challenging moments – not just those parents of children with autism. However, what other parents of typically developing children will never have is your extraordinary perspectives about yourself, parenting, and humanity in general, which you acquire because you are raising a "totally interesting and unique child!"

Helpful Tips in Parenting a Child with Autism

Of course, there are parenting tips and tricks which can help you out along your journey. Here are three of my favorites:

✓ **Do not let the label of autism define him/her.** Your child is a child, not a label! Restricting your child to the disorder will hinder him/her from showing you what he/she is truly capable of. Treat your child like you would other children – implement rules and

"Success is not final, failure is not fatal:
it is the courage to continue that counts."

– Winston Churchill

discipline, have expectations and have meaningful interactions with them.

✓ **Practice planned ignoring.** This is one of the best tools to have in your parenting toolbox. As the name says, you will plan to ignore your child for minor disruptions or unacceptable attention-seeking behaviours such as interrupting you when you are having a conversation with someone else. Initially, of course, your child's behaviour may become even more inappropriate (e.g. louder or even physical), but as long as you keep to your guns, this sometimes annoying behaviour will lessen. If you want, you can inform your child once, "When you calm down/When you can ask me quietly, I will respond", and then return to what you were doing. This helps your child understand your expectation. As soon as your child has achieved your expectation, you now have to keep your end of the deal. Say something like "Thank you for quieting down. Now, what would you like to tell me?" Make sure you remain consistent with this once you implement it and you will quickly see a remarkable improvement in your child's social etiquette.

✓ **Foster courage.** Children with autism experience worries and fears, which we may not understand. Because their senses

(sight, smell, sound, taste, touch) function differently to ours, they may be deadly afraid of enclosed spaces, certain textures or even the way you pronounce a certain word. Do not let them avoid these situations. Avoidance only fuels their anxieties more, and if you do not help them learn to cope with them, it will make it almost impossible for them to integrate into mainstream society as they grow up. Instead, expose them to their anxieties and dislikes step by step and equip them with coping strategies. If you start off your child young with such exposure, and show them that it is their courage to keep facing their fears that counts, then they will be able to overcome most hurdles.

A Rewarding Parenting Experience

Although no one is promising you an easy time figuring out and supporting your Amazing, Unique, Totally Interesting, Sometimes Mysterious child, raising a child with autism never gets boring and is utterly rewarding. You will learn things about yourself and life which will only further contribute to a meaningful existence. Remember, it is completely normal for you not to immediately be an autism expert, and that it is okay for you to seek help from professionals who would love to be a source of support to you and your child. eh



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