Tips for Parenting A Child Who is on the Autism Spectrum

by Patricia Bill

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1. Obtain help for your child as early as you can. Most experts agree that children who have autism spectrum disorders (ASD) usually progress best when they receive help at a young age. Although many children are not diagnosed with autism before age 3, researchers are seeking ways to accurately screen children much younger. Experts say that help for children who have autism disorders is most effective before the age of five. Many parents say the first place to seek help is with your child’s pediatrician. He or she may refer your child to a specialist. Health care systems and school districts may be other sources for help. Parents may hear conflicting theories on how to address autism, and they will need to determine what method(s) they believe will best suit their child. Children with Asperger Syndrome generally are not identified until they have difficulties in school. Again, intervention as quickly as possible appears helpful.

2. Understand that behavior related to the disorders do not reflect your parenting. That your child has a disorder is beyond your control, pointed out Rich Hopper, whose 25-year-old daughter, Megan, has autism. The experience of Rich and his wife, Gwen, in rearing Megan’s siblings helped ease doubts about their parenting skills. Other parents agree and add that parenting skills developed for children without the disorders likely will not work for children on the autism spectrum. Parents may need to use different techniques.

3. Learn about the disability. Most medical professionals say that the cause of and cure for autism-related disorders are unknown, so many families concentrate on the behaviors. There are common characteristics among children with autism disorders and good information to address them. Through PACER’s Web site at www.pacer.org, there are links to 11 organizations and resources including a new National Education Association handbook on autism. The federal government is emphasizing autism research through U.S. Department of Education initiatives and new laws. The National Center for Special Education Research (NCSER), as part of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), is supporting research on autism.

4. Understand your child’s perception. Many parents of children with autism are exceptionally attentive and knowledgeable. They have learned to anticipate and address situations that cause difficulties for their child. “Look at the organization around your house,” suggested Pat Anderson, PACER advocate. Her 19-year-old son, Zac, has Asperger Syndrome. “Will too much stimulation at the dinner table… a lot of dishes, candles, food textures, smells, etc.… cause problems? Will having your child test the water with you at bath time help with sensory issues?

5. Join or start a support group. Meeting with other parents of children with autism and related disorders offers an opportunity to voice concerns and doubts and share triumphs in a “safe” place. The understanding and affirmation of other parents can boost confidence. Their stories and experiences may offer insight and solutions. Parents of children with disabilities usually are happy to share information and resources.

6. Encourage, facilitate your child’s relationship with others. Opportunities to be with others are important to the development of any child. A parent may need to facilitate social interaction for a child with an autistic disorder. A professional may also need to train the child in social skills. Advised one PACER advocate, “It may be helpful for you or someone else to explain your child’s disability to
classmates and others in the community. If they understand the disability, they may become allies in helping your child.

7. **Try not to project too far ahead too early.** The limits of a child with autism or a related disorder cannot be precisely predicted. It is best to take one day at a time, said Gwen. As the child grows older, however, parents will need to plan for further education, employment and living arrangements.

8. **Children who have autism may be successful.** Many children with disorders are intelligent and talented. Megan Hopper, for example, graduated from Brown College in the Twin Cities with a degree in graphic design. Zac Anderson is completing high school, taking some college courses and had a paying summer job. Autism experts can suggest ways to reduce behavior problems and teach appropriate behavior. Some recommend medication. “Don’t rule it out,” said Pat. “We wouldn’t have survived without meds. They made such a difference for Zac.”

9. **Seek help for yourself if you need it.** “Don’t be afraid to go to a support group,” said Pat. “Hobbies or other activities may relieve stress, too. You need to take care of yourself. Not only that, but you need to take care of yourselves as a couple. A big issue that Dave (her husband) and I had in our marriage was that we never had time together. We couldn’t keep babysitters, so we didn’t have any time for us.” Pat suggested that if parents can be involved with other families of children with disabilities, perhaps they can exchange child care – even for an hour or two a week.

10. **Go with the flow** Understanding what affects your child and how to address it helps life flow more smoothly, advised one parent. Understand that there will be times when things are very good and other times when things are not so good, added Gwen. And, that shows it is in any family.

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