

Collaborative parenting

Parenting an autistic child can come with unique challenges; one common challenge is becoming frustrated with a child who refuses to do as they are told, or who doesn't seem to respond to discipline. This resource is for parents who feel that life with their autistic child has become a power struggle, or that getting simple things done involves a prolonged battle of wills. Reframing the way you think about interactions with your child, and adjusting your parenting style to work with your child rather than against them, can really help your relationship feel more positive.

There are several common reasons for interactions between autistic children and non-autistic parents to become frustrating (on both sides):

Communication struggles

Many autistic children have language delays, and some don't speak at all and need alternative ways to communicate. Trying to communicate something important when you don't have the vocabulary, or can't make your mouth form the words, is incredibly frustrating, and can easily lead to meltdowns or other expressions of distress. Children might try to get around this difficulty communicating by boiling their message down to the bare minimum (yelling "No!" or just shaking their head); trying to communicate without speaking (running away, making angry or distressed noises, pushing or throwing away something they don't want to engage with); or just launching straight into a meltdown whenever they can't communicate something important.

Sensory differences

Autistic children experience the world differently to their non-autistic peers and parents, and may not have the words to describe their experiences, even if they are otherwise articulate. Trying to explain that you don't want to go into the supermarket because the fluorescent lights hurt your eyes and the visual input from multiple brightly coloured products is too much to process is very difficult when you don't yet have the words for 'visual input', 'processing', or 'sensory overwhelm'! This is one of the reasons autistic children's objections to activities sometimes don't make sense – they're using the words and concepts they do have to express experiences that they don't have words for. (An autistic child who complains that their carrots are too spicy, for example, may be trying to express a different unpleasant taste or texture that they don't have a word for; a child who refuses to go into a loud, bright preschool may not yet be able to connect the sound and light levels to the inevitable sensory overwhelm, and may give completely unconnected reasons instead.)

Transitions

Transitioning between activities can be very difficult for autistic children. They may focus more deeply on a particular activity than their non-autistic peers, and find it very hard to shift their focus to a different activity (especially if the activity they're focussed on is something they enjoy, and/or the new activity is something they don't enjoy). Telling an autistic child to pack up their toys ready for bedtime seems like a simple request, especially when it happens every day so shouldn't come as a surprise, but for the child, it can be a request to give up control over their environment, pull themselves out of a deep focus, drop the multiple threads of play-related thoughts they were holding together, and start a sequence of pointless, unpleasant tasks. Young children in particular have no real sense of time – so a request that happens at the same time every day will still be an unpleasant surprise, every day.

Processing time

Many autistic children have auditory processing difficulties, and may need to take extra time to process verbal instructions before they can respond. For adults who don't know what's happening in the child's mind, this can look like defiance or ignoring instructions. It's common for adults to repeat instructions to make sure the child understands, but for children with auditory processing difficulties, this often just interrupts their attempt to process the verbal information, before having to restart with processing the new instruction.

Reframing interactions

Working with your child vs. working against them

It's very common for parents to experience interactions with their child as power struggles or constant battles, especially when there are communication difficulties. This is a really easy rut to fall into, it can be hard to get out of, and the longer parents and children stay in the rut, the more antagonistic their relationships can become.

A couple of thought patterns that can help to practice working collaboratively with your child rather than fighting against them:

- Before an interaction, think through "what do I need from this?" and "what does my child need from this?". Your needs are likely to be things like "I need my child to get out the door so that we're at school on time", or "I need my child to put their toys away so that they get to bed on time and aren't cranky tomorrow". Your child's needs are likely to be things like "I need to understand why I can't play any more", "I need to know why this is happening", or "I need to avoid going somewhere intolerable or doing something distressing."

- Before an interaction that you know is likely to be difficult, come up with a Plan B. What would you do if it was impossible for your child to get out the door on time, brush their teeth, hug a relative, etc.? Thinking through plans with your original plan completely off the table can be a good way to come up with accommodations, and starting a difficult interaction with “I know you hate brushing your teeth, so we’re going to try this new flavourless toothpaste” instead of “Time to brush your teeth!” can help to shift your child’s perspective to seeing you as their ally.

Punishment vs. natural consequences

It’s very common for standard discipline, like punishing children by taking away a privilege or favourite thing, to fail with autistic children. Autistic children often have trouble connecting the punishment to the misbehaviour, making punishments seem random and arbitrary. This is why trying to use traditional punishment with autistic children can lead to more behaviour problems – children who are punished for no reason that they understand or remember become anxious and distrustful of parents, and are more likely to have big feelings that come out as misbehaviour.

This doesn’t mean that autistic children should never experience negative consequences for their behaviour; but it does mean that consequences should be connected to the behaviour in a way that children can understand. An autistic child who steals and breaks a sibling’s toy and has their screentime taken away as a punishment may not see the connection between these two events, and is less likely to learn anything. A child who steals and breaks a sibling’s toy and has their access to their sibling’s toys taken away, along with an explanation about how upset their sibling was, and how the sibling doesn’t trust them with their toys any more, is much more likely to understand the connection and change their behaviour in future. Consequences that make sense also help children to regulate their emotions around mistakes and consequences, and make adult reactions to mistakes or bad behaviour more predictable, which feels safer for the child.

Finding shared problems, and shared goals

An easy thought pattern to slip into is seeing your child (or your child's sensory sensitivities, lack of emotional regulation, etc.) as a problem that you as the parent need to solve. Instead, it can be more helpful to think of a problem that you and your child are solving together. If the goal is getting through a supermarket trip, try to avoid thinking of your child's potential meltdown as a problem you need to solve; instead, try thinking about the bright lights, loud noises, etc. of the supermarket as a problem you and your child are both having, that you can solve together. If your child is old enough, talk to them using this framing – "We need to get through this shopping trip, and it's going to be way too loud in there. Do you think we can solve that with some headphones, or do we need a different solution?".

For situations that you know about in advance, it can help to have a brainstorming session with your child, where no idea is too silly. (With younger children who can't articulate exactly why they find something distressing, this can help identify issues as well – a child whose solution to the supermarket problem is pulling everything off the shelves or covering up the products might be having trouble processing all the visual input of a supermarket, and having a book, device, or something else to visually focus on might help.)

Treating your child as your ally in a battle against whatever problems the world throws at both of you will strengthen your relationship with your child, and help them to trust you and see you as their ally in a world that is not made for them.