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#### Featured

Ezra Prisk (permission granted by his mother, Suzanne)

Philippe & Benjamin Lalonde (permission granted by their mother, Michelle)

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## What You Can Do to REALLY Help Your Autistic Child

Accepting Autism Into Your Life



An autism diagnosis is not the end of the world!

- Your child is still living.
- There are ways to help your child become a happy, successful adult.
- All you need is a little support, some education, and lots of creativity!

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## What Is Autism?

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disability that affects how a person learns and experiences the world. With a documented prevalence of 1 in 165, autism is often heralded in the media as being an epidemic and in need of a cure. But there is a growing contingent of parents and autistic people who argue that autism is not a devastating disorder.

“Autism presents strengths not available to the typical population,” writes Michelle Dawson, an autistic researcher, in a blog post from October 2006. “The different pattern of strengths and weaknesses characterizing autism results in many difficulties as atypical needs and adaptive but atypical autistic behaviours are at odds with what is considered or expected as ‘normal’.”

Society as a whole needs to listen to autistic adults like Michelle, who have been speaking for years about the need for accommodation and acceptance of autistic people.

Read on to learn how you can help your child grow up to be happy, healthy, and successful.

### A Note about Pronouns

Throughout this brochure, I have alternated between male and female pronouns in an attempt to be inclusive. This can be difficult given the lack of clarity that sometimes occurs with the use of singular “they.” Please know that these suggestions apply to *all* autistic children, regardless of gender.



Janna Willard is a former early interventionist who specialized in autism during her 10-year career. She has ADHD herself, and is proud to count several autistic adults among her friends. She and her family, which includes several fish, some guinea pigs, a cat, and a flock of chickens, live near Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

### Encourage your child's interests.

An intense interest in watching birds could well lead to a career in ornithology. A love of putting things in order could lead to a career in a book store. You never know what your child will achieve if you are encouraging and realistic.

### Allow your child to be a child.

Children play. Children read books for fun. Children are creative beings. So is your autistic child. Don't take that away from him. He shouldn't be harassed all day by adults trying to force him to "play correctly" (that's not play, that's work), or read out loud to them (again, work), or draw the same picture over and over (not creative).



### Foster pride within your child.

She should be proud of who she is and what she can do, just like all children should. Don't fake your own pride of her, but do your best to find something to be proud of every day.

A healthy self-esteem includes pride in oneself as well as humility. A person with no pride has poor self-esteem, and a person with no humility has too much self-esteem.

### Show and tell your child that you love him daily.

Love includes respect. Respect his needs. Respect him as a person. Give him the kind of control he needs to have over his life. Once in a while, join him in his happy stimming. You will both be happier for it.

Daily, give her the kind of hug she likes best. It may be the lightest touch to the back of her head. It may be a deep-pressure squish or squeeze. It may be a regular hug.

And, finally, use your words. There are only three you need use every single day: "I love you."



### Be realistic with & about yourself & your child.

Recognise that your child is still your child—nothing has been stolen or killed here, except perhaps a few of your fantasies. And, let's face it, no child grows up to be precisely the person his parents imagined during pregnancy.

If you find yourself constantly stuck in negative thought patterns (not "bad," just negative), get some counselling to work through it. Counselling is more a sign of strength than weakness. Your child needs you to be functional, and people who are depressed are only marginally so.

Don't believe the hype. Autism is not the end of the world, and autistic children grow and develop, just like their neurotypical peers do—albeit at a different pace and in a different order.

Don't throw out your dreams for your child, just modify them and keep modifying them as she grows. And make your primary goal her happiness.

### Read everything you can find by autistic people, and meet as many as you can.

The best way to learn about autism is to get to know a lot of different autistic people. Every time I meet someone new—in person—I learn something new that I hadn't thought of before.

### Meet your child where he is at *right now*.

Don't expect him to be someone he isn't. This means you have to abandon your ideas of what is "normal," because he never will be (and shouldn't feel the need to be).

Recognise that your child's abilities will grow and change globally over time, but she may not always be able to demonstrate them in a given moment. Sometimes she will be able to perform typically, and sometimes she will not. Other times, she will perform above her peers.

Don't expect more than he is able to give. By the same token, don't expect less than he is able to give.

### Establish functional & effective communication.

This is the most important thing you can do to help your child, after you've dealt with your attitudes & expectations. Even if your child speaks, some form of Augmentative/ Alternative Communication (AAC) will be useful for times when speech is difficult or impossible.



The most functional & effective types of AAC are pictures and typing (including Facilitated Communication). Get one of these going (or all of them), and remember that AAC has been proven to encourage speech.

### Deal with sensory & motor development.

These are tied together, and sensory processing differences will absolutely have an impact on your child's motor development.

The goal is not to change your child's sensory processing so that it is the same as other people's, and we don't want to "desensitize" her, either. The goal is to find ways to help her feel comfortable in the environment. This could mean ear plugs or earphones. It could mean coloured lenses. It could mean only wearing flannel and cutting all tags out of her clothes. Be creative.

Also, we don't want to force your child to perform motor skills that are painful for him. Low muscle tone will cause a lot of problems with both fine and gross motor skills, and while it is possible to compensate for low tone by building muscle strength, it is important to recognise that this kind of compensation uses a lot of energy, so he will probably tire sooner than his neurotypical peers.

### Take care of your child's physical body.

Vaccinate her. Take her to the doctor regularly. Have her vision checked yearly, for eye health and other such things. Take her to the dentist regularly.

Pay attention to your child's body language. If he has poor body awareness, he may not realise that he is in pain or where, but there are certain behaviours that will indicate it to you if you are watching carefully.

Teach your child how to wash herself in the bath or shower. Teach her how to brush her teeth. Begin these "simple" hygienic routines (including when & how often) when she is young.

Pay attention to your child's diet and his reactions to food—including toileting, if possible. Any changes or abnormalities should be met with a visit to a doctor and probably some modification of his diet. Do your best to discover if your child has any food allergies or intolerances.

### Educate your child.

It is highly improbable that your child is incapable of learning. Teach her academic skills. Send her to school with an aide, if necessary, or homeschool her. However you do it, teach her academics. Stimulate her brain.



### Parent your child.

Autism is not an excuse for poor behaviour. At the same time, it is a reason for some things. While you need to be sensitive to your child's needs, it is also important to be sensitive to the needs of other people.

Take parenting classes if you are uncertain about the different styles of parenting. You want, in the end, to have raised a person who is thoughtful of others and who leads a good life.