

TEACHING GUIDE FOR FOSTERING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS WITH **AUTISTIC CHILDREN** IN EARLY CHILDHOOD



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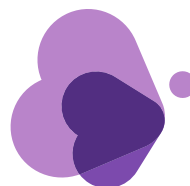


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INTRODUCTION

This guide complements the video clips in order to help parents, child care educators, teachers and anyone else working with autistic children to better understand autism and, in so doing, provide better support for them on a daily basis. We hope that by understanding autism, they will be able to better explain it to other children and answer their questions. To prevent victimization and maintain harmonious relationships with all children, we hope the proposals put forward in this guide will enable neurotypical¹ children to feel and show empathy towards others.

Indeed, “we are afraid of the unknown. To decrease misunderstanding of others, we resort to stereotyping and overgeneralizing, which are usually wrong. We then tend to judge, denigrate and insult others. And what is true for adults is also true for children!”²

In this sense, it has been shown that “the most effective strategy to prevent bullying is by promoting healthy relationships.”³ As mentioned in the submission *Créer des communautés bienveillantes : l'apprentissage socio-émotionnel et la prévention de l'intimidation*, “in order for children to build and maintain healthy relationships, they need to gradually acquire increasingly complex social understanding, social awareness and social skills.” This requires support from parents and professionals. It is therefore important to help these children understand difference and implement tailored intervention.

Please note that this guide's content is not intended for making diagnoses.



1 - The term “neurotypical” refers to children with typical or normal development, i.e. children without any neurological difference.

2 - *Développer les habiletés des personnes autistes dans un contexte d'intimidation* guide

3 - Submission by the Peace Grantmakers Network and PREVNet (2014)

WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder, as described in DSM-5, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. This means that the brain's neural connections in autistic children are different and affect their development.

This disorder may decrease in severity, but cannot be cured, since it is not a disease.

For some children, autism is accompanied by developmental or language delays that are more noticeable at a young age, which facilitates early diagnosis. For others, the diagnosis is often made during schooling, when differences become more apparent. Autism is a "spectrum," which means that there is a range of variability depending on the severity of symptoms and intensity of observable behaviour. Depending on the level of support required, the degree of severity includes three levels: **ASD level 1** > Requiring support; **ASD level 2** > Requiring substantial support; **ASD level 3** > Requiring very substantial support.

People with autism have difficulties in two areas:

- 1) Social interaction and communication.
- 2) Restricted or repetitive behaviour, activities and interests.

*For more information on this topic, see the "Observable Characteristics" section.

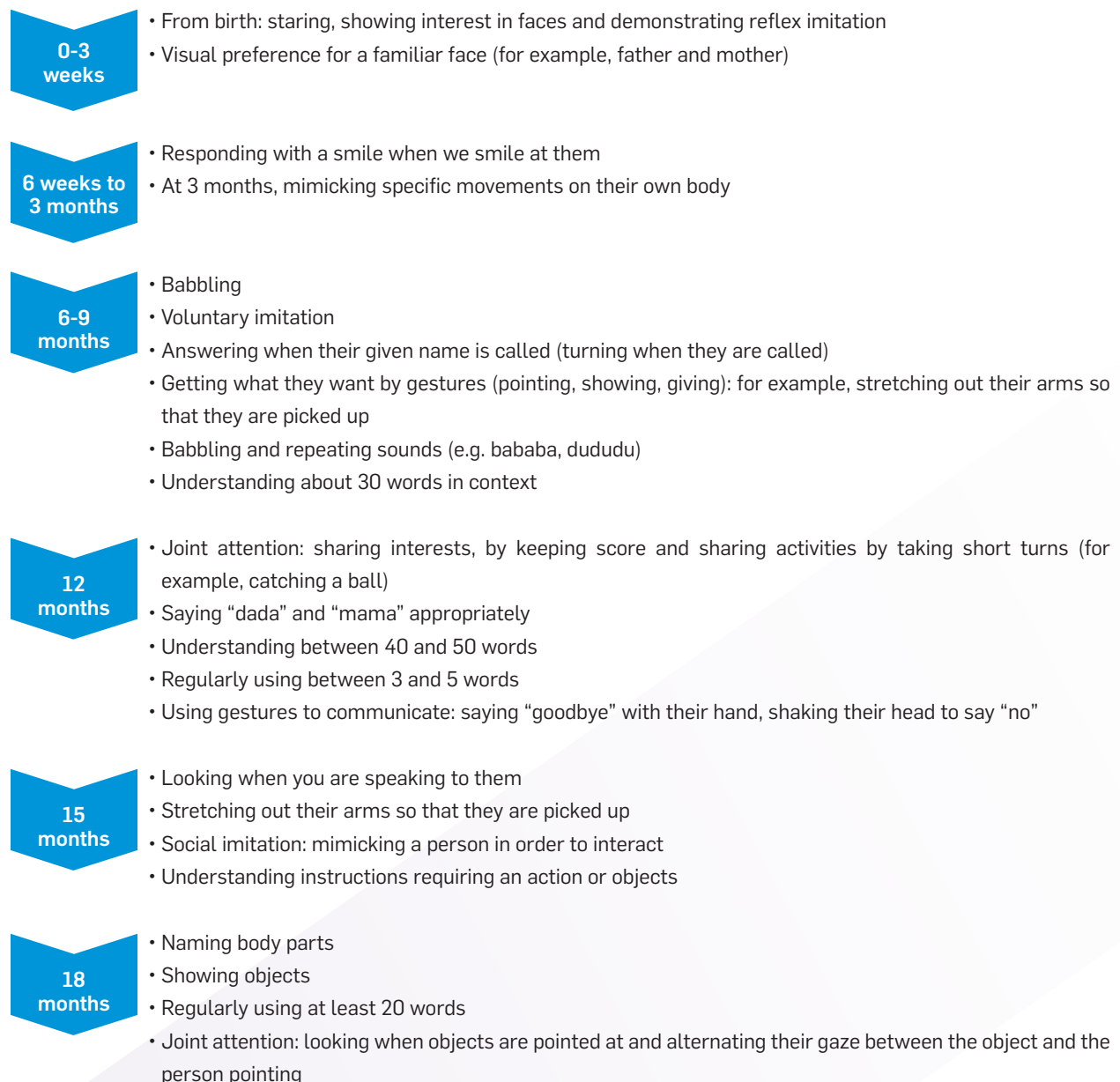
According to the DSM-5, "symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked by learned strategies in later life)." They also limit and alter day-to-day functioning.

According to the government of Canada, in 2018, **an estimated 1 in 66 have been diagnosed with ASD in Canada.** Of this number, more than half of children and youth had received their diagnosis by age 6. **MALES** were identified with ASD **4 TIMES** more frequently than **FEMALES**.



NORMAL DEVELOPMENT BENCHMARKS FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

Social communication is the way in which we use verbal and nonverbal language. It involves adjusting to the context and people with whom we are communicating, respecting the rules of conversation, and understanding figurative language (e.g. understanding the expression “it’s raining cats and dogs”) and facial expressions. However, the development of social communication in neurotypical children occurs in stages. By being familiar with these stages, you can determine a child’s level and notice any delays. The following diagram highlights the main developmental stages (from De Hemptinne, Fallourd and Madieu (2017) and other sources).



2 years

- Saying 2-word sentences
- Using between 100 and 150 words
- Able to maintain 2-3 connected speaking turns
- Following two-part instructions (e.g. "Go get your teddybear and show grandma")
- Mimicking actions (e.g. chores)
- Showing interest in peers
- Recognizing primary emotions (joy, sadness, fear, anger) in themselves and others

3 years

- Using about 350 words
- Saying 3-word sentences
- Maintaining 4-5 speaking turns
- Developing "pretend" play (e.g. playing in the kitchen)
- Distinguishing between dream/reality
- Thinking still "egocentric": believing others think in the same way they do
- Beginning to interact with other children with toys and words

4 years

- Beginning to put themselves in others' shoes: guessing their intentions, beliefs, etc.
- Beginning to use lies and cheating
- Saying 4-word sentences
- Constantly saying an average of 5 speech turns

from 5-6 years

- Using implicit language: metaphores, imagery, figurative language
- Understanding lies and trickery
- Understanding irony, and later, sarcasm

Autistic children have delays in the development of these social communication skills in addition to restricted or repetitive behaviour, activities and interests.

Caution! During early childhood, if behaviour appears more than 6 months behind the average, this is a warning sign. However, an isolated delay of one single aspect should not be considered a concerning warning sign.

OBSERVABLE CHARACTERISTICS AND EXPLANATIONS

As mentioned above, people with autism have more difficulties specifically in two areas:⁴

1. Social communication and social interaction;
2. Restricted or repetitive behaviour, activities and interests.



1. People with autism have persistent difficulties IN THE AREA OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL INTERACTION.

- **Autistic children may demonstrate very little social or emotional reciprocity.**
 - They may not take turns in conversation and may take over the entire conversation.
 - They have difficulty sharing their interests or emotions with others.
 - They may not necessarily know how to interact with others or respond to a peer who asks to play with them.

Explanation:

- Autistic children may sometimes not realize that there are other people around. They may therefore act as if they are alone. They will talk about what interests them, not borrow their toys, grab a toy out of a friend's hand, cut in line at the water fountain, etc. It's not because they are not nice; it's because they often did not notice there were other people.
- They may also not know that they have to ask questions to please others when speaking with them. This must be explained to them.
- Autistic children are often unable to recognize the emotions they experience. For example, they do not know they are sad, angry or happy. They must be helped to express what they experience.

4 - From DSM-5 (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) in the section on Autism Spectrum Disorder.

- **Children with ASD have difficulty with nonverbal communication.**

- They have difficulty maintaining eye contact.
- They have difficulty understanding gestures, facial expressions and looks in others. For example, they may not recognize that a friend is sad.
- They will never or very infrequently use nonverbal language. They will not use gestures, will often have a neutral face and will not have much intonation in their voice.

Explanation:

- Autistic children have a different way of expressing themselves and communicating.
- They have difficulty understanding the gestures and facial expressions of others. They see them but cannot understand them. For example, they may laugh when they see a person crying. This is because what they see is a person whose face has turned red and who has water on their cheeks. They do not see the sadness: they see the changes on the person's body; they do not understand them and may even find them funny.
- They do not understand eye movements, frowning, emotions expressed with the eyes (for example, sad or angry eyes). The more they try to look at our eyes and listen to us at the same time, the more confused they become.

- **Autistic children have difficulty developing, maintaining and understanding relationships with others.**

- They may not be interested in other children and may prefer to play alone.
- If they are interested in others, they have difficulty making and keeping friends.
- They have difficulties adjusting their behaviour to suit various contexts (for example, they will not understand that they cannot speak in the same way to the school principal as to a friend).
- They will have a very literal understanding that will hinder their understanding of expressions, proverbs and games that require abstract thinking, such as imaginative play, role playing, hide and seek, etc.

Explanation:

- Autistic children have a different way of playing.
- Sometimes they like to stare at an object and line up or categorize toys. This is their unique way to play or to calm down. They may also be so fascinated by their object that they forget everything that is happening around them.
- Sometimes they may want to play with friends, but do not know what to say or what to do to interact with them. We must also teach them how to play a game and explain what they can and cannot do. They will not learn it just by looking at others.

2. People with autism have RESTRICTED OR REPETITIVE BEHAVIOUR, ACTIVITIES AND INTERESTS.

- **Autistic children often exhibit stereotypical or repetitive movements or behaviour.**

- They may move their arms up and down (often called hand flapping), swing their body, move their fingers in front of their eyes, etc.
- They may also use objects in a repetitive way, such as lining up, classifying or flipping them.
- They will also use echolalia (an immediate or delayed repetition of previously heard words) or out-of-context sentences.

Explanation:

- Just like you, autistic children are unique. Everyone has a unique way to settle down or calm down. For them, swinging, moving their fingers in front of their eyes or lining up objects may be one way to calm down. Just like taking deep breaths or drawing can help to calm you down.
- When they clap their hands, it means they are very happy. This is their way of showing it to us.
- They also have a unique way of communicating and learning to speak. Sometimes when they repeat words, it can be a way for them to learn to say words or make requests. Since they do not always know what to say or how to say it, they learn by repeating.

- **Children with autism have extreme difficulty coping with change and an inflexible adherence to routines.**

- They may express extreme distress at small changes.
- They may have difficulties with transitions.
- They have rigid thinking patterns.
- They may use rigid greeting rituals.
- They may insist on eating the same food or taking the same route every day.

Explanation:

- Autistic children need things around them to be familiar and similar from one time to the next. It reassures them. It also reassures you to be familiar with the place where you are going, the people who will take care of you, the procedure for an activity, etc. It is the same for autistic children, but it is even more reassuring for them to be familiar with these things.
- They also need to follow steps, for example, when getting dressed or washing their hands. Otherwise, they become distracted or may become anxious. It confuses them when there are too many things to do in the proper order. They need help.

- **Autistic children have restricted and limited interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus.**

- They show a keen interest in one particular topic and are not necessarily interested in other topics.
- They have a strong preoccupation with unusual topics. For example, they may have an interest in subjects that far exceed the interests of children their age.

Explanation:

- Just like you, autistic children are different. We are all different. They are often very interested in one topic and not interested in other people's topics.
- For example, they may know everything about planets and talk about planets all the time. Even if you try to talk to them about other things, they will have difficulty listening to you and will change the subject. It is not because you are not important to them or that they do not like you. Everyone must respect others' interests.

- **Autistic children are hyper- or hyporeactive to sensory stimuli.**

- They may overreact or be indifferent to sensory aspects of the environment. For example, they may be indifferent to pain or temperature, not tolerate specific sounds or textures, have a more developed sense of smell than average, etc.
- They often have a fascination with lights or moving objects.

Explanation:

- When autistic children hear too loud noises, see too much movement in front of them or are taken by surprise, it is as if there is a storm in their head and in their body. They need a lot of calm around them to feel good.
- When they put on noise-cancelling headphones, it helps them to block out the sounds around them. This calms them and reduces their anxiety. This can also help all the children to concentrate better during an assignment, reading or game, for example.
- We all have sensitivities, so it is important to respect the sensitivities of others.

IMPORTANCE OF TALKING ABOUT DIFFERENCE

In the previous section, we proposed a way to explain the various characteristics of autistic children to other children. By better understanding autistic children, a peer "may better accept the differences of a classmate who has ASD, be less afraid and address it more easily."⁵ Particularly since, according to a meta-analysis by Maïano et al. (2016), the overall risk of victimization is three times higher for autistic children and the risk of verbal victimization is almost twice as high as peers with typical development. In school-age children with autism, experiencing bullying may have similar or even more serious consequences than those observed in school-age children, such as psychosomatic symptoms, psychological disorders and lower academic performance. For example, the authors mention that bullying at school and victimization are clearly underestimated among school-age children with ASD.

It is therefore crucially important to demystify and explain difference. Neurotypical children ask tons of questions about children with special needs. Professionals and parents must "answer their questions as accurately as possible so that they can clearly understand the situation. This may prevent some unpleasant behaviour regarding the child in question."⁶ Children may ask you questions that you do not know the answer to. In this situation, it is important to reassure the children and tell them that you will find out and get back to them with answers. It is important to address their discomfort, misunderstandings or prejudices against others.

However, be cautious: "the purpose of the discussion should be limited to encouraging children to be more open, less fearful and to show more empathy for differences they notice among their peers" and not to make them "mini-experts."

The Éducatout⁴ website suggests intervention and activities on difference. The following are some examples:

- Develop in children a sense of belonging to the group. Show them that they form a whole and that this has several advantages.
- The differences game: all the children sit in a circle. A ball is passed around from one child to the next. When you get the ball, you have to name something that makes you special... Example: I wear glasses, I skate...
- Put all the children's names in a container. The children take turns picking a name and naming a quality that matches that child.
- Draw a giant tree and post it on the wall. Cut out apples; paste the children's photos and qualities associated with them. Everyone pastes their apples on the tree.
- Post images of different children throughout the room: different sizes, different ages, different ethnic groups, with disabilities...
- Make personalized cards for each child. Use a different colour for each child, as everyone brings their colour to the group. Paste the children's photos and indicate their tastes, favourite activities and friends. During these activities, also highlight similarities between children (same favourite meal, favourite games...)
- Pair up children so that they realize for themselves that they all have special qualities and talents. Encourage the children to discuss and discover the personalities of all the children in their group.

5 - Dr. Nadia Gagnier, in Rudolphe and Royer (2018).

6 - <https://www.educatout.com/edu-conseils/enfants-besoins-particuliers/chroniques/trucs-pour-faciliter-l-integration-d-enfants-differents-ou-ayant-des-besoins-particuliers.htm>

RECOMMENDED INTERVENTION WITH AUTISTIC CHILDREN

To promote children's optimal development, certain measures must usually be implemented in the daycare, school and home. The following table lists some recommended intervention with autistic children at various times of day.

ENVIRONMENT

For everyone

- **Reduce ambient noise.**
- Provide noise-cancelling headphones as needed.
- **Decrease lighting** (beware of neon lights).
- **Only move furniture** in the child's presence.
- Provide a **place** for the child to take a **break** (e.g. a quiet place with cushions, books, sensory objects, etc.).

For parents

- Pay attention to the **television volume**. Ideally, do not leave it on all the time, as it creates background noise that can overwhelm the child.
- Set up a **quiet place** in the house so that the child can take sensory breaks (bedroom, small tent, secluded place in the living room, etc.).

For daycare or school staff

- Avoid hanging too colorful posters on the walls.
- Avoid hanging crafts or objects that move on the ceiling.
- **Decrease movement** near the child (do not place them near the door, for example).
- Ideally, be careful not to encourage too much physical closeness between peers and the child (e.g. do not seat them too close to others to avoid getting shoved as soon as a child moves).
- Assign a **clear space** for the child and identify it with their name or photo (labelled table and chair, cushion to sit on, space drawn on the floor, etc.).
- Do not set up the child's space in the middle of others (desk, space at the gathering mat, etc.).
- Only put posters on the walls **in the child's presence**.

UNDERSTANDING INSTRUCTIONS AND REQUESTS:

For everyone

- **Reduce noise and stimulation** when addressing the child.
- To help them understand, encourage the child to look at **our mouth** instead of our eyes when speaking to them.
- Say the child's **first name** before giving the instruction.
- Do not talk too much.
- Use simple, concrete vocabulary.
- Use **short, clear instructions**... Be careful of instructions that do not have a conjugated verb (e.g. do not say "eat the apple," but rather "eat your apple.").
- Give them time to **process information**. Do not give one instruction immediately after another.
- Use a **visual aid** to depict the instruction.
- Organize requests in a **logical order** (first..., second..., third...).
- Make sure that the child understands our instructions.

COMMUNICATION:

For everyone

- Give the child **the time** they need to express themselves.
- Encourage the child to **make gestures** to indicate their requests (e.g. help, again, finished, etc.).
- Do not make the child's requests; let them make the requests themselves. Positively reinforce **efforts** to communicate.
- Provide the child with a **means of communication** to help them speak when needed. For example, images or pictograms could be provided to help them make requests.
Use the same pictograms and sequences in all environments.
- If the child repeats previously heard parts of films, programs or lyrics (**echolalia**), try to understand why they are doing this. Try to find the **function of verbalizations** (they may use echolalia to try to retain information that has just been said, to interact with others, to indicate that they do not understand, to make a request, to calm down or to repeat words they like, etc.).

SCHEDULE:

For everyone

- Provide the child with an **individual schedule**.
- Look at the schedule with them at the beginning of the day.
- **Refer** to their schedule after each activity.
- Teach them how to **find their way around** their schedule (e.g. microphone or arrow that scrolls down.).

For daycare or school staff

- Always use an individual schedule. Otherwise, allow them to refer to the group schedule at any time (and put it at their height).

DAILY ROUTINES :

For everyone

- Provide the child with a **visual sequence** of the routine's different steps.
- Teach them each step **explicitly** and make sure they know and understand what is expected of them.

For parents

- Provide step-by-step **visual sequences** for daily routines (washing hands, brushing teeth, bathing, dressing/undressing, evening routine before bedtime, etc.).

For daycare or school staff

- Consider breaking down into sequences all the routines **that require steps**. This will help the child understand what to do (e.g. arrival in the morning and departure in the evening, dressing/undressing, meal, snack, chat, etc.).

IN THE LOCKER ROOM:

For daycare or school staff

- Avoid placing the child in the middle of others; place them at one **end** or in a quiet adjoining room.
- To give them **more time**, allow them to dress or undress alone before the other children.
- Clearly **identify** their space with their name or photo (locker, hook, etc.).

MORNING CHAT AND FAMILY DISCUSSIONS:

For everyone

- Tell them when they can take their **turn to speak** (e.g. use an object or a “talking stick” that individuals take turns passing around when they want to speak).
- **Bring** them back to the topic if they stray from or change the subject.

For parents

- Make sure you have quiet time when you are **available** to speak with your child. Do not pressure them and respect their processing and speaking time.
- To facilitate discussion between your child and their peers, **inform** the daycare or school staff of activities done during evenings or on weekends.

For daycare or school staff

- Provide the child with a **visual aid** for what they can say during the chat (e.g. have parents fill out a sheet with the activities done during the weekend so the child can tell their peers).

MOVING AND TRANSITIONS:

For everyone

- **Inform the child** that there will be a change of activity and when (e.g. “in 2 minutes, we will stop playing. Then, we’ll wash our hands for dinner.”).
- **Visually** show the move that the child will have to make with a sequence or drawing.
- Visually indicate **the time** they have to make the move (hourglass, timer, etc.).
- To reassure and calm the child, allow them to carry a “**transition object**” when moving.
- Try as much as possible to move when there are **fewer people** circulating.



RECREATION, OUTDOOR GAMES AND PARK OUTINGS:

For everyone

- Ideally, allow the child to visit the schoolyard or park when it is **empty** or in the evening when there are few people. Show them the play areas where they can go and what they can do there. Allow time for them to explore the environment alone.
- Before going out, visually show them the **choice of games** they can play outside and ask them to choose one of the games (e.g. sliding, swinging, playing in the sand, etc.). Visually indicate their choice (with their name or photo).
- Allow them to **be alone** if needed. This can help them to reduce their anxiety and later be more receptive.

For parents

- Provide the child with a **picture sequence** of the park outing with the moves. For example, "house, bike, park (with the choice of activities in the park), bike, home."

For daycare or school staff

- If they want to play with others, help them with **social skills**. Help them to understand the game, play correctly, resolve conflicts, etc.
- **Do not force** them to play the same games as other children.
- They may want to strictly apply the rules taught, even if other children want to change the game rules. **Help them understand** that the rules can be changed and that it can even be fun.
- The autistic child can be **paired with another student** for outdoor periods. They will thus first learn to play with one child, rather than having to integrate into a group of children.

CHANGES AND UNEXPECTED THINGS:

For everyone

- **Verbally specify** that something unexpected or a change has occurred. Explain this change to the child. It is also possible to use an image that depicts the unexpected thing and put it on their schedule (for example, a question mark).
- Provide **visual information** on changes using calendars, sequences, etc.
- **Involve** the child in the changes in the environment as much as possible.
- **Give** the child **time** to process information, understand and accept. Teach flexibility with planned experiences.

LEISURE TIME:

For everyone

- It is important to **structure** leisure time as much as possible. Time them with a timer or an hourglass.
- Explain to the child what they can do during this time. Give them **clear, visual choices** (for example, in a table). Indicate the choice they have made with the child's name or photo.

MEALS AND SNACKS:

For everyone

- If necessary, provide them with a **sequence** with the meal steps (e.g. I wash my hands; I sit down; I eat; I drink; I stay seated at the table.) and the time they have to eat.
- Important: Some autistic children have **sensory peculiarities** that cause them to be intolerant of certain textures, smells, colours and food mixtures.

For parents

- For some children, it may be useful to provide a **visual aid for the expected number of bites** or what the child has to eat on their plate.

For daycare or school staff

- Put the child at one **end** of the table or at a separate table to limit physical proximity, movement, noise, etc.
- Bear in mind the **high sensitivity** of some autistic children to the smells of other people's food.
- Also bear in mind the lack of **social awareness** that could lead a child to take food on a peer's plate, for example.

SPECIAL ACTIVITIES:

For everyone

- To explain the activity procedure, prepare a **picture sequence** and bring it with you.
- **Visually** indicate the instructions and expected behaviour during this activity.
- Visually explain the demands and actions expected of the child **as the activity progresses**.

IN SUMMARY, AUTISTIC CHILDREN BENEFIT FROM:

- Knowledge of the day's activities
- A clear environment
- Calm
- Explanations for understanding
- A timeline to understand information
- Visual material
- Routines and sequences

HAVING AN AUTISTIC BROTHER OR SISTER

According to De Hemptinne, Fallourd and Madiou (2017), “autistic children require special attention and various support requires a great deal of time to implement. In response to various family changes (schedule reorganization, adjustment of everyone’s roles, etc.), the brothers’ and sisters’ reactions may vary, depending on their personalities and family dynamics.”

It is not easy to have an autistic brother or sister

The brothers and sisters of autistic children **need** our **attention**. It is important that parents give them quality time. If they have warning signs, it is advisable to consult a professional, such as a psychologist, who can help them feel better and express their emotions. The time and attention that the parent gives to their other child(ren) will allow them to understand how much they love them and that their limited availability does not reflect a lack of interest. In addition, consulting a psychologist and being told that the other children are doing well, but that the situation is difficult for them, will validate them, reassure the parent and allow them to find other strategies to cope with shared challenges (Clet-Bieth, Dujardin, Lefèvre and Périsset, 2008).

Knowing how to explain difference

It is also very important to ensure that all siblings **clearly understand** their brother’s or sister’s **autism spectrum disorder**. According to Clet-Bieth, Dujardin, Lefèvre and Périsset (2008), “children always understand much more than we realize. They hear conversations, phone calls, discussions with parents and professionals, even if they are not told anything directly. Rather than silencing them by saying that they must be protected or that they will not understand, it is best to explain things to the autistic child’s brother or sister.” So we have to **clearly and simply explain to them** what ASD is and why their brother or sister has a given characteristic. To promote their brother’s or sister’s well-being, it is also important to explain to them the behaviour to be adopted and avoided.

Promoting tolerance and understanding difference

According to Deslauriers (2012), “some siblings of autistic children are teased and are sometimes even bullied in daycare or at school. Children may have difficulty tolerating and understanding difference. As a parent or professional, it is important to promote respect for others, uniqueness and difference.”

However, having an autistic brother or sister allows siblings to develop greater maturity, a sense of solidarity, empathy, openness and tolerance of difference.

WELCOMING AUTISTIC CHILDREN IN DAYCARE AND AT SCHOOL

As explained for siblings of autistic children, it is also important to educate other children in the group in daycare or at school about difference and autism. We need to explain to these children why autistic children do things differently, have particular behaviour, require special help, etc.

This guide also provides a list of CHILDREN'S STORYBOOKS about autism. Some of the material can also be used to get autistic children and their peers to discuss the topic, allow them to ask questions and, in so doing, help them better understand autism and accept difference.

Although each autistic child is different, it is important to prepare the child's arrival in the daycare or school environment. The following are a number of things to bear in mind:

- To be partners in setting goals and to foster children's harmonious development, it is important to have a "shared view of autism among parents and professionals."⁷
- "Ensure that you have access to various autism tools, means and resources."³
- Ensure that staff have received sufficient autism information and training.
- Discuss with parents whether or not the child is aware of their diagnosis, and whether or not they want to address the issue with them.
- Encourage the child and parents to visit the premises before the first day of daycare or school.
- Plan a gradual transition for autistic children.³
- "Adjust the autistic child's schedule if they experience intense periods of anxiety."³
- Provide visual material for various times of day (determine who will choose the material and who will set it up).
- Adapt the main room where the child will learn (decrease light, noise and movement; provide a quiet place for breaks; reduce visual overload on walls; provide a place for meals and snacks, rest time, etc.).
- Educate other children in the group about differences and autism (by leading a discussion about differences, reading a storybook about autism, explaining what autism is, watching a video about autism, etc.).
- Have good communication between daycare/home (see next section).
- Make sure to use the same pictograms, images, tools in all environments.
- Transfer the sequences and visual tools from one environment to another so that the child uses the same tools.

7 - From *Guide scolaire SACCADÉ* by Harrison and St-Charles (2017)

COMMUNICATION IN VARIOUS LIVING ENVIRONMENTS

“The sharing of information and difficulties improves collaboration and facilitates the integration of children into various environments” (Clet-Bieth, Dujardin, Lefèvre and Périsset, 2008).

According to Harrison and St-Charles (2017), “close monitoring will have to be done [by the daycare or school and parents] to avoid overlooking any aspect of the autistic child's development or disruption. To assess the student's behaviour and potential disruptions, it is extremely important to be familiar with the home situation.” **The parents' collaboration is thus extremely important.** Discussion and collaboration will have a major impact on the children's harmonious development. It is essential for everyone to communicate with each other on a daily basis.

According to Harrison and St-Charles (2017), to better meet autistic children's needs, good communication should take into account the following aspects:

- Discuss the children's **challenges and successes** with the parents, daycare, school and professionals.
- Inform parents of the **progress made** and the **objectives worked** on in the daycare or school, so that they can focus on the same objectives to help the child to develop more harmoniously.
- Discuss the **child's condition, anxiety level** and **emotions**, as well as **changes** at home and in the daycare or school, in order to be on the lookout for any increase in the child's vulnerability.
- Use a **COMMUNICATION SHEET** to make the connection between the daycare, school and home environment.



AUTISM AND CULTURAL COMMUNITIES

For any parent, whether immigrant or not, a diagnosis of autism is the beginning of a long and difficult adjustment period. Parents must both mourn the ideal child and adapt to the challenge of raising a child whose needs are much greater than average. In the context of immigration, immigrant parents also experience additional stress, including the language barrier, lack of knowledge of the health system and difficulties with professional integration, which increases their exhaustion (Ben-Cheikh and Rousseau, 2013).

Different perceptions

A study by Ben-Cheikh and Rousseau (2013) mentions certain **errors in perception** by parents and professionals. According to them, announcing an autism diagnosis can sometimes be perceived by parents of certain cultures as a threat and stigma on the child. Also, professionals may perceive the parents' reluctance as a denial of their child's condition. According to Pondé and Rousseau (2013), some immigrant parents of young autistic children have to hope for the best development of their child in order to continue investing in them. These parents sometimes mention autistic traits when speaking about their child's disorder, but often they prefer to call it a developmental delay or a communication problem or say that the child has no problem at all. It seems that attributing their child's problem to a delay rather than a disorder would mean for the parent that their child will eventually become normal. **This preserves hope** for them and ensures that they implement more intervention for their child and seek adapted services.

The extended family

Immigrant parents often have few or no extended family members in Quebec. However, they regularly communicate with them in their country of origin by phone or online. "When a language delay or behavioural problem was noticed at the beginning, most parents spoke about it with the extended family before asking for a professional consultation."⁸ However, despite the important place of the extended family, most immigrant parents **preferred not to inform the family of the autism diagnosis**. The reasons mentioned by Ben-Cheikh and Rousseau (2013) range from not wanting to make their elderly parents suffer (who may not have understood the diagnosis), to the shame and fear that their child would be compared to other children in the family and be judged negatively.

8 - Ben-Cheikh and Rousseau (2013).

Sometimes difficult relationships

As noted by Pondé and Rousseau (2013), the relationship between immigrant or ethnic minority parents and professionals is generally difficult due to misunderstandings, prejudices and differences between what is perceived as an appropriate treatment for children. The parents' country of origin also seems to influence their perception of the child's problems. Similarly, Ben-Cheikh and Rousseau (2013) point out that "first contacts [with professionals] are described as difficult by many parents, who feel a lack of listening and empathy, due to cultural differences, and who sometimes suspect discrimination." Professionals must therefore balance the need to convey objective and accurate information with the need to protect parents' investment in their child. While this is true for all parents of children with ASD, this may be particularly important for immigrant parents who experience loss and culture shock and may not be willing to acknowledge that their child is having major difficulties (Pondé and Rousseau, 2013).

Importance of understanding immigrant families better

Ben-Cheikh and Rousseau (2013) mention in their article that there is an increasing number of immigrant families in Quebec who have autistic children, which clearly justifies the need to provide culturally appropriate services to these families. Similarly, they note that "cultural difference cannot only be considered a risk factor; it is necessary to examine specific vulnerability and resilience factors for each immigrant or minority group." It is therefore important to better understand the experience of immigrant families with children diagnosed with ASD and the impact of the child's condition on the parents' support networks.

In summary, since immigrant families have limited support from their extended families, most parents with autistic children expressed a need for substantial support: services offered directly to their child; the need to tell their stories to other parents experiencing the same situation; and the desire to be referred to appropriate services to best help their child (Ben-Cheikh and Rousseau, 2013).



CONCLUSION

In this guide, we discussed the normal development of social communication, the characteristics of children with autism spectrum disorder and some possible ways to explain everything to children.

We also addressed the reality of autistic people and their families, considering siblings and the experiences of immigrant families. We recommended intervention at various times of the day and guidelines for better follow-up between the family/ daycare or school. Lastly, we provided a list of children's storybooks to discuss the topic of autism with children.

Since autistic children are more likely to experience victimization than their peers with typical development, it is important to take action to make change happen. With a clearer understanding of autism, parents and professionals will be able to better address and explain this reality to others. Talking about autism and answering children's questions will help them better understand difference, develop empathy and maintain healthy relationships.



CHILDREN'S STORYBOOKS ABOUT AUTISM

We have listed some of the many storybooks that deal with autism. You can read them to autistic children to help them better understand their reality. For professionals, **it is essential that the autistic child's parents agree with your approach**. Some parents choose not to immediately inform the child about their condition. It is important to be aware of this.

You may also use the storybooks to discuss autism with siblings or children in daycare or classrooms in order to bring up the topic of difference and the characteristics of children with autism.

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RELEVANT WEBSITES

Autisme Québec. <http://autismequebec.org>

Fédération québécoise de l'autisme. <http://www.autisme.qc.ca>

Un guide pour les parents d'enfants autistes pour les premières démarches : <http://www.autisme.qc.ca/assets/files/05-produits/Pochette-parents-2017.pdf>

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VIDEOS ON AUTISM

Mon ami Tom : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8tGoNZn_rM

Créer des choses merveilleuses : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyPVHdBunlw>

Le voyage de Maria : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4q8XJfdpgU>

Mon petit frère de la lune : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_2lhly_8zo

PARTNERS



CREDITS

ORIGINAL IDEA

Jasmin Roy

PROJECT LEADERSHIP AND COORDINATION

Jasmin Roy, President

Jasmin Roy Sophie Desmarais Foundation

Mylène Isabelle, Project Manager

Jasmin Roy Sophie Desmarais Foundation

SCENARIO RESEARCH AND WRITING

Marijo Tardif, M.Sc., Speech Therapist

Jasmin Roy

WRITING OF THE TEACHING GUIDE

Marijo Tardif, M.Sc., Speech Therapist

CONSULTANTS

Geneviève Landry

Lise Carmel

Anik Bilodeau

VIDEO PRODUCTION

Mc2 Concept

CAST

Jeanie Bourdages in the role of Leila

Richard Lalancette in the role of Leo (puppet)

Anne Lalancette in the role of Julien (puppet)

Marcelle Hudon in the role of Annie (puppet)

PUPPET DESIGN

Sandra Turgeon

SET DESIGN

Anne-Marie Ross and **Serge Isabelle**

TEACHING GUIDE GRAPHICS

Carlos Paya, Révolution Publicité et Design

LINGUISTIC REVISION OF TEACHING GUIDE

Jean-Sébastien Bourré

TRANSLATION

Communications McKelvey