

# Top 10 Rules

for Parents  
Raising an  
Autistic Child

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I am an autistic psychologist from Denmark. I was diagnosed with autism at the age of 16, which means that I went through primary school without a diagnosis and the supports that come with it. I experienced a lot of bullying and the challenges that come with it on a mental health level, such as anxiety, depression and even suicidal ideation. Although I didn't have a diagnosis as a child, my mother knew that something was different about me even when I was young. She knew that she couldn't relate to me, nor understand the world I was in, the way I played, the games I came up with, or why I phrased things a certain way. I am grateful that, despite her lack of understanding, she tried her best to accept and accommodate me in my childhood. For example, when I was about eight years old, I wanted a lock on my door so I could have total privacy. I wanted a place where I could relax and recharge, and know that no one would be able to enter unless I allowed it. I didn't just want to close my door, I wanted to lock it. Even though my mother did not quite understand my need for a lock, she acknowledged that it was important for me and helped me to put a lock on my door.

When I was a young adult, my former psychologist prompted me to speak with groups of parents raising autistic children. After several sessions, I began to recognize that these parents valued my personal perspective. I was able to tell my story; I was able to tell them what being autistic is like for me; I was able to share my autistic voice – just one of many. From these experiences, and with the encouragement of my mentor and friend, Dr. Tony Attwood, I wrote a book titled, "What Your Autistic Child Wants You to Know: And How You Can Help Them." In this book, I share Ten Rules, or foundational pillars, that I feel could benefit parents raising an autistic child. These are based on answers I give most frequently to questions posed by parents in these group sessions and are aimed at debunking myths about autism. I don't pretend to know everything. However, with my own experiences and those that other autistic people have shared with me, as well as my clinical work, I hope I can lift up the voices of autistic individuals and raise awareness about the autistic experience.



# Ten Rules

## **1. I am a human being, no matter how different I seem.**

While autistic people can be different from non-autistic people in some very specific ways, overall we are more alike than we are different. We are human beings. We are people just like everyone else. We don't need to be approached as a mystery to be solved or like an alien from another planet. Sometimes we think and approach social interactions differently, but we are human beings like everyone else. It is important to remove the thoughts of "otherness." I have spoken to many parents who feel they cannot possibly understand the autistic perspective because it is "so different." The fact is, however, that autistic human needs are not all that different; they are just expressed differently.

## **2. There is something in this world that I am great at.**

There can be a tendency to focus on the challenges and difficulties of autism, on all the things we *can't* do. In view of what professionals have said or of depictions of autism in the media, parents might feel that their child can't have friends, shouldn't expect to get married, probably won't have a job, or won't have a life that is anything like "normal." I feel that this is a terrible message to give to someone. It's not motivating, and it's also not true! There are so many autistic artists, athletes, researchers and technology experts. After all, we are everywhere in society. If you look, you will find something at which your child excels. There is something that he or she has that is wonderful. Stop focusing too much on the things your child can't do and highlight the things your child is great at.

## **3. I am different from every other person on the spectrum.**

When I received my diagnosis, I was placed in a social networking group by my municipality. I was in the group with four or five other autistic teenage girls to help us build connections with one another. None of us, however, shared the same profile or interests. The only thing we had in common was our autism diagnosis. While autistic people can connect on that level, true connections often happen when they have a shared interest, goal or match in some other way. Just because your child is autistic doesn't mean he or she fits into a special autism box. The experience of autism is very different for each person. The willingness or desire of autistic individuals to engage socially can be very different; the kinds of routines that are important to them can be very different; their interests can be different; their individual sensory sensitivities can look very different. Just like every other segment of the population and every other box that people can be put in, autistic people are going to be very different from one another.

## **4. I need love.**

There is a myth that autistic people don't want to be social, don't want interactions and don't want community. This can very easily transform into a misconception that they do not want love. Autistic people want to connect; they just might not want to do it in the same way that other people do. They might not need quite as big a tribe as other people do. It doesn't mean they don't need or want love, connection or community. Figure out a way that your child receives love that is not overstimulating. It might involve just being in the same room as your child, or receiving a very controlled hug - not too tight, not too long and not by surprise. When I meet with my trusted friend and colleague Christian Stewart-Ferrer, we bow to greet each other at his request. He is not being rude. This is what he is comfortable with, and I respect that. What is more, I recognize the love and respect that are implied in the bow. Try not to impose your signs of affection on your child if he or she finds them uncomfortable. Accept the expressions of love, care and respect that are given to you in your child's way. Then, try to mirror those in the same way to your child.

## **5. I need space.**

The world is constantly overstimulating for most autistic people. The result is that autistic people need to withdraw. They need to put themselves in a space where they are not being overloaded with social and sensory stimulation. They need a controlled space where they can recharge. Sometimes that space is nature, a private bedroom or the beach, or playing video games. It's different for every person. Needing space is not a rejection: it's simply a need to recharge from a chaotic world.

## **6. I am trying.**

I truly believe that all people do their best at life. If people know how to do something better, how to meet a challenge in a different way, or how to change an approach to be less destructive or more accommodating, they usually will do it. When individuals don't look like they are giving enough or not trying to improve, it's usually because they do not have the capacity for some reason or another. Your child is trying and is doing his or her best! When parents begin to acknowledge that their child is trying and that the effort is more important than the success, their child's confidence and development will grow.

## **7. Sometimes I need a day off.**

Everyone needs a break sometimes. Your autistic child occasionally needs a day off from the pressure of expectations, performance, challenges and perfectionism. A break will allow your child to relax. It's important to take a step back and let your child have a day free of the constant challenges and difficulties.

## **8. My energy is spent quicker.**

There are many things that use up an autistic person's energy. These include stressors that non-autistic people do not even notice, such as sensory processing differences, social challenges and more. The autistic brain processes information in such a way that more energy is required to manage the constant stimulation. This causes exhaustion, overload and burnout. An autistic person's energy is spent quicker, so it is important for parents to be realistic about what their child can manage and when breaks and space are required to recharge.



### 9. I need you to catch me, not carry me.

Parents naturally want to protect their child. It is important for parents to protect, teach and nurture. However, it is also vital for parents to give their child opportunities to meet challenges at his or her level and ability. Parents should not fix every problem their child encounters, but allow their child to learn skills and confidence to overcome problems. I sometimes explain this point with a cheerleading analogy. In cheerleading there are flyers, the athletes who are tossed in the air to do tricks and flips, and there are bases, the athletes who catch the flyers. Autistic children who are flyers will only feel comfortable doing tricks and developing their skills if they know they have a base or a parent to catch them, support them, and cheer them on. Without these things, flyers will not want to go up in the air. It is also true, however, that if the bases never let go of the flyers, they are held on the ground and cannot even attempt to develop their skills in the air. All children, including autistic children, need to know that their parents will catch them when they fall. Parents need to be ready to catch their children as they work through difficulties, not carry them through every difficulty. Be their base, but do not keep them on the ground.

### 10. Chill out.

It is natural for parents to worry. Parents of autistic children might worry what their child's life is going to look like in five or 10 years, or when they are gone. They might wonder if they are providing all the supports needed for their child to reach his or her full potential. They might worry about education, employment or independence. My advice for parents is to chill out! It's going to be fine. Life is difficult. It comes with challenges, but you will overcome them. When parents are worried and stressed, their child picks up on that energy. Worrying too much is not productive. Meet your child with confidence. Tell your child that you believe in him or her. Tell your child - and yourself - that you believe everything is going to be okay. Reassure your child that, together, you can deal with life's challenges. I have met so many parents who tell me, "You cannot know; you are not as challenged as my child is." In many ways that is true, but these parents are not seeing me as a child but as an adult. My challenges as a child were not the same ones as I have today because I have learned strategies and developed. We mature, too. When you, as a parent, are with your child every day through the most difficult times, it is hard to see a future when maturity and strategies will give your child a better quality of life, a life that works for him or her. I urge you to believe me when I say that a bright future is possible.

The last piece of advice, or the last rule, is the one that I end most parent-focused presentations or events with because it is the one I most want you to remember. I want to leave you with hope and excitement for the future. I know that life with a child who has any handicap is stressful and full of worry, and that it brings many sleepless nights. I know that the struggles to even get access to support are exhausting. Sometimes, it must feel like screaming into a void as you ask for someone — anyone — to help you and your child. And this is the case regardless of what your child's support needs are. I see it across the board.

In those desperate moments, whether short or long, I hope that you remind yourself that your child will find a way through those challenges. Your child can do it, just as the many adult autistic advocates have done who came through immense challenges and have blossomed into capable, skilled and wonderful people. I implore you to believe it. Rest assured that a bright future that works for your child is in store.

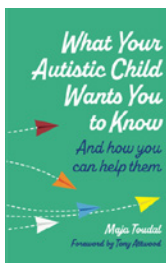


Maja Toudal, MSc.Psych, is an autistic psychologist, speaker, self-advocate and author from Denmark. She has worked in autism communication since 2010, primarily as a speaker at conferences, parent groups and local networking groups for people with Autism Spectrum Conditions. Maja has worked closely with autism experts Dr. Tony Attwood and Kirsten Callesen for many years, gaining clinical experience and helping to run social groups for teenage girls with ASD.

In 2016, she published her first book, *What Your Child With Asperger's Wants You To Know*, combining her personal and professional knowledge to educate and advise parents on the inner life of their children. This book was re-published in 2022 under the title, *What Your Autistic Child Wants You To Know*.

These days she focuses on a combination of clinical work and future book projects, as well as the podcast *Autistic Tidbits and Tangents*, which she hosts along with Dr. Kara Dymond.

Access Maja's book here: [https://uk.jkp.com/products/what-your-autistic-child-wants-you-to-know?\\_pos=1&\\_sid=4e19e2347&\\_ss=r](https://uk.jkp.com/products/what-your-autistic-child-wants-you-to-know?_pos=1&_sid=4e19e2347&_ss=r)



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