Integrating ASD Children Into the Neurotypical World



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with Robin Cantor-Cooke

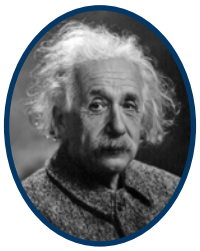
I am an educational therapist specializing in autism spectrum disorders (ASD). I have worked with thousands of children on the spectrum for more than 30 years. In that time, I've seen many parents and therapists try to change these children to be more like their neurotypical counterparts. But I have a different mission: I don't want to change these kids. I want to help them learn to express their uniqueness and connect with people as themselves. Stop for a moment and think about someone you know with autism. What makes this person unique? What amazes you about him or her? Think of a time that you have had a real connection with this person. What made it special and unlike connections you've had with other people?

"I want to change the world. I want to live in a society that doesn't separate individuals who have autism from those who don't. I want to live in a world of integrated classrooms and communities. Yes, I am an idealist, but our children are extraordinary."

I want to change the world. I want to live in a society that doesn't separate individuals who have autism from those who don't. I want to live in a world of integrated classrooms and communities. Yes, I am an idealist, but our children are extraordinary. Our schools, neighborhoods and communities would benefit from welcoming them warmly into our diverse society.



Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni



Albert Einstein



Emily Dickinson

Some of the world's greatest geniuses are now believed to have been on the autism spectrum, including Michelangelo, Albert Einstein and Emily Dickinson. How much would we have lost had they not found ways to express their unique gifts, and how much are we losing now? We need a system that will nurture ASD children and equip them not just to survive, but to thrive in the neurotypical world.

I believe that all people with ASD contain reserves of normalcy that they can tap into and use to connect with the neurotypical world. Our job is to help them learn to do this. But where do you start when your days are consumed with taming temper tantrums, nourishing a picky eater or trying to get more than four hours of sleep? Here are some of my suggestions based on over three decades of experience working with ASD children.

1. Make a connection

I work with children who are non-verbal and have difficulty performing simple daily tasks. I also work with intelligent children who have repetitive behaviours, social limitations, and aggressive outbursts. Just because children on the spectrum have social limitations doesn't mean they don't want to connect with people. They do.

The first thing I do with children is try to connect. The surest way I've found to do this is to watch them carefully and take note of what I see. When are they happy or sad, excited or bored? What draws their attention? Pay attention to what they do, and get involved. Sit and play with them. Line up cars with them. Spin in a circle or jump with them. Get on their level, even when it's on the floor, and watch their faces. Look into their eyes and smile. Make a connection.

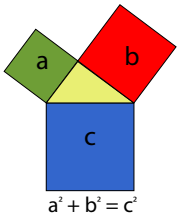
"Through it all, remember that your child is unique, and you are his or her most powerful advocate. Experts may know a lot about autism but you, as a parent, know more than anyone about your child's needs, interests, vulnerabilities and triggers."

2. Educate yourself and search for answers

Learn as much as you can about the aspects of autism that relate to your child. Seek out therapists specializing in autism. Attend autism conferences. Ask questions. Reach out on social media to other parents of ASD kids and learn from their experiences. Through it all, remember that your child is unique, and you are his or her most powerful advocate. Experts may know a lot about autism but you, as a parent, know more than anyone about your child's needs, interests, vulnerabilities and triggers. Stephen Shore, professor of special education at Adelphi University who is himself on the autism spectrum, puts it this way: "If you've met one person with autism, you've met ONE person with autism." What works for one child might not work for yours. What makes your child unique? What activity captures her interest? What toy makes him smile? Pay attention always. Never stop looking for answers.

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- ☐ **Attend autism conferences**
- ☐ **Ask questions**
- ☐ **Reach out on social media to other parents of ASD kids**

I once had a teenage client who was in a class for intellectually disabled students and wanted help studying for the SATs. Jerry* was baffled by the Pythagorean theorem—the formula stating that the sum of the squares of the lengths of the two shorter legs of a right triangle equals the square of the length of its hypotenuse—and wanted me to help him understand it. I tried teaching him the concept several different ways, but he kept getting lost midway through. After a while, I was as baffled as he was, and asked him what the problem was. "I have all these thoughts popping into my head," he said, "and they're clouding my concentration." A light bulb went on in my head: the problem wasn't that Jerry couldn't grasp the concept, but that he was getting distracted by unwanted thoughts. I changed my approach. Instead of trying to force a concept into Jerry's head, I taught him ways to calm his mind. Before working on the theorem, we sat and did some basic yoga poses together, paying attention to our breathing and how our bodies felt against the floor. Afterward, we would work on the theorem. When Jerry became distracted, we would close our eyes, practice breathing and begin again. He soon mastered the Pythagorean theorem and other complex ideas, and was transferred into a regular math class.



$a^2 + b^2 = c^2$
Pythagorean Theorem



Sometimes the answers are right in front of us. We just have to ask the right questions. Connect with your child. Learn whatever she or he can teach you.

3. Challenge your child

I believe that challenging our children will help them to grow. I have a young client we'll call Evan* who loves orienteering, the process of navigating using a map and compass. His passion for this activity borders on obsession, and he is also a perfectionist and insists on things being done his way. Patience is a challenge for him, and something I thought he needed to work on. I proposed we go to the park for our session so he could show me his orienteering skills. My ulterior motive was to force Evan to exercise patience when he got home, because I knew he would be eager to show his parents the map he had made. Before the session, I instructed his parents to greet Evan when he arrived, acknowledge his excitement, and say that they would look at the map as soon as they completed whatever tasks they were engaged in. In other words, I told them to ask him to wait—not for a day, or an hour, or even 10 minutes—but maybe one minute, or 30 seconds, or as long as he could manage. They told me later that it was very difficult for their son and equally difficult for them. But Evan did wait, for a full minute and a half, until his parents finished preparing the table for dinner. Then, they gave him their full attention as he showed them his creation. He wasn't aware of the step he'd taken, but the next time someone told him he'd have to be patient, he would know it was something he had been able to do before.



**Client names have been changed*

Challenging our children makes them grow. Coaxing ASD children out of their comfort zones will help them now in school and later when they are grown and in the workforce. Modest challenges will spark small changes, and small changes will snowball into big successes. Challenge your son to be patient. Challenge your daughter to try something new. Challenge your child to say "hello" to someone. You know your child best. You know better than anyone where she or he could use some improvement. Be creative. Think of small ways to challenge your child during the course of an ordinary day.

4. Tap into your child's interests and nurture them

Engage with your child,
When you see a spark, kindle the flame.
Go the extra mile, drive the extra hour,
and walk the winding trail toward
your child's inner world.

It is important to foster your child's interests. Dylan, my older son, has high-functioning autism and was consumed with rocks and geology when he was a kid. During summer vacations in New Hampshire, we would hike in the White Mountains, searching for fossils and gems. When I asked the local librarian for books on regional geology, she suggested we get in touch with the Presidential Gem and Mineral Society. We piled in the car and drove to its headquarters in Gorham, where we had the good fortune to meet the late Alan Plante, geologist and cofounder of the Society. Not only did he tell us where to find local mineral deposits, he offered to escort us there and teach us about what we found. I ran out and bought a portable video camera, cassettes and a tripod (this was before the advent of moviemaking mobile phones). Several times a week, Alan drove us deep into the mountains to explore rock formations. When Dylan found an especially intriguing spot, he'd set up the camera and videotape himself asking Alan questions about what we'd discovered. Back home, he'd watch the recordings over and over again, revisiting the wonder of these excursions. When I watch these tapes today, I see that Dylan was more than typical in these sessions. He was his true, exceptional self, engaging an enthusiastic, caring mentor in conversation about something he cared about.

Engage with your child, When you see a spark, kindle the flame. Go the extra mile, drive the extra hour, and walk the winding trail toward your child's inner world.

5. Where should you take ASD children to integrate them into the neurotypical world?

Everywhere! Expose your child to as many experiences as possible. This will help you, and them, find their interests. Take your child anywhere and everywhere that he or she can safely and appropriately go. Be imaginative and come up with places that are outside the realm of your child's typical day. I once took a class of high-school age ASD kids to a nursing home, where they passed a member of the maintenance staff repairing a wheelchair. Sixteen-year-old Logan* watched, transfixed, as the worker removed a wheel, examined the motor and tested the probes. When the worker was finished, Logan asked him what kind of education he would need to become a wheelchair mechanic. Six weeks later, Logan completed his training. Eventually, he got a job in wheelchair maintenance. It never occurred to me that an excursion to a nursing home would spark a career, but it did. Today Logan has a job, a steady income and a sense of purpose to his life. Expose your child to as many experiences as you can imagine. You never know what might ignite a passion and illuminate a life.

6. Try to see things from your child's point of view

Help your child understand the rationale for rules that seem illogical. Let me share an example. A class of fifth-graders was baking brownies to sell at an art supply fundraiser. When the brownies had cooled, the teacher cut them up and announced that each student could take one. Carrie*, who has autism, popped a brownie in her mouth, and then reached for another. The teacher steered Carrie's arm away, reminding her that she had clearly stated *one brownie only*. Carrie was bewildered: there in front of her were two sheets of brownies — 104 on each sheet equalled 208, divided by 26 kids in the class equalled eight brownies each! The rule didn't make sense. Carrie thrust her arm out again and a jostling match ensued that ended with Carrie pushing the teacher and getting suspended from school for a week. Carrie sobbed all the way home, raging at being punished, and for what? She couldn't understand. It took hours for her parents to calm her down, and her mother had to take time off from work without pay to stay home with her. What went wrong?

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I found out the following week when Carrie's parents asked me to join them for a meeting at the school with the teacher, principal and school psychologist. After the teacher recounted the events of the ill-fated afternoon, I asked her if she knew how many brownies they'd baked. She looked startled.

"Four trays," she said.

"So, around a hundred brownies?" I asked.

"Closer to two hundred," she said.

"I don't understand," I said. "If you had so many brownies, why couldn't Carrie have another one?"

The teacher glared at me. "Because I said so!"

That was the problem. From the teacher's point of view, her words should have sufficed. For neurotypical children, they sometimes do. But for ASD children, words without logic sel-

dom work. In Carrie's view, there were lots of brownies and she wanted just one more. Carrie required a logical explanation of why she couldn't have what she wanted; without one, her agitation escalated. Had the teacher made the effort to see things from Carrie's vantage point, she would have responded in terms that made sense to Carrie. The event might not have escalated into a physical confrontation.

7. Take time to explain

Once you see a situation from your child's point of view, you must put energy into explaining it in ways that make sense to him or her. Announcing rules isn't enough; you must explain the reasoning behind them. One technique is to devise questions that encourage your child to think logically. For instance, Carrie's teacher might have said, "If no one takes a brownie and we sell all 208 for 50 cents apiece, how much money would we raise?" Next she might have asked, "If each person takes one brownie, how many would be left to sell and how much money would we raise?" And then, "If each person takes two brownies, how much money would we raise?" It was logical to Carrie's teacher and her classmates that having more brownies to sell means more money raised which would equal more art supplies. Carrie's mind, however, worked differently. We must remember this difference when working with ASD kids: frame rules and limits with logic that makes sense to them, and take time to walk them through the reasoning. ASD children are capable of understanding rules and limits; like the rest of us, they're more likely to comply if they grasp the logic behind the rules.

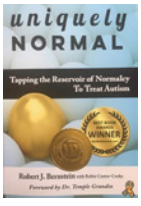
I was once conducting a long-distance phone session with a six-year-old boy who had both attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and high-functioning autism. It was 7:30 p.m. in my time zone and 5:30 p.m. in his. He couldn't grasp how the time at my home in New York could be different from the time at his in Colorado. I told him to visualize Earth as a ball in space and asked him how many miles he thought it would take to fly around the middle. "A million," he said (he was a bit off). I told him that the Earth's circumference was roughly 24,000 miles and that it rotated on its axis once every day. I paused a moment to let that sink in, and then asked how many hours are in a day. "That's easy—24," he said. Now we were getting somewhere. We did the math and concluded that the Earth rotated 24,000 miles in 24 hours, which he agreed came out to 1,000 miles in one hour. "Now," I said, "how many miles away is Colorado from New York?" There was a pause, then he replied, "My dad says about two thousand miles." He got quiet for a moment and, right then, I knew he'd made the connection. If he and I were 2,000 miles apart, that meant we were also two hours apart. In this session there were no outbursts or tantrums, nor was there an ASD child with ADHD. There was only an intelligent six-year-old focused on thinking and talking about the earth's rotation. In moments such as these, when you invest time and energy in verbalizing a logical progression of ideas, you can connect with your ASD child.

8. Effective ASD parents aren't born, they're made

Parents don't magically know what to do to help their ASD child, but if you're willing to make the effort, you can learn. When you educate yourself, you will learn. When you pay attention, you will learn. When you connect, you will learn. And when parents learn how to help their children, they can teach their children to help themselves. ASD children can learn to advocate for themselves on the school bus, on the playground, with their teachers and with other adults. When they are grown, they can advocate for themselves with colleagues and supervisors. Our job is the same as every other parent's job: to rear children who can figure out how to succeed, first with our help and support, and, eventually, without it.

Most important: Never give up. Don't stop learning about your child, even when he or she is grown. Don't give up on connecting. Always make the time to support and foster your child's interests and make the time to explain ideas and concepts, no matter how simple they may seem. Instead of trying to control your child, ask, "How can I help you control yourself?" No matter the age of your child, there is always more to learn and more progress to be made. Never, *ever* give up.





Robert J. Bernstein, M.A., has devoted his career to improving the lives of children, teenagers, and adults with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). He developed his cognitive-based, intuitive approach over more than 30 years of in-depth one-on-one work with clients ranging from nonverbal toddlers to high-functioning adults.

He has consulted for the pediatric neurology department at Bronx Lebanon Hospital and the medical clinic Pediatrics 2000 in New York City, is an educational consultant to the National Council on Alcoholism and Other Drug Dependencies, and has provided expert testimony at hearings on behalf of young people on the autism spectrum. He conducts evaluations and studies for neurologists and neuropsychologists around the country and for 30 years was coordinator for special education and science for the New York City Department of Education.

He conducts workshops, seminars, and support groups for families of persons with autism spectrum disorders. He founded the Table Tennis Therapy Program for Asperger's Individuals in Pleasantville, New York, the first program of its kind. He also has a brother on the autism spectrum.

Join a free parent support group Wednesdays 2:30pm EST: tinyurl.com/robbernstein
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