



AUTISM AND SENSORY PROCESSING CHALLENGES

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INTRODUCTION

Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) or sensory issues describes the challenges children and adults have when the brain has trouble receiving and responding to information that comes in through the senses. Various studies have shown that between 69% to 95% of autistic children have sensory processing challenges.

Dr. Jean Ayres, occupational therapist, first identified sensory processing difficulties in the 1970's. Sensory processing involves 7 sensory systems. Dr. Ayres added two additional internal senses to the traditional 5 of hearing, sight, touch, taste and smell – proprioception (body awareness) and vestibular (movement/balance). More recently added to this list is interoception – the 8th sensory system.

Interoception helps a person understand and feel what is going on inside of the body. Individuals who struggle with interoception may not know when they feel hungry, full, hot, cold or thirsty. It also affects the ability to interpret emotions; butterflies in the stomach may not be felt as anxiety or nervousness. Having trouble with this sense can also make self-regulation challenging.

A person may be over- or under-responsive to sensory input; activity level may be either unusually high or unusually low; a person may be in constant motion or tire easily. Some people may fluctuate between these extremes.

When sensory systems are regulated, a person will feel calm, in control, and able to interpret sensory stimuli. When sensory systems get overloaded and out of balance, behaviors of concern may happen. A person may feel overwhelmed, distracted, impulsive, show signs of distress, become aggressive, withdraw or shut down.

Every autistic person will have a unique sensory profile so there is no one size fits all solution to helping with sensory processing difficulties. Observational checklists can be used to gather information about a person's sensory profile. Sensory checklists will provide the framework for recognizing when sensory processing difficulties are occurring.

Once a sensory profile is known, a sensory diet can be created. This is an individualized plan of physical activities and accommodations to help a person meet their sensory needs. This plan provides the sensory input needed to stay focused and organized throughout the day. It can also be used to help with recovery after overload and plays an integral part in calming strategies.

There are many activities that can help with sensory regulation which support a child's development. Gardening, making toys, outdoor play, physical movement, performing household chores, and practicing yoga can address and fulfill sensory needs.

Engaging individuals in sensory experiences on a regular schedule can support focus, attentiveness, and interaction. A person may feel less anxious when they feel comfortable and in control. Alone-time is also necessary for recovery, reducing overload, and supporting wellbeing. The world can be a busy, confusing, and overwhelming place. Time to retreat will leave an autistic person better able to focus, learn, engage, and regulate.

Processing sensory input will always be challenging for autistic people, but with the right tools such as a sensory diet, exercise, and quiet periods in the day, a balance can happen which will foster regulation for optimal learning and living.



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DOES MY CHILD HAVE SENSORY PROCESSING DISORDER?

Sensory processing disorder (SPD) has long been associated with autism, and its external manifestations are often what lead a parent to getting a diagnosis. For a many years SPD was seen as a “symptom” of autism, but a [breakthrough study in 2013](#) found that this disorder had a biological basis that separated it from many other neurological disorders. More recently it was found that [SPD is actually a stand-alone disorder](#), and that children can have SPD and not autism, and vice versa.

What is Sensory Processing Disorder?

SPD (formerly called Sensory Integration Disorder) is a condition where the brain and nervous system have trouble processing or integrating stimulus. SPD is a neurophysiological condition in which sensory input – either from the environment or from one’s body - is poorly detected, or interpreted and (or) to which atypical responses are observed. For a child with SPD, processing the feelings of hot or cold, tired, hungry, lights and sound can be challenging and overwhelming. SPD can even evoke irregular responses that can cause health issues like not registering temperature in a typical way that allows the individual to [dress appropriately](#) for health and safety’s sake. Like with autism, SPD exists on a spectrum and can affect only one sense like hearing, or taste, or all of them. As a parent, the real challenges of SPD are [figuring out if your child is hurt, cold, hungry](#) etc...and then helping them get to the point where they can regulate themselves.

Signs that your child might have Sensory Processing Disorder

1. **SPD can show up as over OR under responsive** to stimulation from sight, sound, touch etc...Things that should cause discomfort like being too hot or too cold prompt little response, and other things like a dog barking can cause a response akin to physical distress and extreme anxiety.
2. **Intolerance to textures and certain clothing:** some children with SPD cannot stand the way certain clothing feels on their bodies. They need simple styles with very few seams, and have to have labels taken out. They may not be able to wear certain fabrics like wool.
3. **Intolerance to certain noises or loud noises:** some children with SPD hate the sound of vacuums, sirens, or crying babies. These noises can cause what feels like physical pain to those with SPD, and making it difficult to concentrate or function.
4. **Food textures and colours causing extreme responses.** Many of us with kids on the spectrum have to [help our children navigate this issue](#).
5. **Difficulty using fine motor skills** like using crayons or pens, putting small clothing on dolls, or using buttons on clothing for themselves.
6. **Difficulty with change or transitions.** While all young children need transition time, a child with SPD can have real problems with switching from one activity to another, moving rooms or houses, changing classrooms, or even if you change curtains in your home. Change can cause meltdowns or total withdrawal depending on the child.

- 7. Clumsiness: bumping into things or people.** Those with SPD sometimes have difficulty knowing where their own bodies are in space. They can also be overwhelmed by their environment causing them to “not see” furniture or people around them.

There is quite a [thorough SPD checklist here](#) that can be helpful if you suspect your child might be struggling with this disorder. A doctor can then refer your child to a specialist for further testing. There is also a great article by occupational therapist Paula Aquilla that describes what [SPD can feel like, and different ways it can manifest here](#).

Is there any way to treat Sensory Processing Disorder?

Yes, there are many ways to treat SPD, and the trick is to find the right one – or combination of different ones – to help your child. Occupational therapists who are skilled at sensory issues can be very helpful. Some things might need to be left out of the diet, or in the closet until your child is old enough to develop coping mechanisms on their own. The most important thing to remember is that every person with SPD is different and will experience the world in ways that you might not understand. Developing a mutual “language” around what they are feeling and experiencing (even if that language is non-verbal) will be one of the best tools you can help develop. As Paula Aquilla said:

The key to understanding a person’s response to sensation or their need to seek out sensation is to observe with an open mind and without judgement. We can all become detectives to determine possible underlying reasons for a child’s response to the sensation we present when we want to interact.



WHAT IS A SENSORY DIET?

A [sensory diet](#), first created by occupational therapists [Wilbarger and Wilbarger](#) (1991), is an individualized plan of physical activities and accommodations to help a person meet their sensory needs. This plan provides the sensory input needed to stay focused and organized throughout the day. For example, some people may feel overwhelmed or overloaded and need to get to a calmer state; some may feel lethargic or sluggish and need some activities to feel alert.

The main goal of a sensory diet is to prevent sensory and emotional overload by meeting the nervous system's sensory needs; however, it can also be used as a recovery technique. Understanding a child's sensory profile and the activities which create calmness and regulation can really help when a child feels overwhelmed and out of control. Engaging children in sensory experiences on a regular schedule can support focus, attentiveness and interaction. Children may feel less anxious when they feel comfortable and in control.

An occupational therapist (OT) usually designs a sensory diet. Parents and caregivers can then use the tailored activities at home; teachers/educational assistants can use it at school. The reason it is recommended to consult with an OT who has experience with sensory processing issues is because one of the trickiest aspects of sensory difficulty is recognizing when a child is overreactive or underreactive in any given moment, then adjusting sensory input to meet them where they are, and providing the right challenge to help them move forward into a “just right” state of being.

Observational checklists can be used to gather information about a person’s sensory profile. There are numerous [sensory checklists](#) available [online](#) or in books such as [Answers to Questions Teachers Ask about Sensory Integration](#) or [Building Bridges Through Sensory Integration](#).

Engaging children in sensory experiences on a regular schedule can support focus, attentiveness and interaction.

Activities for a Sensory Diet

Certain activities address specific sensory systems. Activities will also vary based on age and ability. Here are some examples of activities that can be used as part of a sensory diet:

Proprioception

Proprioceptive input can be achieved through lifting, pushing, and pulling heavy objects. Some ideas are:

- pushing a stroller or cart
- pulling a wagon filled with objects
- carrying a backpack
- playing hopscotch
- push ups against the wall
- lifting weights
- wearing a weighted vest
- vacuuming
- swimming

Vestibular

Vestibular input (sense of movement) is created by any type of movement such as spinning or swinging. Some ideas are:

- swinging on a swing
- lying in a hammock
- spinning on a Sit n' Spin or disc
- rolling
- jumping jacks
- dancing

Tactile

The tactile sense detects light touch, deep pressure, texture, temperature, vibration, and pain. Some ideas are:

- drawing in sand or salt
- hand massage
- high fives
- play with therapy putty, squeeze balls, a band to pull on
- crocheting, knitting or sewing
- [messy play](#) with shaving cream or foamy soap

Auditory

Auditory input is what we hear and how we listen. Some ideas for calming and organizing auditory input are:

- listening to music
- listening to sounds in nature
- use noise cancelling headphones to dampen sound
- playing a musical instrument
- listening to running water

Visual

Some environments can be too visually stimulating such as classrooms with busy bulletin boards, brightly lit rooms, bright colors or busy patterns on the wall or curtains. To reduce visual stimulation:

- keeps areas organized and clutter free
- store items in bins or boxes
- avoid using fluorescent lighting
- use neutral paint colors

Smell

Smelling certain odors can odors stimulate, calm, or send a person into sensory overload. When it comes to smells, think about:

- exploring [calming scents](#) to find preference. Lavender, vanilla, jasmine and rose are examples of calming scents.
- exploring alerting scents like peppermint or citrus
- sniffing different herbs and spices
- some people don't like scents at all. Look for unscented products such as detergents, soap or shampoo.

Taste

Taste input is perceived by the tongue but how it's interpreted or experienced is strongly influenced by the sense of smell. When it comes to taste, experiment with different flavors. [Oral sensory processing](#) not only involves taste, but tactile and proprioception too.

- Strong tastes can stimulate the undersensitive child.
- Involve children in [food preparation](#) to increase their likelihood of trying new foods.
- Offer crunchy foods such as raw veggies, popcorn, pretzels, or apples for those who like to chew.
- For the child who likes to chew, use chewy jewelry.
- Other ideas for chewy foods are fruit leather, beef jerky, marshmallows or raisins.
- For children who like to suck or lick things, try popsicles, ice cubes, or drinking through a straw.

These are just a few of the optional activities that can be used to create a sensory diet. To have a look at some examples, [click here](#). [Pinterest](#) also has lots of examples of sensory diets and templates. There are also some [great printables](#) organized by sensory system and age. Work with an experienced OT who not only can create a sensory diet, but can also assist with visual supports and scheduling the activities throughout the day.

Ideas for classroom accommodations can be found [here](#) and sensory diet activities for at [home here](#). Some resources to support teens and young adults are [The Out-of-Sync Child Grows Up – Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder in the Adolescent and Young Adult Years](#) and [The Sensory Team Handbook](#).

If you are looking for ideas on how to support autistic adults with sensory issues, have a look at the book [Sensory Issues for Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder](#).

References

[Building Bridges Through Sensory Integration, 3rd Ed.](#)

Chara, K. and Chara, P. (2004). *Sensory Smarts – A Book for Kids with ADHD or Autism Spectrum Disorders Struggling with Sensory Integration Problems*. Jessica Kingsley Press.



INTEROCEPTION AND AUTISM: BODY AWARENESS CHALLENGES

Most of us know about the seven senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, [vestibular](#), and [proprioception](#). There is also a lesser-known sense, the eighth sense, called interoception. This sense helps a person understand what is going on inside of the body like hunger, thirst, feeling hot or cold, fatigue, or a full bladder. It also affects the ability to interpret emotions; butterflies in the stomach may not be felt as anxiety or nervousness. Not understanding this sense can make self-regulation a challenge. It can also be the cause of eating and [toileting difficulties](#), something we frequently see in autistic people.

What is Interoception?

Muscles and joints have receptors that tell you where your body parts are. [Interoception](#) works much the same way, but the receptors are in your organs including your skin. These receptors send messages about the body to the brain, helping to regulate vital functions such as hunger, thirst, digestion, or heart rate.

Understanding these bodily feelings can help with interpretation of what's going on inside the body. If your bladder is full, you need to urinate. If your heart is beating fast, you may need to take a few deep breaths to slow it down.

Interoception also affects the interpretation of emotions.

How can interoception issues make things difficult for autistic people?

Autistic people may have difficulty making sense of this information. They may not be able to tell when they are feeling pain or fatigue. An itch may be felt as pain or pain may feel ticklish. They may not get the feeling of having to defecate and hold on to a bowel movement, which can [lead to constipation](#).

Interoception also affects the interpretation of emotions. Emotions may not be “felt”. If you can't tune in to the body cues that help interpret emotion, it's harder to identify the emotion. It's important to understand this aspect, because not feeling emotions affects a person's behavior. For example, a child may not recognize fear because he doesn't recognize that tense muscles, shallow breathing and a racing heart equals fear. My daughter recently told me that when she was in elementary school, she could only feel happiness or just “blank”. This lack of interoceptive awareness could explain explosive behavior because it's not until the emotions are so big that an eruption occurs.

This is a short [introductory video](#) on interoception that explains what it's all about.

Interoception Challenges and Difficulty with Self-Regulation

Interoceptive challenges will also affect the ability to self-regulate. If you don't know that you're hungry, thirsty or have a full bladder, you may feel uncomfortable but not know why. Frustration can build when you can't explain what is troubling you.

When the interoceptive sense is impaired, certain responses may not be regulated. For example, this could be the reason why an older child wets the bed. Not feeling “off” can lead to a meltdown. The real source of discomfort can’t be pinpointed. It’s important to be aware of this fact in order to discover the source of unexplained behavior. For example, when someone tells me a person is chewing on a hard object like wood, the first question I ask is about dental care. Could there be a cavity? Tender gums? A piece of food stuck between the teeth?

I can remember my good friend, [Judy Endow](#), telling me about a 9 year old girl who kept banging her head so much that she required a helmet for head protection. She actually had head lice that no one had detected. Once that was solved, the head banging stopped.

My autistic daughter once pulled her hair out all around one ear, completely bald. She was later diagnosed with an ear infection. She had never complained or cried to me about the pain.

What can we do to help autistic individuals develop body awareness / interoception?

1. The [Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness \(MAIA\)](#) is a questionnaire which measures IA with eight different scales. This has also been translated into several languages. There is a [research article](#) on how this MAIA was used in a 3 month study, but not related to ASD.
2. Kelly Mahler’s book, *Interoception – The Eighth Sensory System* (no longer in print), is one of the best introductions to understanding this sense and how to build body awareness individuals with ASD. She also created a curriculum for professionals – [The Interoception Curriculum](#).
3. [Mindfulness](#) and meditation may also be helpful. Our son dedicates time twice a week to meditation to help himself relax and re-energize.
4. [Sensory diets](#) can also help – an occupational therapist can create a sensory diet that raises body awareness.
5. A child can learn to pay attention to their body’s signals, recognize patterns in those signals, and then identify each with a particular emotion. These connections can be made through using a [body check chart](#).
6. I also like these body awareness activities used in relation to the body check chart from [Raising an Extraordinary Person](#):

- i. Point to different body parts on your child's chart and have them wiggle that body part on their actual body. This shows you that your child understands their chart and how it is connected to their body.
- ii. Play a game of Simon Says using the chart. Use actions like clench your fists, breath really hard, touch your heart, etc. Ask them to point to the body parts on the chart they used for each action.
- iii. Turn their chart into a self-portrait, getting them to draw all of their body parts on their chart so it's not just an outline. If they can spell, they may label the parts as well, if not pictures are fine.
- iv. Point to a body part on their body check chart and ask them how it feels right now. For example, eyes: they could be itchy, sleepy, awake, dry, watery, etc.

Understanding interoception can be the key to interpreting unexplained behavior or difficulties with bodily functions. With more [research](#) occurring around this topic, we will certainly understand more about this eighth sense and the role it plays in autistic individuals in the years to come.



WHAT IS MISOPHONIA?

Misophonia is an extreme sensitivity to certain sounds such as chewing, pen tapping, sniffing, throat clearing, or scratching. Its main symptom is a strong negative reaction when hearing triggering sounds. Small sounds can be unbearable and cause a fight or flight response to these triggering sounds. Some sound triggers may cause such distress that a person will avoid situations where they may hear these sounds. For example, if someone is hypersensitive to chewing noises, a person may prefer to eat their meals alone or avoid public places where people eat like a café or restaurant.

[Misophonia](#) is not listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V). Some experts consider misophonia itself a condition, while others believe it may develop as a symptom of other mental health conditions. In one of the [largest studies](#) to date with [575 subjects](#), 59% of people with misophonia did not have any other condition or disorder. The study found that around 3% of misophonia subjects had [autism](#), 5% had ADHD, and 2.8% had OCD. Another interesting finding from this study showed that 68% of the subjects with misophonia also had [misokinesia](#) which is a sensitivity to visual movements, such as face touching or fidgeting.

What are the symptoms of misophonia?

Misophonia's main symptom is a strong negative reaction when hearing triggering sounds. It may cause a person to:

- feel annoyed, irritated or disgusted
- feel rage, anger, or become aggressive (can include lashing out verbally or physically)
- be nervous or anxious in situations where triggering sounds may be heard
- feel anxious or panicked, including feelings of being trapped or losing control
- have tightness or pressure throughout the body or chest
- have increased blood pressure, heart rate, and body temperature

Misophonia starts in the preteen – teen years. It may disrupt daily life quite a bit if a person needs to avoid situations where they may hear upsetting sounds. This may mean avoiding friends and family, or frequently missing work and school.

What are some of the common sound triggers?

Sounds that trigger a person will vary widely. While misophonia begins in response to one specific sound, other sounds might eventually trigger a similar reaction. [Heathline website](#) has this list of common triggers:

Oral sounds made by other people such as:

- chomping or crunching
- slurping
- swallowing
- loud breathing
- throat clearing
- lip smacking

Other triggers may include:

- sniffing
- writing sounds
- pen clicking
- rustling of papers or fabric
- clocks ticking
- shoes scuffing
- glasses or silverware clinking
- nail filing or clipping
- mechanical humming and clicking
- birds or crickets chirping
- animal grooming sounds

Visual triggers can cause a similar reaction. This might happen seeing someone who is:

- wagging or jiggling their legs or feet
- rubbing their nose
- twirling their hair or pen
- chewing with an open mouth
- moving their lips or jaw in a chewing motion

People with misophonia might notice that making the same sound themselves typically doesn't provoke any reaction at all. Some find that mimicking the triggering sounds can help alleviate the distress they cause.

What causes misophonia?

No one is sure what causes [misophonia](#) yet and more research is needed in this area. It does appear more commonly in persons with anxiety disorders, OCD, Tourette Syndrome or tinnitus (ringing in the ears). While [misophonia](#) seems to be its own condition, it definitely has some overlap with other conditions, including similar symptoms.

Unique characteristics of misophonia include the following:

- Begins in puberty (age 9 – 12)
- Women tend to report more severe symptoms.
- The initial trigger often comes from a parent or family member, but new triggers can develop over time.
- It often runs in families.

How are the symptoms of misophonia managed?

If a person can't leave the situation/area where the triggers are, they can try:

- using noise-canceling headphones
- listening to music, calming sounds such as sounds in nature like falling rain, or white noise
- distraction with a calming mantra or affirmation
- politely asking the person making the sound to stop

Raising interoceptive awareness may also help a person to recognize anxious or panicked feelings around triggering sounds and then be able to develop calming techniques.

[Low Arousal Approaches](#) can lessen the flight or fight response and reduce stress if signs of arousal mechanisms becoming engaged are spotted early. More information on misophonia coping strategies can be found [here](#).

References

[Understanding Misophonia: When Everyday Sounds Cause Distress – Healthline](#)

For further reading:

- [Allergic to Sound](#)
- [International Misophonia Research](#)
- [Misophonia Awareness Facebook Page](#)
- [Misophonia Institute](#)
- [Misophonia International](#)
- [Misophonia Provider Network](#)



TOY TREASURES: MAKING TOYS AND GAMES FROM RECYCLED ITEMS

One of our past conference speakers, occupational therapist Barbara Sher, has written a number of great books about play and how to make games and toys out of recycled materials. When she presented for us, she asked our conference delegates to pick and choose items from a list to bring to the workshop. Most of us could find all of these items around home – newspapers, magazines, masking tape, string, old scarves, egg cartons, boxes, socks, beans, wool, buttons, cans, water bottles, rope etc. We then got into groups, put our heads together, and made toys and played games with these items. It was a really creative and fun afternoon!

In my experience, most children, including those on the spectrum, don't need expensive toys to be engaged and learn. When children come to us with a diagnosis (learning disabled, autism, global delays, Down Syndrome), we often think we have to buy special equipment to use with them. Not so! I once took a workshop on making toys and games from recycled and everyday household items and was amazed by how much you can do with simple, inexpensive items.

It's easy to lose our ability to play and create amidst technology, products, and gadgets. While I think these things have their place, I'm always surprised to see the creative and clever ways you could use items you have lying around your house.

How do you know what to make for your autistic child?

Find out what motivates them

The great thing about making your own toys and games is you can tailor-make something to suit a child's interest. Anyone who works with a child often enough will know what motivates and appeals to them. If you aren't sure or you don't know the child well, take some time and observe the child in action.

It's easy to lose our ability to play and create amidst technology, products, and gadgets.

Key into their interests

Do they love shiny things? What is their favorite color? Do they mind getting their [hands dirty or wet](#)? What do they play with – trucks, figurines, blocks?

Use music and singing

Most children like [music](#) and enjoy singing so working songs into play, games and routines can help with speech, memory, motivation, or create predictability.

Make what they need in the moment, without having to find that special toy

The advantage of [do-it-yourself](#) is you can create what is necessary to suit a child's needs in that moment. Do they need a body break? You can quickly find items in your house that will get your child using their body (see the toy ideas below). Do they need something soothing to hold? Again, with observation, you will know what kind of items your child would appreciate fiddling with and be able to find something around the house.

Allow them to practice skills

If a child gets involved in [making toys](#), they practice many different skills such as cutting, pasting, stacking, sorting, colouring, holding and grasping different utensils, writing and various other fine motor skills. Toys can incorporate aspects of curriculum too.

Involve the sensory systems

Using the [sensory systems](#) happens too in the play process. Play can involve visual tracking, hand-eye coordination, fine motor skills, gross motor skills like jumping and hopping, tactile awareness through touching different textures, or playing hidden object games like feel what is in the box and try to guess what it is. Auditory skills can be worked on by placing different objects inside a toilet paper roll, sealing the ends, then shaking the tube and trying to guess what's inside. The possibilities are endless!

Playing works on important social skills such as turn taking, cooperation, and reciprocity.

Play is powerful, and an integral part of learning. Take time in the day to play. Adding music and physical activity to play helps with child development. Most of us learn better by doing and if the learning process is presented in a novel, fun and meaningful way, we're more likely to retain the information. Collaborating with others in creative play also brings out the best in everyone in the room.

Simple Toy Ideas You Can Try At Home

1. Why not make a ball out of crumpled up newspaper and masking tape and play a game? I saw one group make a hoop out of newspaper rolled into tubes and taped and toss the ball in several different ways into the hoop.
2. Take a toilet paper roll and place an object inside. Cover both ends and then let your child shake the tube and try to guess what it is. You can also place objects in a bag, and let your child reach in to feel it, and try to guess what's inside. These ideas also work in groups, and can teach cooperative play. Let your child get you to guess as well!
3. I saw a group take their newspaper balls that they had made and play a question/answer game based on a science unit. You could toss the ball to a child and say, "Name something that begins with the letter a" and when they catch the ball, they could say their answer. A child's interest in toys and games may increase too when they become part of the creative and construction process.
4. One woman at one of our workshops made her own version of Mr. Potato Head with a paper bag stuffed with newspaper. She made different eyes and mouth expressions using the lids of jars and juice cans. These could be taken on and off the face to show different emotions. Some people made puppets out of lunch bags but added textured items for sensory play such as yarn, foil, buttons or beads.

For further reading:

- ☰ [*Early Intervention Games*](#)
- ☰ [*Everyday Games for Sensory Processing Disorder: 100 Playful Activities to Empower Children with Sensory Differences*](#)
- ☰ [*Small Steps Forward*](#)
- ☰ [*Stepping Out*](#)



HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW? MENTAL HEALTH, WELLNESS & SKILLS DEVELOPMENT THROUGH GARDENING

Starting a garden is a great long-term project that has [numerous benefits](#). Lessons can be taught through online learning and videos. Gardening can also be an activity that unites a group of people through a common purpose. For example, the things that were grown can be brought in to share, and the growing experience shared through journals and progress photos. This can also be a way to keep a class together as an online sharing project through weekly reports.

In August of 2019, we put our adult son Marc in a horticulture class for the first time. It was through [Cerebral Palsy Alberta](#). Little did we know what a life-changing experience it would be. Growing your own flowers, fruits and vegetables teach a valuable lesson in self-sufficiency and it's a skill you can use for your lifetime.

Gardening can be an activity that unites a group of people through a common purpose.

What is it about gardening – planting, tending, harvesting, and eating what you grow – that is so therapeutic?

Gardening Can Improve Gross and Fine Motor Skills

Activities in the garden can address both gross and fine motor skills. Here are some examples:

1. **The Wheelbarrow** – moving dirt, rocks, or debris counts as heavy work and can build muscles in both arms and legs.
2. **Digging** – builds endurance and hand dexterity; can also reduce tactile defensiveness.
3. **Pulling Weeds** – develops arm and hand strength and postural stability.
4. **Raking** – good for bilateral coordination.
5. **Watering with a watering can** – good for bilateral coordination if using two hands; strengthens arms.
6. **Planting Seeds** – fine motor coordination.
7. **Pinching Plants** – the pincer grasp is used to pinch off dead leaves or flowers.
8. **Picking** – depending on what you are picking, a different touch and gradation will be needed. Raspberries require more delicacy, apples need more coaxing.
9. **Pulling** – vegetables that grow in the ground will need more strength to get them out like potatoes and carrots.

Starting Seedlings is a Great Indoor Activity

You don't have to wait for the good weather to start a garden, nor do you need fancy equipment. You can start planting seeds by using [eggshells](#), [toilet paper rolls](#), [paper cups](#), and other [common household items](#). You don't even have to buy seeds if you don't want to because you can find seeds from the foods you already eat like apples. Here is a [list](#) of 16 foods that will re-grow from kitchen scraps. What a great science lesson to do at home! It also teaches children how to be frugal and re-use what is around them. Looking for free seeds? [Here](#) are some ways to get them.

When plants become too big for the planter they are in and it's time to move them outside, you can transplant them into larger containers such as window boxes, planters, hanging baskets, or any other container that holds soil. You can also use cement blocks or bricks to make an area that fits your space for planting outdoors. The clever Farmer's Almanac has a [superb article](#) on constructing a do-it-yourself garden with limited supplies.

Curriculum Ideas Around Gardening

There are many topics you can teach around gardening such as:

- [Parts](#) of a seed
- [Stages](#) of plant growth
- Plant Categories (fruits, vegetable, herbs, types of flowers)
- [Heirloom](#) fruits and vegetables
- History ([chocolate](#) is a fascinating one)
- [Health benefits](#) of fruits and vegetables

Children can have projects around plant growth such as keeping a journal on the development, taking photos and sharing with others, and researching recipes to eventually use what they are growing. If you are looking for specific gardening lesson plans for various age groups, click [here](#). Here is a list of the [10 Best Gardening Resources for Schools](#).

Benefits of Gardening for Autistic Individuals

For autistic individuals, there are many benefits to gardening.

- It is a calm, quiet activity in a natural environment.
- It provides an opportunity to follow instructions.
- It teaches cooperation and how to work with others.

- It gives numerous sensory experiences and input (refer back to the motor skills section).
- It teaches responsibility and leadership. A garden needs tending every day.
- It is a fully inclusive activity because there is something for everyone to do and a garden is a team effort.
- It provides an opportunity to socialize.
- Eating what you grow can encourage individuals to try new foods. Our son now eats salad and soup several times a week. This is a direct result of the horticulture class.
- You can learn a variety of ways to prepare fruits and vegetables.
- You can learn how to preserve food through canning, freezing, drying, and dehydration.
- Flowers can be dried and used for art projects.

There are lots of [resources](#) on how to start a garden and what to grow. I like this [article](#) for vegetables. Some [vegetables](#) are easier than others, so try to start with something fairly forgiving. Enjoy your gardening projects in whatever space you have available.

For further reading:

- ☰ [*Adults with Autism and Gardening*](#)
- ☰ [*The Autistic Gardener*](#)
- ☰ [*The Farmer's Almanac*](#)
- ☰ [*Gardening for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and Special Educational Needs*](#)
- ☰ [*Sensory Gardens for Autism*](#)
- ☰ [*Tips on Gardening with Children with ASD*](#)



YOGA AND EXERCISE CAN HELP AUTISTIC INDIVIDUALS MANAGE MELTDOWNS AND SELF REGULATION

For many of us, the New Year brings resolutions that often include exercise and diet goals for renewed health. Regular exercise is essential to your good health, but did you know it can also help an autistic person self-regulate and manage stress? Coach Dave Geslak has created [exercise programs for people on the autism spectrum](#) using structure and visual supports. The [Exercise Connection](#) program emphasizes these five points:

1. Body Image
2. Posture
3. Motor Coordination
4. Muscular Fitness
5. Cardiovascular Fitness

Geslak is also the author of a fitness book called [The Autism Fitness Handbook: An Exercise Program to Boost Body Image, Motor Skills, Posture and Confidence in Children and Teens with Autism Spectrum Disorder](#). Designed to address specific areas of difficulty for children, teens and young adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the 46 exercises in this comprehensive program are proven to improve body image, motor coordination, posture, muscular and cardiovascular fitness. The boost to confidence, relationships and general wellbeing resulting from this will be transformative for autistic individuals and their families.

Useful exercises for different issues arising from Autism Spectrum Disorders

1. Recreational sports

Team sports like soccer, baseball, hockey etc...can have health benefits, afford opportunities for socialization, and, in some cases, may help prevent problem behavior such as aggression. For those looking for the social aspect, this works particularly well if peers who have been taught to serve as tutors or models are available during the activity. Smaller “team” sports that are more one-on-one (like tennis), can also be good as there is an opportunity to look for a sport partner that is educated in how to interact positively with autistic individuals.

2. Yoga

Yoga is not only good for a person’s physical body, it also promotes self-regulation, aids in relaxation, and helps to alleviate stress. There are [5 basic yoga poses](#) that are simple to use, and may prevent meltdowns. There is also a You Tube clip called [Good Night Yoga](#) (based on a book by the same name with lovely illustrations) which can help settle children for bedtime pose by pose. For more ideas on how to implement yoga, have a look at [Asanas for Autism and Special Needs](#). [Peaceful Pathways](#) yoga studio has collected a number of [articles about yoga and special needs](#).

The 4 basic yoga poses for helping to prevent meltdowns for autistic individuals

1. Child's pose with "Bee Breath".

In this posture your child sits on their knees, places their forehead on the floor with their arms stretched out behind them. Good Night Yoga makes this pose even more fun and calming by adding a "bee's breath". In order to breathe like a bee your child simply inhales from the floor up to sitting, and then takes a deep deep breath, and buzzes like a bee all the way back down to the post on the floor. Children love to buzz like a bee, and the big breaths are perfect for soothing the nervous system.

2. Cat-Cow pose.

In Good Night Yoga, this pose is just the cat part, but the cow is pretty fun too! Normally they are paired together. To do the poses your child should get on their hands and knees, and can start by inhaling into the cat, followed by exhaling and "mooring" into the cow. The deep breathing with gentle spine movement in this pose helps release tension and calm the body.

Cat: inhale and arch your back like a cat as high as you can.

Cow: exhale and arch your back the other way so that your belly drops towards the mat and you are looking at the ceiling. Let your exhale come out as a loud MOOOOO if you like.

3. Tree pose.

The concentration required to get into and hold this pose is great for quieting the mind. To get into Tree Pose, have your child pick which leg they feel most balanced on. Then they lift the other leg and place it on the thigh at – or above- the knee, as high up as they can. Once they can get their balance (they might need to use their arms for this), they can then place their hands together as if in prayer, and breathe deeply for as many breaths as they can.

Tips: This pose can be pretty funny as most people will flop about a bit at first. It can be fun for a child to see which leg they are stronger and more balanced on (there is usually one side that is easier). If this is too difficult, the child can back up against a wall, and use the wall to support them while they find their balance.

4. Child's pose with visualization.

Child's pose can be a very comforting "safe space". The entire spine is supported on your own legs, and it offers a deep place to relax with a similar "curled up" feeling that many people find soothing when they are overwhelmed. To do this pose, your child simply goes into the face down posture of the child's pose of the first posture, and stays there breathing deeply. They can place their hands before them on the floor, or behind them.

Tip: It can be good to take this a step further by having the child visualize something they find soothing. For some children this can be inhaling pink clouds, or floating on clouds. It's important to find something that YOUR child finds comforting and soothing for this visualization, as some children might find clouds scary or disorienting. Visualization – or meditation- can be a very powerful tool for self-regulation.

Final tips? Have fun, and learn these tools before you need them

Our son does yoga once a week with a private instructor. He is able to use his breathing techniques throughout the week to keep calm and his strength and flexibility have increased. Yoga has kept him mobile in spite of having advanced arthritis.

If you want to add yoga to your child's toolbox of self-regulation, it is best to learn the postures in a calm/fun/non-stressful environment, so that when your child needs to use them to self regulate they are already well practiced. Adding these poses to your night-time ritual can be a great way to not only prepare your child for a [calming sleep](#), but links the poses to a calm, relaxed and safe space for your child.



PLAYING OUTDOORS: BUILDING SKILLS, EXPLORING AND CREATING MEMORIES FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN

When you think of your fondest childhood memories, they are probably about something you did outdoors. Maybe it was camping, going to the beach, playing in a tent or sandbox, having a game of flashlight tag, learning badminton, or swimming in a lake. Playing outdoors builds physical health, provides exposure to vitamin D, supports cognitive and emotional/social development, improves sensory skills, increases attention span, and contributes to a better mood and a sense of well-being.

A backyard can provide lots of opportunities for exploration, sensory play, gross and fine motor skill practice, and a chance to build social skills through unstructured play. Being [outside](#) reduces anger, fear and stress, and contributes to physical well-being by reducing blood pressure, heart rate, muscle tension, and the production of stress hormones such as cortisol. Outdoor activity can also support a [better sleep](#) at night.

There are a number of [studies](#) done on the [benefits of nature](#). With so many positives supporting outdoor play and exploration, let's look at different activities you can do to make the most of being outside.

Safety First

Before using any outdoor space, make sure it is safe. The area should be enclosed with a fence if the child is prone to running away or having a flight response if there is a trigger like a loud noise. If in an open, natural space, stay clear of bike paths and be extra vigilant with supervision around water. In the backyard, remove all garden tools and store them when not in use. Having a pop up tent or little playhouse can provide a quiet space for calming if a child becomes overstimulated and needs a break while outside.

Sensory Play

There are lots of inexpensive ideas for sensory play. Consider some of these suggestions.

Sandbox – Sand play is great for digging, dumping, pouring, building and creating things like roads, towns, castles, and pretend pies. There are many clever, simple ways to [create a sandbox](#). For different ideas on what to do with sand, have a look at this [article](#).

Water Play – Most children love playing with water. It's a gentle, quiet medium and feels wonderful as it runs through your fingers. Have a look at these 25 [water play activities](#).

Blowing Bubbles – Blowing bubbles works on oral motor skills by strengthening the mouth muscles. Popping bubbles is great for hand-eye coordination and finger isolation. You can also practice social skills like turn taking or requesting. There are so many different kinds of bubbles available and they really appeal to children.

Velcro Ball Toss – This game is great for hand-eye coordination because of the tossing and catching of the ball. It also takes hand strength to pull the ball off the Velcro pad.

Sidewalk Chalk – Most kids find sidewalk chalk so much fun they won't even know they are practicing skills like handwriting or drawing shapes and lines. You can draw a Tic-Tac Toe game to practice tossing and aim, a hopscotch board for movement on one and two feet and much [more!](#)

Zoom Ball – This is a great activity to work on bilateral skills. One person holds one end of the zoom ball, and another person hold the other end. While holding the handles, one in each hand, one partner spreads his arms out to the side and the ball slides down the rope to the other partner. You can do fast and slow movements.

Spray Bottle – Fill a spray bottle with water to improve fine motor strength. Water plants, clean off sidewalk chalk markings, wash windows or shine up the car.

Movement Activities

Obstacle Course – You can target all kinds of skills with an [obstacle course](#) depending on how you set it up. It can involve running, jumping, climbing, crawling and all sorts of gross motor skills.

Hide and Go Seek – A classic childhood game for both indoors and outdoors or a combination of both.

Marching Band – This one can be a bit noisy for the neighbors, but it's still great fun. You can combine the outdoor marching band with an [instrument making](#) activity.

A Treasure Hunt – Arm kids with a map or simple visual clues to find the hidden treasure throughout the yard. You can incorporate lots of movement depending on where you hide things.

The Natural World

Make a Bird Feeder – Bird feeders are a great way to watch birds come into your yard. Making a bird feeder will also involve sensory skills as well. Check out these great, [simple ideas](#) for making your own.

Bird Watching – Once you have the bird feeder up, start watching to see who comes. If your child likes photography, they can take pictures. You can then share those pictures on a FaceTime or Skype chat with a family member to provide some structure on what to talk about.

Gardening – I wrote a blog post about how to get a garden going and its benefits.

Sorting Nature – Autistic children often love to sort and categorize. Collect things from around the yard such as leaves, flowers, twigs, and rocks.

Backyard Sports

There are lots of sports you can do in the backyard or in the driveway:

- T-ball
- Bowling
- Badminton
- Soccer
- Mini-golf
- Basketball
- Bean bag toss
- Horseshoes
- Croquet
- Frisbee

The ideas here are inexpensive and easy to implement – they also build skills and keep learning happening. Just remember to provide structure for activities so that the expectations of what and how to do the activity are clear. You can put outdoor activities into your visual schedules and make them a part of a child's day. Outdoor activities are also a great way to practice contingency plans because if the weather changes, you have to be prepared to go to plan B.

This summer might be one spent at home so let's make the most of our outdoor spaces. Getting outside will support health and well-being as well as create lasting memories.



UNDERSTANDING WHY AUTISTIC PEOPLE NEED ALONE-TIME

When my autistic children were in school, they used to need about 90 minutes of alone-time when they got home with no demands or interruptions. I respected their need for a quiet period to regroup and recharge their batteries before connecting with me. As adults, they still have this need to have time to themselves, finding it throughout the day. Alone time keeps them regulated, calm and happy.

I recently stumbled upon Ph.D candidate [Florence Neville's](#) summary of her [study](#) on the wellbeing benefits of alone-time for autistic people. Her PhD research is about finding out how and where autistic adults choose to spend time alone, and what they feel the benefits of alone-time are. Florence defines alone-time for her research as:

1. being by yourself where you won't be interrupted by other people
2. being in a space where one feels comfortable
3. choosing what to do in this time and space

I would like to share Florence's findings because she touches on an important need for autistics and that alone-time should be supported and respected.

The Four Themes

Four themes emerged from the autistic participants that Neville interviewed.

1. Reacting to Social and Sensory Overload

Neville found that her participants felt overwhelmed by social input, sensory input and needed to mask. Difficult, intense, or long periods of being in a social space was often emotionally or physically distressing. Sensory input encompassed a variety of things such as bright lights, background noise, and uncomfortable temperatures. Being in social spaces made it harder to control sensory input (ex. classrooms, workplaces, busy restaurants, family gatherings).

I wrote an in-depth post on [autistic masking](#). Autistic masking, camouflaging, or compensating is a conscious or unconscious suppression of natural autistic responses. It is hiding or controlling behaviors associated with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) that may be viewed as inappropriate in situations. Autistic people may feel the need to present or perform social behaviors that are considered neurotypical or may hide neurodiverse behaviors in order to be accepted and fit in.

Dealing with social and sensory input, and masking is overwhelming and exhausting. It can leave a person feeling irritable or frustrated. This feeling of being overwhelmed can lead to [meltdowns](#) or shutdowns.

2. Retreating to a Safe Space

Autistic people need safe spaces to retreat to in order to get away from social input or negative sensory input. Safe spaces can help with recovery from overload. These spaces will mean different things to different people.

An indoor space could be:

- a. a minimalist space
- b. spaces where temperature, light, sounds, and smells are controllable
- c. cozy spaces (a one-man tent, a hammock, bean bag chair)
- d. an interesting space (for my son, that would be one with a ceiling fan in it)
- e. a space that is set up for preferred activities (art corner, puzzle table, reading chair, sewing station)

Outdoor spaces can connect a person with nature, fresh air and peacefulness. Natural spaces away from people are:

- a. places to feel less inhibited
- b. places with sensory input that feels good
- c. spaces to think clearly

In a busy household, sometimes waking up before everyone else or going to sleep once everyone else is in bed is the only way to get alone-time. (I do a combination of both of these to satisfy my own need for alone-time.)

3. Immersion/Flow States for Regulation, Recovery and Recharging

Being immersed in enjoyable, interesting activities help with [recovery](#) and recharging the batteries. Some of Neville's participants called this being in a flow-state. Damian Milton, autistic scholar, has an excellent [video](#) explaining what the flow-state is. Getting into a flow-state for some people can only happen after spending time in a safe space.

Spending time in [immersive activities](#) can help with processing thoughts and emotions that have built up throughout the day, or provide a break from worrying and anxious thoughts. For example, my daughter finds bike riding a great stress release and helps her to recover from anxious, perseverative thoughts. My son recovers and recharges by listening to classical music or coloring.

Fictional worlds can feel safer, easier and more predictable than real-world environments. These make-believe worlds can be great stress relievers. My daughter spends much of her free time writing stories about Sonic characters on the Wattpad site. My son finds watching Thomas the Tank Engine episodes comforting.

4. Ready and Able to Reconnect

Neville's participants wanted to be sociable and reconnect with other people after having some time apart. They needed time to recover, recharge, feel rested and calm before going into social spaces again. Sometimes it was helpful to create a schedule around socializing and alone-time in order to balance the two and not get overwhelmed.

[COVID-19 lockdowns](#) presented problems for people who lived alone but enjoyed seeing other people during the workday, and for people who were used to being alone during the day but now had their family home all day. Both groups lost the ability to balance alone-time and time with others.

When ready to reconnect, autistic people were more likely to enjoy social events in small groups, based around a shared interest, or with other neurodivergent people. Socializing based around an activity (hiking, crafting, or watching films) meant less pressure to mask. Activities based on social events of interest attracted other neurodivergent people who understood sensory sensitivities.

Why We Need to Understand These Four Themes

Understanding these four themes can help people in supportive and caregiver roles to provide safe spaces to retreat, to not take it personally when an autistic person needs time away, to allow opportunities for breaks in the day, and to encourage the pursuit of interests and enjoyable activities to experience flow-states. Alone-time is necessary for recovery, reducing overload, and [supporting wellbeing](#). The world can be a busy, confusing, and overwhelming place. Time to retreat will leave an autistic person better able to focus, learn, engage, and regulate.

Note – If you're autistic and have a strategy that helps you to feel happy and healthy and want to share it, please consider [contacting Autism HWB](#) in the UK to submit your story.



CALMING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT AN AUTISTIC PERSON

It's been over two years now since the world was turned upside down due to COVID-19. Life has changed a great deal with social distancing, hand sanitizing, new rules in public places, and constant, unpredictable changes. As society opens up again, there will be new challenges to face. The “new normal” will continue to evolve and depending on how it all goes, there could be a return to restrictions or new measures put into place as more becomes known about COVID-19 and its spread.

It's important in this new environment to think about teaching calming and relaxation strategies before anxiety escalates. While [predictability](#) can go a long way in decreasing anxiety, it may not always be possible in a rapidly changing world. Avoiding, managing, and planning for potentially challenging situations will only go so far, particularly when the way we used to operate in the community has changed so much and will continue to do so, often with little or no warning.

Recognizing the Signs of Overload

An autistic person may not be able to tell you that they are becoming overwhelmed, anxious, or upset. You may see outward signs such as:

- sensory avoidance (hand on ears, closing eyes, retreating somewhere).
- sensory seeking behavior (bumping into furniture, getting into a small, tight space).
- an increase in repetitive behaviors such as touching the same objects over and over.
- bolting or running away.
- withdrawing, not engaging.
- an increase in stimming behaviors such as fast, intense rocking, pacing, self-talk, hair twirling, hand flapping.
- increased echolalia.
- self-injurious behaviors like head banging, skin picking or pinching.

Some of these behaviors may be an attempt at self-calming while others may be signs of anxiety or feeling upset.

Teach Interoceptive Awareness

Interoception is the eighth sensory system. The interoceptive system has little receptors located throughout the inside of our body, in our organs, muscles, skin, bones and so forth. These receptors gather information from the inside of our body and send it to the brain. The brain helps to make sense of these messages and enables us to feel things such as hunger, fullness, itch, pain, body temperature, nausea, need for the bathroom, physical exertion and sexual arousal. Interoception also allows us to feel our emotions.

Interoceptive awareness (IA) is often impaired in people with autism spectrum disorder. They may not feel when their internal system is off. They are not aware of their interoceptive signals telling them they are hot, thirsty, or tired. You need IA in order to self-regulate. IA is also connected to executive function skills like problem solving, flexible thinking, intuition and problem solving.

Teaching IA is a way to help a person on the spectrum understand what their internal body signals are telling them and how to react. Since COVID-19 started, my 21 year old daughter Julia has been describing a feeling that her chest is rising. Together, we figured out this was a sign of anxiety. We then came up with a plan of what to do when this feeling started to creep up which was to do some Wii Fit for 20 minutes to alleviate that feeling. We also go for at least 3 bike rides per week to keep “rising chest” at bay. These strategies are helping Julia to create her own solutions which increases her independence and lessens the chance of a meltdown should things continue to build. This “rumbling” stage is often missed which can then lead to challenging behavior.

If you want to learn more about interoception and how to increase IA, please have a look at [Kelly Mahler's webinar](#) which provides a lot of instruction on this topic.

Ten Ways to Stay Calm

Once you recognize the signs of anxiousness, overload, or upset, try some of these ideas to keep a person calm.

1. **Offer an escape plan.** We talk about this a lot in our [Low Arousal Approach trainings](#). A person may just need to leave the area in order to regain their control and reduce stimulation. In the home, this could be a bedroom. My son's classroom used to have a one man tent. My son listens to classical music when he needs a break or reads aloud to himself.
2. **Have a sensory basket or box.** Ours has things in it like a fidget spinner, squeeze ball, [Tangle toy](#), and Fidget for Your Digit. Some kids like to chew, others need deep pressure. If you need some ideas for fidgets, have a look at this [article](#).
3. **Develop some simple exercises or routines that are calming.** I really like the book [Active Imagination](#) because it has many calming exercises/games in it. The illustrations provide clear instruction and there are no complicated materials required. There is also a [series of books for children](#) written by occupational therapist Lauren Brukner that teaches how to recognize anxious feelings and then instructs what to do to feel calm and back in control. Most of her books are geared for ages 7 – 14, but [two](#) are for ages 4 – 7.
4. **Try teaching meditation or meditation techniques.** Our son developed his own over the years to classical music. He spends an hour every Monday meditating in his room. He closes his eyes and breathes deeply. He also colours in a coloring book. There are also [books](#) on mindfulness practice, but keep in mind that not every autistic person can do this successfully. For more ideas on mindfulness, have a look at this [article](#) which also has a great reference section.

5. **Teach how to self-regulate.** Kari Dunn Buron wrote a great children's book called [When My Worries Get Too Big](#) which teaches techniques like deep breathing and counting. She also created a [6 minute video](#) around the book which is well worth watching.
6. **Distraction.** While this may not work every time, providing a distraction can take a person's mind off what is bothering them. For Julia, there are couple of [cat videos](#) that change her mood instantly. Talking about favorite topics and interests can brighten the spirit right away.
7. **Try doing yoga.** Yoga has been a lifesaver for my son. He has been practicing since he was 4 years old. Learning yoga is what moved him into developing his meditation practice. If you need ideas, [Yoga for Children and Young People with Autism](#) is a great book to use because the practice sequences are short and are constructed by ability.
8. **Allow time for physical exercise.** This really is one of the best things you can do to alleviate stress and anxiety for anyone. I discovered [figure skating](#) in my 40's and it changed my life by reducing my anxious feelings. Our kids stay very active with [biking](#), hiking, adapted fitness classes, golf, bowling and yoga.
9. **Adopt a pet.** While I resisted getting a cat for many years, I have to say that adopting Mr. Darcy 5 years ago really improved my daughter's outlook. There have been numerous [studies and stories](#) on how animals can improve the well-being of autistic people.
10. **Establish clear routines and schedules.** [Predictability and familiarity](#) provide a sense of calm. [Visual schedules](#) show how the day will unfold. [Task sequencing](#) outlines the steps for task completion and fosters independence.

If It All Goes Awry...

There will be good days and bad days. Some days, these ideas will work and other days not. If a meltdown or outburst does occur, do not teach a calming technique in that moment. Try not to reason, argue or talk. Allow time for processing. Offer reassurance when the person is back in control and let them know that things are alright between you and them. Keeping a trusting and open [relationship](#) is the foundation for providing solid support for well being.



Maureen Bennie

Maureen has co-authored books and written over 400 articles and book reviews that have appeared in magazines, newsletters and on websites throughout North America and the UK.

Maureen Bennie created the Autism Awareness Centre in 2003 to address what she saw as a gap in support, information, resources and advocacy for those struggling with [autism spectrum disorders](#). For Maureen, education and knowledge brings positive change to the lives of those affected by autism spectrum disorders.

Maureen is the mother of two young autistic adults – Marc and Julia. For 8 years, she managed an at-home Intensive Behavioral Intervention Program which involved working with speech pathologists, child development specialists, psychologists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists.

Maureen has written over 400 articles and book reviews that have appeared in magazines, newsletters, and on websites throughout North America and the UK. She is also an active presenter throughout Canada on autism topics.

Maureen presents on book resources and how to use them, topics in autism, creates book lists for various audiences, writes book reviews for publishers, assesses libraries at organizations and tells them what areas they are lacking up to date information in. She was a contributing author for the [SAGE Handbook of Autism and Education](#) published by SAGE in September 2019.

[Maureen's bi-monthly blog](#) post topics range from her personal experience as a parent of two children on the autism spectrum to detailed coverage of top news stories, events, and resources concerning autism spectrum disorders (ASD).

Maureen's writing provides peer-to-peer support and information for educational and advocacy purposes only. As she is not a medical professional, Maureen's writing should not be seen as providing medical advice.

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ANNOUNCING AUTISM AWARENESS CENTRE'S LINE OF E-BOOKS

A Message From Maureen

After years of receiving thousands of e-mails, comments, and questions about my blogs, I decided it was time to put together a high-level introduction to some of my most asked about topics. With over 20 years of experience raising an autistic son and daughter and working in the autism field, I wanted to share my knowledge and discoveries, my failures and my successes.

This series of introductory e-books are designed to help you quickly assimilate information and strategies that can be applied immediately to home, school or community settings. These e-books highlight personal stories and anecdotes from my experience, while also providing references and resources for delving deeper into a topic should you wish to do so.

These books are about empowering parents, caregivers and professionals to act in positive and effective ways while supporting individuals on the autism spectrum. It is their health, well-being, and happiness that we must keep at the forefront of our thoughts and actions.

[View All Available E-Books](#)