



HAPPINESS AND WELL-BEING ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

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INTRODUCTION

If you ask a parent what the most important goal is for their child, they would probably say being happy and healthy, yet few supports and plans are developed around this goal; most tend to be developed around the diagnosis of autism and its symptoms. How do we design services or assess quality of life for someone on the spectrum? How do we provide an environment that fosters happiness and why is that important?

Having a positive sense of well-being will help an autistic person in numerous ways. A person who feels happy and fulfilled tends to be more flexible, adaptable, calm, content, and resilient.

Supporting a person's interests and passions are important because they are motivating, engaging, conversation starters, friendship builders, skill building, employable, meaningful, calming, enhancing, and expandable. Being able to pursue interests and enjoyable activities adds meaning and pleasure to a person's life.

There should be time allotted in the day for leisure activities. Leisure activities connect us to family and community, develop skills, increase independence, and reduce stress. For people on the autism spectrum, developing leisure interests and skills can be more challenging because skills are often not learned through the informal observation of others or by imitation; however, we can provide the structure and support for the successful pursuit of interests. Examples of structure would be the use of visual supports, a well-defined beginning and end, or a predictable or repetitive quality to the activity.

Daily physical activity, time outdoors, exposure to the arts, participation in sports, reading or being read to, opportunities to try new things, and having creative outlets can lead to greater life satisfaction which fosters happiness and well-being. Everyone needs things to look forward to. New experiences and a variety of daily activities encourage personal growth and wellness.

A happy person will feel positive about themselves and optimistic about their life, moving them beyond just surviving to thriving. The entire family will feel the effects too.

Sincerely,



Maureen Bennie

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MEASURING 'QUALITY OF LIFE' FOR ASD:

SHIFTING FROM DIAGNOSIS TO HAPPINESS

I attended Autism Europe Conference in Nice, France in September, 2019. This conference happens once every 3 years and highlights a variety of research presentations on many different topics about autism. There was one keynote speaker who really intrigued me from Sweden's Karolinska Institutet – [Sven Bölte](#). His keynote presentation 'From Diagnosis to Functioning and Quality of Life in Autism' talked about how autism is discussed in terms of clinical symptoms, but for autistic individuals, their families and large parts of society, the dimensions of functioning and quality of life are both more significant and accessible. In Sven's lecture, a review was given on quality of life and functioning in autism, and why shifting attention from diagnosis to these dimensions is both meaningful and necessary.

There is a need to develop supports and plans around quality of life and happiness rather than around the diagnostic symptoms of autism.

When parents are asked what the most important goal for their child is, they most often say happiness – they want their child to be happy. Every parent wants that for their child, diagnosis or not. How do we design services or assess quality of life for someone on the spectrum? How do we provide an environment that fosters happiness?

The World Health Organization developed the Quality of Life tool, [WHOQOL-BREF](#). This tool is important because it has the potential to ensure that outcomes of services aimed at adults on the autism spectrum are measured effectively. There needs to be accountability and a way to assess services otherwise, how do we know what to improve on or where to make changes?

In 2016, Bölte wrote in an [article](#) that neither the 'International Statistical Classification of Diseases' nor the 'Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders' sufficiently account for either an individual's ability to function in their daily life, or the quality of their life. Yet functioning and daily experience are frequently the starting points for clinical assessments. His argument is these manuals don't precisely define or quantify abilities and disabilities in specific contexts, such as the workplace or among peers at school.

This is why people fall through the cracks because without assessment in specific contexts, you may not see the complexity or scope of problems.

For example, my daughter was highly anxious in the school environment and not able to function well. Her anxiety impaired her cognitive functioning even further. However, at her job working with cats, she exhibits no symptoms of anxiety and functions quite independently in that environment. Abilities and disabilities must be assessed across environments or the supports will not be sufficient or completely denied.

In 2001, the World Health Organization published a guide that could serve as a platform for a comprehensive, standardized clinical assessment of functioning. This [International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health \(ICF\)](#) documents all the possible categories — 1,600 in all — of an individual's mental and physical functioning. However, this encyclopedic tome is too broad to be practical for clinical use. [Core sets](#) were designed from the ICF to be more specific to abilities and disabilities associated with each condition.

Ensuring A Quality of Life Measure

There was a [study](#) done by Professor Helen McConachie about Ensuring a Quality of Life Measure (QoL) for adults on the autism spectrum is appropriate and valid. I encourage you to read the outcome of the study which is [highlighted here](#) in layman's terms.

In summary, Dr. McConachie found the following:

Quality of Life for autistic people:

- Is lower than the general population.
- Is lower for people with a mental health condition, females, and those reporting higher autism characteristics.
- Is higher for those who are employed, receiving support (i.e. at home or work) and those in a relationship.

The WHOQoL-BREF:

- Is an acceptable measure of [Quality of Life](#) for autistic people.
- Each domain measures what it claims to measure. For example, the Social domain is related to questionnaires about social support.
- Lower quality of life is related to higher depression/anxiety. This means the questionnaire might be used alongside interventions to assess improvement.

The WHOQoL-Disabilities module and ASQoL questions:

- The Disabilities module is OK for use with autistic people, but some of the questions may be interpreted differently
- The ASQoL questions measure friendship, social support, barriers and autistic identity.
- The ASQoL questions correlate with each WHOQoL-BREF domain. This means the ASQoL questions do measure QoL.

Using a Quality of Life assessment tool can help those in a supportive role see where the barriers are to happiness/well-being and design services that help an individual with ASD thrive. Parents will not always be there to advocate and help once their children are adults. It is up to the larger community to be accountable and go beyond a diagnostic assessment which is just meant to interpret a group of symptoms that occur together.

For further reading:

- 📖 [*Living Well on the Spectrum*](#)
- 📖 [*A Practical Guide to Happiness in Children and Teens on the Autism Spectrum*](#)



EMBRACING THE INTERESTS AND PASSIONS OF AUTISTIC INDIVIDUALS, NO MATTER WHAT THEY ARE

I featured [an article](#) on [Facebook](#) about age appropriate interests written by Christine Motokane, an autistic young adult. Some of her interests were deemed “inappropriate for her age” by well-meaning people around her. Christine’s mother became concerned about her childhood interests as they continued into her high school years. She hired a behaviorist to teach Christine what age appropriate interests were. The behaviorist created a “cool” and “not cool” chart for Christine’s interest.

This exercise was to help Christine fit in better with classmates. It wasn't until she was in college that her former interests began to surface again and she embraced them as a young adult. It also made her realize how destructive that therapy was to her well being. Christine says:

“I became anxious and second-guessed myself (which I still do today) when I started liking cartoons again. This is because when I was younger, I picked up on how it was considered “childish” to like cartoons such as Hello Kitty, “Frozen” etc. I thought I was regressing because for the last five or six years, I had interests that were more mainstream.”

Christine's mother is now more accepting of her unconventional interests. With the support of others, she is slowly learning to accept that her interest in characters is just a part of what makes her unique.

How Interests are Categorized into Age Appropriateness

Merchandise is often grouped according to age and gender. For example, dolls and Barbies are displayed in a section aimed at girls. The boxes are in colors that would be considered feminine like pink or other soft pastel colors. Toys like cars and building sets are grouped together in boxes with bold, strong colors aimed at boys. Children's clothing looks quite different from adult clothing. Children's clothing often features characters or cartoons on T-shirts, for example, and adult clothing doesn't. Commercials for children's products have cute background music or animation. The language level is also geared for children.

We are socialized to think certain interests are tied to specific genders and age groups, but if you look past that you'll discover many adults like things that are primarily geared for children. When we were in Disneyland, there were lots of groups of adults without kids there enjoying the same rides, interaction with characters, and bought character T-shirts and Mickey Mouse ears for themselves.

There are Lego Clubs for adults. Comic characters have mass appeal for all age groups. The Muppets are loved by adults. As human beings, we are drawn to things and can't always say why we like a certain thing – we just do. We accept that from ourselves, but not always from autistic people.

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Embrace Interests in a Positive Way

It can be worrisome for parents and those who support autistic individuals if they have interests that are not deemed age appropriate or are unconventional. No one can help what they are drawn to, so we need to embrace interests in a positive way.

Interests are:

1. **Motivating** – Motivation is a key tool for wanting to acquire new information and attending to a task. Most of us will devote more time and energy to something that interests us rather than a task that we are told to do. We are more apt to pursue or stay with something that interests us.
2. **Engaging** – You will have a higher level of participation if a person is interested in the activity. They will also stick with the activity longer.
3. **Conversation Starters** – Who doesn't like to talk about what they love? Talking about someone's interest can encourage them to speak more.
4. **Friendship Builders** – Our friends tend to share the same interests as ourselves. My daughter loves cats and likes to spend time with people who also have cats like herself. I have another friend on the spectrum who feels that way about dogs.
5. **Skill Building** – Interests can also be a platform to learning new skills. My daughter loves the Muppets and puppets in general. She now takes private puppeteer lessons which has increased her social and conversation skills, not to mention her singing ability.
6. **Employable** – An interest in something can lead to a job or work experience. My son loves to organize things into categories. This has turned into a job at the local food bank because he uses that interest to organize the food into categories in the storage room. He has also learned that items are grouped into categories in the grocery store so he now knows where to find things. My daughter's interest in cats has turned into a job at a local cat charity twice a week. An interest in numbers can lead to a job at the library as all books are classified using the Dewey Decimal System.
7. **Meaningful** – In the education system, there are curriculum guidelines for teachers to follow, but you can use those guidelines to incorporate an interest. For example, if a Language Arts unit requires a student to be able to write a report, let them do a report on a topic that interests them. You are still building the skill even though it may be around a different topic than the rest of the class.

No one can help what they are drawn to, so we need to embrace interests in a positive way.

You can also offer a different way to demonstrate knowledge. When my daughter was in Grade 4, she had to do a report on a religious parable. She just couldn't present in front of the class reading aloud. The teacher allowed her to use her beloved Playmobil characters and photography skills to create her own visual presentation of the parable. She even added sound effects for the storm. Her classmates loved it, she was still included, and it was satisfying and engaging for my daughter.

8. **Calming** – Nothing feels better than engaging in something familiar and loved. My daughter has trouble falling asleep – her brown stuffed bunny helps her. My son is so excited when flying that he has to hold a model of the plane he is in to keep himself calm. He also mediates weekly to his favorite classical music pieces.
9. **Enhancing** – My son loves chamber music. He now does yoga and workouts with chamber music playing in the background. My daughter has her computer desk surrounded by Playmobil sets and her Bad Cat desk calendar. She likes to look at these things when working on the computer.
10. **Expandable** – I have written about expanding interests to increase knowledge, keep lives interesting, and to foster growth. Exposure to many different things will expand interests and lead to new and exciting things. Use an interest to introduce something new. My son loves planes so he went to an Air Museum and the Military Museum which introduced him to new topics around planes. My daughter's love of the Muppets took us on our first family trip to Los Angeles to see the Muppets live at the Hollywood Bowl. The whole trip was so motivating because that event was scheduled at the half way point of the week so there was opportunity for the build up to the show and expansion of the interest after the show.

When Interests Become Too Distracting

There are times when an interest has to be put aside to do a less preferred task such as household chores or homework. The situation or context may not be appropriate either like the workplace or at a concert. My daughter loved to bring her Playmobil characters with her to high school which was fine, but she had to keep them in her pocket or backpack as they were too distracting during classes. My son loves to travel everywhere with a car from Disney's Cars or a Thomas the Tank Engine. He has to leave them in his coat or backpack at his workplace in order to get his work tasks done. My adult children know there will be a time and place to access their favorite things, but not every situation is appropriate to do so and they've learned that over time. They know they will have access to them at a later time.

Every person is unique and has their own interests. In caring and supportive roles to an autistic person, it is our job to help create a path that leads to a meaningful, rich life and support the things that provide happiness.



HOW EXPANDING INTERESTS HELPS THOSE ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM - THE LILA PRINCIPLE

Over the years, I have tried to expand my children's interests to help them increase knowledge, keep their lives interesting, and to foster growth. This has also been an educational goal in both school and home therapy programs. My son Marc, now 24, has a great range of interests that has broadened beyond ceiling fans and Thomas the Tank Engine. Julia, 22, has also developed many interests such as cooking, puppetry, animation, The Muppets, cats, and ballet. How did this transformation take place? How did these interests increase from just a couple to many?

I have thought about this and can say it is because of two things – something I call the LILA Principle (Leave It Lying Around) and exposure to a wide range of activities to build connections. Here is how the LILA Principle worked in regards to Marc's reading.

LILA in Action: Reading, Music and Ballet

My husband, Ron, and I have been avid readers for many years and buy books every month. We have always allowed both of our children access to any book on our shelves. Occasionally, I buy audio books for Ron to listen to while driving. A few years ago, I bought him Bob Barker's biography 'Priceless Memories'; Ron put it on a shelf when he was done with it. Six years ago, Marc found that audio book and began to listen it with great interest as he knew Bob Barker's voice from the Price is Right game show. I decided to get him the book version as well to see what he would do. He started the CD over again and followed along with the book, running his finger along the text. He never made a mistake or got behind with turning pages so I knew he was able to read the text. After completing the book with the CD, Marc started reading the book aloud without the CD accompaniment.

Marc was most interested in celebrities. He would find different interviews on YouTube, then ask to read their book. I kept the teaming of the book and audio CD for the next 3 titles he wanted. By the fourth title, Marc just wanted to read aloud without having to hear the CD at all. Our avid reader was born! Marc now reads a biography every week that is 200 – 300 pages long. He can't read silently in his head, only aloud. He devotes 2 – 3 hours a day to reading on the weekend when school is on, daily during the holidays. He has read biographies on Bill Clinton, Betty White, Dick Van Dyck, Celine Dion, Bob Newhart, Queen Elizabeth and dozens of others. Marc was also fortunate to have a work experience placement in high school at the local library, which gave him access to all kinds of books that he began to sign out and read.

As a result of this reading, Marc now wants to visit all kinds of museums because he likes to read the plaques aloud. He now also knows many museums will show a documentary video on topics they highlight. This has increased his interest in watching documentaries at home. When Marc reads those plaques, he gets very excited when a name comes up that he knows such as Queen Elizabeth.

I started taking Marc to classical music concerts. He has had a lot of exposure to music his whole life as his father is a professional pianist. I took a chance one year that he may enjoy a Baroque concert featuring a solo mandolinist, [Avi Avital](#). He liked the music so much, he asked for the CD which I purchased. Marc then began conducting to this CD and also using it for relaxation and in his yoga sessions. Avi Avital lead to other concerts, one that featured a string quartet. This became a new passion and we now attend the Banff International String Quartet competition and festival every September.

I took both children to their first ballet several years ago. It was very modern and more like dance than classical ballet. One of the pieces that was performed was Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody, which began Julia's love of Queen. She discovered the Muppets did their own

version of the song on YouTube so this got her researching more about the Muppets and what kinds of music they performed. Julia then wanted to study puppetry when she finished high school and become a puppeteer. She started taking private lessons twice a month to build her puppeteering skills. I ordered a documentary from the library called [Being Elmo](#) which is the story of Kevin Clash, Sesame Street's Senior Puppet Coordinator. Let's see where this will lead!

10 Tips To Increase Interests and Expand Knowledge

1. Leave things lying around to be discovered.
2. Introduce things that are related or connected to a topic of interest.
3. Visit places of interest. You never know what may click or grab their attention.
4. Volunteer. We volunteered at a Farmer's Market for 9 years. After 3 years, Marc started eating a huge variety of fruits and vegetables from having been exposed to them in a work environment.
5. Read and visit your local library.
6. Attend all kinds of events from sports, music, lectures, plays and films – whatever you can get your hands on. Not everything will be a success or liked, but it never hurts to try.
7. Participate in many different activities.
8. Travel if you can, even if it's just an hour's drive outside of your city or town. You're bound to notice something different.
9. Build on an interest. For example, Julia became interested in cats after attending her first cat show. She then started following a cat foundation online. This led to the eventual adoption of our first cat (a three year process) which then grew into a work experience job at a pet store, which led to a volunteer position with the cat charity once Julia turned 18.
10. Talk to people – ask what they do for hobbies, ask about organizations they belong to, be a spectator at something they participate in. Do your own research and offer solutions as well.

Exposure to many different things will expand interests and lead to new and exciting things. Follow the LILA Principle – leaving things lying around – which allows for children to discover something in their own time and way. Every person is unique. It is our job to help create a path that leads to a meaningful, rich life.



DEVELOPING LEISURE ACTIVITIES FOR AUTISTIC INDIVIDUALS

Leisure activities are an important part of life for everyone. Engaging in activities that are fun, enjoyable and interesting increases a person's well-being, happiness and satisfaction in life. Leisure activities can be done alone or in a group, at home or out in the community. We learn activities by watching others, taking lessons, joining clubs, reading instructions, or simply by trying.

For autistic people, developing leisure interests and skills can be more challenging because skills are often not learned through informal observation of others or through imitation. Their interests are developed in their own way. How to use materials may not be understood and the materials may be primarily used for their sensory qualities. Skills learned through one activity may not be generalized to another.

Why is developing leisure skills important?

Challenging behaviors are often reduced when a person engages in personally satisfying leisure activities. The ability to entertain oneself can reduce stress for the individual both [at home](#) and in the community.

There are also social benefits too. Leisure skills and interests can connect individuals who share the same passion. An activity brings a group of people together who share an interest and like to talk about it. My son, Marc, loves drumming so he regularly attends drum circles. He connects with others who enjoy drumming and they all play music together.

Exposure to a wide variety of activities and experiences broadens interests. Interests will also change over time so it's important to keep expanding experiences for growth and development.

Qualities That Make Leisure Materials and Activities More Successful

While everyone has personal preferences, the following specific qualities can make activities more meaningful and successful.

Understandable

Understanding an activity, the purpose of materials and what to do with them can sometimes be difficult. Some ideas to make things more understandable are:

1. Clear, static rules
2. Well defined beginning and end
3. Predictable or repetitive quality
4. Clear visual representation of what to do
5. Minimal verbal instruction
6. Structured activities

Reactive

Reactive materials provide reinforcement through sensory feedback. This means when you do an action, something happens and it looks different. Examples are lights, sounds, movement and tactile sensation. Electronic and computer games provide this kind of feedback, although it can be a struggle to limit time on tech devices. Music can add interest as well.

Comfortable

Qualities that can increase comfort level are:

1. Challenging without being over-stimulating
2. Suitable for the person's ability level
3. Limited demands for complex social interaction
4. Opportunity for a sense of control or mastery

Active

Young children need activities that use gross motor skills such as climbing, running and jumping. Rhythmic activities are also good choices such as swinging or swimming.

No matter what age an individual is, they need physical activity which helps reduce stress, build muscle, and increase flexibility and balance. Regular exercise can also contribute to a better night's sleep.

Visual-Spatial

Repetitive manipulation of objects, putting things in order, or fitting objects into spaces can be very motivating. There are lots of toys and games that provide these qualities such as puzzles.

How Can We Find Out What A Person Likes to Do?

In the book, *Developing Leisure Time Skills for Persons with Autism*, the authors recommend creating a Leisure Lifestyle Profile. The profile information is gathered through a parent/caregiver interview, an interview with the individual, direct observation assessment, followed by an assessment of the leisure and sensory preferences of the individual.

It's also important to assess what family and friends like to do as they often provide the expanded opportunities for activities. In our family, my son Marc loves audio tours so we visit historical sites and museums that provide audio guides. Marc will spend hours looking at paintings if he can press a button and listen to the stories about them. He does not have the same level of interest without the audio guide.

Some families like sports, concerts, nature walks, cooking, travelling, historical sites, gyms – the list is endless. By doing activities that the family likes to do, there will be more opportunities for the autistic person for practice, engagement, and skill building.






Expanding Interests

I've written on this topic before and it's an important one. As a person ages and matures, their interests will change. Boredom can become a problem over time. A person can also get "stuck" in an activity and way of doing things.

Greater independence is achieved through being able to do activities across a variety of environments. My daughter Julia loves cooking, particularly baking. She has an at-home baking program and also attends a cooking class once a week. Our next goal is to get her volunteering at an organization that makes meals for mothers in need. This will give Julia's cooking a broader, community based purpose and connect her to new people. She also volunteered once a week at a Farmer's Market to get exposure to raw ingredients and homemade products.

Leisure activities connect us to our family and community. They develop skills, increase independence, and reduce stress. Greater life satisfaction fosters happiness and well-being, and when a person is happy they are generally more flexible and adaptable – both important life skills.

For further reading:

-  [*Developing Leisure Time Skills for Persons with Autism*](#)
-  [*Come and Play: Sensory-Integration Strategies for Children with Play Challenges*](#)
-  [*Getting into the Game: Sports Programs for Kids with Autism*](#)
-  [*Steps to Independence – Teaching Everyday Skills to Children with Special Needs*](#)
-  [*The Whole Spectrum of Social, Motor and Sensory Games: Using Every Child's Natural Love of Play to Enhance Key Skills and Promote Inclusion*](#)



ENHANCING HAPPINESS AND WELL-BEING FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE THROUGH FINE ARTS

The fine arts are a wonderful outlet for self-exploration, creativity and self-expression. They are another channel for communication, showing us a window into a person's world. Experiences in the arts play a valuable role in helping a person to participate fully in the community and in society as a whole. They provide enrichment in life and can be an excellent teaching tool.

Introducing the arts into the education and life experience of an autistic person can be daunting if you have not had any training in the fine arts. Don't be afraid because [music](#), visual arts, literature, [dance](#), photography, film and [drama](#) can foster a sense of well-being and happiness, adding to the quality of life of an autistic person. There are lots of materials, resources, instructional videos and websites to help you.

Fostering a love of the arts and making them feel familiar gives a person on the spectrum a lifelong activity and pursuit. The arts are like a good friend – always there when you need them and something you can go to in those down or lonely moments.

Where Do I Start?

All fine arts activities should have structure to them. To just give paints and say, “make a picture” may be too overwhelming. You may have to give some ideas of what to paint and then break the task down. Help them to see the parts of an object or subject of a scene and how it comes together to make up the whole. For example, our adult daughter takes a weekly community art class. We have to prepare ahead of time what things she might paint because she finds it very stressful to have to come up with an idea once she gets to the class. We send books and objects that she is interested in and loves for her to paint.

Plan out an art project with a child and then gather the materials together. This will make a child feel that they have some control over choosing materials, colours etc.

Know what the sensory difficulties are. If a child hates getting their hands dirty or wet, finger-painting will not be a good choice. If they have an auditory sensitivity, playing a drum may not work or it may work wearing noise cancelling headphones.

For [art projects](#), break down each step of the project through visuals and have those steps listed in sequence. Assist the child, but don't lead. Sometimes hand-over-hand can help the child at first until they can do the project themselves. Don't overwhelm a child with a project and keep an eye out for frustration. Start with simple ideas and build from there as skills increase.

The arts are like a good friend – always there when you need them and something you can go to in those down or lonely moments.

What Can I Do with Music?

A woman who worked with a nonverbal, visually impaired young man with autism asked me an interesting question. She was told the young man had low cognitive ability but when he heard music, he came alive. Sitting in his wheelchair, he would rock back and forth in time to the music and hum along to songs. When the music was no longer

playing, he would hum the songs and everyone around him recognized the tunes. She was wondering if there was a way she could explore this connection to music in some way to enhance his life and maybe teach him some things too. As a classical musician and former music teacher, my response was an enthusiastic yes!

I think what was happening with this man was he felt a connection to music and could communicate through it. His support team can pursue and build on this interest. Often when a person is blind, their other senses become more acute such as hearing. With autism, many of our individuals have a heightened sense of hearing even without a visual impairment.

There is a great deal that can be taught using music. Use certain songs to cue association with tasks. For example, choose a song that you can use for [transitioning](#) to another activity. Play it every time you move to something new and an association with that song will happen with that transition. You can pick songs for cleaning up, end of day, lunchtime and the list goes on. Experiment with all kinds of music to see what appeals the most. YouTube is a huge source for music, especially classical. Mozart, Beethoven and Bach are great composers to start with. For Mozart, have a look at Symphony #40 in g minor, Beethoven's Fur Elise, and any of the Bach Preludes and Fugues. Scarlatti is also wonderful. Vivaldi is also great, mathematically precise music.

For academics, try and follow a story like Prokofiev's Peter and the Wolf. This has both the spoken word with music. For math, grab a pair of claves and tap out 2 (2 taps) and say plus 3 (3 taps) and ask the person what does it equal – they can tap back 5 times.

Get the individual playing simple rhythm instruments like claves, finger cymbals, triangle, tambourine or a hand drum. Does your school have a music program? Are there [Orff instruments](#) about or ones you can get on loan from a school board? Get a hold of a xylophone. This is a simple instrument to learn to play and it develops hand-eye coordination. Explore patterning and memory with a xylophone. Play a simple tune and have the person play it back. Create rhythmic patterns for playback.

If you are not a musician and need more guidance in music, consider contacting the [Canadian Association of Music Therapy](#). Most provinces have their own association and you can find them through this website. Their [links section](#) lists other music therapy associations worldwide.

Music Resources

Ryan Judd, music therapist, has created a great series of [YouTube](#) videos for autistic children. Here is [one](#) for teaching how to use simple instruments. Ryan's website is called [The Rhythm Tree](#). You don't have to be a musician to use these materials. [Coast Music Therapy](#) also offers wonderful free resources on their website.

You can read more about the benefits of music therapy through the [Autism Science Foundation](#) or this article entitled [Music Therapy as a Treatment Modality for Autism Spectrum Disorders](#).

If working with adults, have a look at [Group Music Activities for Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities](#). For speech development, read [Developmental Speech-Language Training through Music for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Theory and Clinical Application](#). [Music for Special Kids – Musical Activities, Songs, Instruments and Resources](#) is a practical resource that explains simple and fun ways of using songs, instruments and musical games to connect with children of all levels of ability, and includes helpful rhythm worksheets and sheet music.

Music provides many possibilities for learning and enjoyment. Both of my autistic children have had the benefit of live music through their father who is a classical pianist. The music calms them throughout the day. My son has developed a keen interest in music and is attending concerts, a regular drum circle, and sings and dances every day. The experience of music is an important part of a well rounded education. Make sure the individual you support is having the opportunity to listen and participate in musical activities. It can enhance a person's life and well-being.

Dramatic Arts

Drama can be a wonderful way to teach [social skills](#), learn how to express emotions, improve communication and teach cooperation. Conversation skills and vocal production can be practiced through the dramatic arts. Check out [Drama for Autism](#) to find some lesson plans on how and what to teach.

We got our daughter involved in [puppetry](#) after we took a family trip to Los Angeles, CA to see the [Muppets live at the Hollywood Bowl](#). It changed her life and sparked an interest in becoming a puppeteer. She takes a private lesson twice a month which has improved her vocal clarity as she tends to mumble when she speaks to other people. When she has a puppet on her hand, she speaks clearly and with confidence. She loves to sing with the puppets too.

Downtime Activities

There are times in the day when a person needs a break. This can be the perfect time to access the arts. My son meditates every Monday for one hour to classical music. He also uses classical music in his yoga practice. He enjoys reading literature aloud. He began this practice by listening to an audio book and following along with the book in his hand. My son now reads aloud for about 3 hours a day.

Making a collage of favorite pictures can be a nice way to think about an interest and be creative. Save old calendars and magazines that can be cut up for projects. If your child is interested in photography, they can photograph things they like, print the photos, then organize them into books or posters.

Branching Out Into the Community

There are many ways to experience the arts out in the community. Local churches and libraries often offer free concerts. Universities and colleges have student recitals. Most symphony orchestras have open rehearsals several times a year when members of the public can attend. Museums and art galleries have a free admission evening once a week or once a month.

Plays, operas and ballets have dress rehearsals. Ask the organization that is hosting the event if you can attend the dress rehearsal. These are usually free or charge a nominal fee. You may also be able to get “rush” tickets an hour before an event starts. We’ve been doing this for the symphony and getting \$25 tickets rather than paying \$90.

Many arts organizations now offer “relaxed” performances which means they don’t mind fidgeting, movement, or vocalization. The lights may be turned up and the sound turned down. [Xenia Concerts](#) offer high quality music and arts performances, presentations, and educational programs, in an environment that welcomes those who might not have access to such events and activities due to physical, mental, or financial barriers. Movie theatres are offering [sensory friendly screenings](#).

The fine arts are becoming more accessible than ever before with lots of opportunities to participate for free or for a nominal fee. The arts should be as much a part of life as physical activity.

For further reading:

- ☰ [*The Art of Autism*](#)
- ☰ [*Artists in Canada*](#)
- ☰ [*Acting Antics: A Theatrical Approach to Teaching Social Understanding to Kids and Teens with Asperger Syndrome*](#)
- ☰ [*Art as an Early Intervention Tool for Children with Autism*](#)
- ☰ [*Kids, Music ‘n’ Autism – Bringing out the Music in Your Child*](#)
- ☰ [*Music for Special Kids – Musical Activities, Songs, Instruments and Resources*](#)



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, when school resumes in fall after the summer, 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*](#)
-  [*Therapeutic Gardening Post*](#)
-  [*Tips on Gardening with Children with ASD*](#)



COUNT ME IN! ASD AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Physical activity has soared to the top of the priority list since COVID-19 started to support health and well-being. It should be a part of everyone's week throughout their lifespan.

[Regular exercise](#) lessens anxiety, improves sleep, increases endurance, builds muscles, develops motor skills and offers opportunities for socializing.

Whether being involved in organized sports on a team, solo activities (swimming, archery, martial arts), or just playing outdoors, physical activity offers the chance to grow stronger, expand interests, and adds to the enjoyment of life.

Supports and accommodations will need to be put into place to make physical activity inclusive and accessible. How do we encourage physical activity and set the stage for success?

Supports and accommodations will need to be put into place to make physical activity inclusive and accessible.

Understanding Autism

Autism neurology and processing are different from that of neurotypicals. Visual processing is stronger than auditory processing, therefore instruction needs to be delivered more through demonstration or with visual supports than through verbal explanations. There can be movement differences because of [dyspraxia](#) and [motor skills ability](#). [Working memory](#), the brain's temporary storage system, is also affected so instruction must be repetitive and explicit on the same element or skill for a longer period of time.

Repeated practice over time fosters [critical mass](#) which means true mastery of a skill. Critical mass is the point where an individual has gained enough information to be successful in situations, activities, or skills for which instruction has not been provided. When there has been enough instruction and multiple experiences, a tipping point can occur and the person can apply the skill in many new ways. For example, learning how to hit a puck on the ice may also help with hitting the ball in field hockey.

Start with Little Steps to Get Moving

If a child has not been physically active, enrolling them in a sport or lessons may be too much to start with. Think about:

1. Walking to the corner store to get a few things.
2. Walking the dog.
3. Walking to school or the library.
4. Creating a family routine like shooting some hoops after dinner or walking to a nearby park.
5. Introducing little body breaks throughout the day – 5 minutes on a mini-trampoline in between activities, running on the spot during a TV commercial, set an alarm on a phone to get up and move for a few minutes every hour.

Build Physical Literacy

A person will have more success with physical activity if they have some of the prerequisite skills. Physical literacy can be practiced through a series of simple exercises that only take minutes to do. Some examples of physical literacy skills are:

- balance
- coordination
- tracking a moving object in the air
- catching
- throwing
- striking (hitting an object with a stick, racquet, bat etc.)
- agility (used in sports like soccer, basketball, hockey, volleyball, racquet sports, martial arts, dance)
- jumping
- skipping
- hopping

The [Active for Life](#) website has a number of activities that target these skills. They are short (5 – 15 minutes) and a list of equipment and instructions are provided.

Sample a Variety of Activities

You never know what you'll like until you try it. Sample a variety of activities. My adult son enjoys horseback riding, biking, hiking, sailing, bowling, golf, swimming, fitness classes and yoga. My adult daughter loves curling, bowling, swimming, golf, biking, boxing, and Wii Fit workouts. When trying out new physical activities, include one or more from these 3 areas:

Fitness – activities that encourage moderate to vigorous activity that elevate the heart rate

Social Interaction – activities that involve one or more people such as tennis, badminton, or catch

Independent Activities – activities that can be done alone such as yoga, Wii Fit, lifting weights.

Critical mass is the point where an individual has gained enough information to be successful in situations, activities, or skills for which instruction has not been provided.

Visual Supports

Using [visual supports](#) strengthen memory and learning, particularly for those who are weaker with auditory processing (hearing verbal descriptions and instructions and turning them into actions). Video modelling and feedback can show an athlete what they look like and what needs to change in their movement or how to do something correctly. It can also help them learn a skill or break down the sequence of a skill. For example, in figure skating there are [patterns](#) available to print and follow when learning sequences. Drawing patterns with markers on the ice to follow are great visual reminders of what to follow when executing an element.

Drawings or pictures support physical instruction. Hand over hand demonstrations can work as well. Physical positioning with guidance from an instructor can help with muscle memory and teach how things feel physically.

You can also use visual supports to show the instruction breakdown of a lesson, show the sequence of a particular skill, procedures (putting on hockey equipment) and assigning time for physical activity in the daily schedule.

Sticking With It, Staying Motivated

Offer regular breaks and a quiet space to regroup, especially if a person is feeling overwhelmed and needs time to self-regulate and regain control. Learning something new can feel exhausting and frustrating because of the time and focus it takes to master a skill. Progress can be slow and plateaus sometime feel like they will last forever. Setbacks can happen if an injury occurs or life circumstances become overwhelming. [Motivation](#) through praise and encouragement, no matter how small the progress is, can help a person get past these rough patches. Keeping track of progress in a little book or on a chart can also help a person see that they are improving in small, incremental steps.

It is recommended that children engage in 60 – 90 minutes of physical activity a day. Active for Life has an [Activities and Log Skills tracking sheet](#) to keep track of exercise. Some kids enjoy lists and charts and find it motivating to keep track of what they are doing. Whenever your child is active, have them record their times in the appropriate row and column on the sheet. At the end of the day and again at the end of the week, add up the totals to see how they are doing. You can set small goals such as increasing the time for an activity or trying a new skill. Sometimes seeing things written down can lessen the anxiety of having to think of something to do or it can inspire a child to add something of their own to the list.

There are lots of ways to get moving and it doesn't have to be expensive or complicated.

Individual Instruction

When trying a new sport, it may be helpful to start with private lessons to get the one on one attention. A private instructor can pace instruction based on need. When my daughter wanted to try curling this year, we had her start with private lessons. The individual attention made her feel more relaxed and she didn't feel the pressure of having to demonstrate new skills in front of a group. Her social anxiety is very high so it takes her a long time to get comfortable with new things. Being in a group would have made her so anxious that she would not have been able to concentrate.

Group Instruction

Group instruction can work if your child has the prerequisite physical skills (think physical literacy) and is grouped together with others at the same skill level. It can also provide a great social opportunity. When our children first started bowling, we enrolled them with [Special Olympics](#). The instructors had a lot of experience working with different disabilities and knew how to support the athletes. Look for recreational facilities that provide adapted programs. Our children both take an [adapted fitness](#) class at our local recreation center. They have workouts tailored to their fitness level and goals, but work out with same group every week. They have a social at the end of the course which is always good fun.

There are lots of ways to get moving and it doesn't have to be expensive or complicated. For more ideas on how get your child moving, visit the [Active for Life](#) website. Working physical activity into the daily routine will benefit a person for their lifetime.



SUPPORTING LEARNING, INTERACTION, AND INTERESTS THROUGH READING

The ability to read can foster greater independence, support mental health, and lead to positive outcomes in adulthood because reading is connected to employment opportunities, which in turn is connected to income and housing.

Reading improves self-confidence, increases vocabulary for both internal thought and communication, allows for greater participation in society and the workplace, expands interests, and supports understanding in how to navigate in an environment.

[Reading aloud](#) to children every day is one of the most important things you can do to prepare them for learning. More brain development occurs from birth to kindergarten than any other time in life. That's not to say that people can't be lifelong learners – we continue to learn new things all the time – it's just that this early learning period is a rich time for child development. Reading aloud can also be a time to connect with other people, and a quiet time away from [screens](#).

University of Waterloo researchers Colin Macleod and Noah Forrin found that speaking text aloud helps to get words into long-term memory. Their [study](#) determined that it is the dual action of speaking and hearing oneself that has the most beneficial impact on memory so reading aloud to oneself is also a good thing! (My autistic son reads aloud to himself everyday!)

For the parents of autistic children, reading aloud with their children can sometimes be difficult and frustrating because their children may lack the motivation and/or the skills that are necessary to participate in shared reading activities. Parents may be reluctant to read with their children if they have difficulty staying focused or become [aggressive](#) during book readings. We'll look at some ideas to help with these challenges.

Autistic children can have additional problems with [reading](#). Many struggle trying to acquire reading skills through phonemic awareness or a phonics based approach. Difficulties with auditory processing or speech delays/disorders can make reading aloud or retaining information read aloud more of a challenge. Do not despair or give up on reading! I have written about literacy skills in a [past blog](#) and how to support struggling readers.

Let's look at some ways to support the activity of reading aloud, interacting, and different types of books that support both learning and enjoyment.

Reading to Young Children

Speech Language Pathologist Teresa Cardon has a great chapter on reading and books in [Initiations and Interactions – Early Intervention Techniques for Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders](#). Cardon lists the kinds of books to start with made from foam, board, or cloth:

Interactive – books that have buttons, flaps, tabs etc. These are great to enhance sensory experiences. They are great to teach turn taking and provide additional interest. Here is a list of [interactive](#) books.

Reading aloud to children every day is one of the most important things you can do to prepare them for learning.

Repetitive – books with repetitive patterns that provide [predictability](#) and their rhythmic patterns makes them sound musical.

Special Events – books that are written around a specific event such as the first day of school, a birthday party, birth of a sibling, a holiday, going to the doctor, etc. These types of books can be helpful about preparing for a new experience. If you can't find a book that suits the experience, you can make your own with photos of the places and people you will see. We used to do that for our son. We made one for haircuts, first day of preschool, and going to the dentist. They really helped lessen the anxiety of new experiences.

Classics – the [stories](#) we all grew up with like *The Three Little Pigs*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Corduroy Bear*, *Goodnight Moon* etc. Because these stories will appear in other settings like preschool and kindergarten, access to these will make them familiar. Pretend play and stage performances often revolve around the classic tales.

Story Time Stages

Mine! – typically the first stage. The child has limited interest in books, flip through a book quickly, and their interest doesn't include you. At this stage, give the child control and observe what they look at. Make a comment about the things they glance at. Comments should be relevant to the child's interests.

Quick Flip Stage – the child will look through the whole book very quickly. Let the child hold the book and turn the pages and you can point and comment. Follow the child's lead when they are interested or excited about something.

Labels and Comments Stage – the child labels the things they're excited about. This is a great stage for turn taking. You can label back and forth and add attributes – the bear is big, a cat says "meow".

Read to me! – the child pays attention to books for longer periods of time. Still think about what is motivating and interesting for the child when choosing books. You can leave words out of a sentence and wait for the child to say them. Give hints/prompts by pointing at the picture or say the initial sound of the word. Allow time for responding.

If you can't find a book that suits the experience, you can make your own with photos of the places and people you will see.

Supporting Readers – Motivation, Interests, and Alternatives to Books

When supporting readers at any stage or age, try to find materials that support their interests, social connections, and life experience. Make a list of the things they like to do or are interested in – sports, dance, music, art, baking, bike riding, trains, animals etc. There is literally a book out there for every interest imaginable.

Adapting Books Yourself

When my children were first learning to read, their favorite character books like Thomas the Tank Engine, Dora the Explorer, Disney movies or Strawberry Shortcake were too difficult for them. Because their interest and motivation were high for these books, I simplified the text by creating my own simpler text on sticky notes and put those over the sentences that were too difficult. As their reading ability increased, I could adapt those notes or remove them altogether once they could read at that level without ruining their favorite books.

Screen Adaptations

Many [books](#) are often turned into movies or TV series. My son, Marc, has always loved teaming screen adaptations with books. Some favorites over the years have been *Anne of Green Gables*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, *Thomas and Friends*, *Road to Avonlea*, *Happy Feet*, *All Creatures Great and Small*, and the list goes on. Marc also gets book ideas from watching old Oprah show reruns on YouTube as many of her guests had written books.

Graphic Novels and Hybrid Books

Some children find it daunting or overwhelming to open a chapter book and see every page filled with words. Even though my daughter, Julia, is an excellent reader, she certainly feels this way. Graphic novels are a great alternative to having solid print on the page and are very popular with young people. Julia enjoys the Sonic adventures in this format. There are loads of [lists](#) available for graphic novels sorted by age group.

Hybrid books use more than words alone to create a story. These books use pictures, letters, scrapbooking, and other visual and interactive features to create meaning. These books can really appeal to reluctant readers. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* book series would be an example of a hybrid text.

When supporting readers at any stage or age, try to find materials that support their interests, social connections, and life experience.

Audiobooks

Audiobooks are books that are listened to. Audiobooks were the bridge for my son to move from children's books to adult nonfiction books. I bought a book on CD called Priceless Memories read by Bob Barker, host of the Price is Right. Marc took it off the shelf on his own at the age of 15 and began to listen to it. He was enraptured by Bob Barker's speaking voice and stories. When he was finished with 7 hours of listening, he began listening to it again the next day. I decided to get the hard cover book and give it to him to see if he'd follow along – he did, perfectly, with not one page turning error.

I kept on with this method of teaming the book on CD with the print book for the next 7 books that he read. Then, Marc turned off the CD and began to read aloud with fluency. He has never wanted a book on CD again. To this day, he reads at least one adult non-fiction book a week aloud to himself. Every afternoon and evening has at least one hour devoted to reading.

Audiobooks are great for long drives, waiting at appointments, or doing chores. They can also provide additional support for reading texts that are more difficult. Marc learned how to pronounce many difficult words through audiobooks.

Where to Find Materials

Books and their alternatives are easy to find through your local library, secondhand bookstores, or any secondhand store that has a book section like Goodwill. Look for fundraiser book sales (our symphony orchestra has one every year), book exchanges, garage sales, or [Little Free Libraries](#) which are boxes that are in neighborhoods where you can take a book or leave a book. Many books can be downloaded for free or read on the internet, but if you are looking for an alternative to screen time, investigate some of the other ideas mentioned.

Teachers, if you are looking for literacy ideas for remote or hybrid learning, check out this [great article](#) on how to make reading aloud work in the current learning environment.

Reading is an activity that goes well beyond learning – it is enjoyable, can provide an escape, support interests, and be a way to connect with others. Reading enhances quality of life and can provide a lifetime of discoveries.



UNSCHEDULED: THE BENEFITS OF FREE TIME IN A COVID-19 WORLD

Restrictions and lockdowns, now a regular occurrence in our [pandemic world](#), have had both drawbacks and positive effects. There is something to be said for unscheduled days. Free time provides the chance for contemplation, exploration, creativity, and reflection. Moving at a slower pace allows for more practice time to build critical mass, a chance to learn a new skill without being rushed, periods of quiet time to re-group and re-assess, and leisure time to develop and expand on interests and passions.

The time spent near home is an opportunity to discover what's in your local community – the library, an outdoor rink, a park, the corner store. The trips for essentials can help strengthen connections with local businesses and their staff.

Spending so much time at home now with no travel for work or activities that I used to invest time into has given me the opportunity to observe my two adult children's growth during this unprecedented time. Here are some things that have happened.

Creativity

Back in March, my daughter Julia discovered a story writing website called [Wattpad](#). This is an online community of 90 million writers from all over the world. There is the option to write [Fan Fiction](#) stories, which is my daughter's favorite genre. She has focused on writing about Sonic Boom characters. In doing so, she has connected with a large group of people who share this interest. There is also the option to message each other privately as well as publicly. To date, Julia has written 78 stories. Her vocabulary and writing ability has improved a lot since she started this activity. She devotes several hours a day to story writing and developing new characters.

While the online communication has presented some challenges, it has also helped with problem solving and understanding people. When messages get heated or inappropriate, Julia and I discuss how best to respond to some of the emotional messages and what they may mean. We talk about how people may not be who they say they are or that they are braver when saying things on the internet as opposed to in person. She has learned many social nuances and also when to walk away from an exchange. It has been a great learning experience. She enjoys this online community, supporting her fellow writers, and sharing her ideas about Sonic. Julia has also met other autistic writers.

While increased screen time can be worrisome at times, Julia takes regular movement breaks with Wii Fit or does something with her brother (they are best friends). She enjoys watching new movies to expand potential plot lines in her stories.

Learning to Play an Instrument

Our son Marc began participating in drum circles several years ago. We bought him a drum, which then led to him attending group music classes. We just started a structured drumming lesson with a teacher once a week. He loves it! On his own steam, Marc started practicing twice a week for 30 minutes in his room with the door shut. That's my signal not to interrupt him and that he can organize himself independently. He puts on different CD's and drums along to them and practices his patterns. It will be interesting to see where he goes with this as he loves to perform and play music with other people.

Volunteering

My children have been [volunteering](#) in the community for 10 years. The organizations they volunteered with are temporarily closed but that doesn't mean organizations don't need our help. We're finding other ways to contribute. Julia saves all the bottle return money to purchase much needed items for the cats at the Meow Foundation, the charity she volunteers at. We sponsored a cat for Christmas. Julia is doing the research on which one needs the most support by looking at all the cat profiles online and reading about them.

Julia also loves to bake, especially with a holiday theme. She made a batch of sugar cookies and decorated them for donation to the local homeless shelter. Baking with a purpose is motivating and teaches how we can give to people through doing things that we love.

The Love of Literature

Marc has been an avid reader for several years now. His newfound free time has increased his daily reading. He has begun to pair books with DVD topics. For example, he watched [The King's Speech](#), then wanted to read the book. He has been watching several documentaries on the Royal family, prompting him to start pulling books off the shelf about this topic. He is expanding his knowledge on animals, the natural world, and famous people.

“Catpacking”

This is my newest idea which may or may not work. Julia is very attached to our black cat, Mr. Darcy. He loves to be outside with a harness and leash on, even in the snow. During the summer while biking, Julia saw a few people with cats in backpacks. She was intrigued by the idea of it. I asked her if she would be willing to go on walks if Mr. Darcy was with us in a cat backpack. Her response was an enthusiastic yes! I bought the cat backpack that Darcy has explored with great interest. We'll try this activity out when the weather improves.

Connecting with Nature

I've written about the [benefits](#) of being out in nature. Marc has spent time hiking both locally and out of town. He has learned to read a map, plot a route, and enjoys eating his lunch in the great outdoors. He has gone to see Christmas lights and walked near the airport to see the planes take off, one of his interests. We got him some spikes for his boots to continue winter hiking. He enjoys seeing birds and walking in nature, expanding his passion for documentaries and reading material about the natural world.

Unscheduled time allows for discovery, exploration and learning at one's own pace. I have been grateful for this time to slow down and allow for a quieter, slower pace for personal growth. How has your family benefited from this break from the busy pre-pandemic world? Do you have a new routine, skill, or activity?



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](#)