

# Autism: Starting a Conversation



*This toolkit provides guidance on how to talk about autism with both adults and children. It includes tips for disclosing your diagnosis, and ideas on how to talk to your child about their diagnosis.*



## How to talk about autism to Non-Autistic Adults

Whether you're the parent of an Autistic child or you're an Autistic adult, you may at some point consider telling someone about your Autistic experience. Although some individuals may embrace what you share, people who do not understand might cross your path. Some may be genuinely curious, others could be judgmental, and still others may not believe that autism affects you or your child. These people could be strangers, acquaintances, friends, employers, professionals, or even family.

**If you are an Autistic adult**, you may have some decisions to make about who to tell. If you were diagnosed as a child, many people in your world might already know. If you were diagnosed as an adult, you might choose to tell a few people first, then tell others later as you see fit. Some may accept it immediately, others may need time to process the news or have questions. You might prefer to tell some people what supports you need, instead of sharing your actual diagnosis. You may want to consider telling your post-secondary institution or your employer if you'd like to pursue accommodations in those places. All these choices are yours to make.

**If you're a parent**, you may not choose to explain it to absolutely everyone who comes in contact with your child. You are likely spending a lot of time and energy supporting your child, so you may need to prioritize who you talk to about their Autistic traits. What people and places are important for your child to be understood, included, and supported? Perhaps extended family members, schools, community groups, sports teams, or medical professionals serving your child. You don't have to do it all at once. It's okay to tell some earlier, and others later.



Here are some tips for talking about autism to adults:

- Depending on who you're telling, you might like to provide resources about autism, so they can learn more on their own. This could be a book, links to websites or videos, or information you email to them.
- Is your goal to encourage acceptance, support, or inclusion? Then choose a time to speak when you're feeling calm and have given some thought to what you'd like to share. Sometimes people's responses to you or your child might make you feel annoyed or angry in the moment. That may not be a constructive time to share information in a way that would inspire understanding. If possible, reconnect at a later time that's better for you and the other person.
- If you want the person you are telling to keep this information confidential, be sure to tell them that up front.
- There are many ways to tell people about autism. If it's less stressful for you, a positively worded email might be a good introduction. You could type something you've prepared into your phone, or print something out on paper and have it ready whenever you need it. If talking in person, you can do it on your own, or you could bring someone who is familiar with you or your child, as an alternate source of information in case you become overwhelmed and have trouble communicating.
- If speaking about yourself or your child, try talking about personal strengths, challenges, and support needs, as opposed to autism in general. Perhaps people have already noticed some unusual behaviours. Talking about those could be a good introduction to autism and why a diagnosis is helpful.
- Keep in mind that some people might accept your explanation/information right away, but others may need time to process what you share. Especially family and close friends who may feel they already know you. Allow them time to absorb this new revelation, and be open to questions.
- If someone you've told reacts in a negative way (especially friends, family, or partners), acknowledge to yourself that you are hurt and/or disappointed that they did not respond as you had hoped. If you feel safe and confident, you may choose



to explain to them how their reaction made you feel, and why. Remember that their viewpoint may change over time, as they spend time with you or your child, and as they learn more about autism. Meanwhile, be sure to spend time with supportive people, prioritize your well-being, and seek counselling if needed.

## Resources:

- Sharing an Autism Diagnosis With Family and Friends, by Child Mind Institute, <https://childmind.org/article/sharing-an-autism-diagnosis-with-family-and-friends/>
- How to Explain Autism to Other People, by Autism Understood, <https://autismunderstood.co.uk/what-actually-is-autism/how-to-explain-autism-to-other-people/>
- Six Tips for Explaining Your Autistic Child's Needs to Teachers, from Autism Parenting Magazine, <https://www.autismparentingmagazine.com/explain-asd-child-needs-to-teachers/>
- Talking About and Disclosing Your Autism Diagnosis, by the National Autistic Society, <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/diagnosis/after-diagnosis/talking-about-and-disclosing-your-autism-diagnosis>
- Inclusive Workplaces Discussion Tool: An Accommodations Checklist for Autistic Employees from Autism Alliance of Canada, <https://autismalliance.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/PUBLIC-Inclusive-Workplaces-Discussion-Tool -An-Accommodations-Checklist-for-Autistic-Employees-2.pdf>
- Workplace Accommodations for Autism & AuDHD from Embrace Autism, <https://embrace-autism.com/workplace-accommodations-for-autism-and-audhd/>
- How to Talk About Your Autism at Work, from The IMAGE Project, <https://toolkit.imageautism.com/information-and-advice/how-to-talk-about-your-autism-at-work/>
- Making Doctors' Appointments Autism-Friendly, from Autism Parenting Magazine, <https://www.autismparentingmagazine.com/autism-friendly-doctors-appointments/>



- Twelve Things to Tell Your Autistic Child's Teacher, from Clinical Partners, <https://www.clinical-partners.co.uk/insights-and-news/child-autism/12-things-to-tell-your-autistic-childs-teacher>
- What is Autism: See the Potential with Michael McCreary, from Autism Ontario <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubR7VLw8gq0>
- Why Late Autism Diagnosis Matters: What I Wish My Family and Friends Knew - Taylor Heaton, Mom on the Spectrum <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGZoRQLbqdl>
- The Truth About My Son - Mark Rober (last 2 ½ minutes is a fundraising pitch from 2021) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybPgmjTRvMo>
- What is Autism? by the Nishnawbe Aski Nation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWeGJULEpgY>

## How to Explain Autism to Non-Autistic Children

Explaining autism to children who are not Autistic is an important task. How you enlighten them can help to shape their perception of neurodiverse individuals, which may carry on into adulthood. Your words, stories, positive attitude, and the examples you share can all contribute to their impression.

Use clear, age-appropriate language to describe autism (whether that be one person or a group). Start with a basic description. Explain that autism is a condition some people are *born with*, which affects how their brain works. It's just a different way of experiencing the world. Share that Autistic children *may*:

- have trouble interacting, making friends, or looking people in the eye
- struggle to tell you what they think or need, and may use other ways to tell you (such as pointing, pictures, or tablets).
- feel more comfortable when things happen the same way all the time, and struggle with change



- feel things differently than you do, because their senses may not work the same way yours do
- have only a few interests that they *really* focus on, and these interests can help them feel safe and calm

It's great to have an initial discussion about autism, but even better to talk about it multiple times. Using natural opportunities to talk about autism in context will have a higher impact and be more memorable. Are you aiming for the acceptance of a specific child? You can still talk about autism in general, but when possible, use examples that are specific to *that* child's strengths, challenges, and support needs.

Here are other ideas to think about when explaining autism to children:

- Using visuals can help communicate information, whether it's photos, videos, or hands-on items.
- Be sure to explain that Autistic people are intelligent and capable. They can learn and improve their skills.
- You'll likely be able to share more details about autism with older children. Let their questions be your guide.
- Examples and stories can help bring the subject to life.
- Point out the *many similarities* between Autistic and non-autistic people. Everyone has feelings, strengths, challenges, the need to feel safe and included, etc.
- Convey that it's important to treat *everyone* with respect, kindness, and patience.
- For younger children, ensure they know that some people are born with autism, and you can't catch it.
- Check out the 'Kit for Kids' in the resources list below, for grade-level materials.

Whether or not to disclose to children that a particular friend or classmate is Autistic is something that should be decided by the parents, with input from the Autistic child. Presume competence, and endeavour to hear your child's wishes if possible, however they choose to communicate. For older children, be sure to discuss it with them. They may



have a different viewpoint than younger children, and be more sensitive to relationship dynamics. Of course, older children could tell others on their own. Whether the decision is to disclose or not disclose, be sure your child knows that being Autistic does not mean that there's something wrong with them, or that they are 'less' than other children.

## Resources:

- Amazing Things Happen - by Alexander Amelines: This animated video is an introduction to autism that aims to raise awareness among young non-autistic audiences. Go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=RbwRrVw-CRo>
- Organization for Autism Research's *Kit for Kids*: This program is designed to teach elementary and middle school students about their autistic peers. They have workbooks, tip sheets and more. If you choose *download as your 'type' of resource*, the content is free. Check it out at <https://researchautism.org/educators/kit-for-kids/#whats-in-the-kit>
- Amazing Kids - Autistic Spectrum Condition: In this animated video, listen to children from different backgrounds share their unique experiences of the autistic spectrum in their own words. Click <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAogdfYPstU>
- Sesame Street - Meet Julia: In this video, you'll meet Julia, an Autistic friend of Elmo and Abby. Go <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKCdV20zLMs>
- What's Up With Nick? - This short animated video by the Organization for Autism Research teaches elementary and middle school students about their peers with autism. You'll find it <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtRYKjucDHk&t=172s>

## How to Tell a Child They Are Autistic

Remember when you learned about your child's autism diagnosis? You likely wanted to learn all you could about autism, your child's specific challenges and strengths, and how to support them. This knowledge was important to help you through your journey. The same



goes for your child. They need the chance to learn about and appreciate the unique person they are, and be able to ask questions. And they should hear about it from you. Whether they're verbal or non-verbal, your child could pick up on conversations (even if you think they aren't listening), or even notice people's non-verbal responses at playgrounds, school, specialist visits, and in the community.

There is no 'right age' to talk to them; you know your child best. However, in general, sooner may be better than later. Consider their personality, and if they feel like they're different, or not understood. Are they asking questions, or commenting on situations? These may be signs that they are ready. You want to prevent a situation where they start having negative thoughts about themselves that they haven't verbalized to you. They may fill in the information they're missing with other people's words or reactions.

### *How Do I Start the Conversation?*

Take your time talking to your child about their autism. Think of it as a series of ongoing casual conversations over time, not something you have to divulge all at once. Even if it doesn't feel like the right time to use the word autism, you can still approach the conversations by talking about *their* experiences. Specific times when they had challenges with other children or siblings, and why you (or they) think they struggled with it. Your child might already be wondering why people don't understand them, or can sense that they are different than their peers. You can introduce them to the words autistic/autism a bit later, as you're getting into more details about their challenges and strengths. Soon, the language becomes normalized. Be sure to make clear that autism is not an illness.

An older child (teenager) likely knows the word autism from TV shows or social media. Some may even wonder if they might be Autistic, especially if they have an Autistic classmate or sibling. Others may know hardly anything about autism, and yet feel they are different somehow. If working towards getting an assessment, it is important to be as open and honest as possible with them, in an age-appropriate (or developmentally appropriate) way. Even if you're not pursuing an assessment, listen to what your teen is feeling or



noticing. That, along with your observations, could be a good starting point for a conversation that explores challenges and strengths.

## Resources:

- The National Autistic Society has an excellent resource that explores how someone might feel about learning they are Autistic. It includes quotes and insight from Autistic individuals of different ages. You'll find it here - <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/diagnosis/after-diagnosis/how-will-i-feel-after-receiving-an-autism-diagnosis/>
- Looking for ideas about talking to your child? Check out this resource from Reframing Autism called Talking to Children About Autism - <https://reframingautism.org.au/talking-to-children-about-autism/>
- Check out this article from the Organization for Autism Research website, called How to Explain Autism to Your Autistic Children: An Autistic Parent's Perspective - <https://researchautism.org/blog/how-i-explained-autism-to-my-autistic-children/>
- This article from Child Mind Institute gives ideas on how to start the conversation, and tips for talking to children at a variety of age ranges. You can read *How to Tell Your Child About Their Autism Diagnosis*, here - <https://childmind.org/article/how-to-tell-your-child-about-their-autism-diagnosis/>