

AUTISM-FRIENDLY PLAYGROUND

CHOOSING AN AUTISM-FRIENDLY PLAYGROUND FOR YOUR CHILD

Parents are always on the watch when it comes to their autistic kids. However, with the increasing number of missing autism children cases across the globe, many parents can't help but wonder if their focused supervision would be enough to keep their kids from harm at all times. According to the recent autism research funded by Autism Speaks, about half of the population of autism children manage to leave their designated safe zones such as the playground and wander off somewhere. From this number, more than half of these wandering children will be reported missing, and those who are found are often tracked in perilous locations. Autistic children are said to wander off because they are overwhelmed by an existing situation and just want to escape somewhere, or that they have a strong desire to go to a specific spot that holds a special place in their heart. Some parents would eventually find out that their autistic kids just simply want to explore places, and being confined in a specific area such as the playground limits their opportunity to do so. When these autistic children go missing, their families are the most stressed out by their disappearance, which would not only affect the parent's work situations but their relationship to other people as well. To ensure that your autistic child doesn't go anywhere else but inside their playground, here are some of the most helpful tips for achieving that.

Choose a completely fenced playground

One of the main factors why autistic children are able to wander off within a matter of seconds or minutes away from their watcher's supervision is because there is not enough physical safeguard in their playground to keep the child from going outside the safe zone. The next time you plan on bringing your child to a public playground, be sure to choose one that has a fence system which is installed in the entire perimeter. There should only be at least two ways of entry in the playground, and the entrance/exit must be carefully watched over or kept closed when there's nobody using it as much as possible. There should also be a bench or sitting area near the entrance/exit so that the parents can better know if

their child is nearing that area. If you have your own playground inside of your house and you think there's no need to install a new fence system because you already have one for the whole territory, make sure that your house perimeter is well-fenced as well and your gates are always closed if nobody else is using it. Know whether the playground has equipment and toys that your child likes to play with.

Another mistake that most parents often make when bringing their child to a playground is the thought that their child will always come to like the stuff that they see in there. Not all autistic child is the same, which means that their sensory needs may differ and their preferences to play as well. There are those that might like playing with the big equipment, while others might prefer playing with hand-held toys and tools. You should always consider whether your child finds something interesting in that playground or not because if your child thinks that the whole area is uninteresting, they might find another way to amuse themselves and that includes wandering off to discover other things. Simply ask your child if they have seen something that they want to play with, or if they want to stay in the playground. If the answer to both these questions is "no" or "not sure", it's better to find another playground.

Choose a playground that maximises your vision

A playground with big equipment that can cover up your child's entire body is a big no-no. As a parent, it is your utmost priority to ensure the safety of your child, and the only means that you can maintain that setup in a playground is through careful observation. As much as possible, choose a playground that maximises your line of sight on your child, such as those that only install see-through and flat-modelled equipment. Some examples are climbing bars, swing, roundabout, and seesaw that can still give you guaranteed vision on your child while they are playing. One small window of time where the child is out of your sight can spell accident, which you can't afford risking your child for the sake of enjoyment.

Make sure that the playground has a wide outer area where your child can chill out or rest

There are playgrounds that are too narrow and compact due to area limitations.

Knowing that your child is not the only one who'll play inside a playground, it is easy to imagine them bumping with another child while they go to the playground because of the lack of space to freely move about. To keep your child safe from any injury while inside a playground, choose one that allocates space between equipment and the overall playground area. This will not only give your child the proper location to safely study the whole playground at a distance, it will also give them a good venue to rest while they are far from other children.

Identify the playground that best addresses your child's several autism features and issues

There are playgrounds that promote interaction between children due to the very design of the equipment and toys. There are also playgrounds that provide sensory tools which are ideal if your child is having sensory issues. Aside from these aspects, your child can sometimes feel the need to play alone and away from other children, which necessitates the feature of a playground that has enough space for a child can play quite privately. If there are many playgrounds to choose from in your locality, choose one that hits the most birds with a single stone.

Playgrounds are a great place for your autistic child to spend their time and energy, but not all playgrounds are safe. It is your duty as a parent to keep your child safe and busy while inside the playground and not wander off someplace else.

• AUTISTIC CHILD ESSENTIALS

ESSENTIALS FOR YOUR AUTISTIC CHILD

A slice of a parent's happiness is knowing that their child's needs have been met, with diligence and utmost care. This fundamental notion is universal in scope, which means that it's not only applicable to parents of neurotypical children but to parents of children with disability or disorder as well. As a parent of an autistic child, it is not enough to just take notes on what the experts have to say about your child. Sometimes, you have to conduct your own research in order to explore more alternative solutions and to provide supplementary courses of action to improve your child's early intervention treatment and prepare them for a brighter future. It is in this manner that such parents like yourself have to be thorough in choosing what alternatives and supplementary elements to provide for their child, especially when it comes to gadgets and other products that many people suggest as useful for children with autism.

In this day and age, being updated on many things is a must, not to satisfy personal fascinations, but more like a necessary means of survival. The discovery of a new cure, a revolutionised treatment, and other essentials for people with autism can be easily accessed through many media channels that a traditional-thinking parent may fail to know and try, which makes being adaptive to recent developments a good trait of parents with an autistic child. The following modern products below can help give you an idea as to what essentials should be provided to your autistic child.

Weighted Blankets

As the term suggests, weighted blankets are a modern take on the typical sleeping cover we use at home. For autistic kids, weighted blankets are a wonderful innovation that helps address their sensory cravings associated with pressure. This type of blanket can be used in many ways, according to the needs of the person. You can cover your whole body with it, or wrap specific areas like the shoulders, or fold it and lay it on your back or your thighs. Aside from sensory issues, weighted blankets are also beneficial for children who are sleep-deprived due to anxiety and stress which results in insomnia or sleeping disorders.

Sensory Pea Pods

Just like the weighted blankets, a sensory pea pod also applies pressure evenly to help autistic children with sensory cravings. When they are inside the pod, the child can do other things like eating, reading a book, playing with toys, or watching a TV show. The sensory pods are also inflatable which makes them a space saver if they are not needed because you can just deflate them and keep them somewhere else. The surface of a sensory pea pod is also made from comfortable materials which also helps calm your children. They are also washable which is a good thing when the surface gets dirtied and needs a thorough cleaning.

Vibrating Wristwatch

Products of this kind are designed to be discreet which makes it ideal for persons with ASD. The cue for the alarm is initiated through a vibrating effect, which helps most autistic people avoid sensory issues. Many brands are also programmable, where you can record your own voice and customise messages that will prompt when the timer activates. The vibrating wristwatch is an ideal tool to train autistic children with specific tasks that improve their executive functioning skills. Parents can help set up the schedules, from waking up and fixing the bed, to toilet training and bath time. The watch can also be used as a tool to help the child remember when to take medications, and set up reminders for behavioural training and simple exercises like taking deep breaths and stretching.

Buddy Tag

This special wristband is one of the best safety-designed devices in the market today that many parents want their children to have. There have been many documented cases of autistic children reported to be lost and cannot be found even with the help of local authorities and search and rescue teams, which convinced many parents to find ways to track their kids wherever they go to prevent the same scenario from happening. This product is the perfect response to the problem, which is integrated with a built-in Bluetooth tracking system connected to the parent's mobile device. The material used is comfortable to the touch and are fashionably made so that your child will easily wear it without any

complaints.

iPads

If you are financially able, this sleek and trendy portable device is a must-have for your autistic children. iPad is very customisable, which is ideal for autistic persons that have varying needs. There are thousands of apps available that you can install on the iPad according to your child's needs and preferences, from simple yet interactive games to more complex puzzle apps, you can introduce them to your kids through the iPad. Similarly, there are also many educational materials such as videos and eBooks that you can download to the iPad.

Trendy Noise Cancelling Headphones

A pair of headphones is the product of choice for children with auditory sensory issues. Whenever they feel like the noise or sound input is too much for them to handle, these headphones work like magic in helping them respond positively to the situation. Unlike typical headphones, noise-cancelling ones are designed to absorb and block as much as 27 decibels of noise which is the typical sound produced by a vacuum cleaner, while still enabling the child to hear conversations and important auditory cues from their surroundings. There are many fashionable headphones available in the market today, with cute animal designs or cartoon character prints.

Every autistic child is different in a way when it comes to their needs and preferences, as much as they are unique in their personality. It is every parent's duty to determine what those needs are and find ways on how they can effectively meet those needs. But it is also important to always factor in your financial capacity when providing for those needs to make sure it won't hurt other aspects of the family's essentials.

• BIRTHDAY PARTY

PLANNING YOUR AUTISTIC CHILD'S BIRTHDAY PARTY

Children love birthday parties, especially if it's their own. Kids always look forward to celebrating their big day with friends and family and the idea of games, food, and gifts are sure to make them even more excited just by thinking about it weeks before their birthday. Many parents too are extremely enthusiastic in taking the job of planning a birthday party celebration, especially for their kids. From the theme of the event, down to the birthday cake design, every parent will have to decide on many things that will all contribute to the success of the celebration. Seeing their efforts come to fruition as seen from the smiles of their child and guests, parents will always know that planning a birthday celebration is a very rewarding experience. But what happens when your child is autistic? There are many accounts of well-planned birthday celebrations that ended up being a disaster just because the event planner did not consider the autistic condition of the celebrant. Many parents believe that all children are the same when it comes to birthday occasion. What they don't know is that those who fall on the autism spectrum are one of the few special cases of individuals who find social gatherings such as a birthday party as a battleground instead of an event worthy of celebration. If you're a parent of an autistic child, and it's the first time that you consider planning a birthday party celebration for your kid, the following tips will help you turn it into a successful event despite your child's condition.

Centre the Party's Theme on Your Child's Favourites

Children with autism often have very short attention span on things that don't really perk up their interest. If you build the birthday party from your own preference of concept or theme, it will most likely not end up as memorable or special for your child no matter how grand and well-attended it is. To make your child enjoy and treasure the celebration, one of the most crucial things to do is to plan the whole event based on your child's favourite cartoon character, animal, toy, or food. If the theme revolves around these specific interests that your child is heavily attached to, it will come down as one of the most memorable birthday events for him or her.

Share the Party Schedule with Your Child

If you are used to making birthday surprises for other people, you might need to try a different approach when it comes to your child's birthday celebration. While surprises are good for neurotypical persons, the same can be overwhelming for an autistic individual, which can trigger a negative response such as a meltdown. It is encouraged that the event organiser must share the concepts of the activities planned for the party, as well as the expected time frame and sequence for each event so that the child will have a better idea of what they would expect to happen in the party. If there is stuff that the child can't understand by mere verbal explanation, it would be better to show them a picture or video depicting it.

Consider Your Child's Sensory Issues

One of the primary causes of an autistic child's possible outburst in a social gathering is their unaddressed sensory issues. It could be that they want to touch or feel something but they can't, or there is a presence of one or more overwhelming sensory inputs in the venue. While accommodating the guests and managing other aspects of the celebration, it is very important that there should also be someone looking out for your child's needs to make sure that sensory issues are addressed. If you think it would be difficult to keep your eyes on your child throughout the whole duration of the event, you have to find ways to minimise sensory inputs or provide the same to your child.

In relation to sensory problems, the venue of the birthday celebration must also be chosen based on the same factors. The home is indeed the most familiar venue for your child, where you can freely adjust the ambience with the help of decorations and set ups. But if you want to stimulate your child's liveliness during the party, you have to step up your game and choose a different location.

Be Mindful Whom You Send Your Invitations To

If your autistic child is studying in a classroom mixed together with neurotypical classmates, it might not be a good idea to invite everyone in the class without proper consideration. Kids need to be constantly checked by their parents especially on social gatherings where good behaviour and proper manners are expected to be observed. When you invite so many of your child's classmates,

chances are some parents might not know about your child's condition which would not prompt them to orient their kids about how to behave in the party, or watch out what their kid is doing when the party starts. Although you might want to talk to these parents, you will be very busy yourself that you won't have the time to meet them and talk about your child's condition.

If Possible, Discourage Gift-Wrapped Presents

Many autistic children become easily overwhelmed when they are given wrapped gifts and are expected to open it at the time they receive it. The pressure from the people anticipating, sensory stimuli caused by opening the present, and their very own expectation about the gift, can cause a sudden meltdown to trigger.

When this happens, the whole essence of the party may be spoiled as the birthday celebrant cannot participate in it. What might be a better idea besides giving gift-wrapped presents? You can either coordinate with an autism community or institution to raise a charity event where the guests can make donations instead of giving your child a present. It would also be better to tell your child what you're going to give them as a birthday present even weeks before the actual date to lessen anxiety on their part.

• DATING AUTISTIC PEOPLE

HOW NORMAL PEOPLE SHOULD DATE PERSONS WITH AUTISM

The fact that people with Autism Spectrum Disorder are different from one another cannot be overemphasised. Even neurotypical individuals have characteristics that make them unique from one another, and that same unlikeness is also evident in people with ASD. One cannot misjudge a person with autism by the challenges and difficulties exhibited by other individuals with the same disorder. This is the type of awareness that is essential for building a more autistic-friendly community but is sadly not yet grasped by many.

As autistic persons get older and mature, they need a higher degree of understanding from the people around them and the society. Their needs evolve, as well as their perspective on life, dreams, and aspirations just like everybody else. It isn't unusual for an adult with high-functioning autism or Asperger's to want to find a partner they'd fall in love with and build a family with in the future. Cases of autistic people being able to find a romantic relationship with normal individuals aren't unusual either.

But how does a romantic relationship start for autistic people and how does it last? There is almost no noticeable difference between normal people and autistic individuals when it comes to the aspect of falling in love. The contrast, however, can be greatly observed in the context of courtship, where social skills are being challenged, an area which is commonly not a strong suit for persons with high-functioning autism or Asperger's. Having said this, it is still highly possible for autistic persons to initiate a romantic relationship with normal individuals if the other party understands the nature of the disorder and carefully follows a list of pointers about properly communicating with them. Below are some of the most useful tips that you have to remember when engaging with an autistic person in a special meet up or date.

Do Not Necessitate Eye Contact

You may be told that in order to establish a sense of trust and sincerity, one must always look the other person in the eye while having a conversation. This may be true for social engagements involving normal people, but when it comes to date

with an autistic person, this rule may not apply. People with high-functioning autism or Asperger's can easily feel pressured in social conversations, causing them to avoid making any eye contact with the other person they're talking to. Hence, you must not easily get the idea that the autistic person gives you the cold treatment because they don't like you or the topic you're discussing.

Ask Questions and Voice Out Concerns

It may be unavoidable to have a question or two regarding the autistic person's condition but you decide not to ask anyway in order to not offend the person. This is not the correct approach because your clouded perception may become a barrier as you go along with the social engagement. As much as possible, try to clarify any question or concern that you have with the autistic person. This way, you can both speak freely to each other without having any kind of reservations.

Never Make the Wrong Preconceptions

At this present time and age, most people make it a habit to check on someone's profile or background before meeting them face to face. While it may come to your knowledge that your soon-to-be date is autistic, you should be careful not to make a preconceived judgment about the person. Since autism is a spectrum disorder, there are cases of individuals not exhibiting any symptoms, therefore, it isn't encouraged to be overly accommodating to the point where the person sees you as condescending.

Make Sure that Your Sarcasm and Jokes are Understood

Even between normal people, jokes and sarcastic remarks can easily become the cause of arguments and fights if it is being improperly said or interpreted in the wrong way. The same is true when you're talking to an autistic person, even if it's on a date. It is easy for your remarks or jokes to be misunderstood by your autistic partner, so double check as much as possible to avoid causing an unnecessary fuss and offending the other person.

Give Your Date Ample Time to Make Decisions

When more dates follow suit, and romance is undeniably budding between the both of you, couple decisions will be more frequent. Matters such as where to eat, what movies to watch, and what stuff to buy won't be easy for your autistic

partner. This is primarily because autistic people don't handle transitions that easily, and decisions, whether small or big, can be tough to make for them. So instead of pressuring your partner to decide hastily, it would be better to give them time to process and think about it. As your relationship continues to grow, the both of you will have to face even tougher situations so dating may be a good start to improve this skill.

Be Honest with How You Feel

As genuine as they are, people with autism cannot predict what you're thinking. So in terms of taking your relationship too fast or too slow, your autistic partner won't have a clue unless you tell them so. Be honest with how you feel about the relationship, and things like limitations, the level of intimacy, and absence of something should be discussed with your partner to make your relationship more nurturing rather than a puzzle that must be solved for them.

Love Unconditionally

It will always feel like a mystery to love a person, especially if you know that they have issues with their physique or psychological makeup, but you still love them anyway despite it all. It is important that you show how much you love your autistic partner no matter how many times you go on a date. Having a bad day because of other life issues shouldn't affect the way you treat your autistic date. These are some of the basic insights that you should know before dating someone with autism. We recognise the fact that all individuals, even those with autism disorder, are different in a way and the same goes for our needs and preferences. If you have more concerns regarding this topic or the content of this page, we recommend that you seek professional help or see further links for more support.

• FAMILY GATHERINGS

BIG FAMILY GATHERINGS WITH AN AUTISTIC CHILD

Family gatherings have become a shared tradition of many cultures and nations around the world. On special occasions such as birthdays, weddings, housewarming and baby arrival, it is a common understanding that close relatives from both sides of the family will come and stay at your own home for a certain period of time. We also expect our relatives to come over on important dates, such as the Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas and any other big calendar events. They may pay a visit on their own willingness and choice, or get notified through a phone call and other written formal invitation. In celebrations such as these, you may have to expect a huge number of people to come into your house, which can be a source of stress for your autistic child.

Of course, we all want to make every big gathering as joyful and memorable as possible, made evident in the choices of food we would serve at the table and the changes in home decors we try to fit into the theme or event. But with the existing autism condition of your child, anticipating these gatherings to go as smooth and successful like we want it may not be achieved quite easily. People on the autism spectrum are easily overwhelmed by the presence of new faces and the idea of socialising with them. Relatives, especially those who are distant and not particularly often seen, are not exempted from the autistic person's point of view. Luckily, there are proven solutions that you can try in order to make your family gathering stress-free and worry free not only for your autistic child but for the whole folks as well.

Explain to your relatives about the child's condition

When it comes to sensitive issues such as autism diagnosis, your family relatives can be your source of strength and guidance. If your child has been recently diagnosed with autism, and the reunion plan is just around the corner, the best thing to do is to open up about the issue and let your visiting relatives know about it beforehand. Trying to hide this matter will only get the autistic child misunderstood by your folks, especially on specific autism behaviours that may

be misinterpreted negatively. Some of your relatives might already have knowledge about autism, which in turn can help you disclose this fact more effectively to others who still don't have a clue about what this condition really is. Tell them about evident features that the child may exhibit so that your visiting relatives can act appropriately to it and not be taken aback. If the autistic person just hurriedly runs toward the corner or closes their ears or eyes during dinner time, indicate to your relatives that these are just manifestations caused by sensory issues. If your folks begin to fully understand the nature of the child's condition, you might be surprised just how sincere they can be in showing their concern and support.

Introduce the relatives' brief profile to your autistic child early on. Much like how you inform your relatives about your child's autism diagnosis beforehand, it is also important that you provide your child with a short information about those visiting relatives whom they may have seen only on very few occasions, or never before. This will not only reduce your child's anxiety about their arrival, it will also give them a sense of familiarity with your folks. Show them photo albums both recent and old ones to have them follow your history with these people. If your stories are interesting enough for your child, they may even look forward to meeting their relatives. Social media sites such as Facebook can also be a big help in giving your child a bit of idea whom they are about to greet and welcome into their home in the next day or two.

Train your child for some necessary changes

The visitation of your relatives may cause unavoidable changes to happen in your home setting. Because autistic individuals can have difficulties in adjusting to these changes, it might be better to train your child weeks prior to the set date. Temporary room accommodations, the use of bathroom and toilet, as well as the use of TV and computer are just some of the important things that can easily affect their routine. Start sleeping together with them in your room, and gradually lessen TV and computer time weeks before the actual occasion so that your child will have lesser issues in accommodating their visiting relatives.

Ask other children to be understanding and friendly

If your child has other young cousins, it would be ideal to tell them the right way to interact with your child and bring up to you any problem that they don't know how to deal with. Emphasise that your child needs friends, and ask them politely to invite your child to their games as long as it does not involve too much sensory input. This can greatly help increase your child's confidence in interacting with other children, and how they can place themselves properly in social situations. However, if your child reacts negatively to this, make sure to let the other kids know that it's not their fault.

Delegate one or more persons to keep an eye on your child

Knowing that your home is going to be a host for your special reunion, you should expect yourself to be very busy with many things during that time. You might need to constantly go to the convenient store or supermarket for additional groceries, or you might be requested to accompany your folks for a tour of the city or a special tourist destination in your area. These situations could mean that you have to leave your child in the house, so don't forget to ask someone else first to keep a close watch on your child while you are not around. You should ask another adult and avoid delegating this task to another young teen or kid.

• FIELD TRIPS

TEACHERS' TIPS FOR MONITORING AUTISTIC STUDENTS IN FIELD TRIPS

For neurotypical students, field trips can be on the list of their school life's most memorable experiences. Through excursion activities, students are able to take a break from the standard classroom setting and become immersed in a new environment in a fun-filled tour experience with their classmates. They will wander in a new place they've never been before, see exciting things for the first time, and learn more about the real world as they begin to build its connection to their classroom discussions. For autistic students, however, the very prospect of exploring new things can be a frightening context to think about. This journey to the unknown can easily make autistic students anxious and trigger their autism response. When their daily routine is disrupted by extracurricular activities such as a school trip, autistic students can be overwhelmed by this change in their schedule and react to it negatively. They may exhibit aversive behaviours that can lead them to wander off, disobey instructions, and trigger a meltdown which can affect the overall course of the planned field trip. While you may think it's for the best that your autistic student will not participate in the said field trip, it is most likely inappropriate to exclude them from joining such activity due to the existence of enacted laws and school regulations that discourage discrimination of students in all forms. Needless to say, the responsibility of ensuring the welfare of your autistic students and their neurotypical classmates ultimately falls to you as the teacher who will be there with them throughout the duration of the whole trip. Here are the things that you need to do to guarantee that your field trip is a successful activity for the whole class.

1. The planning for the field trip should be set at an advanced date. This is to ensure that you've given the parents and the autistic students ample time to prepare. You can introduce the plan of having a field trip during the earliest PTA meeting so you can hand out the permission forms personally to the parents. This way you can come up with safety measures and common understanding as to the do's and don't's during the field trip. After discussing the plan with the

parents, you can then set up a schedule in your class calendar and remind your students about it from time to time.

2. To make the activity more interesting for your autistic student, you can discuss in the class the exciting things that you will do during the field trip, simulate some parts, and provide specific visual scenarios. This will help lessen the student's anxiety while waiting for the day of the field trip to finally arrive. Check out if the place you're visiting has a website and then look for virtual tours if there are any. You can then share what you've found to the whole class.

3. Train the autistic student to act appropriately in different social scenarios during the field trip and be more flexible with their responses when there are changes to the plans. Emphasise the importance of waiting for their turn, choosing their bus seat, partaking their lunch or snacks in an open space, and interacting with the whole class outside of the classroom. There will be scenarios that will appear new to the autistic student, so be sure that you've given the reassurance that everything will be fine if they just follow your instructions.

4. Field trips are often composed of a set of activities which are scheduled in specific time intervals. There is a great chance that your students will be fully occupied with one activity and would want to spend more time in that exercise. If your autistic student is experiencing the same enthusiastic feeling or interest in one activity, they might respond adversely to your instruction of proceeding to the next activity. In order to avoid overstaying in one part of the field trip plan, clarify to your students the need to transition to the next part of the activity due to time constraints. Inform them about the maximum amount of time they'll be allowed to spend in each activity with the help of a good field trip program you've created. That way, the autistic student can be more prepared to handle their fascination in certain parts of the trip.

5. If the autistic student raises their concern on the mode transportation and

prefers to get to the field trip location on their family car or other means, you can allow the student to do so. However, you have to communicate with the family in this regard to avoid any miscommunication. As much as possible, tell the family to be on time, if not ahead of the class, on the destination so there will be no inconvenience in the schedule.

6. If your field trip includes engaging with different personalities, introduce them to the class ahead of time. You may use pictures to help the autistic child get familiarised with these new faces, aside from providing their name and their role in the field trip. May they be resource persons, tour guides, or security personnel, it is important that you leave nobody un-introduced to your class.

7. Make sure that there's little to no sensory variables in the field trip location to minimise the chances of setting off the autistic student's sensory issues. Factors such as noise, overall temperature, smell, and brightness must be taken into consideration in planning the field trip. If such factors cannot be minimised, prepare the necessary calming and sensory minimising tools for your autistic student.

8. If the class size is big that you are not really confident that you can monitor everyone's presence on your own observation, do not forget to recheck the class number after every activity. Tell your students to fall in line and count off their pile, while you do the same. If needed, do the counting more than just once to make sure nobody is left behind, especially the autistic student. You can also ask your students if someone is missing, as they know who's in which group in a buddy system.

• FRIENDS AND RELATIVES

HOW FRIENDS AND RELATIVES CAN HELP THE PARENTS OF AN AUTISTIC CHILD

A lot of things will change in the parents' life when their child receives an autism diagnosis. Relationships between friends and relatives will either change for the

better or for the worse. There are those who would stand by the parents and the child and give their full support to the family. Many will choose to stay idle and out of touch with the family, and some may willingly decide to cut their ties with the family whether it's their friendship or kinship that's at stake. If you are one of those supportive friends or relatives who cannot afford to neglect the autistic person and the parents through their tough times, let alone abandon them due to selfish reasons, you should know that there are many things that you can do to extend your support and concern. Here are some of the best responses a friend or relative of the autistic child's parents can make.

Make your presence felt.

As simple as it is, showing yourself can go a long way in helping the parents of an autistic child as their friend or relative. They will need someone they can talk to about the diagnosis and the extra responsibility that they carry with them. They would prefer opening up to someone whom they trust and whom they know is genuinely concerned about them and their child. A lot of times, the most qualified person would be a relative or a good friend who has always been there by their side. You don't have to know a lot about autism, all you need to do is to be there physically for them because there are cases when parents become too busy attending to their autistic child's needs that they have no time to make arrangements for gatherings or long talks with their friends and relatives. What you can do to help is to set the meet up yourself, say a simple phone call or email telling that you'd pay a visit, and let your parent friend or relative vent their built up emotions and thoughts about their child's condition through your talk. You can also interact and play with the autistic child, and even give them an autism-friendly present when you're there. Be sure to do this every once in a while and not just in a single instance.

Be very understanding and perceptive when it comes to autism-related discussions.

Parents are not all the same, especially when it comes to delicate matters concerning their kids. For autism-related stuff, there are those who are very open

and willing to talk about their child's autism disorder. There are also parents who feel that it's inappropriate to talk about the nature of their child's condition. So if you are unsure whether to bring up this specific topic or not in the middle of conversations, the best thing to do is to read cues or wait for signals. If you feel that the parents are trying to avoid discussing this topic or even using the term at all, then you should also do the same and say more generic statements. Even though they feel sensitive about their child's condition, parents will still be glad if you come to ask about how their child is doing in a universal way of saying. If your parent friend or relative is very open about their child's autism, one way of letting them know that you care is to listen intuitively to their sentiments, ask for updates and progress on their child, and propose ideas that work for the benefit of your friend or relative and their child.

Aside from personal and serious talks, here are other casual situations where you need to be critical in bringing up autism-related matters.

- Avoid making remarks about the child's appearance that seem to imply that there's a standard look for autistic people. Autism is a spectrum disorder, and many autistic individuals indeed look quite ordinary or neurotypical, as much as those that look very different and unique. Saying "your child doesn't look autistic" out loud in front of the parents will not create positive feelings, but will only offend them in certain cases.

- Do not keep asking about the parents' future plans for their autistic kid. As a friend or relative, it won't be reflective that you understand their situation if you don't realise that raising an autistic child is not the same with raising a neurotypical one. Although parents can still make future plans for their autistic

child, there are several variables that cannot be predicted which make it difficult to foresee where their child will be when they grow up. Academic achievement, career, and relationships are all future events that are dependent on how an autistic child responds to early intervention programs and support.

- When the parent friend or relative opens up to you, most of the time, they would expect that you keep the talks confidential. So avoid sharing to others what you have discussed, unless they give you the approval to do so.

Share new and insightful information.

Whenever you come across an article that talks about a potential cure or a new treatment method for autistic people, sharing what you've found to your parent friend or relative would mean a lot. But not all information or resources that you find on the internet are reliable, so you need to check first the credibility of your information before sharing it. There are also treatment procedures or autism insights that may not coincide with the parents' principles or beliefs, that's why you need to make sure that what you share will not offend them in any way.

Let your kid play and interact with the autistic child, and offer to babysit.

There are times when your parent friend or relative will get stressed out from taking care of their autistic child and would need some rest. Bringing your own child with you during your visits and letting your child play with the autistic kid while you supervise is a great help for the parents.

• GOING TO THE CINEMA

TAKING YOUR AUTISTIC CHILD TO THE MOVIES

Your child's autistic condition must never become your sole reason for setting limitations to their outlet for fun and enjoyment. Every child deserves to be happy in their own ways, and that should not exclude those who are on the autism spectrum. While it is true that your autistic child is prone to develop sensory issues and social problems that might discourage you to let them try new things outside of their comfort zone, you must not leave your child in a stagnant phase and settle for a kind of decision that disregards what your child really feels and how they would respond to these new activities and routines. Reading books, skimming online resources and listening to other's opinions is one step in providing a good developmental environment for your child, and helping them safely explore the unknown and expand their areas of learning is another step in enriching your child's growth stage. One of the many things that you can try doing with your child is watching movies in the cinema. Although the idea itself already presents many worrying scenarios, there are a good number of ways to make your movie watching experience a memorable one despite your child's autistic condition. You might be surprised with how happy and grateful your child will be after the activity is through.

Avoid Busy Days

Autistic people would easily get overwhelmed when they're standing in the middle of a huge crowd of people. This can easily trigger meltdown tendencies if you are not thoughtful enough in scheduling your movie date. The most important thing to remember when you're planning to watch mainstream and most anticipated movies is to avoid the first two weeks where there's a huge wave of moviegoers falling in long lines. If you don't want to ruin their excitement about the movie, you can delay your announcement about the planned activity and reveal it to them when the time is near. Once you get the schedule right, you'll greatly reduce your child's stress caused by social anxiety.

However, if the cinema is located inside a mall or any other business

establishment, you also need to consider the congestion of people in that particular area during a specific time of the day. There's no point in waiting for the least busy cinema days when the whole mall is still packed with a lot of people. What you can do is to watch the earliest movie showing during that day, where the people coming into the mall or business establishment is still fewer. To verify your estimation, you can try to contact both the cinema and mall ground hotlines and ask for the peak hours.

Bring another familiar face with you

Seeing more than a single familiar face together with them, your child might feel more confident and comfortable than just the two of you going to the cinema. You may ask your partner, your other son or daughter, their grandparent or another close relative, or even your child's friend or classmate to join you in watching the movie. Be sure, however, to treat the other person as generous and as nice as you can, so they also feel comfortable and grateful for the opportunity. You can shoulder the ticket and snacks, and even the ride back and forth. Bringing a frustrated or uninterested person by force will only make matters worse, and any atmosphere of awkwardness might be sensed by your autistic child.

Bring your own refreshments if you could

Especially for children who follow a strict diet, bringing your home-made snacks and drinks can help avoid tense situations from happening. You cannot discount the possibility that your child will get hungry while in the cinema, and there's a good chance that the theatre store is not selling any food allowed on your child's diet. One of the greatest factors in achieving a good movie experience is the presence of morsels that you can just grab and munch while watching the big screen. You might just deprive your child of that if you forget to bring their special snacks.

Don't forget to bring other essentials

Like any other public places, the cinema can be a source of different overwhelming sensory stimuli for your child. It is never encouraged for parents to bring their autistic child at the movie theatre without equipping them with the necessary calming tools and outfit. If you fail to do so, you might just ruin other

people's cinema experience on top of cutting off your movie date with your child abruptly due to a sudden tantrum caused by sensory issues. As much as possible, let your child wear the appropriate calming clothes, with weighted jackets and shoes, as well as accessories. Also, don't forget to bring their favourite gaming device or toys that are allowable inside the cinema. Noise-cancelling earphones, sunglasses, and handkerchief might come in very handy in most situations.

Simulate theatre experience at home

This is one of the best ways to prepare your child for the actual thing. Set up a cinema-inspired theme in your living room or bedroom, by turning off the lights, turning up the volume, and decreasing the room temperature. You can play a movie of your child's choice, then tell them to keep quiet and stay calm as they can. Train your child to behave and sit patiently throughout the whole duration of the movie. If they got questions or concerns, tell them to whisper it to you or make signalling gestures.

For parents who are afraid of bringing their autistic child to public places like the cinema, it must be a relief to know that there are plenty of ways to make this happen. However, before actually planning to bring your child with you, it is of utmost importance that you ask their own opinion about it first. If your child is not particularly interested in such a proposition, it is much better to cancel your plan and avoid forcing your child to go with you.

- **Making Friends**

HELPING YOUR CHILD GAIN NEW FRIENDS

Every child will have their firsts at several stages of their life, and that includes making new friends. Whether it's the kid from next door, the child of a house guest, or a random playmate in the playground, a typical child will have to make new friends in their own little ways. Still, it cannot be denied that most children will feel anxious and dubious when approaching a stranger and introducing themselves with the intention of building friendship. They will most likely get rejected in some of their attempts but they will learn in the process and will be able to earn more friends in time.

However, that is certainly not the same case for autistic children. Those with speech challenges will find themselves unable to speak in front of other people, thus pushing them farther away from the possibility of earning new friends. The lack of empathy and the inability to understand social cues will also contribute to the difficulty of establishing friendly relationships with other children. The worst part is, autistic children may manifest traits that may seem awkward to their neurotypical peers will most likely become the target of bullying and ridicule, which can alienate the child even more to the point where they might tell themselves not to attempt making friends anymore. If you're a parent to an autistic child, you would certainly not want to let this thing from happening to your kid no matter what type of autism diagnosis they fall under. Part of the role of the caregiver is to assist the child in things that they cannot do alone, and that may include winning new friends for autistic children. There are many things that you can do to assist your child in meeting new peers, allow them to bond and become friends.

Instil in them the real concept of friendship.

Many autistic kids cannot easily differentiate their relationship with other people. They might generalise everybody whom they interact with as a friend, even though their role in your child's life may not fit that same definition. They might even consider their bullies as friends, and those who have only talked to them once and never really cared for them. To keep your child away from undesirable

people and help them earn real friends, the very first thing that you need to do is to make them understand what friendship really is about.

When explaining to them this concept, you must not do so by saying abstract explanations that many autistic individuals find hard to understand. Stating that “a friend is someone who accepts you as you are” may not do any good in your attempt to explain what friendship is to your child. Instead, you can give them questions and let them decide which is which based on their own answers. You can ask whether your child likes to spend time with persons who makes fun of them and calls them name, or would they rather be with those who are nice to them. You can also say factual statements to reinforce the meaning of friendship to them, like “friends are those who comfort you in tough times”, “friends will always consider what you want or don’t want”, and “friends are always there to protect you, not to hurt you”.

Introduce a model for engagement to your child, and let them practice with you

Like preparing for a job interview, practicing beforehand what you would say and do in speaking with new people can be very effective. For your autistic child, you can research commonly used conversation starters and ideal topics that would lead to creating a friendly relationship and introduce these scripts to them. If you think practicing scripts is not enough, you can also let your child view a video that depicts self-introduction and verbal exchange that initiates friendship. It is important that your child knows what questions to ask and what topics to discuss, based on the level of priority. Of course, a person’s name and age are most preferred in the beginning of the conversation, followed by deeper questions such as hobbies and favourites.

Put the concepts into practical use

It wouldn’t help much if you cut your support on the conceptual part. No matter how much your child has learned about friendship and the ways to gain one, leaving the practical task all to your child will not be as fruitful as you’d expect it to be. Like many things that we learn, theory and actual practice may differ greatly which is why you still need to be there facilitating your child’s real-life

application of what they've learned from you. For instance, you can help arrange a trip with other parents and their kids and involve your child in the planning process. You can ask what the other kids would want to do during the trip and consult your child on their opinion. The resulting set of activities are more likely to be autism-friendly, and it makes your child learn the idea of compromise which is fundamental in friendship.

Aside from learning how to make compromises, you can also create the ideal set up for making new friends by considering your child's likes and dislikes. Autistic people are more likely to engage in social interaction when their own interests are put into play. With this in mind, you can take your child to art or music

lessons, and help them discover other kids who are also interested in the same things that your child likes. This can easily pave the way to fruitful interactions. Autistic people may not perceive friendship the way neurotypical people do. But once they come to terms with the whole concept and learn how to make new friends in their own ways, you will be surprised just how much value and appreciation they put into it. As a parent, it is your great responsibility to prepare a bright future for your child, and that includes gaining new friends that will help your child overcome challenges along the way.

• Nurturing Autism inside a Home

MAKING YOUR HOME AUTISM FRIENDLY

It is a common expression to say “there’s no place like home” because it is in our nature as a territorial species to regard with utmost value and appreciation a specific place that gives us privacy and a sense of security. We always see to it that our home is filled with only the things that make us feel comfortable and safe, so we become meticulous with the choices presented to us in many aspects of our home living. From picking the perfect furniture and decors to fit the visualised interior design to choosing the type of indoor plants and appliances to compliment the overall aesthetic look of our home, you’ll always make sure that your home’s furnishing is a reflection of your family’s preferences.

But this task becomes more challenging when you have a family member who is diagnosed with a neurodevelopmental disorder, like ASD. People with autism have special needs brought about by their condition, as well as preferences that may prove to be incompatible with your own and other family members, making it quite more difficult to meet all the plans for your indoor look. Although very challenging, it is still possible to come up with a home interior setting that meets all of your family’s preferences, you just have to make specific compromises and adjustments. To give your task more ease, here are the particular contexts that you can help you achieve an autism-friendly home interior.

Create Different Sensory Environments

As a spectrum disorder, autism is characterised by a variety of features which include sensory-related issues. An autistic individual may either be sensory offensive which is manifested by abnormal cravings for sensory output, or sensory hypersensitive which results in distress when they are exposed to sensory stimuli that seem too much for them. One of the ways to make your home autism-friendly is to accommodate your autistic family member’s sensory needs or aversions. You need to determine first on which end of the sensory issue the autistic person falls under before you can make the necessary considerations. Allocate a certain part of your home, preferably a single room, that minimises or controls the degree of sensory input. This room doesn’t have to

be the autistic person's room, but it should always be accessible for them to manage their sensory issues. You will need to design the room in such a way that sunlight or moonlight can go through because autistic persons prefer natural lighting over artificial ones, especially those who are hypersensitive. You can also install a noise cancelling material on the wall, which not only minimises audio output but also satisfies the sensory craving for touch if the autistic person likes

to feel the material. The colour theme of the room may either be brightly or softly coloured, depending on the nature of your child's sensory issues. You can also place in there a lot of stuff that are tools in sensory issue management, as you begin to learn more about this topic.

Aside from creating a specific sensory environment for the autistic family member, you should also consider allocating a big space for that room, because autistic people also need to exercise their body movements, and train to improve their spatial awareness and balance.

Designate An Area for Honing Savant Features or Sharpening Interests

It is highly likely that your autistic family member will manifest savant skills or talents that will become life-changing if you provide the much-needed support and encouragement. Most autistic individuals tend to develop highly restricted interests which they may easily become preoccupied with. They can spend the whole day reading books, training some skills, and working on some stuff with a great amount of focus. For this specific matter, it would benefit the autistic person if you allocate a certain area in the house to function as their workspace. That area must reduce clutter and eliminate unnecessary distraction so that the autistic person can put all their attention to their topic of interest. The whole family's support should not end on providing this room, however. If the autistic person's interest is obsessive and not beneficial in the long-term, it is the duty of the parent to ensure that they still maintain a healthy diet and proper hygiene while also finding an alternative area of interest to end the obsession.

Facilitate the Learning of Basic Life Skills

It is not always guaranteed that an autistic child who lives under a spacious and

well-furnished house will grow up as an independent and highly able adult who can manage their daily needs and functions without supervision. Most of the time, it all comes down to how the family makes specific house arrangements that somehow train their autonomy. To help your autistic family member become more self-reliant and learn basic life skills, a good start would be putting labels or visual aids to things that they need and put them in locations in the house that make them easily accessible to the autistic individual. When they try to make breakfast on their own, you can put the cupboard in an easily reachable area in the house and label the products inside it. Shelves for kitchen utensils such as cup, plate, spoon, and fork must also be organised for an easy going-over and segregation when they are tasked to wash the dishes. Doing the laundry must also be guided by a specific cue, such as color-coded baskets to segregate different types of garments, and a visual aid to set schedule for different laundry work. Even the folding and keeping of washed clothes can be done on their own, through the help of labelled compartments in the closet or cabinet

The family's role in the development of an autistic individual and the improvement of their condition cannot be undermined. In this context, planning the house interior and making specific arrangements also create a big impact on how well an autistic person can cope up with their condition. Calling an architect or an interior designer and an autism expert in a joint consultation is ideal for creating an autism-friendly home.

KEEPING THE BALANCE: RAISING BOTH AUTISTIC AND NORMAL CHILDREN IN ONE HOME

It isn't an unusual situation to have both an autistic and a typical child in your family growing together in the same type of environment. As a matter of fact, these scenarios can happen to any family who has two or more offspring, given that autism is not a disorder that has a great linkage to hereditary factors.

Although some causes are known to be genetic in nature, mutations of these genes may happen after childbirth, and not directly inherited from the parents. As such, it would be very inappropriate to conclude that if an autistic child has siblings, all of the brothers and sisters are autistic as well.

Because cases like these happen in real life, the lifestyle of affected families become even more complicated as parents face the challenge of addressing the different needs of both autistic and normal siblings. What the typical siblings would feel and how they would react to this underlying household setting can also greatly affect the overall status of family living. Normal children may perceive the autistic condition of their brother or sister as either a challenge or an opportunity, and your guidance as parents will matter the most in maintaining a balanced and nurturing environment for all of your children.

When do normal siblings see their autistic brother or sister as a challenge? Here are some of the most common reasons why typically developing children find it hard to live with their autistic siblings and what you can do as parents to straighten out every problem or misunderstanding along the way.

Normal siblings can easily get embarrassed by society's perception of their autistic sibling's condition. Especially when they are still kids, normally developing children easily get offended by what other people would say about their friends and family. The worst part is, they can easily believe the things that they hear. So when someone tells them that their brother or sister is a weirdo, it is hard for them to just turn the other cheek. This growing sense of dilemma will most likely to persist, even until teenage or adulthood. There are certain life stages when normal siblings will have to revisit this issue and may try to change their mindset for the better, especially on teenage years when finding dates and

throwing parties are the highlight events. The typical sibling may also think critical on this issue when finally deciding to find a lifetime partner and settle down. In this regard, parents should always try to inculcate on their normal children the proper response for these situations, convincing them to accept their autistic sibling's condition and take pride of it if they can.

The autistic sibling's handicap may push the normal sibling to take in more responsibilities in the family and step up their game as meeting built up expectations are required of them. A set of household chores that should've been divided among the siblings may end up being done by the normal child alone. This would make the latter feel that the autism condition of the other sibling is a heavy burden that he or she will have to carry. Even on more personal and emotional needs, the normal child would be told to manage them on their own or ask for help only when the parents are not occupied with taking care of the autistic sibling. This attitude towards his autistic sibling might even worsen if the parents fail to explain the many great needs of persons with autism while at the same time appreciating everything that the typical sibling has done for the family. Communication is a key factor in helping the normal child understand the nature of his sibling's disorder and to encourage him or her to become a better brother or sister.

There are instances when the typical sibling cannot help but feel that their parents have an obvious favourite. When the autistic sibling's condition begins to cause financial constraints in the family, one of those who will be affected the most is the normally developing sibling. That is because parents will have to prioritise the autistic child's needs over other matters that are not of the life-and-death level of importance. When it comes to wants and interests, the normal sibling will most likely get little to no approval at all and they will be forced to compromise for the sake of the autistic sibling. Medications and therapies will be preferred over toys, and autism-friendly food will be served at the table instead of the normal sibling's favourites. Unless the autistic sibling is not interested in watching, the television is not free to be enjoyed by other members of the family,

including the normal child. On a bigger perspective, such as housing and school preference, the normal child will have no choice but to wait for the family's final decision after having factored the autistic sibling's needs in the arrangement. As a parent, there is no easy way to tell your normal child that you are not choosing favourites, but you will still have to try. It may help if you emphasise that you love all of them equally, it's just that the other one is less capable of overcoming life's challenges alone, and in the end, you will always be there for all of them whenever they need you.

It isn't easy to raise many children in the family, let alone have at least one of them with autism. It is your duty as parents to see to it that all of your children feel that they are loved, especially the typically developing ones who are more emotionally vulnerable. Just as much as you want to spend time with your autistic child, make some quality time with your typical child as well and treat him or her as equally special. Do not prevent your normal child from asking you questions related to autism, as long as it educates them about the disorder and helps them understand fully the condition of their sibling.

• SPORTS ACTIVITIES

SPORTS ACTIVITIES FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN

You may have heard about the common assessment on autistic kids describing that they're not strongly compatible with athletic activities. That's primarily explained by the autism features which most children exhibit, including a lack of coordination of the different parts of the body leading to reduced fine and gross motor skills, lack of spatial awareness and sense of balance. Many parents eventually come to accept their autistic child's natural preference for indoor games that are less intense and requires little physical exertion. While this is often the case, it is still possible for children to develop great enthusiasm for sports activities that are greatly beneficial in the improvement of their motor functions. That's because, with proper training and positive reinforcement, autistic children are able to get the fun out of these sports while also enhancing other aspects of their development. Some might even uncover their latent potential in these specific sports which can prove life-changing. It all lies on their family's overall support in this area, and the manner in which they are trained. If you think your autistic child is more than capable of learning and mastering one or more of these sports activities, there's really no harm in trying. We've created a basic guide to choosing the kind of sports that your autistic child might like to play.

Team Sports vs. Individual Sports

Before introducing your child with whatever kind of sport you think they may like, you should first consider the nature of the sport according to the number of players involved. There are autism-related issues that might get in the way of your child's enjoyment such as social anxiety and communication challenges. If it's a cooperative kind of sport like basketball, baseball or volleyball, your child might have trouble performing at their best in real scenarios because they find it hard to communicate well with their teammates. There is also that existing pressure created from their team and the viewer's expectations of their performance that might overwhelm your child. Although most team sports are

indeed fun to play, these problems might get the better of your child's sense of enjoyment. However, if your child is really fascinated with playing these cooperative games, there are still things that you can do in order to make it happen for them. You can set the game into a one-on-one type of match, which still follows the same rules but with the absence of other players. You can also invite other family members, friends, or close relatives to play as well. For individual sports such as golf, pool, and cycling, there are also important factors that you must consider before you can be sure that your child will have fun playing it. For a start, you must teach your child the concept of sportsmanship, which they may not completely grasp due to the increased level of competitiveness they'll feel when playing this game. They should be able to handle defeat and not resort to self-pity and loss of self-confidence. It is true that single-player sports do not require team communication and coordination, but this also means that your child has to know all the rules and terminologies of the game because they have to play a one-man team. If you decide to let them join official tournaments, you have to make your child knowledgeable enough about their own sport, especially when you know that you can't always be there to coach them all the time.

Level of Action

There are sports activities that are very intense in the level of physical exertion involved, such as track and field, ball games, swimming, and gymnastics. Most autistic children have trouble with strenuous activities because of weaker muscle strength and an overall poor agility and coordination, especially those who are still new to these sports. If your child has low muscle tone and endurance, it would be better to introduce them to sports that require moderate to little amount of physical exertion such as golf, darts, pool, and bowling. If you see positive development in your child's physical strength and stamina, you can then work your way up to the more intense sports.

Sensory Input

You also have to be very conscious about the kind of environment where certain

sports are played. Outdoor sports might not really be your child's interest if there are many sensory inputs that they find distracting and irritating. If you go to a public court to play ball games, there might be other groups of people playing as well and the noise coming from all the sports equipment and people might overwhelm your child. The time of the day is also crucial to your child's enjoyment because too much sunlight in the morning or bright artificial lights at night can discourage your child to play well. Whether playing indoors or outdoors, the temperature must be kept in check to allow your child to play at their maximum performance.

Aside from undesirable sensory inputs, your child may also seek special sensations such as the feeling of weight, pressure, and vibration. If they are sensory seekers, you can introduce to them sports like basketball and football where they can dribble and hug the ball, respectively. Gripping sports like badminton, tennis, and baseball may also work well for your child's sensory needs. Bowling, boxing and sumo wrestling can also help address your child's need for weight and pressure.

Affordability and Availability

Before choosing any kind of sport to introduce to your child, make sure that you can play it without spending a huge amount of cash and without having to worry whether you have sufficient time or not to complete a whole game. There are sports that require expensive equipment before they can be played, and there are also those that can last more than an hour or two. Using cheap versions of sports equipment may pose health dangers to your child and to other players, and not having enough leisure time may cut short your child's enjoyment which might cause frustration.

• THE BENEFITS OF HOLIDAYS

THE MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS OF HOLIDAYS

“What we’ve long known anecdotally, we will now prove through authoritative research: travel has a positive effect on health, relationships, business performance and the well-being of communities.” Roger Dow, president and CEO of the US Travel Association.

It’s no secret that getting away from it all, even for a couple of days, can do wonders for your mental health. Life these days is hectic, and we all need a break from the stresses and challenges of everyday life.

When you’re on holiday you can leave your worries behind, and focus on spending quality time with loved ones. Whether you’re dipping your toes into a pool, soaking up the sun on a beach, doing something active or experiencing a spot of culture, you’ll get a wonderful mental boost.

In fact, scientists have found that the psychological benefits of a vacation can last for up to a month after returning home. And why shouldn’t everyone get the chance to benefit from a holiday? Here at The Family Holiday Association, we believe holidays shouldn’t just be for the privileged and wealthy, everyone should be able to enjoy the mental health benefits that holidays bring.

Here are just a few of the many mental health benefits of holidays.

They help reduce stress

Nuffield Health, the UK’s largest healthcare charity, and tour operator Kuoni, conducted a study and discovered there are striking effects of not going on holiday. They discovered those who didn’t go away for a break had higher blood pressure, didn’t sleep as well and had higher levels of stress.

It’s not surprising that holidays help us de-stress, because we do things that give us pleasure and distract our mind. Travel provides a much needed break from hectic lifestyles, which in turn, helps us feel less stressed.

Holidays can make us mentally sharper and more creative

If your mind is emotionally exhausted, you probably won’t be functioning at your best. Just like when you do work you need to take breaks regularly in order to

remain productive, you also need prolonged breaks where you can properly rest. Going on holiday can give you a fresh wave of motivation and the strength to keep your life moving forward when you return. A study found that three days after vacation, travellers felt well-rested, less anxious, and in a better mood.

Travel helps you stay active, which helps your mental health

It's fairly well known that doing exercise can give you a mental health boost. A long walk in a calm environment can do wonders for your mood. When we travel, there's often an opportunity to be active, and in order to explore new places, we

have to travel on foot. Regular holidays where you have the chance to do something energetic, such as an activity or walking holiday will definitely help improve your mental health and generally wellbeing.

Travel broadens your mind, literally

Studies have shown a connection between travel and an increase in creativity, a deeper sense of cultural awareness and personal growth. When you travel to new places, your brain goes into overdrive. There are new sounds, sights and smells to adapt to. Your brain takes in your new surroundings, and you have encounters that help make you more culturally aware.

Travel gives you something to look forward to

Research has shown that simply having something to look forward to can help boost your mood. So, as soon as you click 'book' on that holiday website, your mind starts doing mental somersaults. Everyone loves having a holiday to look forward to.

Travel can help depression

Scientists from the Icahn School of Medicine, University of California and Harvard found that just six days away triggers genetic changes which dampens stress, boosts the immune system and lowers levels of proteins linked to dementia and depression. If you're feeling low or going through a particularly bad period in your life, travel can provide a temporary respite and Wolf Pack leader of the Content Wolves)

• TRAVELLING

TRAVELLING WITH YOUR AUTISTIC KID

One of the best things life has to offer is the idea of travelling together with your family. May it be a local tourist spot or a long-planned international destination, travelling to new places and being immersed into a new culture and its people is best experienced when you're touring with your loved ones. But as much as we would like to take a memorable trip together with our whole family, many real-life situations can make this plan hard to accomplish. Many parents of autistic kids are confronted by this very problem, which becomes harder to deal with when they are not experienced and educated enough to deal with autism-related issues that their kid's condition would bring about. Autistic children require special attention and care, as their needs and want also different to that of their neurotypical counterparts.

Many autism-related issues would discourage travelling especially in cases of young ones because their symptoms and condition may worsen due to the variables that they might encounter along the trip. When exposed to overwhelming situations such as noisy streets, crowded parks, and places illuminated with bright lights, autistic individuals can have very adverse responses. This limits the whole family's list of activities that every member can join and experience, and ultimately decreases the quality of life of many families with an autistic child. Although bringing your autistic child with you on a trip is a challenging task to accomplish, it is not entirely impossible to do, especially with the help of the following travel tips.

Choose Your Travel Destination According To Your Child's Needs and Wants

Many parents fail at this part simply because they generalise every travel destination as enjoyable for the whole family, even though their autistic child may react differently. To be able to let your child enjoy the travel, you have to prioritise their wants and needs in deciding where to go. If your child is an animal lover, you can take the whole family to the Zoo, an eco-tourism park, or an open farm where they can interact with animals. If your child likes to play with water during

their bath time or loves to stay in the sandbox during their playtime, the beach, water park, an island resort are the ideal places to visit. You should realise that the point of the trip is to guarantee that your autistic child enjoys it, as the other neurotypical family members can adapt easily to the travel plan and think of their own ways to enjoy the trip.

It is also encouraged that you choose travel destinations that won't require you to plan extensively because your autistic child can easily sense your tension when you get stressed out from making all the necessary preparations, and may respond to it in a manner which you might see as interference to the plan. If you are packing up things, it's better that you don't let your child see you do it, and try your best not to get too anxious while checking other necessary preparations.

Bring Necessary Identifications

One of the greatest risks of bringing a child with you on a trip is the possibility that they'd wander off and get lost. Neurotypical kids have a higher chance of getting found or coming back to their parents because they can supply the necessary information to other people or authorities. When it comes to cases of lost autistic children, especially nonverbal ones, the chances go down drastically. That is why if you are not confident that you'll have your eyes on your child for the whole duration of the trip and you don't have the trendy tracking device to help find your kid in case they'd go astray, it is imperative that you put necessary identifiers on their outfit that can help people recognise them and contact you. You can let them wear sensory jewellery such as a chewable necklace or bracelet with name tags or your contact number on them. If your child doesn't want to wear any accessory, you can try placing a personal information card in their pocket which includes their name, autism condition, potential allergens, and your contact number. You can also have your child's shirt printed with a well-known autism logo with basic personal information in the back of it so people can easily recognise your child's condition and become more eager to help.

Make Sure You've Packed Everything That Your Child Will Need

Autistic children have special needs to be addressed that cannot be delayed if

you want a worry-free travel experience with the whole family. This includes a handful of things that can give them the necessary distraction, or calm them down if they're on the verge of a meltdown. You can never leave behind your child's favourite toys as it serves as their self-extension which helps reduce anxiety. Gadgets such as MP3 players, iPad, and tablet are also included in the list of must-bring, where they can play games and music, and watch movies. Sensory tools such as pressure jackets, headphones, stress balls, and sunglasses must also be included inside the luggage. If your child strictly follows routine activities such as potty training, book reading, and snacking, you also have to bring the necessary things that can prevent your child from breaking these routines such as diapers, books, and goodies.

Help Your Child Get Familiarised with the Travel Experience

Preparation for the trip must also include building your child's expectations for the travel. It is important that you give your kid a visual idea about what they can do and enjoy on the trip so that they won't get overwhelmed by the things and situations that they will encounter. Telling travel scenarios and showing pictures to your child will help a lot in getting them familiarised. You should also start developing a set of routines specific for the trip even weeks before the travel date to get your child accustomed to certain schedules and prevent an unwanted meltdown in the middle of the trip.