

AUTISTIC CHILDREN ARE DIFFERENT NOT LESS

Managing Stigma as a Parent of an Autistic Child

One thing that parents of autistic children consistently share is that they experience a lot of stigma around their child's diagnosis. This might come from family or community members who don't understand the diagnosis, medical professionals and providers who only see the challenges your child experiences, or even within your family as different people respond to the diagnosis differently. This resource will share many common reactions to stigma, ways to fight it, and some resources to help you connect with the larger community.

RESPONSES TO STIGMA

It's common for parents of kids with disabilities to feel like other people don't understand. People in the community might judge you based on your child's behavior, without understanding what autism is or why your child is acting that way. You get messages from the world around you that say you need to change your child or fix your child, which can lead to shame, embarrassment, and fear.

These feelings come from the world telling you that autism is bad. But you can push back against them.

Remember that when you are afraid and ashamed, you are more likely to isolate yourself. That makes you vulnerable to things like misinformation, scams, and interventions that may not be a good match. When you start to feel stigma from people around you and get scared, ashamed or embarrassed, the best things you can do are remind yourself that autism is not inherently bad or wrong, and that there are people who can support you. Other parents do get it. And you can find them. They are the first step in building your community.

REFRAME YOUR THINKING: NEURODIVERSITY

When facing stigma, one powerful approach is to begin reframing the way you think about autism. Many parents and adults with autism have found the neurodiversity paradigm affirming. The neurodiversity paradigm highlights that human brains are naturally diverse, meaning that people experience and process the world in a wide variety of ways. Autism is one part of this diversity, a natural and normal variation in how some people's brains work. Embracing this perspective means understanding that autism is not a flaw or something to be "fixed"—it's a part of who your child is. This diagnosis doesn't change your child. They are the same person you've always known and loved, with strengths, quirks, and a unique way of seeing the world.

Shifting toward a neurodiversity-affirming mindset can help you see autism as a difference that brings its own challenges and strengths, rather than something inherently negative. By embracing your child's neurodivergence, you can support them in ways that honor who they truly are. Shifting your mindset can also help you fight back against stigma and judgment by providing you with a firm foundation: **you know your child is wonderful. No one else can tell you differently.**



BECOME YOUR CHILD'S CHAMPION

As a parent, you are your child's first advocate, their line of defense, and their biggest supporter. Even if your family is still finding its way toward a shared understanding of autism, you can set the tone by leading with empathy, strength, and understanding. Your advocacy gives your child the space to learn and grow in spaces that accept them.

Being your child's champion also helps them emotionally. When your child sees that you believe in them, support them, and understand their unique strengths, it builds their confidence and resilience. This journey isn't always easy, and it's natural to feel uncertain or even overwhelmed at times. But your love and advocacy give your child access to a world where they feel valued and empowered. By embracing this role, you help pave the way for a world that is more accepting, inclusive, and understanding, not just for your child but for all autistic individuals.

Here are some ideas that can help you take on the role of an advocate and fight back against stigma.

AUTISM IS COMMON

Autism is more common than you might realize, even if it isn't often talked about openly. Many families have walked this path before you and understand the struggles and joys that come with parenting an autistic child. By sharing your experiences and connecting with others—especially autistic adults and other parents—you can find support, understanding, and inspiration. Together, we can all work toward creating more supportive communities for autistic people and their families.

EVEN AUTHORITY FIGURES CAN BE BIASED

Authority figures like community leaders, experts, and providers may have stereotypes or biases about autism. As you navigate medical systems or look for support from people around you, remember that everyone can make mistakes or hold biases. Even if you hear negative messages from an authority, that does not mean that your child is bad or wrong. Often, the systems were built on negative or stereotyped ideas about autism, which can make interacting with systems like county services or medical providers really difficult. Remember that these systems can be improved, and as you connect with other parents and advocates, you contribute to the push for better, more inclusive support for all autistic people and their families.

THE DIAGNOSIS IS A HELPFUL TOOL

Diagnosis can be a key that opens doors to support, resources, and understanding. While getting a diagnosis can be challenging—due to waitlists, scarcity of resources, or even negative messaging—knowing that your child is autistic does not have to be scary. A diagnosis helps professionals understand your child's needs, and it's the first step toward accessing services and support that can make a difference in your child's life. You may be worried that the label makes it easy for others to judge your child, but many adults with autism share that they experienced those negative consequences even without a diagnosis: the diagnosis gave them tools of self-understanding and support.



TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF AS A PARENT

As a parent, you may feel overwhelmed. You might get messages that you are not parenting your child the right way, or that autism is your fault. It's essential to remember that your child's autism is not a result of "good" or "bad" parenting.

You are doing the best you can with the tools you have.

Learning to navigate the social and emotional aspects of having a child with a diagnosis—such as dealing with others' reactions and comments—can be just as important as navigating the healthcare or educational systems. Find the people who support you and make them a part of your life.

It's also important to give yourself permission to feel your emotions, whether that's joy, pride, frustration, or exhaustion. Acknowledging how you feel—without judgment—can help you process your experiences and move forward with greater clarity and compassion for yourself.

Accept help when it's offered, whether that's from friends, family, or professionals. Taking time for yourself, even in small ways, can recharge your energy and help you show up for your child with patience and strength. By caring for your own needs, you model self-compassion and resilience for your child, building a stronger foundation for both of you.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Finding your community is one of the most important steps in navigating life as a parent of an autistic child. Other parents who have been through similar experiences can provide support, understanding, and practical advice. Organizations and spaces that accept and welcome you and your child can become sources of strength and belonging. Autistic adults, in particular, can offer valuable insights into what your child might be experiencing and help you understand their world in ways only they can. By building connections with others, you can create a network of support that helps you and your child thrive.

WHERE TO START

- Connect with the Autism Society of Minnesota (AuSM). Visit www.ausm.org to find classes, trainings, community events, and connection with people who understand.
- Learn more on the Disability Hub. Visit disabilityhubmn.org for tools and resources, plus a calendar of events.