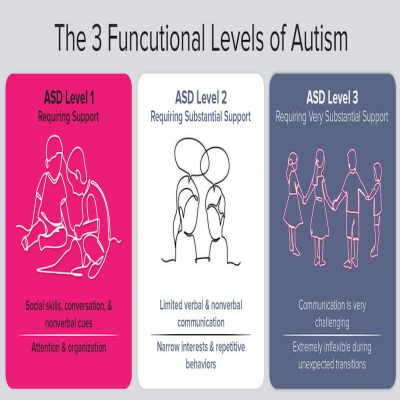

Understanding Different Levels of Autism: A Guide for Parents

Description

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This comprehensive guide provides essential strategies and insights for parents navigating the challenges of raising a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). It emphasizes the importance of understanding ASDâ??s spectrum nature, creating tailored support plans through early intervention and effective therapies like ABA, speech therapy, occupational therapy, and social skills training. Educational considerations such as selecting appropriate settings and implementing IEPs or 504 Plans are highlighted, along with practical tips for creating a supportive home environment and accessing community resources. The guide also addresses common challenges such as communication difficulties and sensory sensitivities, encourages celebrating milestones, and stresses the vital role of self-care for parents and caregivers.

Introduction

Brief Introduction to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by challenges in social interaction, communication, and repetitive behaviors. The term â?? spectrumâ?□ reflects the wide range of symptoms and severities observed in individuals with autism. Some may require significant support in their daily lives, while others might lead relatively independent lives with minimal assistance.

Importance of Understanding Where a Child Falls on the Spectrum

For parents, especially those new to the diagnosis, understanding where their child falls on the autism spectrum is crucial. This knowledge helps in tailoring the appropriate

interventions and support mechanisms to meet the specific needs of their child. Recognizing the level of support required can also guide parents in setting realistic goals and expectations, facilitating better long-term outcomes.

Overview of the Articleâ??s Purpose: To Guide Parents in Supporting Their Autistic Child

This article aims to provide parents with a comprehensive understanding of the different levels of autism as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). It will outline the characteristics of each level, suggest appropriate interventions, and offer practical advice for parents to support their child effectively. Whether you are a new parent navigating an initial diagnosis or the parent of a young adult on the spectrum, this guide will provide valuable insights and resources to help you support your childâ??s unique journey.

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What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

Definition and Explanation of ASD

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex developmental condition that affects how a person perceives and interacts with the world. It encompasses a range of symptoms and skills, primarily affecting social communication and behavior. People with ASD often experience challenges in social interactions, have difficulty with verbal and nonverbal communication, and may engage in repetitive behaviors or have restricted interests.

Variability in Symptoms and Behaviors

The symptoms of ASD can vary greatly between individuals. Some common signs include:

- Difficulty in forming relationships and interacting socially
- Delayed speech and language skills
- Repetitive movements or behaviors (e.g., hand-flapping, rocking)
- Intense focus on specific interests or topics
- Sensory sensitivities (e.g., to sounds, lights, textures)

This variability means that each person with autism is unique, with their own strengths and challenges. Some may have co-occurring conditions such as intellectual disability, anxiety, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Importance of Early Diagnosis

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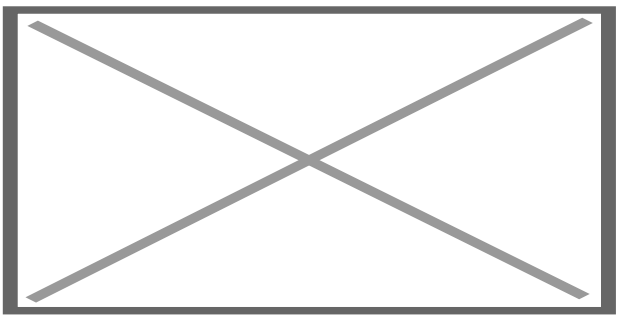
Early diagnosis of ASD is crucial for several reasons:

- **Early Intervention:** Identifying autism early allows for the initiation of interventions during critical developmental windows, which can significantly improve outcomes.
- **Tailored Support:** Early diagnosis helps in developing personalized support plans that cater to the specific needs of the child, enhancing their ability to communicate and interact.
- **Parental Guidance:** Early diagnosis provides parents with the necessary information and resources to support their childâ??s development effectively, reducing uncertainty and stress.

Early intervention programs can include speech therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioral therapies such as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), all of which can help improve communication, social skills, and adaptive behaviors.



The Three Levels of Autism

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is categorized into three levels in the DSM-5, each indicating the degree of support needed.

Level 1: Requiring Support

- **Characteristics**: Individuals at this level can speak in full sentences and engage in communication, but may struggle with back-and-forth conversations and making friends. They have noticeable impairments in social interactions and may have difficulty organizing and planning.
- **Examples of Behaviors**: Difficulty initiating social interactions, decreased interest in social activities, and problems with flexibility in behavior.
- **Types of Support Needed**: Support in social and organizational skills, structured routines, and interventions like social skills training and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT).

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Level 2: Requiring Substantial Support

- **Characteristics**: Individuals show significant deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication skills, leading to apparent difficulties even with support. They may engage in limited, rigid behaviors and have difficulty coping with change.
- **Examples of Behaviors**: Limited speech, difficulty understanding social cues, repetitive behaviors, and intense focus on specific interests.
- **Types of Support Needed**: Substantial support in daily activities, tailored educational programs, speech therapy, and behavioral interventions to develop communication and adaptive skills.

Level 3: Requiring Very Substantial Support

- **Characteristics**: Individuals have severe deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication, causing severe impairments in functioning. They exhibit extremely limited initiation of social interactions and minimal response to social overtures from others.
- **Examples of Behaviors**: Nonverbal communication or very limited speech, severe repetitive behaviors, extreme difficulty coping with change, and significant sensory sensitivities.
- **Types of Support Needed**: Intensive, individualized support for daily living activities, comprehensive educational programs, consistent and structured environments, and therapies focusing on improving communication, behavior, and

life skills.

Understanding these levels helps parents identify the right interventions and support systems to enhance their childâ??s development and quality of life.

Assessment and Diagnosis

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How Autism is Diagnosed

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is diagnosed through a combination of observations, developmental screenings, and comprehensive evaluations. The process typically begins when parents or caregivers notice developmental delays or atypical behaviors in their child. Initial concerns are usually raised with a pediatrician who conducts preliminary screenings using standardized tools such as the Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (M-CHAT) or the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS).

If these screenings indicate potential signs of autism, the child is referred for a more in-depth evaluation. This evaluation involves a multidisciplinary team of healthcare professionals who assess various aspects of the childâ??s development and behavior.

Role of Healthcare Professionals

Pediatricians: Often the first point of contact, pediatricians play a critical role in early detection. They conduct initial developmental screenings and refer the child to specialists for further evaluation if needed.

Neurologists: Pediatric neurologists are involved in cases where neurological conditions might coexist with ASD. They help rule out other neurological issues that could explain the childâ??s symptoms.

Psychologists: Clinical psychologists or neuropsychologists conduct comprehensive assessments using tools like the ADOS and the Autism Diagnostic Interview-Revised (ADI-

R). They evaluate the childâ??s cognitive, social, and emotional functioning, providing a detailed report on the presence and severity of ASD symptoms.

Speech and Language Therapists: These professionals assess the childâ??s communication abilities, identifying specific speech or language deficits that are common in children with ASD.

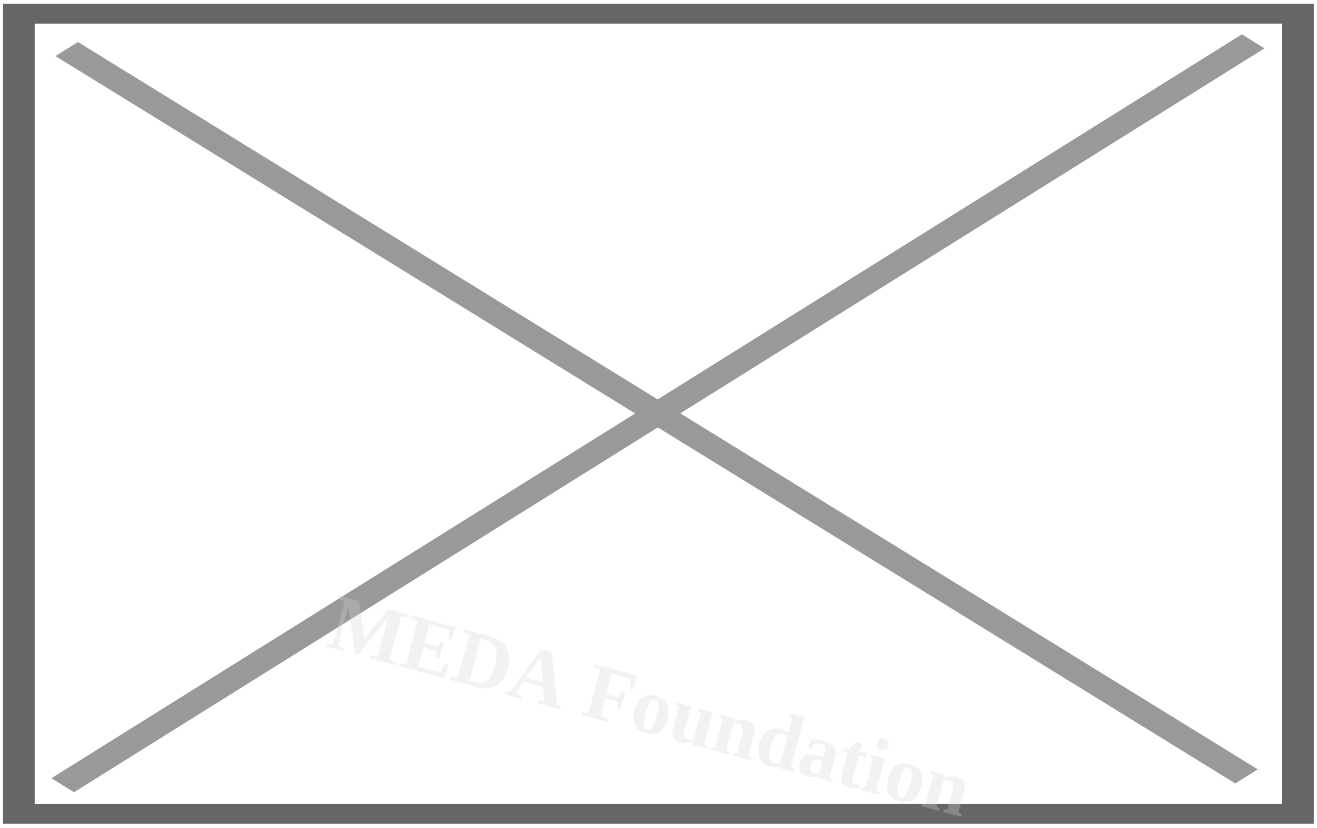
Occupational Therapists: Occupational therapists evaluate the childâ??s motor skills, sensory processing, and daily living skills, which are often affected in children with ASD.

Importance of a Comprehensive Evaluation

A comprehensive evaluation is essential for several reasons:

- **Accurate Diagnosis:** It ensures a precise diagnosis, distinguishing ASD from other developmental disorders or conditions with similar symptoms.
- **Individualized Intervention:** A thorough evaluation provides detailed information about the childâ??s strengths and weaknesses, enabling the development of tailored intervention plans that address specific needs.
- **Family Guidance:** It offers valuable insights for parents and caregivers, helping them understand their childâ??s condition and how best to support their development.
- **Monitoring Progress:** Comprehensive evaluations establish a baseline, allowing for the monitoring of the childâ??s progress over time and adjustments to intervention strategies as needed.

The assessment and diagnosis of autism involve a collaborative effort among various healthcare professionals to ensure an accurate diagnosis and the development of effective, individualized support plans for children with ASD.



Tailoring Support to Your Childâ??s Needs: A Comprehensive Approach

Navigating the landscape of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be complex for parents, especially when it comes to tailoring support for their child. Understanding how to create an individualized plan, the crucial role of early intervention, and the various therapies and interventions available are pivotal steps in providing effective support and fostering growth and development.

Creating an Individualized Plan

Each child with autism is unique, with their own set of strengths, challenges, and developmental needs. Crafting an individualized plan is essential to address these specific requirements effectively. This plan should be a collaborative effort involving parents, educators, therapists, and healthcare professionals, aiming to create a structured and supportive environment tailored to the childâ??s abilities and challenges.

Assessment and Goal Setting: Begin by conducting a comprehensive assessment to understand the childâ??s current skills, behaviors, and areas needing improvement. Set clear, measurable goals that are realistic and achievable within a specified timeframe. Goals should encompass various domains such as communication, social skills, behavior

management, and daily living skills.

Structured Support Strategies: Implement structured routines and visual supports to enhance predictability and reduce anxiety for the child. These strategies can include visual schedules, token economies, and clear expectations, which provide a framework for understanding and navigating daily activities.

Regular Monitoring and Adjustments: Continuously monitor progress and adjust the plan as necessary based on the childâ??s response to interventions and changes in their developmental trajectory. Flexibility and responsiveness are key in ensuring the plan remains effective and adaptive to the childâ??s evolving needs.

Importance of Early Intervention

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Early intervention is widely recognized as critical for children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. The early years represent a period of rapid brain development and neuroplasticity, making it an optimal time to introduce targeted interventions that can significantly influence long-term outcomes.

Maximizing Developmental Gains: Early intervention focuses on maximizing developmental gains by targeting core deficits associated with ASD. It aims to improve communication skills, social interactions, adaptive behaviors, and cognitive abilities during the formative years when the brain is most receptive to learning and change.

Family Involvement and Support: Early intervention programs often emphasize the involvement of parents and caregivers, providing them with strategies and tools to support their childâ??s development within natural everyday routines and activities. This approach enhances the childâ??s learning opportunities and promotes consistency between home and therapeutic settings.

Accessing Services: Promptly accessing early intervention services is crucial. This may involve collaborating with pediatricians, developmental specialists, and educational professionals to initiate assessments and referrals to appropriate intervention programs tailored to the childâ??s needs.

Types of Therapies and Interventions

A variety of therapies and interventions have demonstrated effectiveness in supporting children with autism spectrum disorder. These approaches are typically tailored to address

specific challenges and promote skill development across various domains.

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA): ABA is a structured, evidence-based approach that focuses on understanding and modifying behaviors through systematic techniques. It involves breaking down skills into manageable steps, providing positive reinforcement for desired behaviors, and systematically fading supports as skills are acquired.

Speech Therapy: Speech therapy targets communication difficulties commonly associated with autism, including language delays, speech articulation, pragmatics (social use of language), and nonverbal communication skills. Therapists use a range of techniques such as picture exchange systems, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), and verbal prompting to improve communication abilities.

Occupational Therapy: Occupational therapists work on enhancing the childâ??s ability to participate in daily activities and improve sensory processing, fine motor skills, self-care routines, and adaptive behaviors. They use sensory integration techniques, fine motor exercises, and environmental modifications to support the childâ??s functional independence.

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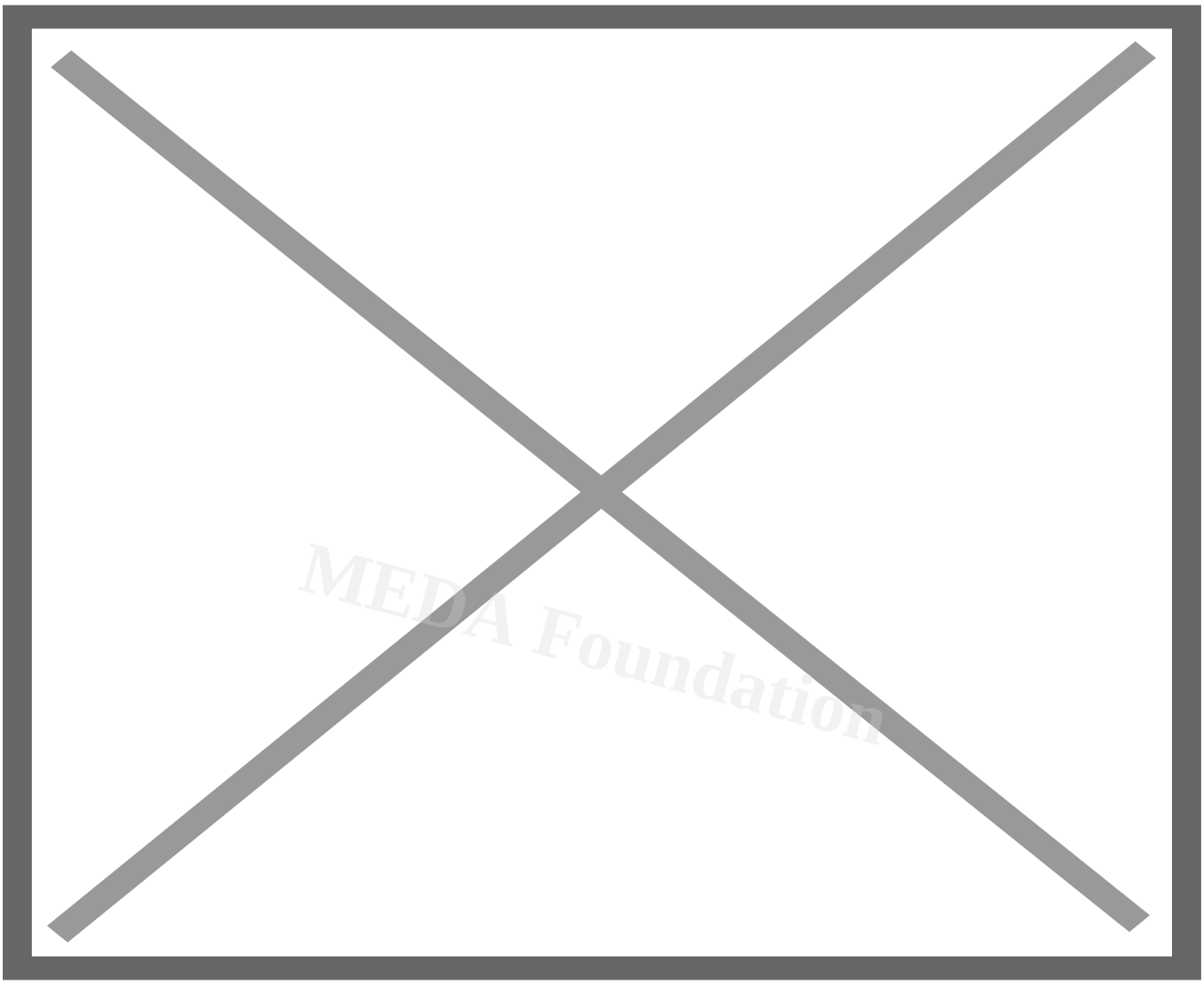
Social Skills Training: Social skills training focuses on teaching children with autism essential social skills, including initiating and maintaining conversations, interpreting social cues, understanding emotions, and developing friendships. Structured activities, role-playing, video modeling, and peer-mediated interventions are common approaches used to enhance social competence.

Tailoring support for a child with autism spectrum disorder requires a multifaceted approach that integrates individualized planning, early intervention strategies, and evidence-based therapies and interventions. By creating a supportive framework that addresses the childâ??s unique strengths and challenges, families can promote optimal development and enhance their childâ??s quality of life. Emphasizing the importance of early intervention and accessing appropriate services ensures that children with autism receive the comprehensive support needed to thrive and reach their full potential.



Educational Considerations for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

When it comes to the education of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), making informed decisions about the right educational setting, understanding the importance of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 Plans, and fostering effective collaboration with educators and specialists are crucial steps to support their learning and development.

Choosing the Right Educational Setting

Selecting an appropriate educational environment is foundational to ensuring a child with ASD receives the support and resources needed to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Factors to Consider:

- **Inclusive vs. Specialized Settings:** Determine whether an inclusive classroom within a mainstream school or a specialized program specifically designed for students with ASD would best meet the childâ??s individual needs.
- **Class Size and Structure:** Consider the optimal class size and structure that would provide the right balance of support and social interaction while minimizing sensory overload or anxiety triggers.
- **Educational Philosophy:** Assess the schoolâ??s educational philosophy and approach to supporting children with special needs, including their commitment to individualized instruction, behavioral supports, and social skills development.
- **Accessibility of Support Services:** Evaluate the availability and accessibility of support services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, behavioral intervention, and counseling within the educational setting.

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Individualized Education Program (IEP) and 504 Plan

Individualized Education Program (IEP):

An IEP is a legally binding document designed to outline the specific educational goals, services, and accommodations tailored to meet the unique needs of a child with disabilities, including ASD.

- **Components of an IEP:** Collaborate with educators and specialists to develop an IEP that includes measurable annual goals, progress monitoring, special education services, related services (e.g., speech therapy), accommodations (e.g., extended time on tests), and modifications (e.g., alternate grading criteria) necessary to support the childâ??s learning and development.
- **Annual Review and Updates:** Regularly review and update the IEP to reflect the childâ??s progress, evolving needs, and any changes in educational goals or services required to ensure continued academic and social success.

504 Plan:

A 504 Plan provides accommodations and supports for students with disabilities, including ASD, who do not require specialized instruction but need modifications to access the general education curriculum.

- **Accommodations and Supports:** Collaborate with school personnel to determine appropriate accommodations and supports, such as preferential seating, extended time on assignments or tests, access to assistive technology, and modifications to classroom routines to support the childâ??s educational participation and success.

Collaborating with Educators and Specialists

Effective collaboration between parents, educators, and specialists is essential to creating a supportive educational environment that meets the unique needs of a child with ASD.

- **Communication and Information Sharing:** Maintain open communication channels to exchange information about the childâ??s progress, challenges, and strategies that are effective both at school and home.
- **Team Meetings and Planning:** Participate in team meetings, including IEP meetings and parent-teacher conferences, to discuss goals, progress, and adjustments to educational plans based on the childâ??s needs and achievements.
- **Professional Development:** Advocate for ongoing professional development opportunities for educators and school personnel to enhance their understanding of ASD, effective teaching strategies, and methods for supporting social-emotional development within the classroom.

Choosing the right educational setting, developing a comprehensive IEP or 504 Plan, and fostering collaborative partnerships between parents, educators, and specialists are essential components in ensuring the academic and social success of children with autism spectrum disorder. By prioritizing individualized supports, accommodations, and effective communication, families can empower their child to thrive in an inclusive and supportive learning environment tailored to their unique strengths and challenges.

Supporting Your Child with Autism at Home and in the Community

Creating a nurturing home environment, establishing effective strategies for daily living and routines, and accessing resources and support groups are essential aspects of supporting a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). These elements contribute significantly to their overall well-being, development, and family dynamics.

Creating a Supportive Home Environment

A supportive home environment plays a pivotal role in fostering the growth and comfort of a child with ASD. It involves creating a space that promotes structure, predictability, and sensory regulation.

Key Considerations:

- **Structured Routines:** Establish consistent daily routines and schedules that provide predictability for the child. Use visual supports such as visual schedules, timers, and calendars to help them understand and anticipate daily activities.
- **Sensory Considerations:** Pay attention to sensory sensitivities and preferences. Create sensory-friendly spaces within the home that offer opportunities for both sensory stimulation and relaxation, such as quiet corners, sensory bins, or weighted blankets.
- **Clear Communication:** Use clear, simple language and visual aids to facilitate communication and reduce misunderstandings. Encourage the use of communication tools like picture exchange systems (PECS) or assistive technology as needed.
- **Safety Measures:** Implement safety measures tailored to the childâ??s needs, such as securing hazardous items, creating boundaries, and teaching safety skills appropriate to their developmental level.

Strategies for Daily Living and Routine

Navigating daily living tasks and routines can present unique challenges for children with ASD. Implementing effective strategies can help promote independence, organization, and skill development.

Practical Strategies Include:

- **Task Simplification:** Break down tasks into manageable steps and provide visual or verbal prompts to guide the child through routines like getting dressed, brushing teeth, or completing chores.

- **Visual Supports:** Utilize visual schedules, checklists, or social stories to outline tasks and expectations, aiding in comprehension and reducing anxiety related to transitions or changes in routine.
- **Reinforcement and Rewards:** Use positive reinforcement techniques, such as token systems or specific praise, to encourage and reinforce desired behaviors and task completion.
- **Flexibility and Adaptation:** Remain flexible and adaptable in routines to accommodate the childâ??s needs while gradually introducing changes or new activities to promote skill development and independence.

Resources and Support Groups for Families

Connecting with resources and support groups can provide invaluable guidance, encouragement, and shared experiences for families navigating the challenges of raising a child with ASD.

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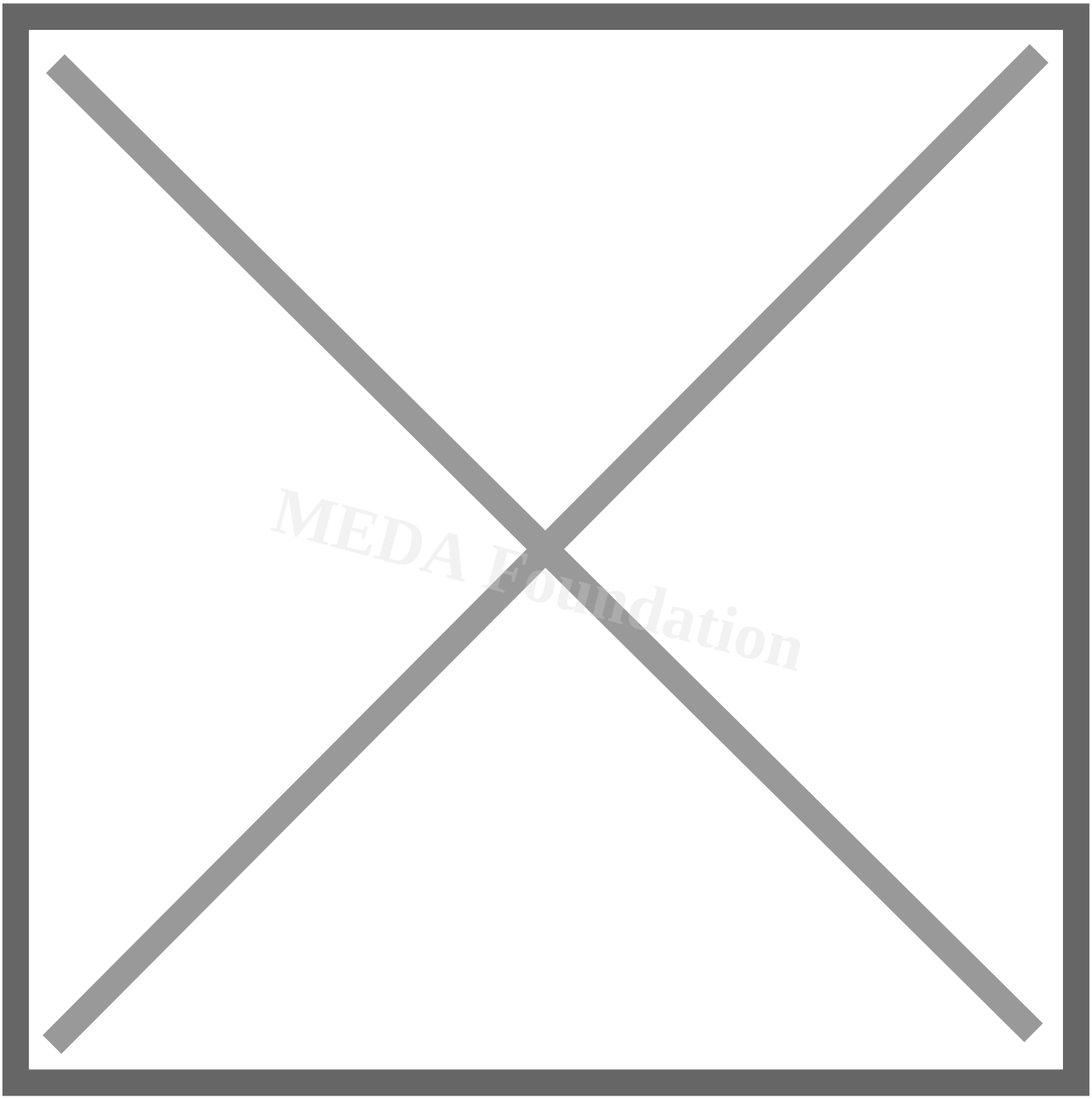
Explore the Following Resources:

- **Local Support Services:** Research community-based services such as parent training workshops, respite care providers, and recreational programs tailored for children with ASD.
- **Online Support Networks:** Engage with online forums, social media groups, and websites dedicated to autism support where families can exchange information, seek advice, and find emotional support.
- **Professional Guidance:** Consult with healthcare professionals, therapists, and educators who specialize in autism to access information on interventions, advocacy resources, and additional support services available locally and nationally.

Creating a supportive home environment, implementing effective strategies for daily living and routines, and accessing resources and support networks are essential components of caring for a child with autism spectrum disorder. By fostering an environment that prioritizes structure, communication, and sensory regulation, families can enhance their childâ??s comfort, development, and overall quality of life. Additionally, connecting with community resources and support groups provides families with the necessary tools and encouragement to navigate the complexities of autism with resilience and support.



Navigating Challenges and Celebrating Successes

Raising a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) presents unique challenges and milestones that require understanding, patience, and resilience. Effectively navigating these challenges, celebrating achievements, and prioritizing self-care are essential aspects of supporting both the child and the caregivers on this journey.

Dealing with Common Challenges

Children with ASD may face various challenges that impact their daily lives and interactions. Understanding and addressing these challenges proactively can significantly improve the childâ??s quality of life and family dynamics.

Common Challenges Include:

- **Communication Difficulties:** Many children with ASD struggle with verbal and nonverbal communication skills. Strategies such as visual supports, alternative communication methods (e.g., PECS, AAC), and speech therapy can help improve communication abilities.
- **Sensory Sensitivities:** Sensory processing issues are common among children with ASD, leading to over- or under-sensitivity to sensory stimuli (e.g., sound, touch, taste). Creating sensory-friendly environments, using sensory tools (e.g., headphones, weighted blankets), and occupational therapy can aid in managing sensory sensitivities.
- **Behavioral Challenges:** Children with ASD may exhibit behaviors such as repetitive movements, meltdowns, or difficulties with transitions. Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), behavior intervention plans, and consistent routines can assist in managing and modifying these behaviors effectively.

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Celebrating Milestones and Progress

Recognizing and celebrating the achievements and milestones of children with ASD, no matter how small, is crucial for fostering motivation, self-esteem, and family unity.

Ways to Celebrate Successes:

- **Setting Realistic Goals:** Establish achievable goals tailored to the childâ??s abilities and interests. Celebrate milestones such as mastering a new skill, improved social interactions, or increased independence in daily tasks.
- **Positive Reinforcement:** Use positive reinforcement techniques, such as praise, rewards, or preferred activities, to acknowledge and reinforce desired behaviors and achievements.
- **Family Rituals and Traditions:** Create family rituals or traditions to commemorate milestones, such as a special dinner, a day trip, or a family activity that the child enjoys, reinforcing a sense of accomplishment and togetherness.

Importance of Self-Care for Parents and Caregivers

Caring for a child with ASD can be demanding physically, emotionally, and mentally. Prioritizing self-care is essential for maintaining overall well-being and the ability to provide consistent support to the child.

Self-Care Strategies Include:

- **Seeking Support:** Connect with support groups, online forums, or local organizations for parents of children with ASD. Sharing experiences, advice, and emotional support with others who understand can alleviate feelings of isolation and stress.
- **Setting Boundaries:** Establish boundaries to balance caregiving responsibilities with personal needs and interests. Delegate tasks, seek respite care, and communicate openly with family members or trusted friends about your needs.
- **Engaging in Relaxation Techniques:** Practice stress-reducing activities such as mindfulness, meditation, exercise, or hobbies that promote relaxation and recharge your energy levels.
- **Professional Support:** Consider counseling or therapy to address stress, anxiety, or caregiver burnout. Talking to a professional can provide coping strategies and emotional support tailored to your specific needs.

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Navigating the challenges of raising a child with autism spectrum disorder involves understanding common obstacles, celebrating achievements, and prioritizing self-care for parents and caregivers. By proactively addressing challenges such as communication difficulties and sensory sensitivities, celebrating every milestone achieved, and taking care of their own well-being, families can create a supportive environment that fosters the childâ??s development and enhances family resilience. Embracing both the challenges and successes of the journey can empower parents and caregivers to provide the best possible care and advocacy for their child with ASD.

Conclusion

Supporting Your Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder

In navigating the complexities of raising a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), it is essential to equip oneself with knowledge, strategies, and support to ensure the best possible outcomes for both the child and the family. Here, we recap key points, offer encouragement, provide resources for further assistance, and extend a call to support the MEDA Foundationâ??s mission.

Recap of Key Points

Throughout this guide, weâ??ve explored crucial aspects of supporting a child with ASD:

- **Understanding ASD:** Recognizing the spectrum nature of autism, variability in symptoms, and the importance of early diagnosis and intervention.
- **Tailoring Support:** Creating individualized plans, emphasizing early intervention, and exploring effective therapies such as ABA, speech therapy, occupational therapy, and social skills training.
- **Educational Considerations:** Choosing appropriate educational settings, understanding the role of IEPs and 504 Plans, and fostering collaboration with educators and specialists.
- **Home and Community Support:** Establishing a supportive home environment, implementing strategies for daily living and routines, and accessing resources and support groups.
- **Navigating Challenges:** Addressing common challenges such as communication difficulties, sensory issues, and behavioral challenges through understanding, support, and effective strategies.
- **Celebrating Successes:** Recognizing milestones achieved by the child, reinforcing positive behaviors, and fostering a supportive family environment.
- **Importance of Self-Care:** Prioritizing self-care for parents and caregivers to maintain resilience, well-being, and the ability to provide continuous support.

Encouragement and Reassurance for Parents

To all parents and caregivers of children with ASD, your dedication, patience, and advocacy are invaluable. Remember, each step forward, no matter how small, is a triumph worth celebrating. Your unwavering commitment makes a profound difference in your childâ??s life and development.

Continue to embrace the journey, seek support from loved ones and community resources, and remember that you are not alone in this path. Together, we can create a supportive environment where children with ASD can thrive and reach their full potential.

We encourage you to consider supporting the **MEDA Foundation**, an organization dedicated to empowering individuals with autism and developmental differences through advocacy, education, and support services. Your contribution can make a meaningful impact in enhancing the lives of individuals and families affected by autism.

CATEGORY

1. Autism Parenting
2. Autism Treatment
3. Early Detection and Diagnosis
4. Independent Life
5. Personal Stories and Perspectives

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POST TAG

1. #ASDAwareness
2. #AutismCommunity
3. #AutismJourney
4. #AutismResources
5. #AutismSupport
6. #EmpoweringFamilies
7. #MEDA
8. #ParentingAutism
9. #SpecialNeedsParenting
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