

Autism Support for Parents

AN E-BOOK BY SPENCER HEALTH



Understanding Autistic Meltdown Vs Tantrum



Choosing Your Battles: When to stand firm, when to move aside



The importance of support networks when raising kids on the spectrum – and where to find them!



Welcome.

Currently 1 in 100 Australians have Autism Spectrum Disorder.

That is 1 in 100 families who have been blessed with a child who is neurodiverse. A child who brings a unique view to the world and will challenge and enrich the life of others.

Each day, I work with families to help develop strategies to bring the very best out of children and each day I am astounded at the resilience, love and bravery of these families.

This e-book is a small gesture of support for those families who are seeking a little extra advice.

Stay strong parents.

Emma Spencer
CEO, Spencer Health.

The Facts.

Autism spectrum disorder, commonly known as ASD, affects how people communicate and interact with others. It affects how they make sense of the world. Autism is a developmental condition that is typically life-long. People with ASD experience difficulties with communication, social interaction and restricted/repetitive interests and behaviours. These are often accompanied by sensory issues, such as oversensitivity or undersensitivity to sounds, smells or touch. All of these difficulties may lead to behavioural challenges in some individuals.

The term "spectrum" is used to emphasise that autism presents differently in every single person. People with autism have a wide range of challenges as well as abilities. These difficulties might present as some (or all) of the following characteristics:

Social communication and interaction:

- Difficulties with social-emotional reciprocity e.g. being unable to maintain normal back-and-forth conversations, having little or no interest in sharing interests and emotions (pointing or showing), displaying little or no interest in social interactions.
- Difficulties with non-verbal communication, e.g. abnormal eye contact, difficulties understanding and using gestures (such as nodding), body language and facial expressions.
- Difficulties in developing and maintaining relationships appropriate to age and development e.g. difficulties with imaginative play and making friends.

Restricted and repetitive behaviours:

- Stereotyped or repetitive speech, movements or use of objects, such as lining up toys, flapping hands, toe walking or echolalia (repeating words or phrases).
- Inflexible adherence to routines, patterns or behaviour (e.g. eating the same foods, travelling the same way to school etc.) and becoming distressed at changes.
- Sensory hyper or hypo-reactivity (e.g. to sounds, pain and textures) as described above.
- Restricted or fixated interests e.g. only playing with certain toys or discussing certain topics.

Support Agencies:

- **Autism Awareness Australia** - <https://www.autismawareness.com.au/>
- **Autism Spectrum** - <https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/>
- **Autism Advisory & Support Service** - <https://aass.org.au/>
- **Amaze** - <https://www.amaze.org.au/>
- **AEIOU Foundation** - <https://aeiou.org.au/>
- **Open Minds** - <https://www.openminds.org.au/>



*THE SAME
RULES DON'T
APPLY*

“Just don't let them leave the table until they've finished their meal”

“That'd be it for my kid and screen time for the week – no way would they be getting their hands on their device if they did that in my home”

As a parent we are constantly being given advice by caring family members and others in our networks about how best to raise our kids.

This can easily leave us feeling guilty – as if we are doing the wrong thing, confused about the different advice, overwhelmed and judged. Whilst most of this advice is well meaning, it is coming from somewhere and from someone who isn't an expert on your child.

I want to let you know that you are the expert in your child.

You understand their temperament, nuances and needs better than anyone in your social network – and even your professional network. Whilst misguided advice is designed to be helpful, it is given without the knowledge of your child's special qualities, and when it comes to neurodiverse kids – these qualities are even more nuanced and sensitive.

What I'd like you to know is that whilst lots of behavioural strategies (consequences, limits, expectations, guidelines and schedules) can be helpful – when it comes to neurodiverse kids the standard rules don't apply.



How we approach supporting them needs to be specifically tied to their unique needs and characteristics.

Whilst “regular” kids can get their homework done after a long day – neurodiverse kids often need to rest and settle after a long day managing emotions and dealing with the social world that is school. Limits on screen use are important in neurotypical homes – for neurodiverse children, these devices are often a tool for self-regulation. The same rules, simply, do not apply.

It is important as a parent of a neurodiverse child for you to feel empowered to set limits on the unhelpful advice directed at you from others.

Even from health professionals – I consider myself an “expert” in child behaviour and neurodiverse presentations – but I am not an expert in YOUR CHILD – only you are.

So when working out the best way to support your child, work with a trusted professional who takes the time to understand your child and listen to your view on what does and doesn't work. Approach this relationship collaboratively, and where possible – set limits on unsolicited advice, and for those family or friends whom this is a habit – let them know respectfully that you are working with a professional to meet your child's needs in a way that is directed by best practice principals, science and parental love.





Understanding Autistic Meltdown Vs Tantrums

Being a parent of a child diagnosed with Autism is extremely challenging in many ways. One particular way is understanding and meeting the needs of your child. Children with Autism find it hard to express their needs for a variety of reasons. A child may be non-verbal or have limited abilities to express themselves verbally.

For those children with excellent verbal communication, it is a common feature of Autism to find it hard to understand and express their emotions.

Whenever I work with parents of any child I have a mantra **“behaviour is a tool for communication”** – and it is important that we observe

and listen to a child's behaviour to understand what the underlying need is.

But what about when the behaviour itself is difficult to decipher, such as in the case of “meltdowns” vs “tantrums”.

When a child is having an emotional meltdown or a tantrum, it can present in the same types of behaviour – crying, screaming, rolling on the floor, throwing things and BOTH can go on for minutes or HOURS!

However – the root need and how we address this is different in both cases. Let's explore that more.





Meltdown

Meltdowns occur when a child is completely overwhelmed emotionally. Perhaps they have had a long day at school? Completed a challenging activity? Are overstimulated and need relief? There can be a number of triggers but at the root of this is an inability to continue to manage their emotions.

This is a time where a child needs support to regulate their emotions and is not a time to “parent” the behaviour. This will make the meltdown worse as you are providing more information for the overstressed system to process. In such cases, providing space for the child to de-escalate is important. It is likely you might need to create a safe environment for the child and those around them.

You won't always be able to move them into another room and sometimes this will happen in public!

But clearing the area around the child and allowing the emotion to be expressed is important. When appropriate to do so, moving in and offering comfort and co-regulating is important.

If the child finds hugs soothing, hugging them – providing a comfort toy, other physically soothing options. Quiet words of “it's ok”, “you're overwhelmed” – an emotion coaching approach is really important here in a meltdown situation.

Meltdowns will end when the child has been supported to regulate.



Tantrum

Tantrums are always a means to getting something the child wants, and are usually triggered by boundaries that the child is not happy with.

Thus the short-term (and not ok) way to deal with these is to give the child what they want – the tantrum will end.

However, of course we know this is not an effective way to parent.

Where tantrums are occurring, staying firm to the boundary is important but also offering compromise or distractions can be helpful.

Where unacceptable behaviour occurs (e.g. using bad language, being violent), addressing this behaviour once things have settled is appropriate.

The challenge is that sometimes tantrums – as they are emotionally overwhelming – can turn into meltdowns.

Thus, stepping in early in both situations is key and as always – keeping “teaching moments” where consequences for behaviour should be applied until things have calmed down.

Choosing Your Battles.

When to stand firm, when to move aside.



We all know the saying “pick your battles” and to be honest, I don't think that there is sager advice to any parent than this!

For today's western parent, our most powerful parenting tool is our voice – so we want to use that wisely!

If we raise our voice, and parent every small misdemeanor or issue – it will lose its value and power.

You will find yourself yelling louder and louder – and this is not an effective way to create harmonious relationships in a family system. It also models to your children that yelling at people to motivate them or reprimand them is ok – **monkey see monkey do.**

So how then do we know which battles to pick? Firstly it's important to set up the expectations of what is ok and what isn't in the house.

As a trained 1-2-3 Magic Facilitator, I have taken the very simple principle of identifying 3 groups of behaviours that are not ok in the house and require “parenting”:

- **Use respectful language**
- **Respect for property and belongings**
- **Use gentle hands and respect other people's bodies**

There are a few things to reflect on with regard to these. Whenever establishing guidelines with anyone – but especially children – it is important to let them know what you EXPECT – not what you don't.

All of the above could be stated as “don't use rude words” “don't smash things or jump on the couch”, “no hitting your siblings” – reframing these in a “what we want to see” light is a much more helpful and positive way to present guidelines.

Next – having only 3 sets of expectations really cuts down and hones in on what is important in the family – of course under each category there are lots of individual items – but imagine if you were to write down every single thing?! You'd fill pages and pages! Start off with sitting down as a family and discussing the above expectations, and the consequences for not abiding by them.

Discuss the prompt that you are going to use to indicate to them that their behaviour is not acceptable e.g. "Sally, are you using gentle hands?" – to give them a chance to change their behaviour. Let them know that the guidelines also apply to adults in the house and get them to brainstorm parental consequences -this will get a good laugh from all involved!

In our day to day stress and life, we can tend to "sweat the small things"

Remember – their response doesn't have to be perfect – they can move into action at a sloth like pace, whinging all the way to empty that dishwasher – and that is good enough. They can grumble on their way to the bedroom for their time out (or whatever the consequence may be). In our day to day stress and life, we can tend to "sweat the small things" – and raise our voice more than we want, for things that aren't really important.

Save your most vital parenting tool for issues of safety (like stopping your child running out onto the road) – use a calm voice to remind them of the guideline they are breaking and allow them time to change their behaviour. If they don't, calmly apply the appropriate consequence. They may get upset and push back – and this is totally appropriate – but allow them their moment of upset without adding more fuel to the fire.

If you are interested in getting some support in reducing the yelling in your house and feeling more competent in your role as a parent – please don't hesitate to get in touch.

Building Social Skills

The Importance of Soft Skills



It is well understood that Autism is a disorder which affects social communication which results in neurodiverse kids often finding it challenging to make and keep friends. The good news is that in most cases, particularly for children without significant intellectual impairment, these skills can be taught and supported by parents.

How can we promote social skills for kids who find it hard to approach and engage with peers.

Practice skills when out and about

Take the opportunity when out with your child to practice skills such as saying hello to shop keepers and paying for groceries or objects you have purchased. Encourage your child to say hello to peers they know if you run into them when out and about. If you go to a restaurant, have your child state their order and “thank you” to the waiter/waitress.

Encourage play dates

The school playground can be overwhelming and confusing. It is much easier for kids to make connection in one on one setting and in familiar environments. Arrange play dates for your child and other kind/caring peers, so that connections and relationships can be established and your child gets an opportunity to really “shine” in an environment they feel safe and familiar in.

Buddy at school

Encouraging the class teacher to arrange a “buddy” in the classroom and playground can be really helpful to make sure that your child is not being socially isolated. A more mature peer who can be given the responsibility of “inviting” the neurodiverse child into a group play situation which can be a really helpful thing.

Model social skills and encourage use in the home

Children learn what they live – and observing you using appropriate social skills is also helpful. Whilst it might not be in your nature to “chat” with a checkout operator – do so to model conversations to your child. Use phone calls with your friends as a chance to model appropriate etiquette and also use this as an opportunity for your child to practice some skills with a familiar adult. Just a reminder however, that ultimately we want kids to be engaging with their PEERS – practice with safe and familiar adults is important, but encouraging to use these skills with kids your child’s age is then important.

Join a social group for neurodiverse kids

Seek a social group such as Scouts to promote connection with peers outside of school. Enrol your child in a social skills program such as KidsLink to support their social skill development with other neurodiverse peers. These groups are where your child will find their “tribe” and start to form relationships with others facing similar challenges to them – with the support of a trained professional.

Social skills are what are known as “soft skills” and they take time and practice to generalise into common practice. With support and encouragement your child will start to become a master of these skills which will serve them in friendships now, and into the future.

About KidsLink.



Through once weekly groups during the school year the KIDSLINK team helps children identify what's getting in their way socially, name it, and learn strategies and coping skills to compensate for these difficulties.

Skills that are focused on include:

- Friendship skills
- Dealing with feelings
- Ability to control impulses
- Conversation skills
- Successful play skills

For more details visit:

www.spencerhealth.com.au/kidslink/





**The importance of support
networks when raising
kids on the spectrum
– and where to find them!**

Raising kids is one of the hardest things you can ever do. Raising kids with extra needs is often even more challenging! Parents of neurodiverse children are often given advice to “link in with support networks” but are not provided with the actionable steps to achieve this successfully. As a parent of a neuro-diverse child, are meeting all your support needs. Typically when I talk with people about their support networks, they name a few family and friends around them as well as maybe a trusted health care worker.

However – support needs are varied and it is important to understand the different types of support that can be found for the different needs that you have.

Below are the 6 categories where support can be offered and their description. Taking a little time to reflect on each category, the people, resources, professionals etc that are available and identifying where they can help is the first step in developing your support plan.



Emotional – this is all about who and where can you get your emotional needs met. This is often through your partner/parents or close friends. Sometimes through a trusted professional like a psychologist. This is the person/people that you can be vulnerable with, cry, get validation and non-judgement from.

Practical – who are the people in your life that can come and help by taking your laundry off your hands for a day. Bring your family a cooked meal? Do you have a unicorn in your life whom you can trust to hang with your kids for a few hours so you can get some respite? Can you engage a service like “hello fresh” to cover meals for a few nights?

Informational – this arena is all about getting the knowledge you need to feel empowered in your role as parent and probably advocate for your child. This can be from books, organisations such as ASPECT or Yellow Lady Bugs, private providers such as ours, Facebook groups. Where can you attend a seminar or workshop? Google may just be your best friend to find these supports, and don't forget to speak to health providers about what resources they can suggest!

Companionship – the business of parenting can leave you feeling isolated and lonely. Who are the people in your life that you feel connected with, who you can just sit with, grab a coffee, do a zoom call – this need is usually met by close family and friends who you feel connected with and who “just get it”.

Interdependence – these are needs that relate to situations where you and other people are relying on each other or working together for a common goal. For example, maybe you and some other Mum's are admins on a specific Facebook group, your partner and yourself are interdependent in terms of your relationship and parenting together. Where are you getting those needs met of where you feel that you and other people are a part of something bigger and supporting each other.

Intangible – this can seem a tricky category to understand as in essence these are needs that are being met that don't seem to have a form. However – these needs are met by those people in our life who just “get it” – those people who with just a hug, or a kind facebook message can lift your spirit. Who are the people in your life who you know just get you and your situation. They may be friends or that unique health provider who you feel “held” by. These are special people and I bet just identifying them will warm your heart by thinking about them.

What is great about knowing that there are categories to support, it helps you broaden your network of supports, and also makes sure you aren't relying on just 1 or a handful of people to meet your needs.

Now that you know who your supports are – make sure you reach out and most importantly ACCEPT that help. Trust me – people want to help you, it is in our fundamental nature to ensure the survival of our communities.

You are doing an amazingly challenging role – one of parent, therapist and advocate – to succeed engaging those supports you need will be imperative. And in those moments where it all just gets too much – it's ok to take a moment to practice self-compassion and have a cry, or scream, or punch a pillow.

Even with support we all get overwhelmed, so be kind to yourself, allow the help that is available and try to be your own best friend.



About us.

At Spencer Health we believe that "children are not things to be moulded, but people to be unfolded".

We also believe that all humans have unique qualities, however recognise that sometimes these can become obstacles to them reaching their full potential. Through recognising and building on the unique skills of every child we can support them to find their place in the world.

With this in mind our Mission is to provide an uncompromising quality of service to parents, children, adolescents and families so that they may achieve their full capacity in life.

Our practice values focus on providing an environment and opportunities in which to nurture our clients, from which positive growth will occur, as we support each individual's development so that they may evolve into the humans they have the potential to become.

Our services include assessment and treatment services for the spectrum of developmental needs, providing support from pre-conception to young adulthood. We provide individual and group based therapies and offer tele-health services to rural and remote clients.

Get in touch with us if we can support.

SPENCER *Health*



CHILD DEVELOPMENT
SOLUTIONS AUSTRALIA



SYDNEY PSYCHOLOGY CENTRE™
CHILDREN | ADOLESCENTS | ADULTS



KIDSLINK
SOCIAL SKILLS GROUPS