

Sharing the diagnosis with your child

Research has suggested that the earlier the child is told about their diagnosis, the more positive the outcomes. Deciding when, how and if to share an autism diagnosis with your child can be a daunting process for many parents. This information sheet is aimed to help parents how and when to tell their child about an autism diagnosis.

Why share the diagnosis with your child?

There are many benefits of sharing the diagnosis of autism with your child.

Here are some of the key reasons and benefits of telling your child that they are autistic.

1. Many autistic people challenge the concept of autism as a disorder or deficit and instead view it as a neurological difference which provides them with unique strengths as well as differences. With the diagnosis, you are enabling the person to get a deeper understanding of themselves, their strengths, positive attributes, as well as challenges, and most importantly, who they are. With this better understanding of themselves comes a greater sense of self, and more positive self-esteem.
2. By appreciating that their brain works in a unique and different way, the child can begin to understand why certain aspects of their behaviour may appear different to others. They can develop a compassion for themselves rather than imposing self-blame, a sense of failure or shame.
3. A child can learn about their own unique perception of the world including an appreciation for how they learn and process information around them. This can help them to appreciate what sort of adaptations they may need at school or college or later in their adult life.
4. Having a diagnosis can mean the child can look back at previous life experiences and clarify why things were difficult e.g. why they were treated differently, or struggled to make friends.
5. Being told they are autistic can help a child realise that they are not alone, that there is a whole community of autistic people who may have similar interests, strengths and talents as they do.
6. On a more practical level, sharing a diagnosis can enable access to different support services, within and outside of school, and ensure that your child's legal right to a voice are recognised (SEN Code of Practice)

When to tell your child?

There is no clear guidance on when you should tell your child about their diagnosis. In our experience, the earlier you tell your child the better! By concealing a diagnosis from a child that is later revealed, this may give the implicit message that they should be ashamed of the label and that it should be hidden from others.

As children develop, they naturally begin to notice differences and compare themselves to their peers. Your child may notice that they struggle with some things more than their peers, and begin to question why. If they do not understand the reason for this, they may develop explanations that aren't helpful (e.g. there is something wrong with me, I'm not as good as other people). It may also be the case that your child's school have started to put support or particular arrangements in place and they are beginning to question why this may be.

Autism is not an illness or a 'disorder'. It is an identity and one that should be celebrated. Autistic people possess a unique set of skills and talents, and an incredible way of viewing the world. They think outside the box, problem solve in creative ways, and have a unique view on life that is fresh and dynamic.

Parents should take time to process the diagnosis. See it not as a diagnosis – this is a very medical term and sounds as if someone is ill! Instead, it is an identification of a difference and an identity.

How should you share the news?

We recommend that you pick a time and a place that is familiar to promote calmness with minimal distractions and competing demands for you both. Perhaps it could be when you are out walking together, or on a leisurely drive somewhere.

Be ready to answer questions from your child and correct any misconceptions or misunderstandings that they may have. It can be helpful to use visual resources such as drawings or YouTube clips to facilitate understanding.

It is helpful to begin the conversation by talking about differences; first differences on the outside like eye colour, hair colour and height, before talking about differences on the inside such as likes, dislikes, strengths and difficulties. You can talk about the differences between members of the family and between friends or important people in your child's life. You may like to use drawings or photographs of people to support this discussion. If your child is younger, you may use cuddly toys or play figures to illustrate this point. This can lead to a discussion about your child's likes, dislikes, strengths and things they find difficult. You can point out that this particular pattern of strengths and difficulties has a name: Autism.

Be mindful to limit words such as 'disorder' and 'disability' because this implies that there is something wrong with your child. In fact, the reality is quite the opposite – Autism is a brain difference and difference in how your child sees and process information in the world. This difference is definitely not wrong, bad or 'disordered'. Brown hair is different to blonde hair, but brown hair is certainly not disordered.

Strength	How you might phrase this to your child
Good memory, especially for visual information and facts	<p>You can always remember the routes we take when we are out</p> <p>You always remember dates which I've forgotten</p> <p>You can remember lots of information about things that interest you</p> <p>You always remember directions of where we're going</p>
Good ability to solve non-verbal problems	<p>You do jigsaws really quickly</p> <p>You are great at Minecraft</p> <p>You pick up on how to do things so quickly</p>
Attention to detail	<p>You are very thorough at checking things are done properly</p> <p>You can help others notice errors and mistakes</p>
Honesty	<p>You always tell the truth</p> <p>You always say what's on your mind</p>
Obsessional interests	You are so passionate about animals (*insert interests here)

Inevitably, you may talk together about the things that your child finds difficult and challenging. It can be helpful to talk together about how to use their strengths to overcome these difficulties in various settings.

Who should share the news with your child?

We highly recommend that you talk about the diagnosis as a family including parents and siblings in the discussion. The impact on siblings cannot be underestimated so it is important to discuss what it means with them as well as answer any questions or dispel any erroneous myths that they may also have. You can invite other trusted people into the conversation including the child's wider system if this may be helpful.