

# Autism Parenting Magazine

Issue 29

Understanding  
**NEUROFEEDBACK**

Pets and  
Social Skills...  
**MAKING A  
CONNECTION**

Help:  
**WHY IS MY  
CHILD BITING?**

**LET'S PARTY:  
CELEBRATING  
WITHOUT THE  
STRESS**

**FINDING NEW WAYS TO THRIVE**

## Dear Readers,

“Spring is the time of year when it is summer in the sun and winter in the shade.” –

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

Springtime has always been my favorite season as it signifies new life and hope for tomorrow. As the days get longer and the earth begins to warm, the once brown grass greens and flowers emerge. The Spring Equinox, which begins March 20th, inspires gardeners to till the earth and plant seeds for a new day.

Springtime is also an excellent time to explore new activities - to find innovative ways to help your child flourish. It's easy to get caught up in the daily grind between jobs, doctor appointments, therapies and school meetings - that's why it's so vital to step out of the everyday routine a little and discover.

I am reminded of something Temple Grandin said to me recently about parenting children on the spectrum. It's essential, she said, for families to help children discover an activity they are good at and enjoy and then stretch them so they can grow. It's important, she said, for children to have the opportunity to learn a skill - whether it's creating artwork, programming computers or fixing cars. It's critical to find a talent to embrace as ultimately it will help your child thrive.

Fifteen-year-old Chris Furches is an excellent example of someone who has found his niche. Chris discovered his love and natural talent for racing when he was 10 years old. Fast forward five years, and this young man with Asperger syndrome and ADHD who was once slow to speak and experiencing sensory and digestive issues, has become an accomplished ATV motocross racer. Chris is now described as focused, determined and strong and is able to express himself. His story is sure to inspire.

Another activity we are excited to share with you is the multiplayer video game known as Minecraft. In his article, "Minecraft Opens a World of Possibilities," CJ Miyake (Creative Director for PixelAton Labs) describes the trendy game that can offer children with autism new skills and concepts. First publically released in 2009 (full version in 2011), this game has become extremely popular with people on the spectrum as it is creative, logical and structured. And much to the relief of parents concerned about their children spending too much time playing video games, it promotes social skills and instills confidence.

If you are open to adding a pet to your family, you may be interested in reading Lisa Timm's piece called, "Pets and Social Skills...Making a Connection." We all have heard about the positive impact animals can have on our fami-



lies from companionship to unconditional love. Recent reports regarding the value of pets ownership has been expanded to specifically include children on the spectrum. In the right situation, a dog, cat, hamster, bunny, etc. can possibly help improve social skills as well as help with sensory tactile issues.

We have been delighted with the positive response from our readership in recent months and appreciate the people who have reached out with questions regarding autism. We recently received a question from a mother who had serious concerns about how to handle her child who has been biting. Board Certified Behavior Analyst Angelina M. provides a comprehensive answer to include the four main reasons a child bites as well as ways to help stop the behavior.

We also received an email from a father of a young man with ASD, anxiety disorder and learning difficulties, who wanted a better understanding of neurofeedback. Be sure to check out an informative response provided by Desaree Festa, PhD of Southeast Psych.

And in an effort to keep our families well-versed, we have included an article written by Occupational Therapist Bill Wong on FERPA, which stands for Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. He explains why young adults on the spectrum need to be aware of this federal law that protects privacy of student records.

On a lighter note, we are also thrilled to share with you excellent party ideas in "Let's Party: Celebrating without the Stress." Written by the mom of seven children, Lisa Fish Smith, the article provides advice for planning a party while taking in consideration different sensory needs.

Wishing you a happy Spring full of hope and new beginnings!

Amy KD Tobik  
Editor-in-Chief

### Disclaimer:

Autism Parenting Magazine tries its best to deliver honest, unbiased reviews, resources, and advice but please note that due to the variety of capabilities of people on the spectrum that these are recommendations and are not guaranteed by Autism Parenting Magazine or its writers.

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Author: Elouise Robinson, Autism Food Club

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# Pets and Social Skills... Make a Connection!

By Lisa TIMMS, M.S., Special Education

Many studies have been conducted on the positive effect a pet can have on your health. A pet can be comforting if you are upset, they can lighten your mood as you play with them, and of course you have their companionship and unconditional love.



**S**tudies have also shown that pets can help improve social skills for children on the spectrum. If your child is struggling with social skills you might want to consider getting them a pet.

An article published in *Time* suggests the key is when to introduce a pet into your family. Children who grew up with a pet since birth didn't show any significant difference compared to their peers who had a pet introduced around the time the child was entering kindergarten. Those children showed improvement in sharing and comforting others in distress. It's interesting to note that the changes noticed in the children were not related to their IQ, which means that all children on the spectrum, no matter their level of functioning, may be able to benefit from interacting with a pet. (<http://healthland.time.com/2012/08/02/pets-can-help-autistic-children-learn-to-share-and-comfort-others/>). Yet another study conducted in Australia showed that students were more likely to interact with their peers while playing with a guinea pig as opposed to toys. The students with the pet showed more interaction including looking at faces, talking, smiling, laughing, and physical contact. (<http://www.healthline.com/health-news/mental-animals-help-autistic-children-socialize-022713>)

Let's think about this for a minute. Your child, no matter where they fall on the spectrum, could improve social skills just by introducing a pet! It doesn't have to be a cat or dog, you could get them a guinea pig or a rabbit. Any type of pet they can have physical interaction and an emotional bond with. Something they can hold, pet and connect with or something that fits into their interest. I wouldn't suggest getting your child a cat when they love fish. Bringing a dog into the home when your child is terrified of dogs will not help...actually it could make things worse. It's important that the pet is something your child actually likes.

A pet could also help with sensory tactile issues. Some children on the spectrum experience calming benefits from petting something soft. I have personally used various swatches of materials with my students to help them focus in class. Most liked the soft feel of micro suede or soft fur materials. Combining the feel with something they can interact with has amazing potential to help them develop positive social skills.



I would suggest exposing your child to different types of animals to see what your child relates to before introducing the pet. Maybe take a trip to the local rescue shelter or pet store and see how your child reacts to various animals. You may think they would like a puppy and your child winds up gravitating toward the birds. Also, if there are other siblings, you may want to specify that the pet is primarily for your special needs child so there are no power struggles about whose pet it is.

So if your child has been asking you for a puppy for the past six months...they may be just asking you to help them improve their social skills.

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*Lisa Timms has a Master of Science Degree from the University of Scranton. She is the author of "60 Social Situations and Discussion Starters" published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers.*



*You can find her book online at <http://www.jkp.com/catalogue/book/9781849058629>. She is also the creator of The Timms Social Skills Program. A live, fun, interactive, peer-to-peer online social skills program, with monthly enrollment, which is offered internationally for students ages 6-18+ with Autism, Aspergers, ADHD and/or related disabilities or atypical students who may be struggling with their problem solving and/or social skills.*