

My Child Has Autism. What Do I Do Next?



Read books. Check websites. Talk to other parents. Join ASASB. Take care of yourself, your marriage, and the rest of your family. Some families may join a religious organization for moral support and youth programs. Join Boy or Girl Scouts. Volunteer at your school. Go to conferences.

Never give up.

How Can Autism Be Treated?

Many educational, medical and behavioral treatments are available to children with autism. With good therapy, the future can be bright. The one research-proven method of treatment for autism is Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA), a systematic process of studying and changing



observable behavior. If a parent says a child is aggressive, that is not a behavior, but if a parent says the child hits his brother, you can count that - how many times per day? what happened before? what happened after? Once you know what behavior(s) you want to change, you can come up with ways of working on them. For example, since you know how many times he used to hit, you can figure out if your efforts are working, or if you need to try something else. Just as important are the behaviors that you wish were happening, but may not be, like potty training, getting dressed, or following directions. You might use a reward system with stickers or computer time, then gradually phase it out as the new behaviors become routine. It is important to have a professional who specializes in this type of program supervise the program to ensure it is designed to meet your child's individual needs.

ABA is the application of the principles of behavior to socially important problems. There are a variety of methods that fall under the ABA "umbrella," including Pivotal Response Teaching (PRT), Discrete Trial Teaching (DTT), Natural Environment Training (NET), etc.

In addition, many families report good results with relationship-based interventions, such as Developmental/Individual-difference/Relationship-based Intervention (DIR, sometimes called Floortime or Greenspan method). DIR comes from the philosophy that a child must be emotionally

attached to the people in his world and have the ability to interact with them in order to develop cognitively and emotionally (thinking and feeling). Learning does not happen separately from emotional development, but together with it. DIR takes into account the child's feelings, relationships with teachers and caregivers, developmental level and individual differences in his ability to process and respond to sensory input. It focuses on the child's skills in all areas, including social-emotional functioning, communication, thinking and learning, motor skills, body awareness, and attention. It is less focused on teaching specific academic skills, recognizing that those skills will develop more readily when the child has a solid foundation from which to learn.

Some local schools utilize the TEACCH program (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication handicapped Children),

or perhaps use an “eclectic” approach, where teachers and therapists combine aspects of several approaches. More recently, some parents have looked into Relationship Development Intervention, or RDI, a parent-based intervention



where parents are provided tools to teach Dynamic Intelligence skills and motivation to their child. RDI is based on the work of Dr. Steven Gutstein.

Since autism is, by definition, known for problems with language and communication, specialized speech therapy is likely to be an appropriate part of the child's overall therapy program. The same goes for occupational therapy and/or sensory integration therapy, for those children who struggle with sensory regulation.

Many families choose to explore biomedical therapies for autism, such as the Defeat Autism Now! (DAN!) protocol, gluten-free/casein-free diet (gf/cf), or nutritional supplementation. Some families find prescription medications to be helpful in controlling their children's autistic behaviors. ASASB strongly encourages parents to proceed with an open mind and to research all available treatment choices. Check out providers carefully – references, professional recommendations, etc. – before beginning any therapy with your child.

It is important to continue discussing your child's autism with your pediatrician. Some children on the autism spectrum need many different medical professionals, including a regular pediatrician, a developmental pediatrician, neurologist, psychiatrist, etc. Keeping positive working relationships will help you get services through your medical insurance and help your child battle any medical issues associated with his or her autism.

What Causes Autism?

There is no known cause for autism. Brain scans show differences in the shape and structure of the brain in people with and without autism. Researchers are studying a number of theories, including the link between heredity, genetics and medical problems. In many families, there appears to be a pattern of autism or related disabilities, which points to a genetic basis for the disorder. It also seems that some children are born more likely to develop autism, but researchers have not yet found a single “trigger” that causes autism to arise. (Source: Autism Society of America, 2005)

Parents, professionals, and researchers continue to discuss the possibility of a connection between vaccines and autism. In a 2001 study by the Institute of Medicine, a committee concluded that the “evidence favors rejection of a causal relationship... between MMR [measles, mumps, and

rubella] vaccines and autistic spectrum disorders (ASD).” The committee acknowledged, however, that “they could not rule out” the possibility that the MMR vaccine could contribute to ASD in a small number of children. While some researchers are certain there’s no obvious link between the MMR and autism, others believe there is a connection. Books and articles, such as David Kirby’s *Evidence of Harm* (2006) and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.’s “Deadly Immunity” (Rolling Stone, June 2005), describe a close relationship between vaccinations, mercury exposure, and autism spectrum disorders. More research is clearly needed.

Whatever the cause, it is clear that children with autism and pervasive developmental disorders are born with it or born with the potential to develop it. It is not caused by bad parenting. Autism is not a mental illness. Children with autism are not unruly kids who choose not to behave. What’s more, no known psychological factors in the development of the child have been shown to cause autism.



What Can Family And Friends Do To Help?

Often, parents learning to live with autism feel alone and left out from their previous friendships. Watching other, typically developing children alongside one's own child with autism can be frustrating and painful. It is important for family and friends to remain close by, giving the parent emotional space when necessary, but not giving up on the relationship. It is not necessary to try and "cheer up" the parent, especially for family members and friends who are new to the autism diagnosis themselves. Honest silence is far more helpful than well-meaning, but ill-informed, comments or advice.

Sometimes, the parent of a child with autism needs help with basic needs, such as housekeeping and running errands. Adults familiar with the child may be able to help with childcare, so that the parents may attend to other children and themselves, as well as the responsibilities of the household. Respite care is available to families through TCRC; friends and family members can encourage parents to take full advantage of this service, to reduce the likelihood of caregiver burnout.

People from different family backgrounds may view disability differently. Whatever your beliefs or family history, having a child with special needs does not mean you, your family or your child is less valuable. Every person has strengths and weaknesses. Finding your child's strengths and learning to battle his or her weaknesses will strengthen you as a parent and help you to see what beauty your child can offer the world. People with autism have a different kind of mind, a different flavor - the rest of the world is chocolate and they are strawberry. Everyone brings something to the world. Helping your family, extended family members and community understand autism and your child will benefit everybody.

These are the primary public agencies responsible for assessment, diagnosis, and service planning for children with autism in Santa Barbara County:

Santa Barbara County Education Office (SBCEO)

www.sbceo.org

4400 Cathedral Oaks Road
P.O. Box 6307
Santa Barbara, CA 93160
Phone: (805) 964-4711
Fax: (805) 964-4712

Tri-Counties Regional Center (TCRC) —Santa Barbara County

www.tri-counties.org

Main Office

520 East Montecito Street
Santa Barbara, CA 93103-3278
Phone: (805) 962-7881; (800) 322-6994
Fax: (805) 884-7229
E-mail: tcrcweb@tri-counties.org

No. County Office

1234 Fairway Dr.
Santa Maria, CA 93455
Phone: (805) 922-4640; (800) 266-9071
Fax: (805) 922-4350



The local autism community includes a large number of experienced parents and professionals. Informal support and advice may be obtained from the following sources:

**Autism Society of America,
Santa Barbara
www.asasb.org**

**P. O. Box 30364
Santa Barbara, CA 93130-0364
(805) 560-3762
info@asasb.org**

**Alpha Resource Center of
Santa Barbara,
Family First Program
www.alphasb.org**

**So. County Office
4501 Cathedral Oaks Rd.
Santa Barbara, CA 93110
(805) 683-2145**

**No. County Office
1234 Fairway Dr., Ste. A
Santa Maria, CA 93455
(805) 347-2775**

Online Discussion Groups:

**SBATA@yahoogroups.com
(This discussion group is for parents only)**

**SBSPED@yahoogroups.com
(This discussion group is for parents and interested professionals)**