

## Finding Your Parenting Path with Your Autistic Child

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### Editorial

Parenting a child on the autistic spectrum can feel like walking an emotional tightrope. Parents try so hard to balance love, guidance, expectation, and consequences without falling into the darkness of their worries and fears. The burden of self-judgment can send a parent into the depths of guilt if their verdict is that they have taken the wrong step with their child. The wish to do what's best, and confusion surrounding what's best, makes raising an autistic child a confounding mystery. Unintended parent precipitated problems can emerge, such as overindulging out of guilt and anxiety, expecting too little to protect oneself from being disappointed, and allowing fear to undermine parental authority [1,2].

If these circumstances are familiar to you or someone you know, read on for ways to find the parenting path that makes one feel comfortable and capable.

Draw a large circle representing a parenting compass on a sheet of paper that replaces the four cardinal points with the four most important ingredients you align with parenting. Consider the four previously mentioned, and place parenting actions and goals in between the four major directional points. For instance, 'coaching empathy' can be placed in between love and guidance or 'reward acceptance of change' in between guidance and expectation. Add those values, experiences, lessons, etc. that you hold dearly and which you always envisioned instilling within your child, even before you had children. No need to complete your compass at this starting point; it can evolve and take shape, providing a firmer foundation for parenting than a tightrope.

As you and your child arrive at different points along your compass, journal when, where, with whom, etc. that it all took place. Add some distinctive responses or behaviors of your child so that their "successful arrival" can be accessed in their future memories. This journal of your

"growing travel" with your child will be especially valuable when they have fallen off the route of healthy growth and need concrete evidence of their prior accomplishments and your pride in them. The compass becomes a place for parents and children to recall, strive, and feel the relief that progress is being made.

Find trusted confidantes and professionals who have intimate knowledge about autism to serve as your "compass advisors." Share your drawing with them and ask for honest critiques and advice. Make note of their responses and mull over for consideration. Determine if their feedback is compatible with your parenting goals and your child's unique strengths and needs. Don't feel compelled to immediately incorporate new ideas since timing and comfort level often determines how successful new approaches are with children on the autistic spectrum.

Keep in mind that with all children, no matter the circumstances, development proceeds in ebb and flow, sometimes rising to meet the challenges of change and frustration, while other times coming to a grinding halt. Children on the spectrum display much of this variability, making your parenting path marked by uncertainty. When plans must change due to angry volatility, opportunities lost due to a lack of social responsiveness, or minor disappointments magnified into a river of tears, parents can try to take some solace in remembering that "compass progress" is underway, but stop signs are inevitable.

### References

1. American Psychiatric Association (2014) Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, fifth edition, Washington, USA.
2. De Magistris L, Siniscalco D, Bravaccio C, Loguercio C (2016) Gut-Brain axis: A new revolution to understand the pathogenesis of autism and other severe neurological diseases. Human Nutrition from the Gastroenterologist's Perspective 4: 49-65.