The Autism Discovery Institute

at Rady Children's Hospital

How to tell your child about their autism diagnosis

Setting the stage

- Start by considering the best day, time of day, environment and people to be present for your child.
- Gather your resources. This may include reaching out to your child's current therapist(s) or the provider who diagnosed your child.
- Write out talking points or a script for yourself. During your conversation remember to take frequent pauses for your child to share their thoughts or ask questions.
- Remember, this conversation will be ongoing. Everything does not have to happen at one time.
- It is okay not to know the answer to a question. Tell your child "Let's find out together."

Identify strengths

Point out your child's strengths and things that make them feel good, particularly those that might be related to their diagnosis. You can engage them in identifying their own strengths as well. Examples might include having deep and passionate interests, being very knowledgeable about topics you're interested in, being truthful and trustworthy, thriving with routines and consistency, noticing sounds, sights, textures, tastes, and sensations that others may not.

Name challenges

Start with challenges your child has verbalized. For example, "You've talked about how hard it is to find kids to play with on the playground," or "You know how you get upset when we are getting dressed every morning?"

Define the diagnosis

Share how you have come to understand autism. Consider using visual aids that show the concept of a spectrum. Here are some talking points you can use to get started...

- "Autism is a pattern of how someone's brain works. It comes with strengths and challenges that are different than someone without autism."
- "Your brain enjoys routines and rules, but your brain may have a hard time when those routines or rules change."
- "You may communicate differently than your neurotypical peers. Sometimes they might not understand you, and you might not understand them. That's okay! We all have a lot to learn."
- Everyone is learning the same skills, but in different ways. Certain things might be harder for you than for friends, and you find certain things easier than them.

You are not alone

Share with your child how they might have encountered people with autism in the past. Make a plan to seek out others with similar experiences. Tailor the information to their interests and experiences.

Let's make a plan

Talk to your child about what supports they feel they might need, accommodations in different environments that they might advocate for (or want you to advocate for), or how they can seek community support.

Check in later

Provide opportunities for your child to continue asking questions. Some children might benefit from having this scheduled, or you might revisit the conversation when the opportunity arises.

Additional resources are available on our website
https://www.rchsd.org/programs-services/autism-discovery-institute

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