

# Tips to help your child manage the challenges of autism

April 3 2013, by Marie Sutton

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(Medical Xpress)—As Autism Awareness Month kicks off this April, experts at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) offer tips to an increasing number of parents and children facing the challenges the disorder presents.

According to a recent report by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), 1 in 50 school-age [children](#) in the United States has autism – a range of brain developmental disorders. That number increased from 1 in 88 in 2012.

Seemingly uneventful activities such as taking a trip to the doctor's

office or a spending time at a playground can cause a sensory overload for children with certain levels of the disorder, said Kristi Menear, Ph.D., chair of the UAB Department of Human Studies.

"The child may have very few apparent challenges that are visible to the lay public or that highly impede him or her from fitting into most [social norms](#)," Menear said, "Behind the scenes, however, he or she may be working very hard to accommodate challenges in areas such as communication, social skills or organizational skills."

With individualized intervention, parents can lessen the extent of some of the challenges their child faces, she said. Here are some tips parents can consider:

Educate yourself: Autism, or [autism spectrum disorder \(ASD\)](#), is just that – a spectrum – and each child falls into a different category.

"Learn about where your child falls and what that means," Menear said.

Although some children have significant challenges with [social situations](#), communication skills, sensory integration, motor development and cognition, many of these can be managed with help. Many other individuals with ASD have lives more typical of their peers without the disorder.

"Once you know to what extent your child has the disorder, you can create a plan of action," she said.

**Plan ahead:** Daily activities can be overwhelming for some children with ASD. Have a plan in place and try to anticipate any challenges that may come up throughout the day. Prepare a backpack with familiar items that can easily be retrieved if a child needs a familiar touch of home.

"Also, have a talk with your child about the plans for the day," Menear said.

For many individuals with ASD, this is often best done with visual aids such as pictures, video and written stories.

**Be consistent:** Changes in a routine can cause distress for some children with autism.

"The unfamiliar may be changes to a daily schedule, diet or environment, as well as a lack of accommodations that are necessary to set the child up for success," Menear explained.

Try to keep a schedule in place that will help maintain normalcy. If change is to be expected, "provide gradual preparation prior to any change, decrease negative sensory input and introduce new concepts in planned phases that match the person's learning style and communication skills, as well as provide something or someone familiar to help balance the unfamiliar," Menear said.

**Be a voice:** Parents of children with autism often find themselves being an advocate for their child so that professionals, friends, family and community members can appreciate the person's abilities and challenges, Menear said; do not be afraid, for example, to "inform a medical doctor of challenges a child has while visiting a clinical environment and participating in a medical exam."

"The parent may suggest ways to reduce some [challenges](#) so the doctor can have a greater opportunity to examine the child and provide a diagnosis and treatment plan," she said.

**Encourage activity:** Consider a child's interests and customize physical fitness activities with that in mind. Menear said many children with

autism particularly like repetitive activities like biking, jogging and swimming.

"If someone is very interested in numbers, there could be a math component to performing or analyzing the activity," Menear said. "Or the person could be motivated by trying to match someone else's score or time."

Also, make exercise a family time.

"For young children, it is very beneficial to match interests to physical activities in which the family can engage together, so there is the win-win of a family activity that benefits all in terms of health," Menear said.

**Be good to yourself:** "As a caregiver of a child with autism, it is important to get the needed amount of sleep, exercise and proper nutrition to be fully functioning for your child," Menear said. "Try to balance having typical friendships and relationships, as well as a support community through a local advocacy group focused on ASD."

**More information:** [www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr065.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr065.pdf)

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

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