

Dealing with Autism in Public

Autism is a developmental disorder that affects roughly one out of 100 children. It is characterized by a lack of ability to function socially and in more severe cases, the process of communication.

Discovering that your child has autism can be a traumatic experience. Oftentimes, parents may believe there is something developmentally wrong with their child, but accepting that autism is the culprit can be difficult to say the least. Accepting that your child is autistic and getting him the help he needs is just the beginning. There are many other factors that go into parenting an autistic child.

At first, having an autistic child can be embarrassing for some parents. Autistic children do not have the same social skills as most of their peers. They are often prone to fits of anger and violence due to their inability to properly communicate. Oftentimes, these ‘tantrums’ occur in public.

There are many people that do not understand the first thing about autism. This means that they are more likely to make rude or insensitive comments about autistic people. People, on the whole, are an understanding bunch, although there are plenty of people who will make insensitive comments, ask inappropriate questions, and even stare at autistic children.

The first instinct for many parents may be to meet this insensitivity with anger. This is not the best approach. Consider that the person who makes an insensitive comment is ignorant to what autism is. They just don’t know any better!

What you should do as a parent, is try to ignore the comments if possible. This may be easier said than done, but it falls upon you to be the voice of reason. In addition, you should always focus on providing a good example for your child. Remember, the well-being and safety of your child is paramount. Everything else is secondary.

If ignoring rudeness is impossible, you should approach confrontation with the aim to educate. If someone understands that your child is autistic they will be less likely to make any further comments.

In addition, it is a good idea to have a plan when you go out in public. Understand the types of situations that can upset your child and do your best to avoid these circumstances whenever possible. It is also a good idea to keep a journal of your child’s behaviors and cross-reference them with locations. This will allow you to understand the triggers for bouts of violent or aggressive behavior.

To minimize disruptive behavior, think about the particular outing you have planned and what the worst case scenario would be and then plan for it. Take along a favorite toy or snack for placating your child, if they do ‘act out’ or make unusual movements/noises have some stock answers at the ready i.e., ‘Sam has autism and lots of people/noises/new environments upset him.

His movements/noises help him cope with stressful situations'. Try going out in small groups of friends or family who know your child and can help you cope with any public outbursts or comments from strangers.

Dealing with autism in public is not an easy task. There are many people out there who will make judgments, comments, and other rude gestures at your child. Parents of other 'normal' children may also make insensitive comments. This is a negative part of human nature – but it is impossible for you to change it. What you can do is to provide information about the disorder and offer insight that will help others understand. If this does not work do not initiate a confrontation, as that will probably only upset your child and probably attract further attention.

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