

## **Tips for Coping With, and, Enjoying Your Kids:**

From a Mom with 5 Children on the Autism Spectrum

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**Sylvie, you seem uniquely qualified to address this topic. Please tell us a little about your family.**

I have been blessed with beautiful, healthy children. My oldest daughter was born in 1998. She came as a surprise as I was still in university. She was full term but needed some help coming out so she was born by caesarian-section. My second daughter was born 2 years later in 2000. She came to us at 40 weeks and had trouble breathing on her own at first. In 2001, at 18 weeks of pregnancy, I had a miscarriage. Fortunately I was blessed with another pregnancy soon after, so in 2002, I had my first son. He was born healthy but also by caesarian-section. In 2005, our 4th child, another son, was also born healthy although quite small.

In the spring of 2013 I had four children all of whom are on the autism spectrum ranging from mild to moderate. I felt very blessed.

In the summer of 2013 my husband and I decided to adopt another child on the :spectrum. He came to us just before Christmas; a beautiful baby boy of 23 months. He didn't have an official autism diagnosis but showed obvious signs. He currently receives a lot of therapy for his developmental delays. Now here we are with five wonderful children.

**How would you describe your attitude or approach to raising five children on the autism spectrum?**

Each has their own unique gifts and challenges and I wouldn't change any of it for the world. Mostly, I see their ASD as a gift and, as their

mother I make it my job to help them develop their gifts. It is not always easy for them or those around them. Sometimes that gift might look more like a curse but with a little time, some perseverance and a lot of patience, their gifts flourish.

The one thing I've never done for my children is to try to make them "normal". For sure I want them to fit in and be happy, but as themselves. I always try to encourage their special interests by showing an interest in it myself. I also encourage all my children to show an interest in each other's special interests. Usually, we all enjoy each other's interests and develop a taste for a variety of things along the way.

The biggest rule in my home is respect. I taught them what it means to have respect for one another from a very young age and we are always working on it. By being respectful, they know that they can't hurt each other physically or verbally. They also know each other's sensitivities and quirks and so they work really hard to be mindful of them.

**What are some other strategies that you have found helpful?**

Something I've done in terms of their "stimming" (repetitive) behaviours is find ways to fill their need in a more acceptable way. For example, my son likes to rock himself and although this isn't a "bad" behaviour in itself, my other children thought it made him look weird. To help him with this behaviour, we purchased a swing, which we put up in the house to help him get this sensory need met. It was an easy solution that worked immediately. Another example is

for my two younger sons who like to spin themselves in circles. We found a large lazy Susan that we put in the middle of our living room. They love to lie on it to be spun or they sit and spin themselves. Again, this is an easy solution with immediate results.

I also try not to burden my children with unnecessary stressors. By that I mean no extra-curricular activities when they are young. Going to school is stress enough for them. They need down time to focus on their own needs and interests.

With children on the spectrum, routine and predictability are very important. It makes them feel more secure and calm. They also like to know ahead of time what to expect in order to be prepared mentally. In my home, I always tell the children ahead of time that a certain event will be happening. For example, even for mealtime I warn them at least 5 minutes in advance. When we need to go out for any reason I tell them at least a day in advance, and then provide reminders on the day of the outing. Whether it is a trip to the grocery store, the doctor or a museum, they all get advance notice. I find that the older a child gets, the more warning time he or she needs.

## Can you explain a little more about how you do this?

In my house, there are calendars everywhere. The children all have their own where they mark down all their activities. They also mark their achievements, such as having a dry pull-up in the morning. We also have a family calendar posted for everyone to clearly see. It is a good visual strategy with the weekends clearly marked in a different colour. All events and outings are posted on this calendar. Also, after a day has passed, we cross it out. This helps with understanding the passage of time.

Something else I've always done with my children is to give them a run down of what is to be expected during a specific outing. For smaller outings, like going to church or grocery shopping, I usually do this while in our vehicle once we reach our destination. I make sure they understand before leaving the car. For a bigger outing, like a trip to another city, I go over it at least a month in advance, sometimes verbally, and sometimes with pictures. It all depends on the

outing and which child I'm dealing with.

Limiting my children's "screen time" is another strategy I find helpful. Their limits are clear and consistent so there is no room for confusion. Children on the spectrum seem to like logic and reason, so I explained to my children why there is a need for these limits. They might not necessarily be happy with the limits but they accept them.

## Have you ever tried adjusting their diet?

I find it extremely helpful (and it makes our lives less stressful) to limit all refined sugars in our diet. When all my children were younger, we went completely refined-sugar free. It was very difficult at first but once I knew how to live without it, things changed for the better. We saw a noticeable improvement in the children. There was a dramatic decrease in meltdowns and aggressive behaviours. They seemed more in control of their actions and were more pleasant to be around. After approximately six years of being refined-sugar free, we started to reintroduce it slowly. The children are now a little older, except for our new son, and they seem to be able to handle it better.

## Other things you have found helpful?

The children all have their own little place to hide or to escape to when they need time by themselves. My daughter has a little pop-up tent in her bedroom. My son likes to go in his closet. No matter where their spot is, I encourage it. When we go out of town, whether we are staying with relatives or in a hotel, I always try to find a couple of quiet spots for them to use if they need to. This helps everyone to stay calmer.

I also try to be prepared for the unexpected whenever I leave the house. I make sure to bring enough snacks and drinks, as well as some fidget toys. I'd rather be safe than sorry.

## Where do you get support and help?

As for the role my husband plays in all this, well he is my friend. He lends an ear when I need to talk or vent. He loves his children but doesn't play a big role in the child rearing. When the children were smaller he was often away on business. Now he doesn't travel as much

but he isn't around much to help out. He is always happy to do what I ask him to do but basically the children are my responsibility. This is fine with me because I was born with enough patience for both of us. I am always doing research to learn to be a better mother and better person. I attend workshops and courses to learn from and share ideas with other parents. My husband provides for us and supports me through it all.

## Do you have some final words?

Finally, the last bit of advice I have is to enjoy your kids. You might be surprised at what you can learn from them. Just don't sweat the small stuff!

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