



Reactions to diagnosis

A diagnosis of autism may come as a shock to some families, or maybe they've had a feeling for some time. It is also possible they knew about their child's autistic identity and a formal diagnosis affirmed this. Some parents are autistic themselves, so their understanding of their child's identity is informed by their own lived experience.

The variation in time to receive a diagnosis can occur due to a number of different factors:

- The way autism presents in a young person
- The way a young person communicates
- Accessibility and affordability of autism assessment for families
- Family knowledge, understanding and awareness of autism

There is no right or wrong way to react to a diagnosis. Some families may feel more confident moving forward to support their child.

Some reactions and barriers are based in cultural concepts of difference and disability. For example, some families, or individual family members may not acknowledge a formal diagnosis of autism for their child.

Impacts of diagnosis

Feeling anxious, overwhelmed, or just unsure where to start or what to do next in the early days and months after a diagnosis are common experiences. It is okay for families to be frustrated, sad or even angry about the diagnostic process at times. After all, most parents experience these emotions during their parenting journey.

Some of the challenges that can arise from parenting an autistic child don't necessarily arise because the child is autistic, but stem from navigating systems that are not necessarily designed for autistic people. e.g health and education.

Reactions from immediate and extended family and community members may be varied, resulting in parents feeling more or less supported. Meeting the needs of everyone in the family, including themselves, can be a balancing act and attending to their own self-care might move down the priority list.

For some families, there is an increased cognitive load in advocating for their child in different environments and in their efforts to parent consciously with patience, understanding, respect and love.

Enhancing support and understanding

The diagnostic process is more supportive for families when it is collaborative and they feel heard by the professionals they're working with. Providing families with practical and up-to-date information about autism, can strengthen an understanding of their child. Attending workshops, autism-focused events and connecting with key autism organisations can strengthen families' understanding of autism.

It can be helpful to use positive and supportive language when talking about autism and neurodiversity. Getting to know other autistic young people and their families can build a greater appreciation of the many different lived experiences of autistic people and provide genuine connections and support.

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