

Introduction

If you are a parent of a child recently diagnosed with autism, you are not alone. A 2009 study by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, found that autism spectrum disorders (ASD) affect 1 in 110 children in the United States, meaning that hundreds of thousands of parents have learned that their child has an ASD. This year, more children will be diagnosed with ASD than with cystic fibrosis, AIDS, and cancer combined. Children from all economic and racial backgrounds are affected equally. You are not alone in the chaos of feelings, questions, and concerns that you have now. Please be assured, however, that, equipped with solid knowledge and skills, parents of a child newly diagnosed with ASD can put the pieces in place to have satisfying and happy lives. Children with ASD can lead meaningful, productive, and fulfilling lives. This book will help you take action right now that will put you and your child on the road to that kind of life.

The goal of this book is to provide parents¹ like you, and the other people who love and care for your child, with tools and strategies to help your child move onto a positive developmental path as soon as possible. No matter how difficult life may seem right now, there are things you can do starting tomorrow that will, over time, make a tremendous difference in your child's future. You can teach your child to interact with you and others, communicate, enjoy social exchanges, and play. You can be hopeful that your child can learn, engage, and relate to others.

We know that many parents are left to fend for themselves for quite a while after their child has received a diagnosis of ASD. Either trained therapists are not available in their area, or there are long waiting lists to get into intervention programs. We know you are eager to begin helping your child. So to ease your frustration and worry while you wait for intervention to start, or to enhance the

¹Although we generally use the term "parents," this book is designed more broadly for all types of caregivers, including extended family members, legal guardians, and others who provide care for a young child with ASD.

intervention your child may be receiving now, in this book we offer information, tools, and strategies that you can use immediately, on your own. The strategies described here are designed to be used during your everyday interactions with your child—playing, changing, dressing, bathing, meals, outings, book time, and even household chores. They can transform your day-to-day experiences with your child into enriched learning opportunities, and they can also give your child’s treatment a boost as you continue to use them once intervention begins.

With these strategies in hand, we are confident that you will help your child learn, communicate, and play. You will likely see changes in your child day by day, week by week. As you begin to use these strategies, you will see how effectively you can help your child with ASD and how responsive your child can be to new learning opportunities. We hope that some of your feelings of fear and frustration will be replaced with a sense of hope, determination, and confidence in yourself as a parent, in your family, and in your child.

This book is based on our extensive and ongoing work with families like yours, using the Early Start Denver Model to help children become active, curious, and engaged learners in the world. The strategies you’ll learn come from formal scientific studies that show children’s accelerated development when the Early Start Denver Model is delivered combined with parents’ use of these skills. Although children with ASD benefit from and need intensive early intervention services from trained professionals, we believe that parents and other family caregivers can make an enormous difference in their child’s learning.

We three authors of this book have all worked for many years directly as clinicians teaching families how to promote engagement, learning, and communication during the daily routines that naturally occur with children. We have found that parents are as effective as therapists in teaching core skills affected by autism. They can use these strategies to make every interaction with their child count toward learning. Parents also have the opportunity to teach skills or behaviors at home that children may not learn elsewhere or may not have much opportunity to practice in other settings.

The Early Start Denver Model supports parents’ relationships with their children. It helps parents develop learning opportunities via simple games, communicative interactions during caregiving, and fun exchanges during other daily routines. No special background or prior knowledge is required. The strategies described here are designed to help parent–child interactions become more fun, more emotionally rich, and more meaningful, while at the same time providing children with more learning opportunities. We hope that parents from many different walks of life and many different backgrounds will find the strategies helpful for developing richer learning experiences for their children from the everyday activities involving playing with toys, bathing, eating meals, grocery shopping, or other activities in their daily lives.

We also understand that each child with ASD is unique, with a personal set of special gifts and challenges. As someone once said, “If you have met one child

with autism, you have met one child with autism.” Like each typically developing child, each child with ASD has a unique personality, set of likes and dislikes, talents, and challenges. But all young children with ASD, by definition, have trouble relating and communicating with others and playing with toys in a typical way.

From decades of research on early development and intervention in children with ASD, we have learned a great deal about the kinds of difficulties that

Areas in Which Most Children with ASD Have Difficulties

- Paying attention to other people
- Using social smiles
- Taking turns and engaging in social play
- Using gestures and language
- Imitating others
- Coordinating attention (eye gaze) with others
- Playing in typical ways with toys

young children with ASD have. It can be hard for them to pay attention to the people around them—including others’ language and activities. It is often hard for them to share their feelings—happiness, anger, sadness, frustration—with other people by sending emotional messages to others through their facial expressions, gestures, and sounds or words. They experience a full range of

emotions but may not share them in a way that is easy to understand. They may not be very interested in playing with other children and may not respond very well to other children’s efforts to play with them. They often do not use many gestures to communicate and don’t seem to understand the gestures of others. They are less likely to imitate others readily, so it can be hard to teach them by showing them how to do something and expecting them to copy it. Many children with ASD enjoy toys, but they often play with them in unusual ways, and their play can be very repetitive. Developing speech, and responding to others’ speech, can be very difficult for many children with ASD, even for those who learn how to repeat other people’s words. It is also not unusual for children with ASD to have some “challenging behaviors.” These challenging behaviors are often seen in other young children as well, but young children with ASD do not respond to the typical ways parents try to teach children how to behave. They may throw tantrums, hit or bite others, destroy objects, and sometimes hurt themselves (this is called *self-injurious behavior*).

This book will teach you strategies for helping your child in each of these areas. Many studies, including studies we authors have conducted ourselves, have shown that early intervention can be tremendously helpful for children with ASD, resulting in significant gains in learning, communicating, and social skills. Some children even lose their diagnosis of ASD as a result of early intervention; others may still have challenges but are able to participate well in regular classrooms, develop friendships, and communicate well with others. Still others may

continue to have significant challenges requiring ongoing special services, but early intervention will help them progress.

Most of the research on early intervention has focused on studies in which the treatment is delivered by trained therapists. The research on *parent-delivered* early intervention is still at an early stage. However, studies show that parents and other caregivers can learn to use many treatment strategies as well as trained therapists, and that when parents use these strategies, the quality of their interactions with their children improves and the children become more socially engaged and learn to communicate better with others. We have helped many parents learn to use these strategies at home with their young children, and they have told us again and again how helpful these approaches are for teaching their children to learn, interact with others, communicate, and play in more typical ways. In our work with many children over the years, we have discovered that *every single child with ASD can learn* to communicate, improve social interactions with others, and increase play skills. We are confident that these techniques will help you feel more effective as a parent, a playmate, and a first teacher for your child. And as you use the techniques and see your child learn from them, you will experience a sense of parental pride and pleasure that comes from seeing your child achieve and knowing that you are part of your child's successes.

This book is designed for parents of young children with symptoms of ASD who are in the infant through preschool years/kindergarten. You can use it whether you only suspect your child has ASD or your child has already been diagnosed. It will provide you with step-by-step instructions and examples through which you can use your typical everyday activities to help your child become more engaged, communicative, and interactive with you and with your family.

How to Use This Book

Each chapter of this book is designed to address questions, concerns, and challenges that most parents of young children with ASD experience. Among the issues that we address are feelings and concerns related to leading your life as a parent of a child with ASD, including knowing what you need to do at this early stage. Getting the best professional help will be uppermost in your mind, so this topic is covered in Chapter 1. Because parenting a child with ASD can be stressful, it will be essential that you begin this journey by considering how you will make sure to take care of yourself and the rest of the family, and avoid setting aside those needs to focus solely on the child with ASD. Doing so would mean that you would be less effective and more likely to become worn out in the process. These issues are addressed in Chapter 2. Then, to lay the groundwork for the intervention strategies described in the remaining chapters, Chapter 3 offers a fundamental understanding of what is known about ASD. This provides a context for the treatment approach offered in this book. Each of the remaining

chapters describes the intervention strategies in detail, with each chapter building on the previous ones. So it will make sense for most people to read the chapters in order. However, Chapters 9 and 13 are not as dependent on earlier chapters as are the others. You may find it helpful to read them earlier in the process and refer to them as you move along in the book. We recognize that some parents will find some chapters more helpful than others, however, depending on their child's unique challenges.

“It’s extremely overwhelming to get the diagnosis of autism, then to find out all of the therapies that are available and how many hours they entail. You want to act immediately, you want to make up for lost time, you want to try everything to get your baby back. You hear numbers such as ‘40-hour-a-week program,’ and you start to panic. Breathe. You can do this. The beauty of the strategies in this book, which are based on the Early Start Denver Model, is that it gives you the tools to interact and teach your child in a naturalistic environment without making therapy a significant strain and burden on your family. The goal is to give your child as many opportunities as a neurotypical child, and this workbook outlines the steps for your family to carry that out in a comfortable and natural way.”

As you begin to practice the intervention strategies and incorporate them into your everyday interactions with your child, please keep in mind that the goal of this book is not to transform you from a parent into a therapist! Nor will you spend many hours with your child “providing therapy.” Rather, these strategies are meant to be used during the typical routines that are part of your daily experience, such as during bath time, at the park, or while you are putting your child to bed. They should not take more time than your typical activities with your child would. The strategies build on the loving, caring relationship you already have with your child, and they use that foundation to help your child overcome some of the difficulties that are part of ASD. So let’s get started.