

**The
Advonet
Group**

Providing Independent Advocacy



**Mental Health
Equity Project**



**Autism
AIM**

Strategies and Resources

Autistic Parenting and Mental Health

Autistic Parenthood

Autistic parenthood can have unique strengths, experiences and challenges. In this guide, we will discuss a wide variety of potential autistic parent's experiences, needs, access barriers and coping strategies.

As well as the ways autistic people can find solidarity, joy and liberation with our families, autistic parental peers and via parenthood experiences.



This guide will discuss the lived experiences of autistic parents, including perinatal and postnatal support.

When we refer to autistic parents in this guide we mean autistic people who have, or have had parental responsibilities of infant and child dependents.

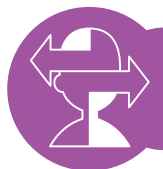
Autistic Mental Health Needs and Parenting

Autistic parents can face specific access barriers, systemic ableism and autism-specific experiences that can lead to unique mental health support needs. We will discuss some of the key support areas below:



Sensory Overload & Meltdown

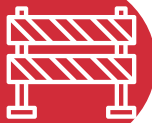
Parenthood can lead to changes in sensory experiences e.g. flashing toys, new textures, such as via food prep, or breast/chestfeeding. Sensory inputs can be layered, leading to meltdown, and control over the environment may be limited.



Conflicting Needs & Anxiety

All parents can have conflicting needs with their children, but there can be autism specific ones e.g. sensory seeking versus sensory averse. Managing these conflicting needs can be anxiety-inducing and exhausting.

Inaccessible Services & Autistic Needs



Primary and secondary care, as well as social and school services may create barriers, or misunderstand the needs of autistic parents and families. For example, at parent's evening teachers may discuss your child's needs, but not uphold your own.

Routine & Burnout



Parenthood will create changes to routine as there are new responsibilities to account for. Routine disruption, and a lack of recovery time can lead to burnout, chronic masking and fatigue.

Stressors for Autistic Parents

There are a number of stressors that autistic people face during parenthood, and while these may vary from individual to individual, there are a number of common reasons identified:



Social Barriers

Autistic parents may experience communication and social barriers with their parenting peers. Finding supportive, or neurodivergent friendly parenting support is helpful.



Transport Issues

Autistic parents may face additional stressors with transport due to unfamiliar travel routes, and carrying heavy equipment e.g. prams. Autistic parents would benefit from clear travel instructions from schools, and their parental peers.



New Activities & Routine

New people in our lives can mean new activities; this is no different for children and families. Their hobbies may require your support, and could take adjustment.



Representation

Autistic parents may lack representation in the news and media. Often with attention focused on parents of autistic children, but not autistic parents themselves.



Masking & Social Expectations

Parenthood often has great social expectations and pressures put upon individuals with minimal community support, or understanding. This can be isolating for autistic adults who may feel pressure to mask, or hide needs e.g. parent/ baby groups.



Sleep Deprivation

Parenting can involve changes to sleeping routine and environment. Sleep deprivation can have a significant impact on people's wellbeing and mental health.

Challenges for Autistic Parents

Parenthood can come with its own set of unique challenges for autistic people, impacting on mental health and coping strategies, often due to the inherent lack of autism specific support, or understanding from society. Below is a list of autistic parenthood challenges that some people may experience:

A list of autistic parenting challenges to consider:

- May encounter **untrained, or ignorant services and staff, as well as family or friends** who do not meet their needs e.g. school systems that are trained to support autistic children, but ignore autistic parental needs.
- May experience **biases, or challenge from professionals** who are unaware of autistic parenthood and different family structures.
- May experience **conflicting needs** with their child e.g. one may be sensory seeking and the other sensory avoidant.
- May struggle to adapt to **routine updates and unexpected changes**, so will need good coping strategies/ support in place for this.
- May hyperfocus on their children's needs and **neglect their own** e.g. feeding child, or reminding child to drink, but not themselves.
- May **struggle to form parental social networks**, attend social events, or make playground small talk.
- May be **pathologised** for their parenting, even though safe and loving, because people don't understand or respect autistic social cues e.g. avoiding eye contact, or monotone voice.
- May have **vicarious trauma** if their child has negative experiences or marginalisation, that they recognise from their autistic childhood e.g. mocking for literal thinking.
- **Conflicting information** can be difficult to process when seeking advice and support as a parent e.g. different theories.



Coping Tools for Autistic Parents



**Have a Parent
Sensory Zone or Toolkit**



**Respite Support from
Friends or Service**



**Contact Support & Set
Boundaries**



**Your Reasonable
Adjustments Shared
with School/ GP**



**Sharing Autistic
Experiences with
Parenting Peers**



**Burnout Plan e.g.
Disposable Plates, or
No Chop Meal Plans**

Additional Tips for Autistic Parenthood



**Interest and Hobby
Time for You**



**Sensory Play with
Family and Children**



**Parental Peer
Support/ Social Time**



**Recovery Time &
Affirmations**



**Support from Primary
Care e.g. GP, Counselor
or Social Prescriber.**

Unmet needs, chronic pain, or fatigue through the day can compound parenting stressors, so it is important these needs are addressed to help regulate mood, and support your window of tolerance, as well as improve general wellbeing.

Autistic Parenting Coping Strategies

Tips and coping strategies to manage mental health needs during parenthood as autistic adult:

- **Model your own needs** to your children, support network and family unit. Let them know what your needs are e.g. echolalia and repetition.
- **Set realistic expectations**, parenting is not easy and knowing your limits and needs as well as your children's is important. Be kind to yourself.
- **Peer support** from other autistic parents with lived experiences.
- **Joint-problem solving** and sharing issues with your support network.
- **Autism-specific therapy** and mental health support. You can find guidance on **Mental Health Guide**: <https://leedsautismaim.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2023/12/Leeds-Autism-AIM-Mental-Health-Guide-v7-December-2023.pdf>
- **Acknowledge your achievements**, give yourself affirmation and celebrate wins together as a family e.g. family memories board.
- **Share your interests** with your family, but also find yourself time to enjoy your hobbies and **reconnect with your own passions**.
- **Implement reasonable adjustments** to support your access to services needed for yourself and also involved in your child's care.
- Create a **sensory space and toolkit** for your household.
- Have a **burnout plan** e.g. easy meal plans/ respite contacts.
- Know when you need a **time out**, and take 5-10 minutes, if safe to do so e.g. sensory overload.
- **Toy and activities** for children to **access independently and safely**, if you need time alone to regulate.
- **Identify** parental **stressors** and **triggers**, seek support and know that you can accept support from others.



Reasonable Adjustments for Autistic Parents

Autistic parents will often experience access barriers when accessing services for themselves, but also with their children as well.

As autistic people we have rights outlined in the Equality's Act 2010 that support our access to reasonable adjustments (RAs). We will now explore options that are helpful for autistic parents to implement, and which can improve wellbeing and equitable service access.



Suggestions and Prompts of Relevant Reasonable Adjustments:

- **Written summaries** of children's medical and educational appointments, and action plans.
- **Quiet waiting area** for your family before appointments.
- **Extra time** at appointments to allow for communication and processing needs.
- Request the **same, reliable professional** to be involved in your child's care e.g. doctor, midwife, or social worker.
- **Alternative methods of communication** e.g. communication cards.
- Allowances for **remote meetings** when possible, if in-person is inaccessible for you, or your family.
- **Flexible start and end times** of appointments, or **regular breaks** accounted for.
- Professionals to be accepting and supportive of stimming, movement, vocal stims and unmasking - create a network that is a **safe autistic space**.
- **Health passports** that include parental needs, if you are the child's primary advocate e.g. comms profile.
- **Notice in advance of changes** to appointments, events, locations, or your child's schedule.



Activities Tailored for Autistic Families

Family activities are important for mental wellbeing, learning and family cohesion.

As autistic people, we often are not the only autistic or neurodivergent person in our household, and it is good to consider how to tailor social activities that meet differing needs and interests.

There are some suggested activities below that help to support autistic needs:



Sharing Special Interests:

Our hobbies and interests shared in families can help us bond, share memories and start new traditions. It also provides opportunities to do recharging activities together. E.g. Camping, painting, cooking etc.



Recovery and Solo Time:

Solo time is needed by everyone, but especially during parenthood. Seeking childcare support, and taking time to yourself when available to rest and recover is important. E.g. reading, or resting in a sensory safe space.



Sensory Play:

All families benefit from sensory play, but as autistic people this type of play can help us to meet our own sensory seeking needs too. For example: water or sand play, soft items and stim toys.



Parallel Play:

Autistic families can benefit from parallel play, which reduces social pressures, while giving time in community together. Parallel play could be one person knitting, while someone in the same room plays a video game; you may chat too.

Autistic Pregnancy, Birth and Postpartum

Care for autistic pregnant and birthing people, as well as postnatal health can be unsatisfactory, or lack specialised training of autistic needs. Autistic people are 29% more likely to experience postnatal depression, and need tailored support.

For example, there can be a lack of support for sensory needs during birth, or communication adjustments not being followed in postnatal home visits.

Although improvements to services are being made, we need to know our rights and be prepared to advocate for our own wellbeing.

Ways to Support Autistic Pregnant, Birthing and Postpartum People:



**Autistic Maternity/
Perinatal Passport**



**Sensory Friendly
Birth Environment**

- Use autistic friendly resources/ perinatal plans e.g. Autistic and Expecting by Alexis Quinn, and autistic maternity passports.
- Create a sensory toolkit for birth and parenting.
- Make sure the community midwife, or health visitor knows about any reasonable adjustments e.g. processing time.
- Asking to have the same midwife or medical team throughout pregnancy, so they understand your needs.
- Supporting agency in birth choices, such as stimming and movement, elective c-section, or switching positions.
- Mental and social health support postpartum, especially from autistic peers.
- Be aware that birth plans can change in emergency situations, prepare yourself.



Apps to help with Parenting



Sociability

Find Accessible Days
Out and Services



Spoony

Neurodivergent Friend App



Baby Buddy

Parenting & Baby Support
App



Antistress

Sensory Needs App

Additional Resources

Local Organisations and Support

Leeds Mental Wellbeing Service – Offer a range of services and support for people struggling with mental health, such as anxiety.

Autistic Parents UK - Offers autistic parenting resources, webinars, peer support and counselling: <https://www.autisticparentsuk.org/>

Autistic Maternity Passport:

https://www.autisticparentsuk.org/_files/ugd/45a401_e9d9cec75ae54ffb893fadb1ed0abf33.pdf

Further sources of support can be found in Leeds Autism AIM's Mental Health Guide: <https://leedsautismaim.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2023/04/Leeds-Autism-AIM-Mental-Health-Guide-v6-April-2023.pdf>

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Please leave a message for the AIM Mental Health Equity Project team.



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This guide was produced by the Mental Health Equity Project, part of The Advonet Group. We are a free service co-led by and run for autistic adults (aged 18+) in the West Yorkshire area.