

Voices

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Across Autism.

The journey no one plans for

Parents talk honestly about diagnosis, the good, the hard, and finding their footing.

PAGE 4

Siblings Speak

What it's like growing up alongside a sibling with autism.

PAGE 15

Top 25 autism friendly apps and activities.

PAGE 25



CONVERSATIONS FROM THE AUTISM COMMUNITY

Welcome to Voices Across Autism.

When we started thinking about this magazine, we asked ourselves: What do families really need?

There's no shortage of autism information out there. But we read between the lines: Families dealing with autism often feel alone and adrift, unanchored. Feeling part of a community could provide a pivotal shift.

That's what Voices Across Autism is meant to be.

In these pages, you'll hear from parents navigating the same questions you are. You'll read about the history of ABA, where it's been, where it's going, and what modern therapy looks like. You'll find practical resources, stories of hope, and reminders that you're not alone in this.

Whether you're brand new to the autism journey or years into it, this magazine has something for all of you.

We created Kennedy ABA because we believe every child has the potential to thrive. Not according to someone else's standards, but just to be the best version of themselves. And we believe every parent should be able to access support, community, and honest answers. This magazine is our way of extending that support beyond therapy sessions.

You're a hero for being on this journey, and we're honored to be part of it.

With gratitude,
The Founder

Table of Contents

3	THE JOURNEY NO ONE PLANS FOR
6	NAVIGATING THE HARD STUFF
9	THREE STORIES OF THRIVING
11	THE HISTORY OF ABA
13	WHAT I WISH YOU KNEW
15	SIBLINGS SPEAK
17	CELEBRATING AUTISM IN THE WORKPLACE
19	BY THE NUMBERS
21	TOP 25 AUTISM FRIENDLY APPS AND ACTIVITIES
23	INTERVIEW WITH A BCBA

The Journey No One Plans For

A PANEL DISCUSSION

Every autism journey is profoundly different, but certain themes emerge again and again: the early confusion, the grief and growth, the moments of unexpected joy, the fierce advocacy that becomes second nature. Here are voices from parents at different stages of the journey; from early diagnosis to the teen years. They share what they wish they'd known, what changed everything, and what keeps them going.



THE PANEL:

Maria Chen

Mom to 6-year-old Lucas diagnosed at age 3

Keisha Williams

Mom to 11-year-old twin boys, both autistic diagnosed at age 4

Rob Patel

Dad to 9-year-old Mia diagnosed at age 5

Jennifer Adams

Mom to 14-year-old Connor diagnosed at age 7

What was the hardest part of the early days?

MARIA: The not knowing. Before diagnosis, I kept thinking I was doing something wrong. Why wasn't he talking? Why did grocery stores send him into meltdowns? Other moms would give me these looks, like I couldn't control my kid. I felt like I was failing him every single day.

KEISHA: The grief. And I hate saying that because I love my boys so fiercely. But I grieved the future I'd imagined. The playdates, the easy conversations, the "normal" milestones. I had to let go of what I thought parenting would look like and learn to see the beauty in what it actually is.

ROB: Watching other dads at the playground with their kids. My daughter wouldn't even look at me some days. Wouldn't respond when I called her name. I didn't know how to connect with her. I felt like she didn't even know I existed, and it broke my heart.

JENNIFER: Middle school. The social stuff got so complicated so fast. Connor knew he was different by then. He could see other kids forming friend groups, having inside jokes. Kids can be cruel at that age. Watching him come home heartbroken, knowing I couldn't fix it, that was the worst.

What changed things for you?

MARIA: Two things. First, therapy helped, but not just any therapy. We found therapists who really listened to Lucas, who worked with his interests instead of against them. Second, connecting with other autism parents. Realizing I wasn't alone. That my kid wasn't broken, he was just wired differently. That shifted everything for me.

KEISHA: Finding the right team. Not the providers who wanted to "fix" my boys or make them act neurotypical. But the ones who wanted to help them communicate, feel safe in their bodies, and build real skills. The ones who saw them as whole people, not a list of deficits. That made all the difference.

ROB: Learning Mia's language. She doesn't show affection the way I expected. No hugs, rarely says "I love you." But she has her ways. When she brings me her favorite stuffed animal to hold? When she sits next to me during her favorite show? That's her "I love you." Once I understood that, everything clicked.

JENNIFER: Getting Connor into robotics club in 6th grade. Suddenly he had friends who got him. They bonded over coding and building things, not small talk or sports. He came alive. Started smiling again. I saw my kid for the first time in years.

What do you wish people understood about autism?

MARIA: That autism isn't one thing. People hear "autism" and picture a stereotype. Lucas isn't like every other autistic kid. He's Lucas, with his own personality, his own quirks, his own brilliant, surprising mind. He's not a diagnosis. He's a person.

KEISHA: That we're not giving up when we celebrate what might seem like small wins. My boys learned to tie their shoes at 10 years old. That's HUGE. Don't minimize it because your kid did it at 5. Every milestone matters, no matter when it happens.

ROB: That my daughter isn't rude when she doesn't make eye contact or respond right away. She's not ignoring you. Eye contact is physically painful for her. It doesn't mean she's not listening or doesn't care about what you're saying, her brain just works differently.

JENNIFER: That sensory issues are real. Connor's not being dramatic about the tags in his shirts or the cafeteria noise or bright lights. His nervous system processes things differently than yours. What feels like background noise to you feels like a fire alarm to him.



What gives you hope?

MARIA: Watching Lucas discover what he loves. He's obsessed with trains. Like, memorized every subway line in New York City by age 5, including transfer stations and service changes. His brain is incredible. When he talks about trains, his whole face lights up. That joy is everything.

KEISHA: My boys' relationship with each other. They have their own language, their own way of communicating. They understand each other in ways I never could. When one is having a hard time, the other just knows. They're each other's safe person. That's beautiful.

ROB: Mia started talking at 7. Everyone said she might never speak. Doctors, therapists, other parents, they all prepared us for nonverbal. Then one day she looked at me and said "ocean." Now at 9, she says a lot! Every word is a gift.

JENNIFER: Watching Connor advocate for himself. Last week he asked his teacher for noise-canceling headphones during a test. Explained exactly why he needed them. Three years ago, he would've just suffered through it and failed. Now he knows his needs and isn't afraid to ask. That's huge growth.

What would you tell someone just starting this journey?

MARIA: You're going to be okay. Your kid is going to be okay. It won't look how you imagined, and that's okay. Some of my favorite moments with Lucas are things I never could have predicted. Let go of the script and write a new one together.

KEISHA: Find your people. The parents who get it. The ones who won't judge when your kid has a meltdown in public or won't make small talk at pickup. Also, find therapists who see your kids as human beings with their own goals and dreams, not problems to solve. Those people will save you.

ROB: Let go of the timeline. Your kid will do things when they're ready, and it won't match the developmental charts. That's okay. Comparison is poison. Focus on YOUR child, not everyone else's.

JENNIFER: Trust your kid. They know what they need better than anyone, they just might not have the words for it yet. Our job is to help them find those words, find those tools, and advocate fiercely for what they need. You'll learn their language. I promise.



When the Storm Hits:

MELTDOWNS, ANXIETY, DEPRESSION, AND GETTING THROUGH

"The first time it happened in public, I thought I was the worst parent in the world. My son was on the floor of Target, screaming, hitting himself. People stared. Someone had the nerve to tell me I needed to discipline my child better."

Rachel's voice still shakes when she talks about it. "I didn't know yet that he was autistic. I didn't know this was a meltdown, not a tantrum. I just knew my kid was in pain and I had no idea how to help him."

Understanding Meltdowns

A meltdown isn't misbehavior. It's not manipulation. It's a neurological response to overwhelm.

Think of it like a circuit breaker. When the sensory input, emotional stress, or unexpected change becomes too much, the system overloads. The child isn't choosing to lose control—they've lost the ability to regulate.

Tantrums have a goal. Stop the tantrum, give the kid what they want, and it ends. Meltdowns don't work that way. The child is beyond reasoning, beyond negotiation. They're in survival mode.

What To Do During a Meltdown

Keep them safe. Move sharp objects. Use cushions to block head-banging if needed. Don't restrain unless absolutely necessary for safety.

Reduce the stimulation. Dim lights. Turn down volume. If you're in public,

move to a quieter space without reacting emotionally.

Give space, but stay near. Some kids need physical distance during a meltdown. Sit nearby where they can see you, but don't crowd them. Your calm presence says: "You're safe. I'm here."

Use few words. They can't process language right now. Short, simple statements. "You're okay." "I'm right here."

Don't punish. This isn't the time for consequences or lectures. Punishment doesn't reduce meltdowns—it makes them worse.¹

"After a meltdown, my daughter is exhausted. Sometimes she cries. Sometimes she just wants to be held. I let her lead."



After It's Over

Once your child has calmed down, offer reassurance. Let them know it's okay to have hard moments. Don't force them to talk about it right away if they're not ready.

Later—maybe hours later, maybe the next day—you can explore what happened. What triggered it? Was there a change in routine? Too much noise? A scratchy tag on their shirt?

Keep a log. Patterns emerge. You'll start to see the warning signs before the meltdown hits.

When Anxiety Takes Hold

Anxiety and autism often go hand-in-hand. About 40% of autistic people have elevated anxiety or an anxiety disorder.²

For kids who struggle to express their feelings, anxiety can look like increased stimming, withdrawal, refusal to do things they used to enjoy, or physical complaints—stomachaches, headaches, trouble sleeping.

“My son started having panic attacks at age eight. He couldn't tell me what was wrong, but I could see it in his body, the rapid breathing, the panic in his eyes.”

What helped? Predictability. Visual schedules. Preparing him for changes ahead of time using social stories. Teaching him deep breathing through apps and games.

And therapy. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), adapted for autism, can teach kids to recognize and manage anxious thoughts.³

Depression Is Real—and Treatable

Autistic people are four times more likely to experience depression than the general population.⁴

But it doesn't always look the way



you'd expect. Some autistic kids with depression show a flat affect, no emotion on their face even when they're deeply struggling inside. Others have limited speech and can't verbalize what they're feeling.

Watch for changes: sleeping more or less, eating differently, withdrawing from favorite activities, increased

irritability, talk of wanting to hurt themselves.

If you see these signs, reach out immediately. Depression doesn't go away on its own, but it is treatable.

Talk to your pediatrician. Ask for a referral to a mental health professional who understands autism. Therapy and medication can help.⁵

“The hardest part was accepting that my child was hurting in ways I couldn't see. But once we got help, things started to shift. Slowly. But they shifted.”

RESOURCES:

Crisis Support:

National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: 988

SAMHSA's National Helpline: 1-800-662-4357

Finding Help:

- Talk to your pediatrician about referrals to mental health professionals
- NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness): nami.org
- Psychology Today therapist directory: psychologytoday.com

Learn More:

- AutismSpeaks.org
- Autism.org.uk (mental health resources)

You're Not Doing This Alone

Meltdowns, anxiety, depression, these are hard, and often exhausting. Sometimes heartbreaking.

But you don't have to figure it out by yourself.

Talk to your child's therapist. Join a parent support group. Reach out to your pediatrician. And when you're overwhelmed? It's okay to ask for help.

Some days are harder than others. But you're showing up. And that matters more than you know.



Footnotes (sourced from medical websites): ¹ Autism Parenting Magazine, Blue ABA Therapy, Hopebridge Autism Therapy

² SPARK Autism Research, Western Tidewater Community Services

³ REACH Institute, American Psychiatric Association

⁴ Harvard Medical School, SPARK Autism Research

⁵ National Autistic Society, Raising Children Network

Three Stories of Thriving

WHAT DOES THRIVING LOOK LIKE?

Ask three different families and you'll get three different answers.

Here are stories from different stages of the autism journey, a child finding his voice, a teenager finding her people, and a young adult building a life on his own terms.

Different ages.

Different challenges.

Different definitions of success.

Matthew, Age 7

"He's finding his words."

Told by his mom, Jennifer

Matthew didn't talk until he was almost five. Not a word. Not "mama," not "no," nothing. We did speech therapy three times a week. ABA therapy four days a week. I read him books every night even though I had no idea if he was listening. When he was four and a half, he started using an AAC device—basically an iPad with pictures he could tap to communicate. Suddenly we knew what he wanted. Apple juice. More swings. All done. It wasn't talking, but it was something. Then one morning last month, he looked up from his breakfast and said, "More." Just like that. Clear as day. I froze. "What did you say?" "More." He pointed at the cereal. I gave him more cereal. Then I texted my husband and cried right there in the kitchen. He still uses his device most of the time. He's not having full conversations. But words are coming. "I'm hungry." "My turn." Last week: "Love you." People ask if I'm sad he's not "caught up" to other seven-year-olds. But he's reading at a third-grade level. He can beat me at memory matching games. He knows every state capital. He's Matthew. And Matthew is doing great.



Olivia, Age 15

"I'm not trying to be normal anymore."

Told by Olivia

Middle school was awful. I tried so hard to fit in. I forced myself to make eye contact even though it made my skin crawl. I ate lunch in the bathroom because the cafeteria was too loud and I didn't know where to sit. I had one friend, Jessie, but then she moved away in eighth grade. I cried every single day. My parents kept saying it would get better. I didn't believe them. Freshman year I joined the school's art club. Not because I wanted friends. Because I like drawing and it was quiet. There were like six kids in there. Nobody talked much. We just drew. This girl, Sami, sat next to me one day and said, "I like your style." I just said "Thanks." That felt very big. We started sitting together every week. Then she asked if I wanted to come over and watch a movie together. I almost said no because new places freak me out. But I said yes. Her house smelled different than mine and her mom made this really spicy food I couldn't eat but Sami didn't care. We just watched the movie and she let me pause it when I needed to. Now we hang out every weekend. She knows I don't like hugs. She knows I need to leave parties early. She doesn't make it a thing. Last month she told me she has social anxiety. She said being around me is easy because I don't expect her to perform. I'm not trying to be normal anymore. I wear noise-canceling headphones in the hallway. I eat lunch in the art room. I stim when I need to. Some kids still stare. I don't care. I'm applying to art school next year. I want to do animation. My guidance counselor said I should have a "backup plan" but my art teacher said my portfolio is really strong. I think I'm gonna be okay.

David, Age 28

"I have a job. I have my own place. I'm doing this."

Told by David

I moved out of my parents' house two years ago. A lot of people thought I wouldn't be able to. My mom was scared, too. I understood why, but I was 26 and I felt like I needed to try. I live in a small one-bedroom apartment. It's quiet most of the time. My neighbor can be loud, but I bought better earplugs, and that solved the problem. I work at a tech company doing data entry and quality assurance. It's the same tasks every day which is perfect for me. My boss knows I'm autistic so he gives me written instructions and doesn't expect me to talk to anyone by the coffee machine. I'm good at my job, like, really good. I catch errors nobody else sees. I don't drive so I take the bus. It's the same route every day. I know exactly where to sit and what time it comes. I grocery shop on Sundays at 7am when the store is empty. I cook the same five meals on rotation even though my mom says I should "branch out" but I like what I like. I have two friends who I met online in a gaming forum. We play together every Thursday night. I've never met them in person, but we're still friends. Last year I had a girlfriend for a few months. We met at a board game meetup but didn't work out. She wanted to go out to restaurants and bars and I kept saying no. She said I wasn't trying. I still think about that sometimes, and I'm not sure if she was right. But I'm not lonely. I call my parents twice a week. I have my routines. I'm saving money. I'm thinking about adopting a cat. Ten years ago I was living at home, couldn't hold a job, had daily meltdowns. Now I pay my own bills, go to work on time, and take care of myself. Is my life exciting? No. But it's mine. I like it this way and I'm proud of it.





The Story of ABA:

HOW THE SCIENCE OF LEARNING BECAME CHILD-CENTERED CARE

With over 60% of autistic individuals receiving ABA therapy, it has become a familiar part of many families' lives. Here's how a science of learning grew into the care many families recognize today.

1950S-1960S The Foundations of Learning Science

ABA grew out of behavioral psychology, a field focused on understanding how learning happens. Researchers such as B.F. Skinner studied how behavior is shaped by environmental factors — what happens before a behavior and what follows it. These ideas helped explain how skills are learned and maintained over time.

In 1968, Don Baer, Montrose Wolf, and Todd Risley formally defined Applied Behavior Analysis as a discipline, with the goal of applying learning science to improve everyday skills in real-world settings.

1970s – Early Application and Structure

As ABA began to be used with autistic children, early programs emphasized highly structured teaching. Skills were broken into small steps and practiced repeatedly, often one-on-one. This approach proved effective for teaching language, academic, and self-care skills. These models reflected broader healthcare norms of the time, prioritizing structure and adult direction, while concepts like sensory needs, autonomy, and lived experience were still emerging across many fields.

1980S-1990S – Refinement and Ethical Standards

By the 1980s, ABA methods began to shift. Research increasingly supported positive reinforcement, functional communication, and skills that improved daily life rather than isolated performance.

In 1998, the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) was established, introducing formal training, ethical guidelines, supervision standards, and accountability that helped professionalize the field.

2000S – Learning in Real Life

As understanding of child development deepened, ABA continued to evolve. Natural Environment Teaching (NET) became more widely used, emphasizing learning through play, routines, and everyday interactions. Skills were taught in the settings where they were meant to be used.

This era also brought a stronger focus on generalization and maintenance, helping skills carry over across environments and last over time.

2010S – Collaboration and Lived Experience

Autistic self-advocates became more visible in conversations about autism care, helping shape best practices around autonomy, communication, and sensory respect. Their perspectives contributed to clearer expectations around ethical, supportive care.

At the same time, major medical and developmental organizations recognized ABA as an evidence-based therapy, expanding insurance coverage and reinforcing quality standards.

Today – Helping Each Child Become Their Best Self

Modern ABA is individualized, play-based, and relationship-driven.

Children learn through activities they enjoy, communicate in the ways that work best for them — whether through words, signs, pictures, or technology — and build skills that support everyday life.

The focus isn't on changing who a child is, but on helping each child grow, gain confidence, and become the best version of themselves.

Looking Ahead – An Evolving Field

ABA continues to develop as research expands and lived experience informs best practice. What began as a science of learning has grown into a child-centered approach focused on connection, growth, and helping individuals thrive as themselves.



What I Wish You Knew

FROM YOUR AUTISTIC CHILD

What I can't always say, but wish you understood

Dear Mom and Dad,

I know you get frustrated when I can't tell you what's wrong. I get frustrated too.

Sometimes my body feels like it's on fire and I don't have words for it. The tag in my shirt is screaming at my neck. The fluorescent lights are buzzing so loud I can't think. Your perfume smells like it's choking me. But all that comes out is crying or hitting or running away.

I'm not trying to be difficult. I'm drowning and I don't know how to ask for help.

When I don't look at you, it doesn't mean I'm not listening. Eye contact hurts. It feels like staring at the sun. But I hear every word you say. I love your voice. I just can't look and listen at the same time.

When I talk about the same thing over and over like dinosaurs or trains or planets, it's not because I'm obsessed or weird. It's because that thing makes sense when nothing else does. It's my safe place. When the world feels too big and too loud, I go there in my mind and everything quiets down.

I know you want me to play with other kids. But their games have rules nobody explains. They change the rules without telling me. They laugh and I don't know why. It's exhausting pretending I understand when I don't.

Being alone isn't always lonely. Sometimes it's peaceful.

When I flap my hands or rock or spin, I'm not being weird. I'm trying to feel okay in my body. It helps. Like how you take deep breaths when you're stressed. Please don't make me stop.

I see you cry sometimes when you think I'm not looking. I know you're sad about me. I wish I could tell you I'm not sad about me. I like who I am. I just wish the world was built for brains like mine too.

I know I'm not the kid you imagined. I'm sorry if that hurts you. But I'm still me. And I'm trying my best.

I love you. Even when I can't say it. Even when I pull away from your hugs. Even when I seem like I'm in my own world.

I'm here. I see you. I love you.

“Being alone isn't always lonely. Sometimes it's peaceful.”

FROM A PARENT

What I want my autistic child to know

Dear sweetheart,

I need you to know something: I don't want to change you. I just want the world to stop hurting you.

When I push for therapy or accommodations or skills, it's not because I think you're broken. It's because I see how hard you work every single day just to exist in a world that wasn't designed for you. I want to give you tools. I want to make things easier.

I'm sorry for the times I've gotten it wrong. The times I pushed too hard. The times I tried to stop your stimming because I was worried what other people would think. I was learning. I'm still learning.

You are not my disappointment. You are my greatest teacher.

I'm sorry for the grief you saw in me at the beginning. I wasn't grieving you. I was grieving the guidebook I thought I'd have. The milestones I expected. The “easy” path I'd imagined. But this path—OUR path—has shown me things I never would have seen otherwise.

Your brain is not wrong. It's different. And different is not less.

I see your brilliance. The way you notice things no one else does. The way you can focus on something you love with an intensity that's almost magical. The way you experience joy fully, completely, without holding back.

I know the world is hard on you. I know



you mask and hide parts of yourself just to get through the day. I see how exhausted you are. I wish I could fix that.

But here's what I can do: I can fight for you. I can advocate for classrooms with softer lights. Teachers who understand. Spaces where you can be fully yourself. I can make our home a place where you feel comfortable and free.

You don't owe anyone neurotypical behavior. Not even me.

When you struggle, I'll be here. When you succeed, I'll celebrate—whether that's graduating college or tying your shoes at 10. Every milestone is worth celebrating because I know how hard you worked for it.

You are exactly who you're supposed to be. I wouldn't trade you for a neurotypical version. Not for anything.

I love you. All of you. The stimming, the special interests, the needs, the brilliance, the challenges, the magic. All of it.

I'm so proud to be your parent.

WHAT IT'S LIKE BEING THE SIBLING

Siblings Speak:

Siblings of autistic kids don't always get asked how they're doing.

They're the ones helping, explaining, adjusting their plans. They love their brothers and sisters with all their hearts, but that doesn't mean it's not hard sometimes.

Here are voices across different ages, saying what they don't always get to say out loud.

"I know things other kids don't know."

EMMA, AGE 10

"I know spinning calms my brother down. I know the blender sound hurts his ears. I know when he lines up his cars he's happy, not being weird.

I know some people are mean for no reason.

I know my parents are tired all the time."

LIAM, AGE 19

When I left for college I cried for three days.

Not because I missed home. Because I felt guilty.

Guilty that I got to leave. Guilty that my parents had one less person to help. Guilty that I was relieved.

My mom called and said, "Liam,

you're allowed to have your own life."

I'm studying special ed now. Partially because of Ava.

Ava texts me every day: "Hi Liam. I miss you. Love Ava."

Every day the exact same thing.

And every day I text back: "Hi Ava. I miss you too. Love Liam."



MARCUS, AGE 16

Middle school sucked. Riley would melt down at the mall and everyone stared. I pretended she wasn't my sister. I'd walk way ahead.

I feel horrible about that now.

Freshman year this kid made fun of "that weird girl who sits alone." I told him to shut up and almost got in a fight over it.

Riley doesn't talk much but she notices everything. She

remembers every birthday, even cousins we barely see. She draws these super detailed pictures of our family.

It's hard. We can't do normal stuff. No loud restaurants. No surprise trips. Movie night is always the same movie. We all know every line by now.

But she's my sister. And if anyone messes with her, they're messing with me.

"Sometimes I'm jealous."

SOPHIA, AGE 14

"My brother gets all the attention. Therapy, special programs, mom spending hours with him.

I know he needs it. But I want my parents at my choir concert without leaving halfway through.

I want to talk about MY day without it becoming about whether HE had a good day.

I love him. But this is hard. I'm allowed to say that."



MAYA, AGE 8

My brother only plays with trains. He lines them up and if I mess them up he screams. Really loud screaming.

Last week he let me sit next to him. He gave me three trains. Mom started crying.

I scored a goal at my soccer game and nobody saw. And then I had to leave early because Daniel was freaking out.

But Daniel hugs are the best hugs. He squeezes so hard it kind of hurts but in a good way.

JORDAN, AGE 22

People ask if I "had to grow up too fast." Like Caleb stole my childhood. He didn't steal anything.

Yeah, I helped out more than my friends. I learned to spot a meltdown coming. I canceled plans. I explained to people why Caleb couldn't come to the birthday party.

Caleb is obsessed with weather. Like, crazy obsessed. He predicted a storm three days before the weather service said anything. He was right.

He's in community college now studying atmospheric science. He still lives at home. He probably always will.

Do I wish things were easier? Yeah. Do I wish I didn't have to explain autism to every person I date? God, yes.

But Caleb taught me that normal is boring anyway.

I wouldn't trade him.



"He's my brother. That's it."

NOAH, AGE 12

"Yeah, my brother's autistic. So?"

He's good at video games. He knows every dinosaur fact. He's funny. He calls to himself 'the autistic' and then starts cracking up. Kids ask dumb questions like 'Is he contagious?' or 'Can he even talk?'

I tell them he's my brother and he's cool. If they don't get it, whatever."

Celebrating Autism in the Workplace

STORIES OF CAREER SUCCESS

Autism doesn't look one way. And neither does success. Some autistic people are revolutionizing technology. Others are creating art, building things with their hands, caring for animals, or teaching the next generation. The thread that connects them? They found environments where their strengths could shine, and people who believed in their potential.

Temple Grandin

Animal Scientist & Autism Advocate

At age two, doctors told Temple's mother to institutionalize her. They said she had brain damage. She'd never talk, never connect, never contribute.

Her mother refused to believe it.

Today, Temple Grandin holds

a PhD in animal science. She's designed livestock handling systems used in half the cattle facilities in North America. She's written books, given TED talks, and changed how the world understands autism.

"I think in pictures. Words are like a second language to me."

Temple credits her visual thinking—a trait directly linked to her autism—as the key to her success. She could see solutions others couldn't imagine.

Her message to parents? Early intervention matters. Belief matters. And autism is not something to fix. It's a different way of being brilliant.



Anthony Hopkins

Actor

At 77, Sir Anthony Hopkins was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. Suddenly, decades of his life made sense. The obsessive rehearsal. The ability to memorize entire scripts in one sitting. The way he could

deconstruct characters and see them from angles no one else could.

"It's a great gift, actually. Obsessiveness about the details."

Hopkins has won two Academy Awards. His performances in *The Silence of the Lambs* and *The Father* are considered some of the greatest in cinema history.

He didn't succeed despite being autistic. His autism shaped his craft.

"Autism is not a tragedy. Ignorance is the tragedy."

-Temple Grandin

Beyond the big names

Success isn't about being extraordinary. It's about living a life that feels meaningful to you.

Autistic people thrive in fields that value:

- Deep focus and attention to detail
- Pattern recognition
- Visual or analytical thinking
- Honest, direct communication
- Dedication to specific interests

The key isn't finding a "special" job. It's finding the right fit where strengths are recognized, accommodations are reasonable, and differences are respected.

Satoshi Tajiri

Video Game Designer

As a kid in Japan, Satoshi was obsessed with collecting insects. He'd spend hours studying them, categorizing them, understanding their patterns.

When he grew up, he channeled that childhood fascination into something the world had never seen: Pokémon.

The game became a global phenomenon. Billions of dollars. Millions of fans. An entire generation grew up "catching 'em all."

Satoshi's ability to see patterns, his intense focus on his interests, his attention to detail (all traits common in autism) turned a childhood obsession into one of the most successful franchises in history.

What parents can do to support their child

Notice what lights them up. Does your child love animals? Computers? Drawing? Building things? Music? That passion is a clue.

Encourage their interests. Even if it seems narrow or unusual. That deep dive into one topic can become expertise. Expertise becomes a career.

Teach self-advocacy. Help them understand their needs and communicate them. "I work better with written instructions." "I need breaks in quiet spaces." These skills matter in the workplace.

Don't write off their dreams. If they want to be a scientist, a teacher, an artist, an engineer—believe them. Then help them find the path.



The world needs what autistic people have to offer. Always has. Always will.

Different isn't less. It's just different.

And the world is richer because of it.



You're Not Alone:

WHAT OTHER FAMILIES ARE EXPERIENCING

44%

If you've ever felt like you're the only one struggling to find the right services...

You're not. 44% of parents say availability of services is their biggest barrier. 39% face geographical constraints just trying to access care.

If you've had to cut back on work to care for your child...

You're not alone. 57% of parents have reduced their work hours or stopped working entirely to provide the care their child needs.

57%

If you're wondering whether therapy is making a difference...

79%

It is. 79% of school-age autistic children are doing well in at least one developmental area by age 10. 25% are thriving in ALL areas.



77-95%

If certain sounds send your child into overload...

That's common. 77-95% of autistic people experience sensory processing differences. Sound is the most challenging sensory trigger, while touch and movement are often the most enjoyed.



If you're wondering whether now is the right time to begin therapy...

Studies show that children who start structured support at a younger age tend to show stronger improvements in social communication and fewer repetitive behaviors than those who start later — with earlier starters consistently showing better developmental gains.

If mealtimes feel like a daily battle...

Most families get it. Parents consistently report that food-related challenges like texture, taste, and routine are among the most stressful parts of the day.

"Finding the right therapist was our biggest challenge, but once we did, everything changed."

The truth is, every family's journey looks different. But you're part of a community that understands the struggles, celebrates the wins, and keeps showing up every single day.

It's Never About the Behavior, It's Always About the Person

A CONVERSATION WITH NICOLE HARTLEY, BCBA

● You've been in this field for a while now. How long have you been practicing as a BCBA, and what drew you to ABA in the first place?

I've been a BCBA for sixteen years, but I was working in the field for a few years before that, so I'm coming up on twenty years total. What drew me to it honestly wasn't the science behind it. It was my nephew.

He was diagnosed when he was three, and I watched my sister navigate this world with very little guidance. Nobody was telling her what to do at home, she was so alone. I remember thinking, someone needs to be the bridge between the clinical side and the family side. That's what I've been trying to be ever since.

● For parents who may not fully understand what a

BCBA does day-to-day, can you describe what your work actually looks like?

People picture us with clipboards and timers, which, yes, sometimes that's accurate. But most of my day is relationship work. I'm observing kids in their natural environments, talking with parents, and collaborating with teachers and speech therapists.

A big part of my job is sitting with a family and really listening to what their life looks like. Because if a plan doesn't work in their kitchen on a Tuesday morning, it doesn't work.

● What's the biggest misconception parents have about ABA when they first come to you?

That it's going to change who their child is. That fear is real, and I take it seriously. Parents come in with

their guard up. My first conversation with almost every family addresses this directly. We are not here to make your child someone else. We're here to give them skills that make their life more manageable and more enjoyable on their own terms. Communication, flexibility, safety. Those are the goals. Not compliance for compliance's sake.

● How do you approach the topic of autism with the children themselves? Do you talk openly with them about their diagnosis?

As much as possible, yes, and I always follow the child's lead. Younger kids may not have the language for it yet, but I try to build in self-awareness naturally from early on. We talk about things like "your brain works this way" or "you're really good at noticing sounds that other people miss."

For older kids and teens, I'm much more direct. I think every autistic person deserves to understand themselves, and our job is to give them the vocabulary to do that with pride, not shame. Some of my teenage clients have become genuinely curious about their own neurology, and those conversations are some of my favorites.

● If you could sit down with every parent of a newly diagnosed child and say one thing, what would it be?

Your child is still exactly who they were the day before the diagnosis. The diagnosis didn't change them. It just gave you a map. And maps are good. Maps mean you're not wandering in the dark anymore.

There will be hard days and there will be days that take your breath away in the best possible way. Both of those things are going to be true at the same time sometimes. But your child is watching you, and the way you approach this shapes the way they see themselves. So approach it with openness. Approach it with love. And know that there are people in this field who genuinely care about your family and are honored to walk this road with you.

● For a parent who has a teenager with autism and feels like the window for

progress has closed, what would you say to them?

I'd say that window is a myth. Full stop. The idea that there's some critical period that ends and after that it doesn't matter is not what the research supports, and more importantly, it's not what I've seen in practice.

I have worked with teenagers who made more progress in two years than they did in the previous ten, because they finally had a clinician who connected with them and goals that actually mattered to them. Motivation changes everything. When a sixteen-year-old wants to learn to take the bus so he can visit his friend on weekends, that's a goal he'll work for. We just have to find what that goal is.

● Lastly, what's the most important thing you think

a parent should know?

Please don't push yourself too hard. I mean that sincerely. Yes, consistency matters, and carrying over what we work on in sessions does make a real difference. But an exhausted, burned-out parent is not what your child needs most.

What I tell families is this: a calm, happy parent is more valuable than a perfectly executed strategy. Do your best to keep up with what your child is working on, but we are not expecting perfection. We never are. If you miss a prompt or handle a transition differently than we practiced, the world doesn't end. You are doing an incredible job under a lot of pressure, and the most important thing you can give your child at home is a parent who feels okay, safe, and secure. Everything else we can work on together.



Tools & Resources for Your Family

TECHNOLOGY & APPS FOR COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING

Technology can open up new ways to communicate, learn, and connect. Here are some of the most recommended apps and tools for autistic children:



For Communication (AAC Apps):

Proloquo2Go – A symbol-based communication app that's fully customizable. Works for beginning communicators all the way through advanced users. Features natural-sounding voices, including children's voices.

GoTalk NOW – Create customizable communication boards using pictures and symbols. Great for daily communication needs.

TouchChat HD – Comprehensive AAC app with extensive vocabulary options. Highly customizable to fit individual needs.

Let Me Talk – A free AAC app with simple, picture-based communication tools.

For Learning & Skills:

ABC Kids – Helps young children trace letters and learn phonics through interactive games and cute characters.

Otsimo – Over 50 personalized educational games designed using ABA principles. Includes progress tracking for parents.

Speech Blubs – Uses kid “experts” to teach first sounds, words, and sentences. Makes speech practice fun and engaging.

First Then Visual Schedule HD – Visual schedules help children understand routines and what's coming next, reducing anxiety.



For Social Skills:

Social Story Creator – Create personalized social stories to teach social skills, behaviors, and coping strategies.

iCreate Social Skills Stories – Combine visuals, audio, and text to create custom storybooks about social situations.



For Self-Regulation:

Breathe, Think, Do with Sesame – Interactive games and calming exercises to help children learn self-regulation and coping skills.

Tip: Many AAC apps offer discounts during Autism Awareness Month in April. Check around then for special pricing.



SENSORY-FRIENDLY ACTIVITIES FOR FAMILIES

Getting out as a family doesn't have to mean sensory overload. More and more places are creating autism-friendly experiences:



Movies & Entertainment:

Many theaters now offer sensory-friendly showings with:

- Lights turned up slightly
- Volume turned down
- Freedom to move, talk, and express yourself
- No pressure to sit still
- Look for programs like AMC's Sensory Friendly Films (second and fourth Saturdays) or check local theaters for sensory-friendly times.



Outdoor Adventures:

- Nature can be naturally calming:
- Parks & nature walks – Choose quieter times, bring sensory supports
- Botanical gardens – Peaceful, multi-sensory experiences
- Libraries – Quiet spaces with sensory-friendly storytimes and activities
- Some outdoor places offer special autism programs with smaller crowds.
- Zoos
- Nature centers



At-Home Activities:

- **Sensory bins** – Fill containers with rice, beans, sand, or water for tactile exploration
- **Nature scavenger hunts** – Collect leaves, rocks, or pinecones
- **Textured painting** – Add salt, flour, or sand to paint for different sensations
- **Freeze dance** – Play music and freeze in fun positions when it stops
- **Gardening** – Digging, planting, and watering provide great sensory input

Tip: Start small. Short outings to less crowded places can help build comfort before tackling busier venues.

Exceptional therapy for exceptional children



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Thinks differently. Learns differently.
They deserve therapy that celebrates those strengths
while building new skills. That's the Kennedy difference.



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