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Exceptionalities

SUPPORTING FAMILIES OF KIDS WITH AUTISM
CARING FOR HIGHLY ENGAGED ATHLETES
MEALS THAT MEET YOUR CHILD'S NEEDS
STEM GALORE!

Supporting Families of Kids with Autism


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I love my life as a nanny; it's hard for me to imagine doing anything else, but my career life actually started out quite differently. I was enjoying my work as a clinical social worker in 1993 when I realized that my two sons were not hitting their developmental milestones properly, especially with language development. Despite our pediatrician's claims that they were just "late bloomers," my husband and I sought out the help of specialists. In 1994, at ages 18 months and 3 years respectively, our two sons were diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). It was heartbreaking and life-changing to receive such a diagnosis, and our family has been affected significantly every year since then. One positive change is that I discovered my passion of in-home childcare, first as a licensed family daycare provider and then, as my children grew, as a nanny. Because of my unique situation as both a nanny and a mom, I have a unique insight into what it takes to be an effective nanny for families affected by Autism Spectrum Disorders.

What is Autism anyway?

In 1994 when my children were diagnosed, it was being reported in just 1 out of every 2000 births. Now, it is being diagnosed in 1 out of every 68 births. Some of that rise can be explained by more accurate diagnosis, but experts generally agree that the incidence is increasing, and the cause is not fully known. Autism is a spectrum disorder, meaning that the symptoms can present themselves in a wide variety of combinations, from mild to severe. Merriam-Webster defines autism as "a variable developmental disorder that appears by age three and is characterized by impairment of the ability to form normal social relationships, by impairment of the ability to communicate with others, and by repetitive behavior patterns." There are more than four million people today in the United States with some form of autism. ASD affects boys four times more often than girls.





What are the characteristics of ASD?

Every child is different, but they may, or may not, have any combination of these symptoms:

- Prefers to play alone
- Aloof mannerisms
- Has tantrums for no apparent reason
- Delayed or unusual language
- Unusual attachment to toys or objects
- Repetitive movements or posturing of body, arms, or hands
- No real fear of dangers
- Apparent insensitivity to pain
- Echolalia (repeated words or phrases)
- Difficulty expressing needs
- Noticeable physical overactivity or extreme underactivity
- Unresponsive to normal teaching methods
- Uneven fine and gross motor skills
- Sensitivity to light, sound, clothing or food texture, etc.
- Extremely picky eater
- Resists change in daily routine
- Little or no eye contact
- Difficulty reading social cues

Children with ASD will rarely show all, or even most, of the characteristics listed. There are many benefits to working with an ASD child and their family. Children with ASD are typically intelligent, extremely honest, and are able to easily entertain themselves. They are very loyal and are often affectionate. My sons are both very musically talented. The oldest was a National Merit Scholar, attended the College of Charleston on a full scholarship, and is a classically trained professional tenor choir singer and soloist. My second born has an amazing memory for almost everything and won the Music Memory Competition in Elementary School and the Black History Bee in Middle School. He never met a fact he didn't enjoy! Parents of these wonderful children are typically very appreciative and are willing to pay a higher salary for nannies with special needs knowledge and experience. Because my husband and I didn't have a nanny, and friends and family were uncomfortable with our boys, my husband and I never got a night out. That is hard on a marriage, especially one that is already strained with special needs. Thankfully, we remain happily married after 32 years. Although the exact number is disputed, it is generally accepted that the divorce rate is higher in ASD families. You can make a real difference in their lives.

Do you have what it takes to be a special needs nanny?

As you can see, the need for nannies with special needs experience is great. The following are a few of the skills and characteristics that a nanny working with these kinds of families should possess. Of course, you should have all of the same attributes of any great nanny: education, experience, a love of children, energy, and creativity. But ASD nannies should also have patience (more so than usual), because gains may come more slowly (in our family we call this "two-steps forward, one step back"). They should have a willingness to learn and take direction from several different sources, not just parents and teachers, but also therapists and doctors. They should also possess super organizational skills and a tough-skinned personality, one where they won't easily get their feelings hurt. This is because ASD individuals are often blunt to the point of rudeness. You will come to appreciate this brutal honesty most of the time, though.

What can you do specifically to help an ASD family?

After you've been hired to work with an ASD family, there are many things that you can do specifically for their family to help them out.

- Be there to give the family a much-needed break!
- Learn all you can from the child, the family, the therapists, books, conferences, etc.
- Share all the good ideas you learn. Good ideas don't just come from therapists and doctors.
- Be consistent with schedules, discipline, routines, etc. This is especially important for the ASD child.
- Give visual cues whenever possible. Written signs and pictures are invaluable.
- Pick your battles.
- Be aware of safety issues specific to the ASD community, like wandering and destructive behavior. Water can be especially dangerous to ASD children. Teaching them to swim as early as possible is recommended. I had to save my middle child from drowning on more than one occasion. Be sure you can swim too!
- Be sensitive to the emotions in the house, including those of the parents, siblings, and the ASD children. Parents may be worried about finances, loss of friends and family, grieving dreams they had for "neurotypical" children, and pure exhaustion (sleep problems are also common for ASD children). Siblings may be concerned with embarrassment, how to talk with friends, and a lack of attention and resources from parents, and even you.
- Give extra attention to siblings whenever possible. They often feel as though the ASD child gets the majority of the attention in the home.
- Stay and observe therapy sessions so that you can generalize concepts in the home environment. It will also be important for you to teach these concepts to the parents, so that they can do the same when you are not there.
- Keep therapy notebooks and all school notes and papers organized. Believe me, there will be a lot!
- Finally, be loving and enjoy them - remember they are children, and just want to have fun.

My hope is that this article will serve as inspiration to some to obtain more information about working with children and families with ASD. We could really use your help, and there are lots of us out there. Remember that each child on the autism spectrum is different, so it's important not to generalize. A great idea is to try babysitting for different families to gain experience. Just like the regular nanny world, each family will handle things a little differently, but there will be lots of similarities. There are lots of great ASD nannies out there and I hope you will feel confident to become one too. Every specialty skill you can add to your resume makes you more valuable and more confident that you can handle anything!