



Mindscape: Different Paths, Same Destination

# Mindscape Family Toolkit



**Different Paths, Same Destination**



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## **Introduction**

### **What Autism Is and Isn't**

Autism is a natural way that some people experience and interact with the world. It affects how someone thinks, learns, communicates, and relates to others. People with autism may have unique strengths, interests, and ways of seeing things. They might also find certain situations, changes, or social interactions challenging.

Autism is not a disease or something that needs to be “fixed.” It is not caused by parenting, vaccines, or anything someone did or didn't do. People with autism are not “broken” or “less than” anyone else—they simply have a different way of being.

### **Why Understanding Neurodiversity Matters in the Home**

Neurodiversity means that everyone's brain works in its own way. Just as people have different personalities, talents, and preferences, they also have different ways of thinking and processing the world.

Embracing neurodiversity at home helps everyone feel valued and understood. It encourages acceptance, patience, and support for each person's needs and strengths. When families understand and celebrate these differences, it creates a more positive and supportive environment for everyone.

### **Quick Guide on Respectful Language and Identity Preferences**

- Use language that respects each person's identity and preferences. Some people prefer “autistic person,” while others prefer “person with autism.” If possible, ask what language someone is most comfortable with.
- Avoid negative terms like “suffers from” or “afflicted by.” Instead, use neutral or positive language, such as “lives with autism” or “is autistic.”
- Focus on strengths and individuality, not just challenges.



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- Remember that everyone is unique—what works for one person may not work for another.

Respectful language and understanding go a long way in building trust and making everyone feel included.



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## **Understanding Your Autistic Family Member**

### **Common Strengths**

Many autistic people have unique strengths that can enrich family life and relationships. Some common strengths include:

- **Pattern Recognition:** Noticing details, patterns, and connections that others might miss. This can be helpful in problem-solving, organizing, and creative thinking.
- **Honesty:** Being straightforward and genuine, often saying exactly what is meant. This honesty can build trust and clear communication.
- **Creativity:** Approaching situations with fresh ideas and unique perspectives. Many autistic people excel in art, music, writing, technology, or other creative fields.
- **Focus and Passion:** Deep interest in specific topics, leading to expertise and enthusiasm that can inspire others.
- **Reliability:** Preference for routines and consistency can make autistic family members dependable and trustworthy.

### **Common Challenges**

Autistic people may also face challenges that families can help support:

- **Sensory Overload:** Everyday sounds, lights, textures, or smells can feel overwhelming. This might lead to discomfort, anxiety, or a need for quiet spaces.
- **Transitions:** Changes in routine or unexpected events can be stressful. Preparing for transitions and providing advance notice can help.
- **Social Communication:** Understanding social cues, body language, or unspoken rules may be difficult. Clear, direct communication is often helpful.
- **Emotional Regulation:** Managing strong feelings or stress can be challenging, sometimes leading to meltdowns or shutdowns.

### **Autism Across Ages**

Autism is lifelong, but needs and strengths can change over time:



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- Childhood: Children may need support with communication, play, and adapting to school routines. Early understanding and acceptance are important.
- Teen Years: Social situations, independence, and self-advocacy become more important. Support with friendships, transitions, and managing new responsibilities can help.
- Adulthood: Needs may include employment, independent living, relationships, and community involvement. Some adults may need ongoing support, while others thrive with independence.

Every autistic person is unique, and their needs may change as they grow. Listening, adapting, and respecting individual preferences are key.

### **Myth Busting**

- Myth: Autism is caused by bad parenting or vaccines.  
Fact: Autism is a natural difference in brain development. It is not caused by parenting style or vaccines.
- Myth: All autistic people are the same.  
Fact: Autism is a spectrum. Each person has their own strengths, challenges, and personality.
- Myth: Autistic people don't want friends or relationships.  
Fact: Many autistic people value friendships and relationships, though they may connect in different ways.
- Myth: Autism can be "cured."  
Fact: Autism is not an illness. Support and understanding help autistic people thrive.
- Myth: Autistic people lack empathy.  
Fact: Many autistic people feel empathy deeply, though they may express it differently.

Understanding and supporting autistic family members helps everyone grow, connect, and thrive together.



## **Communication & Connection**

### **Tips for Clearer Communication**

- Give Processing Time: Allow extra time for your family member to think about what's been said and how to respond. Avoid rushing or repeating the question too quickly.
- Use Visuals or Written Cues: Pictures, written notes, schedules, or gestures can help make communication clearer and reduce misunderstandings.
- Be Direct and Clear: Use simple, straightforward language. When someone is stressed, avoid jokes, sarcasm, or figurative language, as these can be confusing.
- Check for Understanding: Gently ask if your message was clear or if more explanation is needed.
- Reduce Background Noise: Communicate in a quiet space to help with focus and understanding.

### **Conversation Starters and "Safe" Questions**

- What was your favorite part of today?
- Is there something you'd like to do together?
- Would you like to talk about your favorite hobby?
- How are you feeling right now?
- Is there anything you want to share or ask?
- What helps you feel calm or happy?
- Would you like some quiet time or company?

These questions are open-ended but not too broad, making it easier for someone to respond in their own way.

### **How to Support Non-Verbal Communication**

- Pay Attention to Body Language: Notice facial expressions, gestures, or changes in posture. These can communicate feelings or needs.
- Offer Choices Visually: Use pictures, objects, or written words to let your family member choose what they want or need.



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- **Respect Alternative Communication:** Some people use communication devices, sign language, or picture cards. Encourage and support these methods.
- **Be Patient and Observant:** Give time for responses and watch for non-verbal cues that show comfort, discomfort, interest, or stress.
- **Acknowledge All Communication:** Respond to gestures, sounds, or expressions as valid ways of communicating.

Supporting all forms of communication helps build trust, understanding, and stronger family connections.



## **Sensory Friendly Home Environment**

### **Household Sensory Audit Checklist**

Use this checklist to identify areas in your home that may affect comfort and wellbeing:

- **Lighting**
  - Are lights too bright or flickering?
  - Is there access to natural light?
  - Can lights be dimmed or softened with lamps or shades?
- **Sound**
  - Are there loud appliances or constant background noise?
  - Is there a quiet space available?
  - Can headphones or soft music be used to reduce noise?
- **Smells**
  - Are there strong cooking, cleaning, or perfume scents?
  - Can windows be opened for fresh air?
  - Are unscented products available?
- **Textures**
  - Are there scratchy carpets, rough furniture, or uncomfortable clothing?
  - Are soft blankets, cushions, or preferred fabrics available?
  - Can clothing tags be removed or covered?

### **Creating "Calm Corners" Without Isolation**

- Set up a cozy area with soft seating, pillows, or a tent where anyone can take a break.
- Include calming items like books, fidget toys, headphones, or weighted blankets.
- Keep the space open and inviting, not hidden away, so it feels like a positive choice rather than a punishment.
- Encourage family members to use the calm corner as needed, and respect their time there.



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- Make sure the area is visible and accessible, allowing for supervision and connection.

## **Practical Tips**

### **Meal Times**

- Offer familiar and preferred foods alongside new options.
- Reduce strong smells by serving simple dishes or ventilating the kitchen.
- Allow for quiet or soft background music instead of loud conversations.
- Let family members use preferred utensils, plates, or seating.

### **Clothing Tags**

- Choose tagless clothing or remove tags before wearing.
- Wash new clothes to soften fabrics.
- Allow choice in clothing based on comfort, not just appearance.

### **Routines**

- Use visual schedules or written lists to outline daily routines.
- Give advance notice before transitions or changes.
- Keep routines consistent, but allow for flexibility when needed.
- Celebrate small successes and adapt routines to fit individual needs.

A sensory friendly home supports comfort, reduces stress, and helps everyone feel safe and included.



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## Daily Living & Routines

### Visual Schedules for Morning and Evening Routines

#### Morning Routine

Step	Visual/Icon
Wake up	
Use the bathroom	
Brush teeth	
Get dressed	
Eat breakfast	
Pack bag	
Put on shoes	
Leave for school/work	

#### Evening Routine

Step	Visual/Icon
Eat dinner	



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Take a bath/shower



Put on pajamas



Brush teeth



Read or quiet activity



Say goodnight



Go to bed



### Transition Support Cards for Outings or Appointments

- Where are we going? (Picture of destination)
- Who will be there? (Photos or names)
- What will happen? (Simple steps with icons)
- How long will it take? (Clock or timer icon)
- What can I bring? (Favorite toy, headphones, snack)
- What to do if I feel worried? (Deep breaths, ask for help, use fidget)

These cards can be printed or shown on a device before and during outings to help prepare and reassure.

### Family Calendar Template (with Icons)

Date	Event/Activity	Who's Involved	Icon
Mon	Therapy appointment	Sam, Mom	
Tue	Library visit	Family	
Wed	Soccer practice	Alex	
Thu	Movie night	Family	



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Fri	Grocery shopping	Dad, Sam	
Sat	Park outing	Family	
Sun	Rest day	Family	

### Reward Chart Focused on Encouragement

Goal/Positive Action	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Su	Encouraging Note/Reward
Tried something new		★		★				"Great effort!"
Helped with chores		★		★				"Thank you for helping!"
Used calming strategy			★		★			"You did it!"
Was kind to others				★		★		"So proud of you!"

Rewards can be extra story time, a favorite activity, or a special outing—focus on celebrating effort, growth, and positive choices rather than just following rules.

Visual supports and encouragement help make daily routines smoother, transitions easier, and family life more positive for everyone.



## Emotional Regulation & Mental Wellbeing

### At-Home Regulation Toolkit Ideas

- Weighted Blanket: Provides calming deep pressure and comfort.
- Fidget Toys: Stress balls, putty, spinners, or textured objects to help with focus and self-soothing.
- Breathing Cards: Visual cards with simple breathing exercises (e.g., “breathe in for 4, out for 4”).
- Noise-Cancelling Headphones: Reduce overwhelming sounds.
- Calm Jar or Glitter Bottle: Shake and watch the glitter settle to encourage calming down.
- Soft Lighting or Night Light: Gentle lighting to create a soothing environment.
- Favorite Book or Music: Access to comforting stories or calming playlists.
- Visual Timer: Helps show how long an activity or break will last.

### Printable Emotion Cards

#### Emotion Description

#### How It Feels in the Body

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Happy	Feeling good, smiling, wanting to play or talk	Warm, light, energy in chest or face
Sad	Feeling down, wanting to cry or be alone	Heavy, lump in throat, tired



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Angry	Feeling upset, frustrated, wanting to shout or move	Hot, tense muscles, clenched fists
Worried	Feeling nervous, unsure, thinking a lot	Butterflies in stomach, shaky, fast heartbeat
Excited	Looking forward to something, can't wait	Bubbly, jumpy, big smiles
Calm	Relaxed, peaceful, everything feels okay	Loose muscles, slow breathing, steady heartbeat
Scared	Feeling afraid, wanting to hide or run	Cold, tight chest, fast breathing

### **Scripts for Helping a Child Name Emotions**

- "I see you're frowning and your fists are tight. Are you feeling angry or upset?"
- "Your eyes look watery and you're quiet. Are you feeling sad right now?"
- "You're jumping up and down and smiling. Are you feeling excited?"
- "It looks like you're holding your tummy and looking worried. Is something making you nervous?"
- "You're smiling and laughing. Are you feeling happy?"
- "It's okay to feel (emotion). Can you show me with your card how you feel?"

### **Self-Care Checklists for Parents/Carers**

#### Daily Self-Care Checklist

- Take a few deep breaths
- Drink enough water
- Eat regular meals
- Get outside for fresh air



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- Take a short break (even 5 minutes)
- Connect with a friend or support person
- Notice one thing you did well today

### Weekly Self-Care Checklist

- Do something enjoyable just for yourself
- Get some physical activity (walk, stretch, dance)
- Reflect on what's working and what's challenging
- Ask for help or delegate a task
- Plan a relaxing activity (bath, reading, hobby)
- Celebrate small wins

Taking care of your own wellbeing helps you support your family with patience and understanding.



## **Sibling Support**

### **Explaining Autism to Siblings in Age-Appropriate Ways**

For Young Children:

“Autism means that our brother or sister’s brain works a little differently. Sometimes they might play in their own way, need extra help, or get upset by loud noises. They love you and want to play, even if it looks different sometimes.”

For Older Children:

“Autism is a way some people’s brains work. It can make things like talking, playing, or handling loud sounds harder. Our sibling might need routines or special tools to feel comfortable. They have their own strengths and challenges, just like everyone else.”

For Teens:

“Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference. It affects how our sibling communicates, processes information, and experiences the world. They might need support with social situations or sensory things, but they also have unique talents. Understanding and patience help everyone feel included.”

### **Activities Siblings Can Do Together**

- Build with blocks or LEGO
- Draw, color, or do crafts
- Play board games with simple rules



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- Watch favorite shows or movies
- Go for walks or play outside
- Listen to music or dance
- Read books together
- Do puzzles
- Bake simple recipes
- Create a shared scrapbook or photo album

Choose activities that both siblings enjoy and adapt as needed for comfort and fun.

### Feelings Worksheet for Siblings

How I Feel About My Sibling and Our Family

<b>Emotion</b>	<b>What Makes Me Feel This Way?</b>	<b>What Helps Me Feel Better?</b>
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Happy

Sad

Frustrated

Proud

Worried

Excited

Draw a picture of you and your sibling doing something you like together:

[Space for drawing]

Who can I talk to when I have big feelings?

One thing I wish my family knew about how I feel:

Supporting siblings with information, shared activities, and space to express their feelings helps everyone feel understood and connected.



## **Education & Advocacy**

### **Working with Schools and SENCOs**

- **Build Positive Relationships:** Communicate regularly and openly with teachers and the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO). Share insights about your child's strengths, needs, and what works at home.
- **Share Information:** Provide relevant reports, assessments, or strategies that help your child. Keep a record of all communications and meetings.
- **Ask Questions:** Don't hesitate to ask for clarification about support, accommodations, or school policies.
- **Collaborate on Solutions:** Work together to create practical strategies for learning, social support, and sensory needs. Be open to suggestions and share your own ideas.
- **Follow Up:** After meetings, request written summaries and action points. Check in regularly on progress and any agreed changes.

### **Preparing for Meetings and Reviews**

#### **Template: IEP/EHCP Preparation**

<b>Section</b>	<b>Notes/Information to Prepare</b>
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Child's Strengths	What does your child do well? What do they enjoy?
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**Areas of Need** What are the main challenges at school and home?

**Current Support** What help is already in place? What works/doesn't work?

**Goals** What would you like your child to achieve this year?

**Questions/Concerns** What do you want to ask or discuss at the meeting?

**Requested Support** Are there specific resources, therapies, or accommodations needed?

**Review Date** When will progress be checked?

**Tips:**

- Bring examples of your child's work or notes about their progress.
- Write down questions or concerns ahead of time.
- Take notes during the meeting or bring someone to support you.

### **Parents' Rights**

- **Right to Be Involved:** Parents have the right to participate in all decisions about their child's education and support.
- **Right to Information:** Schools must provide clear information about your child's progress, support plans, and any assessments.
- **Right to Request Assessments:** Parents can request an assessment for special educational needs at any time.
- **Right to Appeal:** If you disagree with decisions about support or placements, you can appeal through the local authority or tribunal.



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- Right to Reasonable Adjustments: Schools must make reasonable adjustments to support your child's access to learning.

### **Where to Get Legal Advice**

- SENDIASS (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information Advice and Support Service): Offers free, confidential advice for parents and carers.
- IPSEA (Independent Provider of Special Education Advice): Provides legal information and support for education issues ([ipsea.org.uk](http://ipsea.org.uk)).
- Contact: A charity supporting families with disabled children, including education rights ([contact.org.uk](http://contact.org.uk)).
- National Autistic Society: Offers guidance on education and legal rights ([autism.org.uk](http://autism.org.uk)).
- Local Authority SEND Team: Can provide information about local processes and support.

Understanding your rights and preparing for meetings helps ensure your child receives the support they need to thrive at school.



## **Community & Support Networks**

### **Finding Local Parent/Carer Groups**

- Ask at School or SENCO: Many schools keep lists of local support groups or can connect you with other families.
- Check Community Centres and Libraries: Noticeboards often display flyers for parent/carers meetups and events.
- Contact Local Charities: Organizations supporting autism or special needs often run groups or can recommend trusted ones.
- Online Forums and Social Media: Search for local Facebook groups, WhatsApp chats, or online forums for parents and carers in your area.
- Health Visitor or GP: Healthcare professionals may know of local networks or support services.

### **How to Start Your Own Support Circle**

1. Find Interested Families: Reach out to other parents/carers at school, therapy sessions, or online.
2. Choose a Meeting Format: Decide if you'll meet in person, online, or both. Start with informal coffee mornings, park meetups, or video calls.
3. Pick a Regular Time and Place: Consistency helps people plan and feel comfortable.



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4. Set Simple Guidelines: Agree on confidentiality, respect, and how to share information.
5. Share Resources: Bring along helpful articles, books, or contacts. Invite guest speakers if possible.
6. Stay Inclusive: Welcome new members and encourage everyone to share and support each other.
7. Promote Your Group: Use school newsletters, community boards, or social media to let others know.

### Volunteer and Respite Services Directory Template

Service Name	Type (Volunteer/Respite)	Contact Details	Location/Area	Notes
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Example Entries:

Service Name	Type (Volunteer/Respite)	Contact Details	Location/ Area	Notes
Family Support Volunteers	Volunteer	01234 567890	Town Centre	Home visits, befriending



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Short Breaks Respite Club	shortbreaks@e mail.com	Citywide	Weekend sessions for children
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Carers' Time Respite Out	www.carerstime out.org	Local Borough	Daytime respite for carers
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Building connections with other families and accessing community support can make a big difference for everyone's wellbeing.



## **Employment & Future Planning**

### **Early Guidance on Job Skills and Independence**

- Encourage Life Skills: Practice daily tasks such as cooking, budgeting, using public transport, and managing time. These build confidence and independence.
- Explore Interests: Help identify strengths and interests that could lead to future job opportunities or volunteering roles.
- Work Experience: Seek out internships, part-time jobs, or volunteer positions to gain real-world experience in a supportive environment.
- Social Skills for Work: Practice workplace communication, teamwork, and problem-solving through role-play or social stories.
- Self-Advocacy: Teach how to ask for help, explain needs, and understand workplace rights.
- Use Visual Supports: Create checklists, schedules, or step-by-step guides for tasks and routines.

### **Benefits and Support Services Overview**

- Disability Living Allowance (DLA)/Personal Independence Payment (PIP): Financial support for those with additional needs.
- Employment and Support Allowance (ESA): Income support for those unable to work or needing extra help to find work.
- Access to Work: Government scheme providing practical support, equipment, or job coaching for disabled employees.
- Supported Employment Services: Local charities and agencies offer job coaching, skills workshops, and workplace support.



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- Social Services: Can provide help with independent living, personal care, and respite.
- Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP): May continue to provide support up to age 25 if in education or training.
- Local Authority Transition Teams: Help plan the move from school to adult services.

### **Guardianship and Long-Term Planning Considerations**

- Mental Capacity Assessment: Determines if a young adult can make their own decisions about finances, health, and welfare.
- Deputyship/Guardianship: Legal arrangements for parents or carers to make decisions if the young person lacks capacity. Seek legal advice for the right process in your area.
- Wills and Trusts: Consider setting up a trust to manage finances and protect benefits for the future.
- Supported Decision-Making: Encourage involvement in decisions as much as possible, using accessible information and support.
- Long-Term Housing Options: Research supported living, shared housing, or residential care if needed.
- Emergency Planning: Prepare a plan for who will support your family member if you are unable to do so.

Early planning, practical skill-building, and understanding available supports help young people move towards greater independence and a secure future.



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## Resources & Helplines

Resource/Helpline Description		Contact Details
National Autistic Society	Information, advice, and support for autistic people and families	autism.org.uk / Helpline: 0808 800 4104
Local SENDIASS	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information, Advice and Support Service for parents and carers	Find local service via your council website
Carers UK	Support, advice, and information for carers	carersuk.org / Helpline: 0808 808 7777
Mindscape	Mental health support and resources for families and carers	mindscape.org



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Your Trusted

Contacts

Add names, phone numbers, and websites for local groups, professionals, or services you trust. Keep this list somewhere easy to find for quick support when needed.



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## Reflection & Progress

What's Working / What We Need

What's Working Well

What We Need Help With

Weekly Check-In Journal Page (Parents/Carers)

This Week's Highlights:

Challenges Faced:

What Helped Most:

What I'd Like to Try Next Week:

How I'm Feeling:

Calm

Hopeful

Tired

Overwhelmed

Proud

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Weekly Check-In Journal Page (Child)

Something Good That Happened:



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Something That Was Hard:

How I Felt Most Days:

Happy

Sad

Angry

Calm

Worried

Excited

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

One Thing I Want to Do Next Week:

Gratitude Page: Celebrate Wins

This Week, We Are Grateful For:

Big or Small Wins to Celebrate:

Special Moments to Remember: