



Together for Neurodiversity
Empowering Futures, Embracing Differences

Understanding and Embracing your Autistic Great Grandchild





Introduction

Finding out that your great grandchild is autistic can bring up all sorts of emotions—love, concern, confusion, even grief. You might feel unsure of what autism really means or how best to support your great grandchild and their family. These feelings are all valid, and it's okay to take time to process them.

This guide is here to help you on that journey—not with judgement or overwhelming information, but with kindness, clarity, and encouragement.

An autism diagnosis doesn't mean something is wrong. It simply means your great grandchild experiences and interacts with the world in a different, but equally valid, way. Autism is a natural part of human diversity. Autistic people may communicate, learn, play, and connect differently—but they have their own unique strengths, joys, and ways of seeing the world.

Understanding more about autism can help you build a strong, supportive relationship with your great grandchild. It can also give you the confidence to be a steady, loving presence in their life—just by being there, listening, and learning.

You don't need to have all the answers. Your presence, your patience, and your willingness to understand are more than enough. This guide will walk with you every step of the way.





What is Autism?

Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference. That means your great grandchild's brain has developed in a way that means they experience the world a little differently to many other people. It's not something that's caused by parenting, vaccines, or anything anyone did or didn't do—it's simply a natural variation in how human brains work.

Autism is lifelong. Your great grandchild won't "grow out of it", and they don't need to. Being autistic isn't an illness or a problem to be solved—it's just a different way of thinking, communicating, and interacting. There's nothing wrong with your great grandchild, and nothing that needs to be "fixed".

Some autistic people may need more support in certain areas, such as communication, managing their emotions, or coping with sensory experiences like noise or bright lights. Others may need less day-to-day support but still benefit from understanding and acceptance from those around them.

Just as every person is different, every autistic person is different too. Some speak fluently, others are non-speaking and communicate in other ways. Some love routines, others are more flexible. Some have deep, passionate interests that bring them great joy. Many are incredibly observant, creative, honest, and kind.

Autism is not a tragedy. It's not something to be pitied or feared. It's a different way of being—and with the right support and acceptance, autistic people can lead happy, fulfilling lives, just like anyone else.

Understanding autism means embracing difference, not trying to change it. And that understanding can begin with you.





Common Traits and Strengths

Every autistic person is unique, and your great grandchild is no exception. Autism doesn't look the same in everyone—there's no single list of traits that fits all. That said, there are some common characteristics you might notice in your autistic great grandchild. These can include both strengths and areas where they may need a bit more support.

You might see that your great grandchild...

- Communicates in a different way—some autistic children are non-speaking or use few words, while others may speak a lot but find social conversations tricky.
- Enjoys routines and becomes upset by unexpected changes.
- Has intense interests or passions—they might talk about them often or play in the same way repeatedly.
- Might not enjoy loud noises, busy places, or being touched—this is called sensory sensitivity.
- Finds eye contact uncomfortable or doesn't respond to their name in the way you might expect.
- Plays differently with toys or prefers to play alone.

It's important to remember that these aren't “bad behaviours”—they're simply ways your grandchild is navigating the world that make sense to them.





Strengths of Autistic People

Autistic children often have wonderful qualities that shine through when they're in an environment where they feel safe and understood. Your great grandchild might:

- Be incredibly focused on topics or hobbies they love.
- Notice details others miss.
- Be wonderfully honest and straightforward.
- Have a brilliant memory for facts, patterns, or routines.
- Show deep care and loyalty to people they trust.
- Bring a unique perspective to the world that helps others see things differently.

Challenges they may Face

Just like all children, autistic children face challenges too. They might:

- Find it hard to understand what others are thinking or feeling.
- Struggle with unpredictable environments or unclear expectations.
- Feel overwhelmed by too much noise, light, or sensory input.
- Become anxious if they can't follow a routine or don't know what's happening next.

These challenges aren't the result of "bad behaviour". Often, they're signs your great grandchild is feeling overwhelmed or misunderstood. With kindness, patience, and support, they can learn strategies to manage—and you can help by simply being calm, predictable, and loving.



Everyone is Different

It's important to remember that being autistic is not all about challenges. It's about a different way of experiencing the world. Some autistic children may need lots of support; others may be very independent. Some speak, some don't. Some love hugs, others don't want to be touched. All are equally valuable and equally worthy of love, respect, and acceptance.

Autism is not a checklist to tick off—it's a spectrum of experiences. Your great grandchild is not defined by a label. They are still the same child you've always loved. Now, you just have a better understanding of how to connect with them and support them in their own unique way.





Supporting your Autistic Great Grandchild

Being a great grandparent is a special role—and your presence in your autistic great grandchild's life can be a powerful source of love, stability, and understanding. You don't need to be an expert on autism to make a difference. What matters most is your willingness to listen, learn, and love your grandchild for exactly who they are.

Be a Positive Influence

You have the chance to be someone who truly sees and values your great grandchild just as they are. Your calm, accepting presence can help them feel safe, loved, and confident in themselves. By showing that you're open to understanding their world—even if it's different from your own—you're already doing something wonderful.

Acceptance Matters

Autistic children thrive in environments where they are accepted, not judged or compared to others. They may not reach milestones in the same way or follow the same paths as their siblings or peers—and that's perfectly okay.

Meeting them where they are means:

- Respecting their ways of communicating, playing, and connecting.
- Being patient when they're overwhelmed or need space.
- Celebrating the progress they make in their own time.

Acceptance sends a powerful message: "You are loved exactly as you are."





Connecting with your Great Grandchild

You might find that connecting looks different than with your other great grandchildren—and that's not a bad thing. Some ways to build a relationship include:

- Following their lead in play or conversation.
- Joining in with their special interests (even if you don't quite understand the appeal!).
- Using simple language, visual cues, or alternative ways to communicate (like pictures or gestures).
- Being consistent—routines and predictability help autistic children feel secure.

Even if your great grandchild doesn't speak, they can still feel your love and enjoy your company. Eye contact, hugs, or verbal responses aren't the only ways to bond.

Celebrate their Identity

Your great grandchild's autism is not something to “overcome” or hide—it's part of who they are. Rather than trying to make them act more “typical”, help them feel proud of who they are. This means:

- Avoiding language that makes autism sound like a problem or burden.
- Supporting their right to stim (like hand-flapping or rocking) as a way of regulating emotions.
- Talking positively about differences and the value of seeing the world in different ways.

When you celebrate their uniqueness, you help build their confidence and self-worth.



Supporting your Grandchild (Their Parent/Carer)

Your great grandchild's parent or carer is on their own journey of learning, advocating, and sometimes juggling a lot of responsibilities. Your support can make things that little bit easier.

You might help by:

- Offering practical help (babysitting, lifts, meals, or just giving them a short break).
- Being someone, they can talk to without fear of judgement.
- Backing up their parenting choices, especially when they're making decisions that support their autistic child's needs—even if those choices are different from what you're used to.

Sometimes, simply saying, "You're doing a great job, how can I help?" can mean the world.

Keep Learning, Keep Loving

You don't need to have all the answers. Being open to learning—from your great grandchild, from their parents, and from autistic voices—shows how much you care.

Mistakes will happen, and that's okay. What matters is that you keep showing up with love, patience, and a willingness to grow.





Common Questions and Worries

It's completely natural to have questions, especially if you're still learning about autism and what it means for your great grandchild. You might also have worries or feel unsure about what the future holds—and that's okay. This section aims to gently answer some of the most common concerns grandparents have.

“Did something cause this?”

No. Autism isn't caused by anything anyone did or didn't do. It's a natural variation in how the brain develops. There is no link between autism and vaccines, parenting style, or anything else often blamed in the media. It's simply the way your grandchild is—and always has been.

“Will they grow out of it?”

Autism is lifelong. Your great grandchild will grow, change, and learn new skills—just like any child—but they will always be autistic. That's not a bad thing. In fact, accepting and embracing their autistic identity will help them to thrive and feel proud of who they are.

“Can they have friends and a happy life?”

Yes, absolutely. Autistic people may build relationships differently, and socialising can sometimes be challenging—but that doesn't mean they can't have meaningful friendships and joyful lives. With understanding and the right support, your great grandchild can find connection, happiness, and success in their own way.





Common Questions and Worries

“Will they go to school or get a job?”

Some autistic children go to mainstream schools, others to specialist settings—what matters most is the environment that supports them best. The same goes for adulthood: some autistic people work independently, others with support. Autistic people can and do live fulfilling, purposeful lives—though their path may look a little different.

“Why do they do that?” (e.g. flapping hands, repeating words, avoiding eye contact)

These behaviours are often your great grandchild's way of managing their emotions, expressing themselves, or processing the world around them. For example, flapping hands (a form of stimming) can be calming. Repeating words (called echolalia) might be a way to communicate or make sense of language. Avoiding eye contact may simply make them more comfortable.

These aren't “bad habits”—they're important parts of how your grandchild experiences and copes with the world.

“Is it OK to call them autistic?”

Yes! Many autistic people prefer identity-first language (e.g. autistic person) because autism is an integral part of who they are—not something separate. It's always best to listen to and respect the language your great grandchild and their parents choose to use.



Common Questions and Worries

“What if I get it wrong?”

You probably will at times—and that’s perfectly human. What matters is your willingness to keep learning and to approach your great grandchild with love, respect, and patience. You don’t need to be an expert. Just showing up and trying your best makes all the difference.

If you have other questions or worries, you’re not alone. It’s okay to feel unsure. Asking questions is a positive step, and there’s always support available.



Looking After Yourself

Being a great grandparent to an autistic child is a rewarding experience, but it can also come with its own set of challenges. It's important to recognise that, just like your great grandchild, you have your own feelings and needs. Looking after your own well-being is not only important for you but also for your ability to be the best support you can be for your great grandchild and their family.

Acknowledge Your Own Emotions

It's normal to have a mix of feelings when you first learn about your great grandchild's autism. You might feel confusion, sadness, worry, or even guilt. These emotions are a natural part of adjusting to the news. It's okay to feel them, and it's important to give yourself space to process them.

At the same time, try to focus on the positive aspects of your great grandchild's unique qualities. Their strengths, individuality, and the opportunity to love and support them are all wonderful things.

Remember, it's okay to have a range of feelings, and you don't need to push them away. Acknowledging your emotions is the first step in taking care of yourself.



Tips for Learning

The more you understand autism, the better equipped you'll be to support your grandchild. You don't need to become an expert overnight, but staying curious and open to learning will help you grow in your understanding. Here are some ways to keep learning:

- Ask questions: It's perfectly okay to ask your child (their parent) or others about autism, your grandchild's needs, and how you can be supportive.
- Read up: There are plenty of books, websites, and resources about autism, and many are written specifically for grandparents.
- Stay connected with professionals: Don't be afraid to ask for advice or guidance from healthcare professionals, teachers, or support workers who work with your grandchild.
- Listen to your grandchild: They are the best expert on their own experience. Pay attention to their likes, dislikes, needs, and preferences.

Remember, you're learning alongside them. It's a journey, not a race.



Self Care Matters

Looking after yourself is key to being there for others. When you feel physically and emotionally well, you're in a better position to offer support. Here are some ideas for self-care:

- **Rest:** Don't underestimate the power of a good rest. Take breaks when you need to and don't feel guilty about them.
- **Get outside:** Fresh air, a walk in the park, or even some quiet time in nature can help reset your mind.
- **Do things that bring you joy:** Whether it's a hobby, socialising with friends, or simply reading a good book, make time for things that make you feel happy.
- **Speak up if you need support:** If you're feeling overwhelmed, don't hesitate to talk to someone about it. This could be a close friend, family member, or a professional. You don't have to do everything on your own.

Taking care of your own health—both mental and physical—is just as important as caring for others. You can't pour from an empty cup.



Connect with Other Grandparents

If you can, seek out other grandparents who are on a similar journey. Connecting with others who understand what you're going through can offer reassurance, advice, and support. There are local and online groups specifically for grandparents of autistic children. Sharing experiences, listening to each other, and offering tips can make a world of difference.

You Don't Need to be Perfect - Just Present

There is no such thing as a “perfect” great grandparent. Your great grandchild doesn't need perfection—they need someone who is there for them, someone who loves and accepts them just as they are. You don't have to have all the answers or always know what to do. What matters most is that you're present, open, and willing to learn.

By being patient, kind, and willing to grow alongside your grandchild, you're giving them the gift of unconditional love and support. That's more than enough.





Helpful Language and What to Avoid

Language plays a key role in how we understand and interact with the world around us—and this includes how we speak about autism and autistic individuals. Using respectful, accurate, and affirming language helps create an environment where your great grandchild feels valued, understood, and accepted.

This section will help you understand some key principles of helpful language and highlight what to avoid.

Identity-First Language: Autism is a Part of Who They Are

One of the most important things to keep in mind is how we refer to someone's autism. Many autistic people, including parents and autistic adults, prefer identity-first language, such as "autistic person" or "autistic child," because it reflects that autism is an inherent part of their identity—just as much as their name, personality, or any other trait.

Using identity-first language acknowledges that autism is a core part of who they are, not something separate or something that needs to be “fixed.”

For example, instead of saying:

- “He has autism,” say “He is autistic.”
- “My child is diagnosed with autism” can be expressed as “My child is autistic.”

Of course, some individuals may prefer person-first language (e.g. "person with autism"), so it's always a good idea to listen to and respect individual preferences.





Phrases to Avoid

There are certain phrases that may be unintentionally disrespectful or harmful. These often stem from misunderstandings about autism and using them can contribute to stigma. Here are some to avoid:

- **"High-functioning"** and **"low-functioning"**: These terms oversimplify the complexity of autism and can be harmful. They create unnecessary comparisons that don't reflect the full range of abilities or challenges an autistic person may experience. Instead of labelling someone as "high" or "low functioning," it's better to describe specific strengths or areas where they need support.

For example:

- Instead of "She's high functioning," say, "She's very independent in some areas, but needs support with [specific tasks]."
- Instead of "He's low functioning," say, "He may need more support with communication, but he has a lot of strengths in [specific areas]."

This approach focuses on the individual's abilities and needs without reducing them to a label.

- **"Normal"** or **"typical"**: Referring to someone as "normal" or "typical" when comparing them to an autistic person can be invalidating. Every person has their own strengths and challenges, and labelling one group as "normal" suggests that those who are autistic are somehow "abnormal." Instead, use terms like "neurotypical" or simply "non-autistic."
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Respecting the Person's Dignity

At the core of all helpful language is respect. Just as with anyone, autistic people deserve to be spoken about in a way that preserves their dignity and celebrates their individuality. Avoid defining them by their challenges or focusing on deficits. Recognise and celebrate their abilities, talents, and potential.

A helpful way to think about language is to ask yourself, "Would I say this about any other person?" Using respectful, affirming language ensures that your great grandchild feels valued and understood for who they truly are.





Moving Forward with Love and Understanding

Becoming the great grandparent of an autistic child is a journey of learning, growth, and deep connection. It's perfectly normal to have questions, feel uncertain at times, or worry about the future. However, remember that you are not alone in this journey. There are countless great grandparents, grandparents, parents, and carers who are walking this path alongside you, learning together and supporting each other.

The most important thing you can give your great grandchild is your love, acceptance, and a willingness to learn. By embracing their unique way of being and celebrating their individuality, you create a safe, supportive environment where they can truly thrive. Autism is just one part of who your great grandchild is, and they are far more than their diagnosis. With patience, curiosity, and understanding, you'll build a relationship with your great grandchild that's filled with love and respect. No matter what, your presence and support are invaluable.

If you ever need extra support, advice, or someone to talk to, please don't hesitate to reach out to Together for Neurodiversity. We're here to help. Visit us at www.myneurodiversity.org.uk for more resources, guidance, and to connect with others who are on a similar journey.

Your journey as a great grandparent is unique, and with time, you'll see that the love and understanding you offer will make all the difference in the world to your great grandchild's life.

