

Teaching a Child with Autism to Express Affection

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Affection is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “a feeling of liking and caring for someone or something; tender attachment; fondness.” Affection can be expressed in different ways and is typically used to show love for another person, or to aid a person in emotional repair (i.e., when someone is sad or upset). Typical displays of affection are often thought to be cuddling, hugging, holding hands and kissing.

Since showing affection also involves the smell, sight and touch of another person, it can be very overwhelming for someone with autism. Affection doesn't always come naturally to individuals on the spectrum, and they sometimes lack the understanding that their family and friends *need* affection. On the other hand, it is often difficult for parents to understand why their child doesn't express affection in typical ways. Parents may be concerned when their child isn't comforted by their embrace, or their child doesn't say “I love you.”

It is vitally important that you NOT equate your child's lack of affection with lack of love. Your child absolutely loves you, even if it is not expressed in the ways you are expecting. Your child loves you. Your child relies on you. You are your child's strength.

To better understand the relationship between autism and affection, consider the following four questions.

1. How does your child emotionally repair?
2. How does your child show affection?
3. How can you create a balance of affection in your own family?
4. Why is it important for your child to express affection?

How does your child emotionally repair?

It is important to identify how your child emotionally repairs. In many instances, a parent's only experience of fixing an emotional difficulty is to show affection. However, hugging a child with autism in emotional turmoil will likely only exacerbate the situation. How can a parent help in this situation? The parent must determine what the child needs in order to overcome sadness, frustration, anxiety and fear.

When conducting a diagnostic assessment, I describe a scenario to each child with autism. I tell a story about a child with autism who comes home from school to find his mother crying at the kitchen table. The mother has tears running down her face and is obviously upset. The question I ask the child with autism is, “What do you do to make your mother feel better?” The child loves his mother and wants to help. The child suggests a tissue or a cup of tea. He might offer to tell her a joke, or he might say that if he does his homework his mom will not be sad anymore. He might say he'll do the dishes or put her to bed. He might suggest that talking about the Titanic would make her feel better. These suggestions offer insight into how the *child* repairs his own emotions, or restores his own happiness. In a child with typical development, a hug would be instinctive: a hug might help the mother feel better. But for a child on the spectrum, a squeeze is not helpful at all. Humour, a special interest or solitude are much more practical ways to deal with sadness.

If parents want to know how their child emotionally repairs, they should simply ask the child what makes him/her feel better in a sad or stressful situation. Parents should pay careful attention and keep a diary of what helps and what doesn't in emotional situations. Knowing how your child emotionally repairs will help you to moderate your own physical affection, and to understand why your child is not liberally offering affection.

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How does your child show affection?

Every child on the spectrum will express affection and love, just not always in the conventional way. It will probably be more subtle than a hug. Each child has his/her own signature expression of love and affection, and the key is to recognize and appreciate the gestures. I have a granddaughter with autism. She shows me affection by sitting next to me and reading her book. She's very cat-like. When sitting next to me, she will touch my arm in the very lightest of ways. This form of affection should not be viewed as less than a big hug. It is simply how she shows affection.

Other children on the spectrum show affection by helping a parent or sibling, by doing a sibling's homework or cleaning a family member's room, or simply by being in a parent's proximity. Many children show affection by sharing successes and happy moments with their parent. The fact that a child might not be cuddled up to a parent during a movie, or giving big hugs, does not mean that there is no show of affection. Parents simply need to be aware of and appreciate how their own child shows affection.

How can you create a balance of affection?

Parents want and, arguably, need affection. Each parent, child and family should seek to find an appropriate balance. Recognize that if affection is pursued or pushed on a child with autism, affection will become a source of conflict and will be perceived negatively. It will then potentially be avoided at all costs by the child because it was an uncomfortable experience. The following suggestions can help you find a balance.

- Begin by explaining to your child why parents, siblings and grandparents require affection. Explain that just as being alone makes your child feel better, a hug can make a family member feel better in a difficult situation.
- Decide together, and as a family, what are your acceptable and enjoyable levels of affection. A child on the spectrum may appreciate affection, but at a level and expression considered too mild for a neurotypical person. Discuss what the child's affection limits are and compromise to find a medium where the child is comfortable. Consider such factors as giving a proper warning before hugging, the intensity of the hug and the length of the hug.
- Teach your child the type of affection that is appropriate for different people. For example you can say "hello" to the post-man, give your friends a high-five, and give your parents a hug and a kiss.

- Foster cognitive affection by keeping a log of when your child gives and receives affection, and by asking your child these questions:

Why do we give affection?

What would happen if you stopped showing affection?

How do you feel when someone gives you affection?

How do you show affection to people you love?

Why is it important for your child to express affection?

Affection can be a typical person's best restorative in a difficult situation. A child with autism, on the other hand, may have difficulties coping with anxiety, anger and depression because affection makes him/her uncomfortable. This is why an individual with autism will need something else to be a restorative. It could be a special interest, solitude and structure or routine. However it is important to help your child develop and enjoy affection to the highest degree possible in order to provide another tool to help manage negative emotions when they arise.

Affection is essential for healthy relationships. Varying degrees of affection are necessary in a parent-child relationship, in friendships, and in future romantic relationships such as marriage. It is imperative to teach affection to young children so they are equipped with the ability to express affection and discuss affection in future friendships and romantic relationships.

There is nothing parents want more than to show affection to their child and to receive affection from their child. Although affection may not be displayed in a typical manner, your child can absolutely show affection in his/her own way, and it is up to you as a parent to identify your child's language of love.



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Tony has been invited to be a keynote speaker at many Australasian and international conferences. He presents workshops and runs training courses for parents, professionals and individuals with Asperger's syndrome all over the world. He is a prolific author of scientific papers and books on the subject.

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