

TALKING TO YOUR CHILD AND OTHERS ABOUT ASD:  
*WHO NEEDS TO KNOW  
 WHAT & WHEN?*

---

NATALIE MONTFORT, PHD  
 CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

© 2015. Do not reproduce, publish, or post to the internet without the expressed permission of the author.

1

TODAY'S EXPECTATIONS

We will be respectful of the ideas and opinions of others

We will be inclusive of all ability levels

We will be a source of uplifting ideas

2

TO TELL, OR NOT TO TELL?  
 THAT IS THE QUESTION.

---



3

WHY WOULD WE NOT WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT?

- Fear of hurting's child's self-esteem
- Fear of creating learned helplessness
- Fear of \_\_\_\_\_



4

WHY WOULD WE WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT?

---



- Increased self-awareness
- Increased empowerment
- Increased self-advocacy
- Understanding of strengths and weaknesses

5

THE LITERATURE IS OVERWHELMINGLY CLEAR:

Talking openly about differences and disabilities is the right choice.

- Literature on physical disabilities
- Literature on adoption
- Literature (recently) on ASD



6

TALKING OPENLY



Most professionals agree that telling children empowers them and helps them learn to become their own advocate.

- "That makes so much sense."
- "When I learned I had autism, I felt normal for the first time. I knew I wasn't the only one."

7

YOUR CHILDREN *WILL* FIND OUT.



Would you like to tell them intentionally or unintentionally?

Parenthood video clip (Season 2, Episode 17; 40:55 to 41:15)

8

Your children *will* find out.



Would you like to tell them, or let their peers?

---

(It may not be friendly...)

9

OKAY, OKAY... WE'RE READY TO TALK! BUT...

---

- When do we tell them?
- What do we say?
- What if he/she doesn't 'get' it?

10

HERE'S WHAT NOT TO DO:



What did you notice that could have gone better?

---

PARENTHOOD VIDEO CLIP (SEASON 2, EPISODE 18: 0:33 TO 2:35)

11

WHEN DO WE START TALKING?

---

- No age is too young or too old
  - use child-friendly language
- Speak openly about autism from the time you are able to do so *with composure*
- Your child will not 'get it' the first time and that is okay!

12

WHAT DO WE SAY?

DO WE USE THE "A" WORD?

- Hiding or avoiding using 'autism' sends the message that it is embarrassing, bad, or fatal

---

13

WHAT DO WE SAY?

Discuss autism matter-of-factly along with other differences such as divorce, depression, wearing glasses, adoption, diabetes, etc.

---



14

WHAT DO WE SAY?

- Your willingness to talk about autism casually and often reduces the likelihood of anxiety or shame and increases the likelihood of comprehension
- If you can, try not to create a situation where you have to 'break the news'



15

WHAT DO WE SAY?

TIPS FROM A TV DOCTOR TO MAX'S PARENTS:



Parenthood video clip (Season 2, Episode 18; 7:29 to 10:08)

16

ONE EXAMPLE OF TALKING WITH A CHILD:



Parenthood video clip (Season 2, Episode 18; 35:40 to 38:40)

---

MAX'S PARENTS GET IT RIGHT!

17

WHAT DO WE SAY?



- Avoid using words that give positive or negative value to characteristics
- Don't say: good/bad, well/poor, better/worse;
- Do say: efficient/inefficient, easier/harder
- Leave out the word "disorder" until understanding is very good
- Talk about successful people with autism or other people that your child knows with autism

18

### ONE IDEA:

Brain 'lights' script:

• You know how you find \_\_\_ really easy? Well, that's because when you \_\_\_, this part of your brain over here lights up. It's a really efficient part of the brain for \_\_\_. Well, when I \_\_\_, this part of my brain lights up over here. It is not the most efficient for \_\_\_. It doesn't mean I can't \_\_\_, but I may have to practice and work a little harder at it than you do.



19

Brain 'lights' script, continued:

• For \_\_\_, we're the opposite. I find \_\_\_ to pretty easy. When I \_\_\_, this part of my brain that is efficient for \_\_\_ lights up. You use this part over here for \_\_\_. It is less efficient, so that's why you find \_\_\_ more challenging. It doesn't mean you can't \_\_\_ just that you may have to work a hard and practice at it. That's why you practice \_\_\_ with/at \_\_\_.

20

### ANOTHER IDEA:



21



22

### HOUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM!



What do I say when my child says...

23

Wishing and Wondering

- *I wish \_\_\_ was easier for you too. I'm so proud of you for \_\_\_.*
- *Autism is just one thing about you. All the things about you make you special.*
- *You are so good at \_\_\_. Maybe without autism, that wouldn't be true.*

"I wish I didn't have autism."  
 "Why can't autism go away?"  
 "Why me?"

24

Feeling Alone or Not Understood

*"You don't understand because you don't have autism."*

- You're right, but my experience is \_\_\_.
- I don't understand, but I'd sure like to try. Can you help me with that?



25

### HOW DO I TALK TO FAMILY MEMBERS ABOUT AUTISM?

- Extended family
- Siblings



26

### TIPS FOR TALKING TO ADULT FAMILY MEMBERS:

- Try to avoid statements that blame autism for behavior
- Use words like "anxiety" that people generally understand
- Use and stick to a schedule... just like with children, you can blame the schedule for your exit or plan!
- Talk in terms of the child rather than "we"

27

### TIPS FOR TALKING TO OTHER CHILDREN:



- Explain stimming, atypical, or unexpected behavior
- Explain that autism is not contagious to others
- Use "can't's" and "won't's"
- Invite them to ask questions

28

### TIPS FOR TALKING TO STRANGERS:



- You have a decision- to ignore or to educate?
- Not sure what to do (are they being rude or trying to connect)? Ask why they care or stare: "Why do you ask?"
- Consider business cards
- Realize that no matter what you do, they may not 'get' it, and it is not your job to make them!

29

Provide resources to children, family, and strangers as needed.



30

QUESTIONS?

---



31