

# Factsheet for Fathers



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## Autism diagnosis

**Your child has been diagnosed with autism, it can be a lot to take in. As a father you may have felt that your child's behaviour wasn't that out of the ordinary, particularly if your child is quite young. You are probably experiencing a range of different feelings, reactions and thoughts. It is important to acknowledge why the specialist has come to this decision. It is not a diagnosis that professionals make lightly.**

Some fathers may suspect that there is something different about their child. However, they have had to be the one who reassures their partner that all is okay and have had little time to consider what the outcome of assessment might be. You may not have been able to make it to every appointment, as many families tend to share this responsibility for a variety of reasons, such as work or childcare etc. Sharing information is key, there is no right or wrong way to react. We are all different and how we deal with diagnosis will differ from person to person.

***"I attended the autism course yesterday. The lady delivering the course was amazing! I gained valuable knowledge to help my 19-month daughter and feel a huge weight lifted off my shoulders."***

**(Dad)**

## What's next?

Your child is the same person they have always been. Now that you know they are on the autism spectrum, you can better understand their needs, identify supports and help them fulfil their potential. You might find yourself searching the internet for answers to the many questions you might have. It's normal to have a mixture of emotions at this time.

Begin with understanding how your child's autism affects them. Every individual who gets a diagnosis of autism is unique because we are all different. Autism affects the way an individual relates to people, situations and the immediate environment. Many autistic people have difficulty processing everyday sensory information like sight, smell, touch, taste and sound.

Think back to when your child was younger, what were the signals you misunderstood, what reactions does your child have to situations? How have you adapted strategies to lessen these reactions so far? Helping your child starts with understanding how they are experiencing the world. If you are a stepfather, it can be difficult to understand the differences your stepchild has. Your partner has more experience and probably has the strategies that work well for your child, it may take some time, but you will get there too.

Fathers play an important role in their children's lives, therefore increasing your knowledge and maximising supports will enable you to develop strategies. If you and your partner are handling the news differently it may feel harder to talk to each other. Sharing your journey with a father of an autistic child can really make a difference and you may find you can talk to them and they 'understand'.

## What can you do?

It may be important for you to be practical about your child's needs and this can be very valuable to your family unit. You may be able to spend time creating some visual signs and symbols and developing strategies that will gradually assist your child. You can also share spending quality time with siblings, making sure they get the best support.

Educate yourself on the strategies that are used in school or recommended by autism training courses. Try to be consistent in using these within the home. Perhaps you and/or your partner could attend a local support group. There are often a lot of opportunities to find out about autism and related issues by talking to other parents or hearing speakers at meetings. Also check out if there are any fathers workshops in your area.

## Relationships

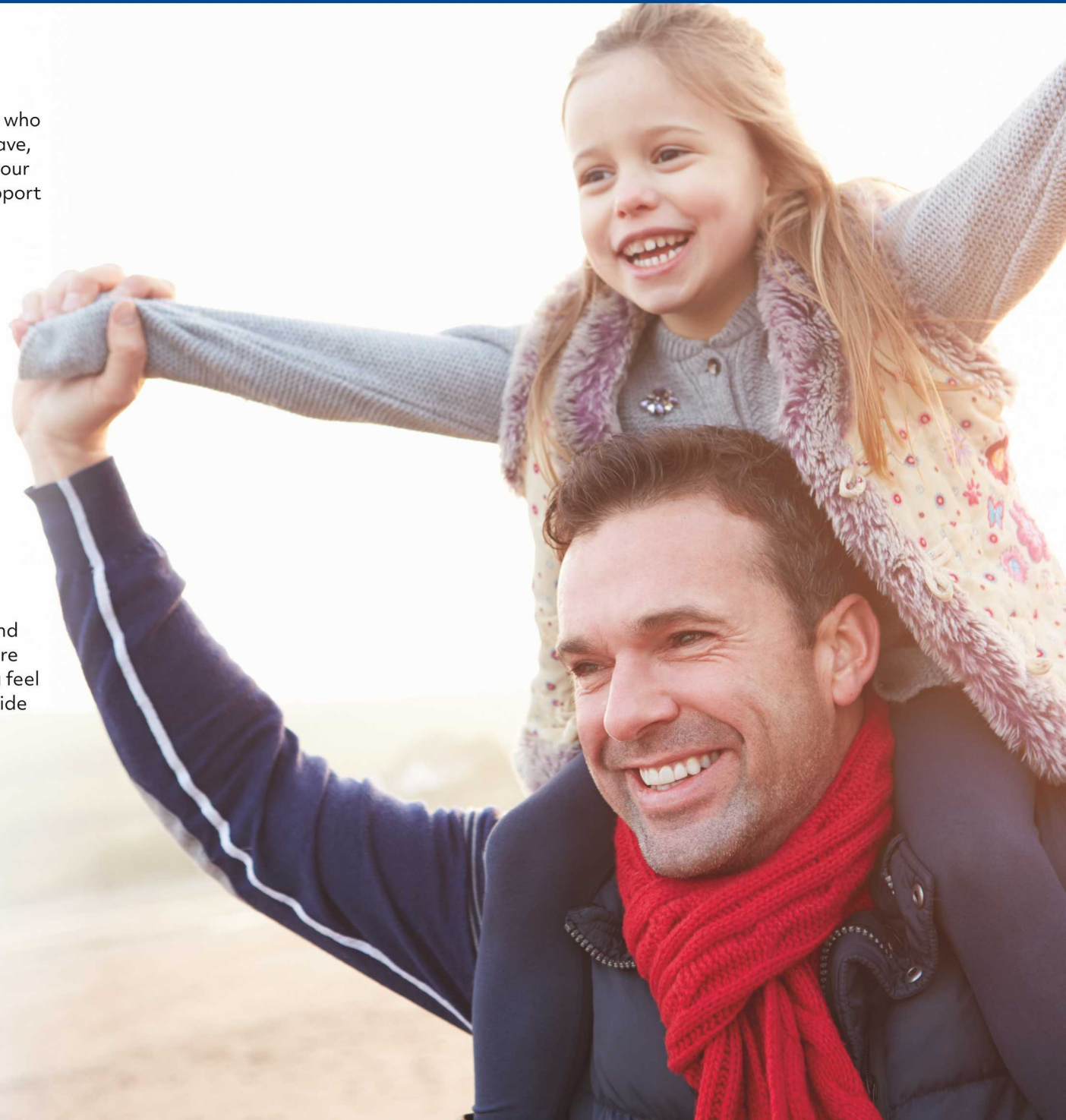
Think about your needs as a couple, prioritise spending quality time together into your routine. It may be vital to find someone you trust who will assist with childcare. Find out your rights in work for parental leave, time off for dependents, flexible working and use that time to help your child and your knowledge but also support your partner. Ask for support from family and friends. You may be anxious about someone else looking after your child, but you can give the person practical strategies to help manage any behavioural concerns that might be seen. The Keyhole® booklets available from Autism NI contain useful information and tips for younger children.

Be sure to look after your own wellbeing as parents, try not to overload yourselves with information that can increase stress levels. There might be times when one parent has taken a lot on, trying to best support the child and it's important for the other parent to recognise and address this. Try and find time to have a break and another equally important point is to communicate with each other, keeping things bottled up causes more harm than good.

Invest time in each other and your relationship, remembering that your partner may not want you to tell them 'it's all going to be alright'. They may need you to let them sound off, listen to them and understand what they are feeling is okay. Acknowledge that you are doing your best adapting and supporting your autistic child. If you feel that things are getting too much, there are agencies that can provide supports.

***"Thanks to the support of Autism NI, it gave me the strength to keep fighting for my two children to receive appropriate support in their schools. I've found attending my local support group empowering, supportive and provided me with confidence."***

**(Parent)**



## The future

Every autistic child has potential. Many fathers will worry about achievements in areas such as speech and academia etc. What is certain is autistic children will surprise us, as they grow and develop. We should never underestimate their potential, look back on how much your child has already accomplished.

### Remember:

Your partner may at times rely on you for motivation and this can be reciprocated. Try to work together, maintain regular routines and consistency maintaining strategies that your child is used to. If there are things to be worked out, seek independent supports such as counselling or mediation. Ask the school and specialists to inform you of appointments as well.



## Training

Autism NI run accredited training courses across Northern Ireland, many of these are free for parents/carers. We pride ourselves on providing training and advice that is evidence based, practical and to the highest standard of accuracy to ensure it is effective in supporting autistic people and their families.

## What if I think I have autism?

Some adults will recognise similar differences that they had as children and may still have as adults and begin to question if they have autism. They may want answers and explanations now that they know more about autism. Only you can decide if you wish to seek a referral and if so, you should speak with your GP about your options. Write down all the issues from your childhood and as an adult. Take these with you to the GP and request a referral on to a specialist.

## Useful resources

- Amazing Things Happen - Autism (YouTube)
- Rainbow Resource Kit - [www.autismni.org/rainbow-resource-kits.html](http://www.autismni.org/rainbow-resource-kits.html) (Downloadable from Autism NI website)
- No Two Stars are the Same - Books by Stellas
- Autism NI Helpline - 02890 401729 (Option 1)

