

How to Talk to a Kid with Autism Without Pulling Out Your Hair (or His!)

By Tina Cruz

The biggest hurdle that we face with my son's autism is that he looks so normal. There is an expectation for his behavior that sometimes he just flat cannot meet. But you can't see what is wrong with him at first glance. He isn't in a wheelchair. He hasn't lost his sight. Most of the time, he hears what you say. But he has a disability. I hate calling it that, but that is what it is. Yes, he has autism. That's not the disability, though. His disability, you ask? Peoples' attitudes. Judgmental women at the grocery store, and anyone who thinks he "should" know how to behave and that he is just the product of over-indulgent parents.

He deals with the attitudes of other children. Kids can be, if not cruel, just not understanding. They think he is weird. He talks funny, with more of a drone than other kids. Sometimes, especially when he is excited, he doesn't enunciate well. His topics go on and on. Frankly, many of his peers don't know what to do with him. It's hard. But you know what? He exists. He has a right to live a full life. I am not going to keep him at home because he might be a little strange in his talk about movie characters. He needs to learn how to interact with others, and some need to learn to be more tolerant. They can help each other.

The hardest thing for me to watch as a mother is to watch my son struggling socially to fit in. He tries so hard, is very gregarious, wants to engage people and interact. He just... isn't very good at it. Autism isn't a very good friend. Granted, I would imagine I am more tuned into his social gaffes than others may be. In fact, others seem to enjoy him. I am concerned when he is around other adults that he will talk their ear off and then get his feelings hurt. It worries me. I really try not to be, but I verge on being hyper-vigilant when he is talking to others, especially adults (his favorite people to interact with). They talk about how sweet he is, and kind. And yes, he is all of those things. But he's also extremely annoying.

I have talked with him about possible conversational approaches he could take. We have worked and role-played in order to figure out the give and take of conversations and how they can be approached. We discuss non-verbal cues that show that someone has grown weary of the interaction and is ready to move on. But he just doesn't get it. It absolutely isn't his fault, and I cannot blame him. It is the way he is wired. Lessons, especially social lessons, must be gone over in depth. We have to work out possible responses. Lather, Rinse, Repeat. He will talk to me, and we have a great talk about science, or the weather or whatever we are discussing. But as soon as he is around someone other than me or his father, it all goes out the window.

In his quest to enjoy someone else's company, to connect with them socially, he forgets everything we have discussed and goes to one of three subjects: Video games (namely the new Indy Wii game which he will describe for you, in detail all the way to the 7th level, if you let him.) What? You don't have quite that much time? Well, of course, my son won't figure that out...that's where I come in.

He also will discuss Lego, the rabbit from Monty Python (and no he has not seen the movie, just a few YouTube clips) and whatever he is into that month as well. Guaranteed to make your eyes glaze over and have you thinking to yourself, “Just look at the time!” But, give the kid a break, he really does try. And he wants to interact with you. He genuinely likes you and he is likable, too.

Here are a few suggestions to make it less painful for you both:

1. **Ask questions about things you are interested in.** Get him to talk about what you want... lead the conversation. If he starts in on Indiana Jones, change the subject...make it something related. “Yes, Indy was a really cool movie, but what did you think of Wall-E?” “Really? What did you like about it?” If you steer the conversation, it will go more smoothly.
2. **Bring someone else into the conversation,** and throw my son a bone...er, rather, a thread of conversation that he and the other person has in common. Once he is talking to the other person, escape! Yes, I am mostly kidding with this one! Besides, he would just catch you...
3. **Be HONEST.** Just tell him you can’t talk about that right now. That you are busy, maybe later you can discuss it. He probably won’t be hurt by it, he will appreciate your candor. But if you tell him this, know he has the memory of an elephant and long after you have forgotten? He will find you.
4. **Play a game.** I Spy, “I’m Thinking of a Word...” “When I Go To the Moon I’m Bringing...” these are all good choices. But don’t be surprised if he kicks your butt. The kid has an amazing attention to detail and his memory will blow you away.
5. **Engage in an activity you both enjoy.** Go to a ball game. Do a craft. Find time for one-on-one. Just know we are working on good sportsmanship to board games and video games...win or lose, he will shake your hand and say, “Good game!” Be prepared.
6. **If all else fails, shoot me a look. I will rescue you both.** Under no circumstances be unkind to him...he will remember it. You may not get a second chance.

Remember that he is a work in progress. He is really trying. If he is having a hard day, let me handle it. Please don’t judge my parenting, or question my decisions. I know my son, I know what helps him calm and what triggers him to fall apart. And realize that just because yesterday he had a conversation with you about physics doesn’t mean he can do it again today. He may be able to...in fact, he probably can.

But, the difficult thing with autism is that it is different every day. I continue to teach him, and he continues to grow. And really, that growth is all we can really ask of anyone. Get to know my son...or any kid with autism. I would bet you will find a great kid with a really unique way of looking at things.

Tina Cruz is a Fullerton-based writer, wife and mother of three children, two who have high-functioning autism. She advocates for autism awareness and education, as well as acceptance. She views autism as a growth process and the opportunity to connect parents to one another for support as a privilege. She is the Special Needs Editor at Type-A Mom (www.typeamom.com) and her own site, Send Chocolate (<http://casadecruz.blogspot.com/>), reflects her passion for her children and autism. She is a contributing writer to Inside Autism (<http://autism.freedomblogging.com/>).