

## Raising Autism 0-10

I became an OT in the midst of helping M with her Autism. I've picked up a lot along the way. Tools, tips, ideas that actually work sometimes. If sharing them makes even one parent's day a little bit easier, then it's worth it. Because we're in this together—even if we don't always say it out loud.

I see so many people out there doing the hard work of raising kids with disabilities. Autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, rare genetic stuff with names most people can't even pronounce... It doesn't matter what the label is. The pressure is real. The fear. The exhaustion. The guilt. The fight to get services, the stares from strangers, the way your world shrinks sometimes and you wonder if anyone really sees you anymore.

The book is called *Raising Autism*, but is for every parent raising a child who doesn't fit the mold. Every parent who's had to explain their kid's behavior in a grocery store. Every parent who's Googled symptoms at 2 a.m. while crying into their pillow. Every parent who feels both proud and totally alone. I see you.

Reflecting back on this journey has created a sense of accomplishment and pride in just how far we have come as a family. It also showed me I often zigged when I should have zagged, pushed when I should have pulled, and yelled when I should have kept silent. Learn from my mistakes when raising a kid with Autism. At least for the first 10 years of life.

## Chapter 1: Our Journey

Our first daughter (M) was born April 7, 2016. She got diagnosed with Autism August 21, 2023. Below is a recount of the journey from our perspective as the parents.

DATE June 29, 2017

MOOD 🙄

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Why won't you build sandcastles with me?

Honestly M, it's just wet sand. You're looking at it like its hot lava. Is it normal for kids to be this afraid of touching certain things? We worked hard to get you to the beach for an experience and as it would turn out, it's not your thing. Oh well.

DATE September 12, 2017

MOOD 🙄

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Pickier than normal

We had to take you in for constipation issues so many times I am losing count. We even traveled 4 hours through a blizzard because we thought you had seizures. Nope, couldn't poop because we have to bribe you with cheese to eat anything. You've been on a steady drip of miralax for as long as I can remember. The doctors call this normal but I am not so sure.

DATE February 19, 2018

MOOD 🙄

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It would seem M has a thing for climbing. She may very well grow up and climb Mt. Everest. We have been taking her to any park we can find within a 50 mile radius. If we don't, she will be climbing out of her crib at night. I've never thought of myself as a helicopter parent, but I am one. If the helicopter runs out of gas, this child's going flying out of a window.

DATE September 12, 2019

MOOD 😡

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Military doctors are about as useful as screen doors on a submarine. We have taken M to several who brush off all of our concerns. We just want somebody to talk to who can help us understand what to do. Can just one doctor be like, "hey, that sounds hard, have you tried this?"

DATE July 4, 2019

MOOD 😞

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Where's my kid?

You don't know what you don't know and I don't know where my kid is. It's the fourth of July and we love to lie out with some friends and watch the fireworks at the park near our house. M went to play and I haven't seen her in a while. We dressed her in a fashionable glow stick attire and I panic check every few minutes for the glowing pink thing going down the slide. I get up and walk around for what feels like 3 gray hairs worth of time and I find her eating some undetermined substance under the play structure. Upon further inspection, I found her gnawing on what I am hoping is chocolate. Good eye my little pirate.

DATE October 12, 2019

MOOD 😊

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There is a word for it

Transitory. I feel transitory. My military career is coming to an end. Forced retirement. I am being tasked to care for M and T while Meagan takes a jab at the whole working thing for a while. She has done a great job caring for these kids over the last few years and I hope I can do half as good. Only trouble is, I haven't had much practice. Good old U.S. of A had me working pretty non-stop their whole childhood.

M clearly has a disability but the doctors think it's in our heads. So what, she just gets really angry sometimes for no good reason? Thanks doctor. Any guidelines we can do to help her? No. Cool. Cool.

Well, if the military taught me anything it's how to pick up my whole life, and be a whole different person every 3 months or so. I will adapt. I only hope I can get to the bottom of whatever this is. Lord knows she needs it.

DATE December 10, 2019

MOOD 😊 ▾

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Home sweet ghetto

We are trying to stay positive about this move. I'm positive we are insane for not just living our life out in Washington. We sold our house for a profit but the realtor stole most of that. Our drive home was funded by our father in law which he expects back "at some point". In order to pay him back and save for a home we rented what can only be described as a poophole. It's nicer than some of the Barracks I've lived in but seriously is this any place to raise a family? It's temporary... That's what we keep telling ourselves.

DATE May 10, 2019

MOOD 😊 ▾

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Intel gathered

I'm happy to have access to civilian doctors. I know nothing about the medical world so I have to trust that this doctor is right on this one. They say M has Oppositional Defiant Disorder. Sounds cute right? They tell us that she defy's authority. Yeah no shit doc. What do I do about that? Surely the answer isn't to give her everything she wants to shut her up?

Figuring out M's issues is beginning to feel like pedaling uphill on a bicycle with a flat tire.. My mom often tells me stories of how hard it was to find me a doctor that understood my illness. I'm starting to get where you're coming from mom. I guess at least now we can bond over the insanity of it all.

Surely in the age of the internet we can classify experts and get them to their corresponding patients based on a questionnaire that parents fill out. Then those doctors and healthcare workers can be rated based on whether or not you actually felt helped.

DATE March 12, 2020

MOOD  ▼

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I'm honestly losing my mind

When we decided to move home and rent this janky bungalow, there was no intent to actually spend time here. Thanks Covid. Keeping M from putting everything in her mouth is a full time job. T is a cute kid, but honestly, how does he poop so much?

T mostly just drools and stares out the window. I wonder what he is thinking about. I can't wonder for too long though, because if I don't stare at M for more than 3 minutes she is getting into trouble. We baby proofed the joint, but some kids find trouble in anything short of a padded room.

I was finding some sanity by going to the gym 2 hours each day and then to the park to get the kids some sun. The gym is closed and the park has caution tape around it. Honestly? I'd rather be anywhere but here. I'm 30 pounds heavier than I was this time last year. I reach out to my military contacts with no real answers only "this shits wack" and "atleast with the masks on the SSgt can't tell if I shaved". Some things never change. My military friends have a great sense of humor..

I find myself missing the military with every fiber of my being. Did my back hurt worse than anything? Yes. Did I hate standing in the snow with a gas mask and machine gun for 12 hours? Yes. Were expectations clear and everything laid out neatly? Absolutely. That's what I miss the most, the clarity. Having the ODD diagnosis hasn't really given us any clarity. When I chat with my friends about it they just think it's a discipline issue. It's not.

DATE June 10, 2020

MOOD  ▼

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It's time to change this situation

This stay at home dad thing is for the birds, especially during a global pandemic. I felt so strange in today's school interview. I put on the only nice top I had, positioned the laptop to show the least crappy part of my bedroom, put t.v. on for the kids, and answered the questions like I actually deserve to be an O.T.

She seemed to enjoy the interview but I can't tell if she is laughing at how ridiculous my whole charade is, or if I am truly worthy. This is financially idiotic. I found out that the G.I. bill only pays for part of the schooling and after all is said and done I will still be 40k in debt. Some decisions aren't all about money though. This one is about becoming the type of person who can help my kids. These two lovely kids, who got into who knows what during today's interview. I came downstairs and they both scuttled toward the t.v. like they were sitting there the whole time. I'm going to pretend I didn't see them climbing through the cupboards. Very convincing kids.

DATE September 12, 2020

MOOD 😞 ▼

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Worst dad alive

Look, It's not like I neglect my kids. I spend as much time as humanly possible with each of them. But it is an impossible task to care for M and T every day while Meagan works upstairs.

M has always been a climber. I remember following her up huge play structures designed for kids much older than her. I did so with episodes of back spasms and migraines. There has to be something chemical in parents that forces us through hardship to protect our children.

Fast forward to today, and she climbed onto her dresser pulling down the old tube t.v. onto her foot. My combat medic training flashed back quick. I elevated her foot, squeezed it for dear life, and called 911. Meagan came home to the ambulance loading her up saying she will need stitches. I'm trying. I'm failing. I'm not sure I deserve to be a father but I guess if Meagan stays with me, I can make it up to her in the future.

DATE January 17, 2021

MOOD 😊 ▼

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Environment is everything

With Meagan working upstairs, we were in basically a 400 square foot cage for all of covid. My tires got slashed, there was a weed farm bust, and the place across the street caught fire. We saved up and got a house. I can almost feel the tension lifting from all of our shoulders. Money will be tight but we

had to get the F out of there! M's "spirited nature" was clearly getting worse from the living situation. She needs a home, with 2 parents who have hobbies and lives. She wasn't getting that.

I am feeling lots of shame over the parent I have been for the last year. It is clear to me that I can do better here. I just hope the last couple of years didn't do too much damage. For goodness sake why did I watch so much t.v. with her. I guess you do the best you can in the situation you're in. That was in nothing short of a mental health crisis. Buying this home and getting into school is just what I needed to help M and T grow and flourish. Fingers crossed little man doesn't develop the same issues M has.

DATE April 7, 2021

MOOD 😊

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Another year older

M turned 5 which is wicked cool. Except that she still needs me to help her poop and can't stand to be alone for more than a few minutes. I don't know how many more times I can sit on the bathtub smelling her stinkers before I tell her she's on her own. I try to help her calm by blowing out a candle that I frantically re-light as she screams in my ear from constipation pain.

Also weird.. She seems to think more literally than most kids her age. I can't seem to figure out where her imagination lies. I pretended to be a magician today, and she was just confused because "you're my dad, not a magician". Yeah kid, I know. But can we pretend? I guess not yet and that's okay.

DATE July 10, 2022

MOOD 😞

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More questions than answers

I thought going to grad school would open up doors to learn about my daughter's disability. They have yet to mention ODD. They have mentioned 99 other un-related psychiatric conditions. I'm exhausted and the extra stress of graduate school is leading to more meltdowns at home from our instability. M's school has been a wreck too. She doesn't belong there, that much is for sure. We are kind of financially pigeonholed into that situation for now, because I have school and Meagan works. Sorry M, we will figure this out soon.. promise.

DATE August 21, 2022

MOOD  ▼

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### Another doctors visit

I don't understand how I can take M to more doctor visits than I can keep track of and they don't know shit. I mean seriously... Why do we work so hard for insurance? We can barely afford to take our daughter to a person who might as well be a cosplaying doctor. Where are the doctors who themselves have special needs kids?

The doc today actually told me "have you tried timeout"? I'd be here for 2 hours trying to explain to her everything we have tried. I am pretty sure she would quit listening somewhere between time out and every brand of chicken nugget. I don't blame her for not knowing. It's not like I've got any clear answers yet either and I am part way through grad school.

DATE November 12, 2022

MOOD  ▼

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### Schools finally paying off

After a bit of time in grad school they let you work for free with kids who need help. I volunteered and have learned so much in recent months. I found a sensory profile and gave it to M and now we understand her sensory needs better. One step at a time, I am understanding her world. A lesson from my pediatric teacher this week: Kids do well if they can. Never forget that.

DATE January 12, 2023

MOOD  ▼

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### Nature heals all wounds.

I can't believe the difference in children that I see before my eyes. Removed from their daily environment and routine. We just spent 5 days together camping and I am pretty sure they would never return to civilization if there were a choice. Kind, attentive, and fun to spend time with. The kids need more nature for sure.



DATE April 7, 2023

MOOD 😊 ▾

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Happy birthday kiddo

7 years have passed in a blink. One would think that time is an illusion if others didn't constantly validate the belief. There is a sense of responsibility that weighs heavier with each birthday. Our feelings that M has more than ODD need further investigation. It's just hard with school and work, and all that. We will get there though.

DATE July 12, 2023

MOOD 😞 ▾

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Generational trauma

Today was scary. M had one of her moments where she tests my boundaries in a new environment and it did not go well.. We were at her grandpa's and she decided it would be a good time to shake his chair. He asked her to stop. I asked her to stop. She did not stop. He ended up on the floor holding her down yelling "are you going to stop now!" He is unable to get off the ground after I pull him off of her.

I honestly hesitate for 30 seconds and wonder if I should just leave him on the floor. He has been otherwise loving and I can't very well ruin our entire relationship over 1 encounter. I help him up and tell him never to lay a finger on my kids ever again. He apologies and we move on.

I am crying inside tonight as I realize this may have been Meagan's childhood. This is why she suppresses so many of her autistic traits. The generational trauma stops here..

DATE August 21, 2023

MOOD 😊 ▾

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When you're right all along but doctors don't validate you for years..

Meagan was talking about M having potential Autism when she was 4 years old. She's 7 and a half and we finally got a doctor to acknowledge her differences. What it took in the end was us learning the language of what to say, how to say it, and more than anything just telling the doctors exactly what she

needs and why. I'm wondering if we came from more educated backgrounds if we would have known how to get this figured out sooner. Can't change your upbringing though.

DATE October 21, 2023

MOOD 🥲

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### My birthday wish

It comes down to this: I'm donating plasma as often as I can to help cover the bills until I can take my exam and start earning an income. M is doing okay. Some days, I'm not sure if she's becoming more resilient as a child or if we're just calloused parents. Either way... it seems we're feeling okay lately—if not good—most days.

I'm just sad to be broke and donating plasma to make ends meet. It makes me woozy. There's word at Meagan's job that they are wiping out her entire department. Not cool, Corporate America.

I'm almost done with my last rotation, which means I'll soon be able to test and start making money. Let's just hope Meagan's job holds on a little longer.

On a brighter note, I worked with autistic kiddos for three months during my last rotation. It's crystal clear M has Autism now. What she needs for growth is still unclear. It is hidden in a fog that only lifts when we slow down enough to see clearly. And lately, we don't get to slow down very often.

DATE December 28, 2023

MOOD 🥲

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### Meat and potatoes

It would seem I am spending my Christmas this year throttling between keeping M regulated and studying for my exams in a few days. I failed last time and I don't have money in the bank to cover the cost of taking it again. Here's to knowing everything about anything just to know nothing about anybody. OT is too broad a career. I can't wait to start working so I can stop studying this generalized nonsense and get down to business.

DATE January 3, 2024

MOOD 🥳

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National Boards can eat it.

9 years of school, 7 different apartment/house moves, several debilitating injuries from the military and I am finally an OT. Why I have to know what the nerve root innervation pathway is for each nerve is beyond me.

I just want to help families navigate autism. Put me in the game coach! This process took more toll on my family than I like to admit. I'm just glad I can start working with other Autistic kiddos to better understand M. Meagan got let go from her job. I guess time to trade back. I'm ready to work again.

DATE Jan 30, 2024

MOOD 😊

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The spectrum is real wide

I am amazed at the breadth of symptoms that I'm witnessing. I am growing grateful that M's body dodged much of this disorder. 90% of girls with Autism I work with share the following in common with M.

1. They turn primal at home specifically toward their mothers.
2. They have serious sensory issues but mostly try to keep those problems to themselves so as to not cause any trouble.
3. They are fairly inattentive, toggling between real life and their head experience without much control.

What I should make of that is unclear just yet. I have to remind myself that I have 40 years in this career to ponder such things. It's a marathon, not a sprint.

DATE April 11, 2024

MOOD 😊

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Timing and brain coherence

I've been secretly working on M's timing as a way to organize her brain. Can't say it's a miracle and can't say it's snake oil, but we are enjoying the time together. I think we will try and keep the metronome training up for another few weeks and then let it go as the novelty fades. I hope she doesn't mind that I am trying to OT her. I don't think she notices.

DATE May 18, 2024

MOOD 🥳

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School is over. Thank the heavens.

I'd be amiss to say this year was anything but tragic for M at school. The teacher was older than my 1970 ford and she basically thought M wasn't trying. We tried for an IEP and failed. How.. How can I as an OT go into a school, demand an IEP and get a loose 504. Because she is fine academically, that's how. Except, she is losing her shit the second she walks in my door and is allowed to drop the mask she wore all day to appease you.

This little girl needs to move, interact and live. I'm excited we are going to trial homeschooling. Arizona is a great state for homeschooling. I just hope meagan can handle M without gutting her mental health.

DATE August 20, 2024

MOOD 😊

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School update

We decided it would be best to homeschool both kids. Even though T would be okay in a regular school, we wanted to get equal time with both kids. Summer break was a breeze and we are officially 3 weeks into our "year". The kids seem to be learning quickly and we aren't going through nearly the meltdowns we used to. Still some but not nearly as bad.

DATE October 12, 2024

MOOD  ▼

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Adapt and overcome

I'm not sure if it was the novelty of homeschooling in the beginning that led to peace. It would seem T and M are at each other's necks. Perhaps its time for a vacation, or a drink, or both. They are still learning, but it's at the expense of Meagan's mental health. Time to incorporate a steady rest schedule for her and pick up more of the chores around here.

DATE Nov 7, 2024

MOOD  ▼

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BJJ

Well, M had a trial class of jui jitsu a few weeks back. She convincingly sold me on the idea of her joining the gym. Who am I to deny her one of my favorite activities? But it's been 3 classes since then and the novelty is gone. So is her passion. So is my wallet.. Time to move on. Even driving to those 3 classes felt like more energy than I care to pull together after a long day's work.

DATE Nov 20, 2024

MOOD  ▼

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I'm at a loss

Honestly not sure what to do right now. We've gone the medication route and it's a miracle for 3 weeks followed by an immediate backlash. Meagan is convinced things will level out and we need to give the psychologist time to dial in the dose. I pray she is right.

I've done all the OT things I know to do. She has a good sleep routine, plenty of movement, a healthy gut microbiome, loving parents, friends, activities she enjoys, just enough pressure to grow but not enough to cause dysregulation, a voice in this house... What more can I give? I have to go back to the drawing board.

DATE December 12, 2024

MOOD 😊 ▾

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Was that just a regression or is communication that important?

It would seem that our recent fiasco was nothing more than a brief regression on an otherwise upward trajectory for M's emotional stability. Note to self: begin line graph to track regressions.

In any order, I am stoked to be able to take a deep breath and go back to my happy girl. Meagan and I have been tapping each other out when we see that we are growing agitated. We also started talking to M in a less directive tone. Amazing what that kid will do when it's her idea.

DATE December 15, 2024

MOOD 😞 ▾

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The yard sale obsession

I'm not sure which is worse, that M is trying to sell her home made pinyatas on the curb each day, or that I have been the one to drag out the table and drag it back in. Don't get me wrong, her entrepreneurial spirit inspires me. I just wish the pinatas would sell a little quicker so we could be done for now.

DATE Jan 16, 2025

MOOD 😊 ▾

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Her first team sport

I'm quite excited for M to get out and be on a team. It seems since we pulled her from school she has gained lots of socialability. She doesn't fit in, but at least she can find a nice kid or two and interact with them. I'm hoping this goes better than jui jitsu went... that was a trainwreck. That was a different time though and she is a more mature version of herself.

DATE February 12, 2025

MOOD 😊 ▾

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Emotional regulation eureka moment

M's mental health is nothing more than a brain problem. Cure the neuronal imbalance, cure the problem. Too bad there's no how to, maybe I will build one once I paid off my student loans. For now, looking into the gut-brain barrier and adrenal axis. Starting her on sensory protocol and elimination diet. More to come..

DATE March 23, 2025

MOOD 😊 ▾

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Bonding

I'm not sure either of my kids enjoy baseball, but they both put on a smile and practice to appease me. The three of us getting out and throwing the ball around has been a great bonding experience. M and T are both learning to be kind and encouraging. I think M likes that she is so much better than her little brother at something. Little man has a couple years before he leaves her in the dust.

It would seem we are on the right track. She is pleasant to be around 6/7 days a week. Winning! Is there still a gremlin in her? Absolutely, but we aren't tip toeing around glass anymore. It's more like stepping over legos now.

DATE Mar 29, 2025

MOOD 😞 ▾

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The coach is neurotypical

No sir, yelling at M you need to swing more while she nervously steps up to the plate is not going to help her any more than yelling at your wife to cook more will. It would seem I am going to spend much of my time teaching others how to interact with M. Even if his interaction with M upset me, I am proud that she is handling this situation with poise, at least until we get in the car. She is talking through it after the tears which is an emotional win.

DATE Apr 21, 2025

MOOD 😞 ▼

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### Another obsession

I was quite happy when M moved on from obsessing about Matilda and Wednesday. I felt her era of loving naughty young girl role models had come to an end. I was right... But damn it all if I didn't wait 3 hours at the mall just to see the minecraft movie for the 4th time in theatres. At least she paid for my ticket... I guess.

DATE May 19, 2025

MOOD 😊 ▼

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### The cavalry has arrived

My sister finally got her finger print card and is able to get paid to watch the kids. I'm loving DDD insurance. It's amazing how many resources open up to you once you're able to talk to doctors in their language. I am now 100% confident that becoming an OT was the right choice. I love the job and I am meeting parents in my shoes from a few years ago which constantly solidifies how thankful I am for where we are now.

DATE Jun 23, 2025

MOOD 😊 ▼

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### Gymnastics Camp

Relief seems to come in waves and this is a Damn Psunami. The kids are loving gymnastics camp. I get to drop them off conveniently on the way to work and it's giving Meagan the break she so desperately needs. I come home to a clean(ish) house and a relaxed wife playing the switch with the kids tucked in. It's a good season.



## Chapter 2: Kids

What's our relationship with our kids?

Building a relationship with our children is complicated and doesn't get enough thought. Who you are in relationship to your child dictates their relationship with every person they meet later in life. Here are some parental archetypes I've observed through my work, along with my personal reflections on the potential outcomes of each.

As you read through them, I invite you to reflect on two things:

1. Which of these archetypes do you see in yourself or strive to embody?
2. Which ones did you experience growing up?

This reflection isn't about judgment — it's about awareness and growth. When we recognize the patterns we come from and the ones we're creating, we can move forward with more intention and clarity.

### 1. The Nurturer (Ron Weasley's Mom - Harry Potter)

- Traits: Warm, empathetic, emotionally available, responsive to needs.
- Impact: Builds *secure attachment*. Children often grow up with strong self-esteem, emotional regulation, and trust in relationships.
- Watch-out: The nurturer can grow resentful when the child finds individuation. This can happen because the child no longer needs the nurturer. A child may attach to the nurturer longer than the nurturer is willing to engage in this role. Think attached at the hip 6 year old.

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### 2. The Guide (Phil Dunphy - Modern Family)

- Traits: Encourages independence, offers structure, teaches problem-solving, sets fair limits.
  - Impact: Children tend to develop strong executive functioning, autonomy, and internal motivation.
  - Watch-out: If overdone, can turn into performance pressure or perfectionism. The guide must teach the child to become their own guide to avoid pitfalls of dependence.
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### 3. The Protector (Joyce Byers - Stranger Things)

- Traits: Vigilant, safety-focused, tends to worry about dangers and shields the child.
  - Impact: A child may feel safe and valued — but may also develop *anxieties*, dependency, or fear of failure if overprotected.
  - Watch-out: Helicopter parenting can limit risk-taking and resilience. Children may not engage in dangerous tasks that would benefit their overall development.
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### 4. The Controller (Red Forman - That 70's Show)

- Traits: Values obedience, often uses strict discipline, may be emotionally distant.
  - Impact: Children may comply out of fear but can develop people-pleasing tendencies, low self-worth, or struggle with autonomy.
  - Watch-out: If you want to see the result of the controller archetype look at individuals born in the 1950's. In this post WWII Era children were to be seen and not heard. Many men brought up in this era developed a tough head down and work mentality along with an inability to express emotions.
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### 5. The Chaotic/Unpredictable (Frank Gallagher - Shameless)

- Traits: Emotionally inconsistent, may be dealing with trauma, addiction, or mental health issues.
  - Impact: Children may become hyper-vigilant, anxious, or take on a “parentified” role. Often results in unstable emotional bonds, causing fear or mistrust.
  - Watch-out: High risk for dysregulation and emotional confusion in kids. It is my belief that many children that I work with are dysregulated in part due to this archetype. For this reason, I try my best to help parents thrive as much as I try and help the kids.
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### 6. The Dreamer (Lorelai Gilmore - Gilmore Girls)

- Traits: Loving in theory but not emotionally present or attuned. May be distracted, focused on their own goals, or lost in fantasy.
- Impact: A child may feel unseen or emotionally neglected despite being materially cared for.

- Watch-out: Leads to deep yearning for connection or validation.
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#### 7. The Friend (Regina George's Mom in Mean Girls)

- Traits: Fun, non-authoritative, avoids conflict or discipline to maintain closeness.
- Impact: Kids may feel emotionally close but lack guidance or structure. Can lead to poor boundary development or insecurity in leadership roles.
- Watch-out: Kids might feel pressure to meet the parent's emotional needs. Parents may feel emotionally cut off as their child ages and locates more appropriate friends.

As children are bonding with their caregiver, they require a level of consistency and predictability within the roles they are being exposed to. A caregiver who bounces between roles such as the friend to the controller is confusing the child's internal compass. This child is likely to develop an emotional whiplash and struggle with attachment to others in the future.

Sometimes, one parent does most of the work and they are forced to switch between the roles to be everything to the child. These parents need as much support as we can possibly get them. More on getting support later on in the book.

Meagan and I discussed our perceived roles in the creation of this book. I thought she was a nurturer and I was a guide. It turned out she was everything and I wasn't doing enough. We sat down and figured out what I could do around here to help out.

#### Behavioral modifications

Kids on the spectrum can come out of the box with all kinds of behaviors that can get them into big trouble. Entire business structures have been built to manage the behaviors of Autistic children (ABA therapy). I will not attempt to sway you toward any one way of molding your child's behavior. I will just let you know what worked well in my household over the years and what works in my clinic.

Pick Fewer Battles, but fight the battles you do pick to the death.

I used to try to correct everything. Every noise. Every bounce. Every little "no" that came out of my kid's mouth. But all that did was wear both of us down. I'd end the day exhausted, and they'd end it feeling like I was always on their case.

Now, I ask myself one simple question: *Is this worth fixing right now?*

If not... maybe it can slide today. As kids gain awareness they will pick up on subtle cues such as people leaving the room due to their behavior.

We can't spend all our energy trying to "fix" every behavior. Some stuff just needs to pass. Yeah, your kid might feel like they "got away with it." But you know what? You're saving your energy for when it actually matters. The big things. The teachable moments that stick.

Looking back at my first 10 years at parenting I realize that there is plenty of time. We've got until these kids are about 25 before we expect true independence. That's 15 more years with M. After seeing the last 10 years progress there is no doubt that we have plenty of runway for takeoff.

If you're the kind of parent who reads books like this? Who's out here trying to figure it out—even when it's hard? Your kid will end up A okay. Why? Because *you're in it*. You're trying. And trying matters way more than being perfect ever will.

The battles you do choose to fight should be fought consistently to let the child know that this is the structure of the world they live in. As my kids have aged, we adopted a family meeting quarterly (every 3 months). This is where we discuss what rules are working and what aren't. Rules getting changed outside of this quarterly meeting are allowed if both parents agree. You'll find a template for quarterly meetings at the end of this book.

Say What You Want, Not What You Don't

I used to always say stuff like:

"Don't throw that!"

"Stop yelling!"

"Quit running in the house!"

And then I'd get frustrated when it didn't work.

But here's the thing—M's brain heard the "don't"... but didn't know *what to* do instead.

Our precious autistic kiddo's don't always come downloaded with the script of what to do in a given situation. It is for this reason that I have explained three times this week that it is okay for her brother to walk away from the table to fart even though we have a rule to stay at the table while eating. My neurotypical son on the other hand, understood this rule almost instinctively. In other words, he understood the rule had a context.

Autistic brains are wired to catch action words. So when I say “Don’t yell,” all she hears is “yell.” She also doesn’t seem to get tone of voice or understand analogies or non-literal statements. Consider these things when communicating with a person with Autism.

Here are some examples of how to speak instead.

- Instead of “Don’t throw,” I say, “Hands stay on the table.”
- Instead of “Stop yelling,” I say, “Use a calm voice.”
- Instead of “No running,” I say, “simon says walk”

This idea of explaining to your autistic kiddo how the world works goes beyond commands. They may or may not understand 101 things that a neurotypical child somehow understands without direction. Once they are taught these things though, it becomes a deep part of them that they will keep forevermore. Become the teacher your kiddo needs you to be.

Also, M learned her language in phrases and she would often repeat those phrases. It’s been at times like living with a parrot that reflects back to be all the dumb shit I have said in my past. It is for this reason that we have learned to be extremely precise in our language. Don’t say anything you don’t want repeated.

### Create Predictable Routines

Not every day has to be perfectly planned. Honestly, I don’t even believe in scheduling every single minute. But what *does* seem to help—especially with my kids—is giving them a little heads up about what’s coming next.

When it’s just me holding things down, I like to set the tone early. We sit down in the morning and I ask, “What do y’all want to do today?” Everyone throws out ideas. Bike rides, snacks, maybe a movie. We don’t always do everything, but we build a rough little plan of the next few hours.

Once those hours are up, I run these parts like I’m Sheriff Woody. I’m the director.” That means we’re doing things my way for a bit. No negotiations. It might be cleaning, running an errand, or something they wouldn’t have picked.

But I always let them know they’ll get another turn later. It gives them something to look forward to. It teaches flexibility without it feeling like a power struggle. This rhythm—*their turn, my turn, their turn*—has saved my turkey more times than I can count.

## Use task breaks Instead of punishment

Sometimes I can look into my daughters eyes and tell she is having a hard time in that body of hers. That's my chance to ask how she is doing and if she would like to switch activities for 3 minutes. That swap of activity or "sensory break" gives her the chance to blow off steam. Remember the whole blow off steam thing? Yeah.. When you and your child both learn to blow it off we call that Co-regulation, and you, dear reader, are looking like a co-regulation champion right about now.

## Connect First, Then Correct

It's catchy right? I'm not sure where I heard it but it's good advice. If your kid or you is spiraling into a storm of emotions, it's best to let that blow over. Once tensions have settled, you can connect to your child through their eyes and soft touch before offering your corrective advice. If a kid is not mentally able to connect at that time then it may be best to save that lesson for later.

*Ask: Will this help my kid feel more in control of their day?*

One day, our daughter was having a rough time. I mean, the kind of day where everything is a fight. The wrong socks, the wrong spoon, the wrong everything. Out of nowhere, in the middle of all that frustration, she asked, "Can I have ice cream?" Now, normally we'd say no. It wasn't snack time. It wasn't planned. But instead of shutting it down, Meagan paused and just said: "Yeah, sure."

And something shifted. Like letting a little air out of an overfilled balloon. That one yes took the pressure off. The day didn't magically become perfect, but it stopped spiraling. Our daughter felt like she got a win. And that changed everything.

Letting your kid win sometimes isn't giving up. It's giving them power in a safe, thoughtful way.

It won't work every time. Sometimes saying yes just feeds into more demands. But every now and then, it's exactly what they need. Some kids need a little control, a little joy, and a little break from the rules.

This advice could backfire in a number of ways and so I am preparing my caveates. You could misinterpret me as saying "giving in to your child's demands will make your life easier". That isn't what I am saying. You could say "I thought my kid needs predictable expectations". I did say that, and I

mean it, but it's not so black and white. What I am saying is, there comes a time when everybody is fried from life and it's okay to slip into momentary pleasure to lighten the load.

What behaviors are okay?

Some behaviors are just so classically autistic that we would be foolish to try and stop them. I let all of my clients stim to their hearts desire, chew on things if they feel the need, and wiggle their hearts out. I allow them to express frustrations verbally. I do not allow them to physically harm themselves or others. I do not allow them to run away from adults in dangerous areas but I do let them run away if they are en route to their favorite destinations.

At home we have worked on different behaviors quarterly for the last year or two. It is important to sit down with your spouse and chat about where your child is and where you would like them to be. You can then create a roadmap and guidelines to help get you where you want to go. After all, we can't reach our destination without first picking it. For your convenience, there are prompts at the end of this book to help you create your roadmap for behavioral modification.

Feeding

I would be amiss if I didn't write a chapter on feeding. Feeding therapy is my number one request from parents. Although, quite honestly, it's the easiest part of my job. It's like a built-in lunch break with a cool kid.

The truth is, parents who decide to follow specific guidelines I give them are graduated within 5 months. I give you here, the things that seem to be universally true when feeding autistic kiddos. Honestly, feeding my tweedle dee and tweedle dum at home is similar, except that all reactions from tweedle dum are dialed up to 100. Tweedle dee says "ugh I don't like peas" and tweedle dum says "nuh uh! No way am I touching those squishy nasty peas!" Enough stalling though, I hope you find these tips useful.

100% of the cookies and ice cream in my house get eaten.

A startling statistic, I know. We have never once eaten half a sleeve of Oreos and left the rest to go stale. On the flip side, at least 50% of the avocados we buy go bad. Every time.

Why? Two reasons:

1. Avocados are only delicious at peak ripeness and can turn in the blink of an eye.
2. My kids, my wife, and let's be honest, even I, am not sneaking avocados when no one is looking.

I share this story to make a point about habit formation and food exposure.

Parents often come to me asking if I can help their child eat more fruit. They don't dare mention the V-word (vegetables), because their kid has likely already thrown those across the room.

My first response is always this: Change the environment first.

A child without constant access to pizza, cookies, and drive-thru fries will eventually eat what *is* available. That doesn't mean they'll suddenly love kale, but it does mean they'll get curious, hungry, and begin to explore. This is harder for kids exposed to school where pop tarts are on the breakfast menu.

We're starting from a place of trust: you already know what the "junk" foods are. Toss them (or give them to a neighbor you don't like), and let's move on.

### Environmental Additives to Encourage Healthy Eating

1. Make healthy food visible and accessible: Kids eat what they *see*.

Keep fruit in a bowl on the counter. Pre-cut veggies in clear containers at eye level in the fridge and label them fun things like "brain berries" and "dinosaur fuel". As children age, label them things that relate to the effect they produce in the body such as labeling carrots "laser vision logs". Have skewers in a predictable location so that kids can kabob as they please. Leave out a bowl of snap peas or mini-peppers out like you would popcorn.

2. Use "friction" to your advantage

Friction between a person and their preferred pleasure creates a barrier to entry. Companies are working endlessly to break those frictions. With food ready to eat and phones on quick unlock, companies are addicting us faster than ever. Adding friction is our way of fighting back.

Put snacks that are less ideal in harder-to-reach places (if you haven't tossed them). Consider locking them away and only accessing them if the whole family agrees. Put a goal of a certain amount



of successful foods explored before engaging. Get creative and stick to it. Friction is your friend.

### 3. Serve “safe foods” alongside new foods on most days

Every hero needs a sidekick, and when it comes to feeding, *safe foods* are just that. Safe foods are the familiar, trusted foods that your child is almost always willing to eat — even on a bad day, even upside down, even while dramatically proclaiming that they are “starving but also not hungry.”

Safe foods are the anchor that allow children to feel that the table is an environment they are accepted to visit. Sometimes parents worry that giving safe foods will not provide enough pressure for the child to jump into eating the new foods. Trust Mr. J on this one. Safe foods are launch pads for which their rocket can take off and reach destination, variety. You can limit the amount of the safe food and encourage exploration of the rest of the food before they can have more of the safe food.

### 4. Normalize leftovers and food repetition

If your kid tries roasted carrots today, offer them again tomorrow. Exposure builds familiarity. Familiarity builds preference. Over do the repetition though and you will have a child begging for novelty.

### 5. Mini portions, big variety

Use a muffin tin or lunch tray to offer a “sampler platter” of colors and textures. It feels like play, not pressure. Encourage children to shop with you and pick a variety of things they want on the platter. Planning a party? Have your kiddo help you hand-build the vegetable platter.

### 6. Ditch the “clean plate club”

Focus on *exploration* over consumption. The goal is interaction, not inhalation. This is, of course, not great universal advice. If your kids are chronically under-eating then encouraging larger portions is highly recommended.

Admittedly... we live by a variant of the clean plate club in my house. If any of us want a “pumpkin pie”, our term for dessert after dinner, then we have to finish all of our dinner. Mostly our dessert is protein icecream from the ninja creamy so it’s not that bad anyways.

When I mention ditching the clean plate club I mean my childhood of “you better finish everything on that plate or you’re not leaving the table”. This sort of old school feeding of children is best served with a side of “children are starving in Africa”. You get my point. Leave this in the 1900’s.

## 7. Eat together, model curiosity

You don't have to love it—just try it in front of them and describe what you notice. Curiosity is contagious. Model exploration for your children. Take them to new restaurants that make you cringe, buy the vegetables you can't pronounce much less cook. Learn to mess up, laugh, and enjoy your evening learning together. Being truly curious about food is the #1 thing you can do to help your kid learn to explore new foods.

## 8. Let your child help prep

Letting your child help prepare food is one of the easiest (and messiest!) ways to increase their interest in eating it. When kids touch, smell, and interact with food before it hits their plate, it becomes *familiar*—which lowers the “ick” factor and boosts curiosity. Even toddlers can rinse produce, tear lettuce, or stir ingredients. Preschoolers love using kid-safe knives to slice bananas or cucumbers. Older kids can measure, mix, or take charge of a simple recipe. The goal isn't perfect presentation—it's building comfort and connection around food. When they help make it, they're far more likely to taste it.

## 9. What gets measured, improves.

Keep a food log of your child's favorite foods. This can be in your head but if your brain is anything like mine post TikTok then it's probably best to write it down. Have children rate their favorites from yuck to Yeaaaaahhhhh boooooiiii and curiously make changes to find patterns. Use A.I. tools like chat GPT to ask “What do these 10 things have in common”. The A.I. can help turn your food log into an action plan and can even get you from pizza to broccoli if you prompt it with “please help me get my kid to eat x through food chaining, they currently only eat y”.

## 10. Build up a cookbook of your favorite recipes

Meagan started this one year ago and I have been grateful ever since. It can be so easy to fall into the trap of eating the same few things. A good family cookbook and weekly cooking plans are required to add variety to a child's life. The cookbook is the first step in saying “we are not eating processed foods, we are going to cook ourselves”. Some day I may digitize our cookbook but for now, go write down your top 10 meals and add a new one each week.

What about the kids who are 3 days without eating out demanding McDonalds chicken nuggets be the next thing that enters their mouth? What if that kid is already low on their caloric intake and is going to cause health issues if you don't act? Or what of the kids who won't drink water unless it's artificially flavored? If that is your child, you are enacting a very different playbook. Top priority is getting your kid food and healthy water into their body. Your child is likely in a chemical dependency and imbalance if they have reached this point. How can you fix a child's chemical imbalance and get them to want regular foods once again?

Restoring food curiosity is a biochemical problem. Believe it or not, our bacteria within our intestines dictate our cravings. There is a constant war in every human's tubes mouth to anus. The war is to see which bacteria, fungi, and microbes are allowed to live in that domain. In a nutshell, processed foods feed team blue while fermented foods feed team green. In research for this chapter I found myself consuming piles of books on gut bacteria only to realize that it boils down to eating foods without labels.

But your child isn't eating regular foods with labels much less without labels so what kind of advice is that? I hear you. To tip the balance back is going to require 6-ish months of strategy but we know what steps work best.

#### Step 1: The initiation phase:

Make a list of all of your child's safe foods and identify which sensory properties these have in common. Are they crunchy, salty, warm, dry? What exactly is your kid's body craving? Stop all pressure to try new foods in this phase. We want to focus on building a healthy mental connection with food even if those foods are unhealthy. Begin a gut-friendly probiotic. We take Culturelle kids purely probiotic but there are many good options.

#### Step 2: Food chaining:

Take the sensory experience of your child's favorite foods and begin to create similar but slightly different experiences. Try for once a week at first and slowly introduce food chained foods more often as your child is more accepting of the novel foods. Online you will find whole communities of parents attempting to re-create your child's addicted food at home in a healthier way. Food chaining for the child addicted to water additives would include decreasing the addictive substance amount and swapping in a healthier alternative in this stage.

Example Chain (Nuggets → Clean Protein):

1. McNuggets
2. Dino nuggets (frozen, air-fried)
3. Home-breaded chicken tenders (crunchy crust)
4. Plain grilled chicken strips
5. Shredded chicken in broth or tacos

Example Chain (Fries → Prebiotic Veggies):

1. McDonald's fries
2. Frozen fast-food style fries
3. Air-fried russet or sweet potato fries
4. Roasted carrots or parsnips (similar shape)
5. Chilled jicama sticks or apple slices (crunchy sweet fiber)

Step 3: Build that Biome

Your child has successfully explored at least 3 new foods in the past month. This is an indicator that the kids' gut has grown with many members of the army on the green team. It is time to airdrop weapons for the green team. Fermented foods and pre-biotic fiber are the secret weapons. Sneaking a pre-biotic fiber into home made icecream or smoothies seems to be the best delivery method. After all, you can't just drop these weapons in an obvious way. Your child is going to revert in an instant if you even mention sauerkraut. Introducing a spore based pro-biotic with separate strains at this point is like releasing captain america in the battlefield. Spore based pro-biotics are only available in pills at the time of writing which is why it's optional.

#### Step 4: Wind it back

At this point your child is hopefully not spending days without food in demand of their favorite addiction. Your happy meals are at least spread a few days apart and your feeling some relief. Now you can start back up at the beginning of the feeding chapter and run the steps.

## Sensory processing

We can't talk for long about Autism without bringing up sensory processing. Autism is a neurological disorder after all and in most cases presents in less than ideal sensory processing abilities. By the end of this chapter you should be able to identify your child's specific sensory needs and have the strategies to help their system feel regulated.

The human nervous system can be thought of as electricity that is created by chemical reactions. The chemicals we contain within us are made in many ways. Our interaction with the environment causes biological changes that turn into electrical charge. The food we eat helps fuel healthy conduction within the wires of our bodies. The system itself operates on loops so that a reaction that was once had is likely to happen again in the future. I give you this framework of thinking of the nervous system to tell you this: If you wish to regulate a nervous system, it is best to treat it from all angles.

Sensory processing is a term used to define our ability to take in the world around us. We do this through 8 different systems. Don't get overwhelmed, I will keep it simple. Your ears hear (hearing), your eyes see (vision), your nose smells and stores memory (olfactory), your tongue is responsible for registering taste (gustatory), your inner ear helps you orient your head in space and know if your direction of travel (vestibular), your muscles tell your body where you are (proprioception), many neurons inside of you work to tell your brain how your insides feel (interoception), your skin absorbs the outside world's pressure and temperature (tactile).

All of those sensory systems work together in harmony to create the human experience. In an individual with Autism, some of those systems are taking in too much information (overreactive) and some systems are taking in too little information (underreactive). If a system is overreactive then the child will be avoiding that input. For example, a child who is overreactive in taste would find eating difficult because they would taste variations in food to a greater degree than we would. The opposite is also true, if the child's system was not receiving information from the tongue (under-reactive) then they are likely to be willing to put almost anything in their mouths.

Spotting over and under-reactivity is a skill that you can develop through self-exploration. I urge you to pay more attention to your own sensory experience of the world. Slow down and feel your shirt fully as you put it on, sip your tea and imbibe it. The more you can learn to experience the world

around you through senses and out of thought, the better you will understand your child's sensory experiences.

Spotting your child's sensory profile truly is as simple as keeping an eye on them and noticing their reactions. If your child is regularly over-reacting to a given sense (squinting in bright lights, running from loud noises, avoiding certain tastes), then it's a given that specific sense is over-responsive. On the flipside, if you're watching your child and they seem to not notice their name being called, ignore visual stimuli, and are generally lethargic then you would expect many of their sensory systems are under-reacting.

So, your child is over-reacting or under-reacting to various inputs around them. The first thing to try in regulating your child is what I like to call the *direct approach*. In the *direct approach*, we are addressing senses individually based on their needs. This can occur in 2 ways.

1. Give them something we bought to help them to optimize the input to their body. Think weighted vest for under-reactive proprioception or headphones for over-reactive hearing.
2. We could teach them to manage their responses. Think exposure to many foods slowly for over-reactive taste or spinning a kid more often for under-reactive vestibular.

The direct approach is often what is happening behind closed doors at your local OT department. We are targeting your child's specific sensory needs and helping their bodies adapt through weekly gradual exposure.

The human body controls its energy levels based on the balance between internal factors and external factors. If your kid is low energy, you can grab their arms and wiggle them all over to see if this can wake them up. Spinning, jumping, and eating crunchy things is also alerting. High frequency tones (above 500 hz) or heavy music is alerting. Smells such as peppermint, citrus, eucalyptus, spearmint, pine, and cinnamon are alerting. Shallow breathing and bright/visually busy environments are alerting.

If your kid is high energy, you will want to give them tons of movement under load. Think animal walks, wall pushups, taking out the trash, and intense games of Simon Says. If you know your kid is unlikely to sit for dinner, homework, etc.. then you can use movement under load to help them calm before sitting. Rhythmic forward back motions and deep pressure to the joints is also calming if done right. Lower frequency (under 500 hz), brown noise, and calm music is calming. Smells such as lavender, chamomile, vanilla, sandalwood, rose, cedarwood, and frankincense are calming. Longer exhales are calming and darker environments are calming.

Up until this point, I have been speaking to the less serious cases of sensory processing disorder. If your child is 2-5 years old and is a danger to themselves due to their sensory seeking behaviors then this next part is for you. This is, admittedly, harder to squeeze into your schedule than adding carrots to a lunch or vanilla to a bracelet they wear. The commitment is ideally 3 months long at 20 minutes per day.

Step 1: Install a lycra swing in your home. You can hang it from your ceiling or buy a stand. If you do go with a stand. Get a spider frame to avoid tipping or hitting the bar.



Step 2: Have your child sit in the swing. They can lie down but that can be overwhelming at first so don't do that until they are ready. Engage them in 10 minutes of forward back swinging in a rhythmic pattern. Then spin them at a rate they are okay with for 10 spins, stop them, and have them fix their eyes on something. Repeat the spin and eye gaze fixation 5x. Follow it with full body movements such as animal walks or yoga.

In a nutshell

Swinging forward and back 10 minutes

Spin 10x and lock eyes on an object (repeat x5)

Engage in full body movement for a few minutes.



There are a few things to note when conducting this protocol. If your child's eyes don't bounce back and forth after 15 good spins, they may have an impaired VOR reflex. If that is the case I highly suggest you find a competent OT.

As a bonus, you can have your child wear bone conduction headphones and play a steady tone of 500 hz. This has been shown in some studies to increase regulation in kids with sensory processing disorder since it is a tone right in the middle of alerting and calming.

Kids with Autism are generally processing the world differently than a neurotypical person is. Don't think for one moment that the way they process it is wrong just because it is different. The most beautiful part of my career has been watching kids with autism flourish when we start to set up the environment in a way that their body agrees with.

## Healthy obsessions

The autistic brain has a way of obsessing and attaching. On my wall in my clinic is a plethora of drawings from autistic kiddos that all have their own obsessions. Among the most common are godzilla, sonic, minecraft, and pokemon. I myself memorized the entire generation 1 pokemon roster as a child (it was only 151 back then). I spoke in chapter 1 of how M obsessed over everything from yard sales to fictional defiant female characters. Let's briefly chat about ways to set up healthy obsessions within an autistic kiddo.

The first step in creating healthy obsessions is to identify what qualities you wish to give to your child. The probability is high their brain will attach and identify with something whether or not you foster that relationship so we might as well attempt to put the right things in front of them. We are strategically engineering obsession as a tool for intentional development. Here are a couple questions to ask yourself:

1. What behavioral lessons do I want my child's obsessions to foster?
2. What skills do I want my child's obsessions to foster?

On the behavioral fostering point, shows like bluey, puffin rock, arthur, and daniel tiger have lessons within. You can play these shows while you do dishes and occasionally point out to your child the lessons within. "Oh wow, Bingo is so frustrated at Bluey because ..." Analyzing T.v. shows with our autistic kiddos can be a great way to get them to engage with discourse around emotions and social cues. Let's be honest, as great as the emotional spot books and other social skills books are, they can be hard to get our children to engage with. Video games for older kids such as it takes 2 can teach teamwork and any 1 player game shared between siblings can teach turn taking.

On the skill development point, give your child many opportunities to explore fine motor and STEM foundations. We have been blessed to explore paint by number, loom, diamond painting, mini-cross stitching, stop-motion animation, origami, paper airplanes, and jewelry creation in my clinic and kids can usually gravitate strongly toward one of those. As your kid grows older and you begin to consider their computer skills, scratch is a software made by MIT to get kids into game development. Scratch is free to use and has a high use rate in the kids I work with.

Creating a healthy obsession within an Autistic kiddo can also take another route completely with a bit of creativity. As an OT, I take the obsession of my kids and run with it to help them

complete daily tasks that they would otherwise refuse. For instance, Chat GPT has helped me create several custom handwriting prompts for all the aforementioned top shelf obsessions. What about a kid obsessed with pokemon with weak postural extension? I'll put him on a scooterboard on his stomach and send him on a pokemon collection mission. What about my son who is obsessed with Zelda currently? I ask him how Link would handle a situation that he is nervous about and he gains +10 bravery points. Use your kids' obsessions to their benefit to unlock their potential.

Is it just autism?

There is a fault in the diagnosis of autism and that is that everything gets nicely tucked under the rug of autism. The meltdowns, sleep struggles, anxiety, stomach pain, it's all nicely packaged and given the name of autism. Don't ever accept that the thing you're worried about is "just part of autism". Consider that your child may be getting diagnostic overshadowing. They may have ADHD, migraines, acid reflux, or any other number of conditions that are not getting examined. It's a mental laziness that causes doctors and parents to partake in diagnostic overshadowing. Track symptoms outside of the autism diagnosis and push for second opinions. Trust your gut if you think there is something more going on, then there probably is.

## Chapter 3: Parents

### Dopamine and technology

The world has gone digital. No surprise there. First, the industrial revolution pulled us into cities. Then we built tech that somehow made us feel alone—even in a crowd. The future of the U.S. economy looks global and online, which means our kids *do* need to know how to use technology.

Tech isn't the enemy. It's not going anywhere. But how do we *use* it, how do we *model* it, and how do we *balance* it in our homes? That part is still up to us. Technology plays on our dopamine system. Over-use can cause headaches, attention problems, and poor development in other areas of life.

This chapter is split into three parts:

1. Tech as a parent
2. Tech and the developing brain

### 3. Dopamine enhancing tips

But first, ask yourself this:

“Is my use of technology bringing me closer to my family and goals—or pulling me further away?”

Kids don’t learn tech habits by googling how to use technology healthily. They learn by watching us. If we’re glued to our phones during dinner or scrolling while they’re playing, they notice. Even if we *think* they’re not paying attention, they are.

I’m not here to guilt-trip anyone. I’ve definitely answered a text while pretending to listen to my son go on and on about Pokémon. But here’s the truth: kids don’t need perfect parents. They need *present* ones.

Meditation helps me notice these moments. When I peek over my screen and actually see my kid’s face, I get to choose, do I set the tech down, or keep half-listening? Just that moment of awareness changes everything. Waking up to your life doesn’t happen unintentionally.

Start with small shifts:

- Plug your phone in across the room during meals.
- Set “no scroll” zones in the house—like the dinner table or kids’ bedrooms.
- Block off tech-free time, even just 20–30 minutes a day, to be fully present.

When you protect space to be together, your kids notice. And more importantly, they *feel* it.

#### Little Brains and Dopamine

You’ve probably heard that dopamine is tied to screen time but perhaps you haven’t given much thought to what this really means. Dopamine is produced in our brain which causes motivation to go do something. It literally gives us the UMPH to move. That is why as we age and get a lower baseline dopamine pool we can end up with parkensia. A disease in which we develop tremors and find it more difficult moving from A to B.

A significant pool of individuals with Autism are also struggling with dopamine production. I asked my daughter's psychologist what percentage of kids with Autism he would guess are on a dopamine enhancing drug and he guessed about half. I am not here to advocate for or against using pharmaceuticals to enhance a child's dopamine pool, but I am here to advocate for environmental changes to maximize their dopamine naturally. I am also here to advocate the idea that your kids' future of tech use is being formed as they watch your habits.

What is the problem with screens?

Scrolling a screen gives a *huge* dopamine hit with *barely* any movement. High reward, low effort. And this pattern is everywhere now. Remote controls mean we don't have to get up. Voice commands mean we don't have to press a button. Someday, Amazon might just deliver based on a thought.

Here's what really scares me: I think we're seeing more and more kids with motor planning challenges because of this low-effort, high-reward loop. It makes sense that if kids learn through movement, and we keep reducing their need to move, then their motor learning is decreased. Do you see the loop? Move less → motor development issues → Move less → motor development issues.

Motor development issues don't stop with the fall of children being able to do monkey bars either. I've been talking to my speech friends about kids who have trouble speaking because they didn't develop the motor coordination of their mouths. Motor coordination problems from being stuck on tech through developmental ages is a serious problem that could make it's own interesting book one day.

As tech gets faster and easier, this trend will only grow. Honestly, now might be a good time to invest in companies making dopamine-boosting meds—because that's the road the medical system seems to be heading down. Heck of a business model we have here. Give kids tech developing dopamine development issues then sell them dopamine orally for a fortune.

But I have a different solution.

If I could re-roll my daughters childhood I would enforce:

- No child-controlled tech before age 4.
- From 4–6 years old, monitor closely. If you notice mood swings, tantrums, or sleep problems after screen time, it's time to pull back.

- From 6 and up, go by the child's maturity. Most kids can handle *some* filtered tech, but parents need to stay involved. Watch what they watch on youtube. Right now I am seeing so many parents come to me because their children are addicted to an evil puppet show called sprunkies. The youtube sensation tricks parents by starting their episodes fairly innocent and then by minute 12 when parents have walked away it gets real dark real fast.

A few things to keep in mind:

- An episode of a show like Arthur with morals built in is always a safe bet.
- Short-form content (like YouTube shorts or TikToks) will shorten your child's attention span and yours for that matter.
- Scary or fast-paced content can cause nightmares and sleep issues.
- Expect to see correlations between unfiltered tech issues and a ton of health issues in your autistic child.

Use tech *on purpose*. Not just because it's there. Use it as a break to speak to your spouse, have your child earn it with reading, etc.

### What If Your Kid's Already Deep Into Tech?

No shame. You're not alone. Create Guardrails, Not Walls

Banning screens completely often backfires. It makes tech feel like forbidden fruit. Kids *really* want what they're not allowed to have. Instead, give tech a place to exist, but with clear rules.

- Use visual timers for screen time—especially for younger kids (more on this in the behavior chapter).
- Involve your child in the plan. Give them a sense of control and help them see tech as a tool, not a lifestyle.
- Pair screen time with responsibilities. For example: “no screens until chores are done”

What matters most is *consistency*, not strictness. Set the rules, explain them, and stick to them. If you're parenting with a partner, talk it through together. You both need to be on the same page so your kids aren't stuck in the middle.

## Closing Thoughts: Tech Isn't Good or Bad—It's Just Powerful

Technology is a tool. Like fire, it can warm your home or burn it down. It can connect your child with the world—or pull them away from the people sitting right next to them. The difference comes down to how it's used, how often it's used, and whether the adults in the room are paying attention.

No one's going to get it right every day. I still catch myself checking my phone when I should be checking in with my kids. But every day is a chance to reset. To unplug for 20 minutes. To sit next to them instead of beside a screen. To model the kind of balance we hope they'll carry into the future.

Remember:

- Movement builds brains.
- Screens are powerful and they stop movement.
- Presence beats perfection.
- And it's *never* too late to make a change.

You've got this. Now go look your kid in the eye, and see what they're up to without a screen in the way. When you're ready, I will get into how to maximize your kiddos dopamine stores naturally.

## Natural dopamine enhancers

Physical activity is both started with dopamine and creates dopamine. That is why we experience runners high. For our kids, we can trigger fun movement ideas in many many ways. Obstacle courses are always a fan favorite broken into the floor is lava style, speed runs, and climbing challenges. Riding bicycles and scooters is alive and well when weather permits and who doesn't love a community sport. There are dedicated leagues for almost every sport for special needs kids if you live in a major city. The special olympics are another great option if your child is on the lower functioning end of the spectrum.

Gamify real life. Seriously, dopamine is released for perceived reward. That's why video games give such an immediate hit of "I'm doing that again!" When you die and respawn you are rewarded for your efforts with the next life. You can use timers to see if they can beat their time record for taking out

the trash, create charts where they earn 3 stickers before unlocking a “boss battle” or “random surprise”. In my household we joke about “what motivated M today”. It takes true creativity to consistently motivate a child with Autism.

When you’re considering gamifying and rewarding your child to get them on task there are a few things to consider. First, rewards require novelty. As a randomization tool: place rewards in a hat or roll a dice determining the outcome. The games require novelty as well. The whole timer for the trash bit works once a month. The other 29 days of trash hauling require different gamified motivators such as but not limited to... Competing with her brother, completing it before I can count to 30, completing it before a song ends, being told no way she can take it out with her left hand behind her back, asking if she would like to do it now or in 5 minutes (then shaking on the deal), saying i’ll get the door for her but hurry because I can only hold the door so long it’s heavy, racing her with another trash can, pretending the trash is letting off poison so we have to remove it quickly. You get the idea. As she has aged, mainly from 8-10 she has required less gamification and is much more routinized into helping out around here.

Roleplay and imagination play also boosts dopamine. Randomly be secret ninjas on a mission to find an only lady wearing red in the store. Pretend the floor is lava while picking up toys. You can even make potions with dish soap that can magically knock the evil witches spell off of dishes. I’m still caught up on chores, sorry... But it was a big deal to finally get some help around our house.

Use rhythm and music to break things up. If you see your kid in a funk, put on a playlist of songs from a movie they like or start a drum line in the kitchen. The mood will bump up in no time. Simon says can get a kid doing anything and dancing breaks up homework quite well.

Find flow and don’t interrupt flow. Art projects with unusual materials, building things, cooking, anything to get your child into the zone where the world is blocked out. They can zone into more than a screen if you foster it. Remember this: when they are in the flow, their brain will grow.

So those were environmental factors, but what of the raw fuel you add to maximize dopamine production? Lean meats, B vitamins, Iron, Zinc, Magnesium, Omega 3’s are all the must haves. The must avoids are ultra-processed foods as they cause that spike and dip we are trying to avoid. More on this in the feeding chapter.

The big picture is this, kids have been moving less with each generation. Blame tech, blame WWII for normalizing 2 parents working, blame whatever. We have to get our kids moving, eating healthy, and in tune with their bodies. Dopamine is one of the key neurotransmitters in making this happen. Your psych doctor can put an educated guess amount into your child orally and you will be impressed, until their body normalizes and you’ll up the dose. This can continue indefinitely and is not necessarily the wrong course of action. M is still taking dopamine and serotonin medication. Just please consider pairing the medication with some of what you just read.





## Unspoken Truths

*We talk endlessly about the right schools, parenting styles, diets, and educational toys, but there's an unspoken foundation beneath all successful parenting: economic stability and the freedom to be present.*

### Economic Security: The Hidden Cornerstone

If you read through part 1 of this story you will know that I have not always been economically secure. Meagan and I both grew up in lower income families and we followed that trend for quite some time. We never accumulated much debt but we also never had a surplus of money. At the time of publishing this book however, we have managed to gather a net worth of 210k as a family and are on our way to retiring on a pile of gold like Mr. Scrooge.

Now that we have both not had money and had money I can say that financial stress compounds every challenge. Chronic economic anxiety impacts our capacity to nurture, empathize, and maintain emotional resilience. When we worry about rent, groceries, or healthcare, we can not show up fully for our children. This is not due to lack of desire, but because basic survival instincts are pulling our energy away from nurturing. Economic security provides the mental bandwidth needed to deeply engage with a child's emotional and developmental needs—this is a powerful yet often overlooked truth.

There are many financial books out there and many are a waste of time. My favorite financial experts are Morgan Housel, Scott Galloway, and Dave Ramsey. Those three authors in combination gave me a balanced view of money. But, you're a busy parent of an Autistic child so here are the distilled lessons that you can follow to find financial success.

1. Money follows value. The more valuable you become, the more people will pay you. If you solve small problems, you will get small money. Netflix solves boredom, Tesla solves transportation/robotics, and you solve what exactly? You likely have unextracted value just waiting to be extracted and shared with the world. Extract it and watch your pockets fill. If you're questioning what your value is then it means you have been distracting yourself instead of exploring your inner landscape. Order the book "loving what is" next and follow it to figure out what your value is.

2. Make interest rates work for you. If you owe any interest on anything you are burning money for no good reason. Interest is a scheme created by the rich to keep the poor poorer. Don't do it. Once the money is no longer tied in that 8% interest rate, invest it in an index fund earning 8%. That makes 16 cents on every dollar you invest every year you do so. Quick maths says 100 dollars invested

every month earning 16% would make \$138,455.70. Assuming you have no debt you don't get that bonus 8% but you could afford to invest more than \$100 because you have no debt.

3. Start a business and take advantage of the tax code. Remember that value you have? Well, to explore it is going to cost you money and make you money. At first, not much money will be made but that's okay. If you form an LLC and make a business bank account then you can get paid your measly 10 to 50 dollars at a time into that account. Anything you buy to fund that business (which can be quite broad), is a tax writeoff. Everything from my gas, to my phone bill, to a portion of my mortgage is a tax writeoff just because I have an LLC that requires I have a home office, and a car, etc..

4. Automate investment and add friction to purchases. This is analogous to keeping vegies on hand but throwing out the oreos. By getting the money out of my spending hands and into a growing situation quickly and without thought, it is actually going to stay there. By giving myself an allowance each month, I have to really think about purchases. Five percent of the checking account per adult seems to work well to keep the peace. At first, consider it being five percent until you get debt paid and investment flowing.

5. Think long term with your actions. Buy a vehicle that is dependable with good gas mileage and holds its value. If you can get into a house then you can magically accumulate money by its rising value. If you can eat cheaper foods today, you can afford to retire like a king/queen. Money never accumulated by accident. It takes a long term vision and automated action over years.

6. Trading time for money has its limitations. I work as a therapist. I make a good hourly rate but it's just that, money traded for time. The real money in my life has come from ways I have found to turn my free time into money. This book is admittedly another attempt at breaking free from the time is money mold. Sure, I'm still putting hundreds of hours into this project, but, once it is done it gives me a steady drip of income for years to come.

### Free Time: The Lost Luxury

Part of a parcel with not enough money is not enough time. Unstructured, undistracted time is when kids learn to be bored. It is the liminal space where creativity and communication seem to shine. If we never sit around and be bored with our kids, we never get to spot their troubles. If we never sit around and be bored with our kids, we never get to hear about the sad thing that happened to them at school. I have a hunch that teenagers who actually want to spend time with their parents are those who had present parents. Although I could be wrong there.

The world we were born into of course has about 9,000 cures for your boredom and your child's boredom. Netflix, youtube, and video games are all excellent distractions. Since I find distraction such an interesting concept, I have talked to hundreds of people over the last couple of years on the subject.

It would seem that people are either still blissfully distracted or they stand atop the mountain looking back at the mountain of time they wasted in the valley.

What is amazing is that we have much more free time than we realize. I offer you this challenge. Put all screens away for the day. Write on paper at least 4 things you have been avoiding then go do them. Do this every day for a year and you may just join the rest of us on the mountain looking back going... “Wow... I really was the one getting in my own way.”

### The Emotionality of it All

There's no easy way around this. You are blessed with a special needs child, an economy screaming for reform, and a lack of clarity. Furthermore, you're spinning on a rock through space looking around at a bunch of other monkeys who are all pretending they know what's up. You know they don't but you smile and nod anyway. Here is one monkey's way to make it through the hard times as well as a peek into my life to let you know I understand.

Some days, it's not one big thing that wears you down—it's the 47 small ones.

It's trying to get out the door with everyone dressed, fed, medicated, and semi-upright.  
It's repeating the same sentence five times, knowing you'll repeat it five more.  
It's keeping your cool when your child melts down in public and people stare like you're the show. It's getting them to therapy then realizing you forgot to eat lunch. Again.

There's a kind of tiredness that sleep can't fix. A kind of stress that doesn't always look like stress. It hides behind quiet sighs, calendar reminders, and that frozen smile you put on when someone says, *“I don't know how you do it.”*

Truth is, sometimes you don't *feel* like you're doing it. You just look back and see that it's been done. Raising a special needs child is like wearing an invisible backpack that is getting filled with rocks throughout the day. Your mind never really clocks out.

Even in your quiet moments, there's a running list:

- What therapy needs to be rescheduled?
- What food can they actually eat this week?
- Did I remember to order the prescription refill?
- Are they progressing enough? Am *I* doing enough?

You might even grieve things silently. Not because you don't love your child exactly as they are—but because your feeling overwhelmed. This doesn't make you a bad parent. It makes you human. If you have another kid or two on top of your special needs kid. Well... you are indeed a strong human and I empower you to believe it.

#### Quiet Victories, Deep Exhaustion

You probably don't get parades for the stuff you pull off daily:

- Helping your child stay calm in a loud room
- Advocating during yet another specialist appointment
- Sitting with them through a tough meal or meltdown
- Showing up, again, and again, and again after it feels like you've failed... Again

These victories are quiet. But they cost something. And over time, that cost adds up if you don't refill your cup.

So if you find yourself feeling snappy, blank, weepy, or just plain numb—your brain might be asking for a break you haven't given it. That's not weakness. **It's a signal.** Listen to it. Let others help you listen to it. They are probably seeing your distress and are offering help because they want to help sooth your burnout. They may not know exactly how to fill your cup, but they can help give you a break so that you can refill it. If your looking around with no help available, gym childcare seems to be the cheapest route and hey, exercise will help your funk.

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## Let the Steam Out

Here's a thought that helped me once: pressure cookers don't explode as long as the valve works. Cars don't explode as long as there is a way to purge exhaust.

You don't need a two-week vacation or a spa retreat. You need *valves*. Little moments where you let out steam:

- Five minutes with your favorite music and no one touching you even if the doors locked and a kids on the other side melting down.
- A friend who knows the real you, not just the "therapist/scheduler/advocate" version
- For saying "no" to that extra event, without explaining yourself

These moments aren't selfish. They're survival skills or what I like to call, panic attack preventors. It is okay for you to let your steam out when you need to. Below are some ways that I found to keep the steam on a permanent slow release. I hope you can use some of the tools from my emotional toolbox.

"The most useful tools in the world held by a monkey are no longer useful." -Jaemey Matherly

## Negative visualization

Imagine for me, two fathers grieving the loss of their daughters from a tragic school incidence. One father had spent his life bonding with his daughter, playing games, laughing, and helping her express herself. The other father provided the necessities to keep his daughter alive but did not truly bond his soul to his daughters. Which father do you think will experience more grief upon receiving the tragic news?

Answer: The father who did not capitalize on his time available with his daughter is the one who will feel the most grief, for he had not done all he could to make her time here memorable. The unresent father will feel regret for all he missed while the father who was there will know he did all he can with the time they had together.

Negative visualization has recorded uses dated back before the roman empire. By purposely placing yourself in a tragic situation for less than a minute, you are able to conjur up an alternative timeline by which to compare your “bad situation” to. Think of it as the classic archetype of that friend who is always like “eh, it could be worse!”.

I learned this technique in response to my daughter’s regularly meltdown stage. As she would throw toys across the room and scream, I would briefly picture, what if she had choked in her sleep overnight? Suddenly the meltdown was not so bad. Gruesome? Yes. Effective. True.

### Meditation

I am not going to teach you to meditate in this book. I am not going to try and sell you on the idea. I am going to tell you this; meditation allowed me to see my thoughts and emotions at a distance which allowed me to be the parent my kids needed me to be. It cured my PTSD, rid me of my video game addiction, allowed me the focus to build my company, and allowed me to be the kind of father/husband i’m proud to be. I am partial to the waking up app as it’s the most science based meditation experience and it has such a wonderful variety of options. It also gives you *6 months free* if you email them saying you can’t afford it.

### Essentialism

What really matters. No really. Take a moment and think of 3 things you did today that didn’t matter. This is not to invoke regret but to show you how very little actually matters. In 80 years from reading this sentence you will surely be dead. In 180 years from the time you read this, the likelihood you exist as more than a photo somewhere is infinitesimal.

Think of 3 things you’ve bought in the last year that are no longer in use. Chances are the list popped up fairly quickly. If you live in America, you are engrained in a constant upgrade culture. Your car can be slightly quieter, your Netflix without commercials, your garage door with an integrated camera. To get away from this mindset and into one of what really matters is the basis of essentialism. Beyond the overconsumption of consumer goods, essentialism points out that we overconsume tasks that, had we thought for more than a minute, we would have said no to doing. Below is a step by step framework to adopting the essentialist mindset.

1. Grab a spiral notebook or open your preferred notetaking tool.
2. Open google calendar or your preferred timekeeping tool.

3. Set one day per quarter to put away the noise and simply examine who you want to talk to, what you want to do in your career, what kind of body do you want, who could you be? (character build day). Be realistic and crystal clear on the characters' statistics and how you will get there.

4. Pick 1 day per month to reflect on your progress for 30 minutes to an hour. (reflection day)

Two important things happened in my life when I picked up this mindset. First, I hit my goals accurately and felt as if I was becoming the person I wanted to be. Second, those around me started living more intentionally by proxy. Nailing down who you want to be to your kids, spouse, and co-workers allows you to build a life you really want and drop all the noise. Drop the noise. Do it now.

Brain health matters more than we realize

I've always been a scientist at heart. It was at 29 years old in the midst of grad school when I realized that the brain and body were connected. I started a slow long experiment. I quit smoking weed, I quit playing video games, I quit drinking anything but water, coffee and electrolytes, and I began exercising regularly. These happened one at a time over two years and I found my brain. I eventually realized that my brain literally dictates my reality. My thoughts shifted quite rapidly before my eyes from PTSD thoughts to an internal landscape I find quite entertaining. The universe has somehow molded around me since, as if brain health is the key to life. Let's dig into the 4 pillars holding up that beautiful brain of yours.

Pillar #1 nutrition

The foods we put into our mouth get broken down through chewing and stomach acid. Our intestines work to pull the nutrients out and into the bloodstream and release the garbage out the other end. Our heart then pumps to spread the blood around and feed the nerves which route back up the the brain and muscles. All this to say, what we eat matters alot.

In undergrad, I wrote many papers on the effects of this diet vs that diet and we would debate to the ends of the earth. I didn't realize back then that we were looking at the wrong metrics. For some reason, the conversations always centered around muscle size and fat loss. My guess is that because these are external factors they are more often thought about. After all, it's not obvious week 3 into a diet how much more clear my thoughts are but it's super obvious that I am 3LB less pudgy. Also, being a healthy body fat percentage is crucial for brain health but it's not everything.

The blood brain barrier is a selective shield that is choosing what bits of blood get into the brain. Scientists have been studying this with more and more accuracy and here is what they have



found so far. Foods can be broken down into inflammatory and anti-inflammatory nutrients. Inflammatory foods damage the blood brain barrier and compromise blood flow.

It is unfortunate we live in a society where it can be so easy to fill your mouth with inflammatory agents. Inflammatory agents broken into oils/sugars are found in processed foods. Soybean oil, corn oil, sunflower oil, canola oil and vegetable oil are the most common offenders increasing omega 6 fatty acid (inflammatory) and counteracting omega 3 fatty acids (anti-inflammation). Sugar and dangerous alternatives are snuck into foods and go by the following aliases most commonly: high-fructose corn syrup, aspartame, sucralose.

Anti-inflammatory things you can put in your mouth include: Fish, flaxseeds, chia seeds, hemp seeds, avocados, olive oil, walnuts, almonds, dark chocolate, a colorful variety of fruits/vegetables, whole grains, and fermented foods such as greek yogurt.

The human body seems to want to eat based on a memory system. I remember x made me feel y and so I would like more of that please. The problem is that the body has a bit of a short term memory and has a hard time seeing the long term inflammation it's causing upon itself. It takes a heavy dose of cognitive horsepower to stick to a healthy stint of eating for 3 months or so before the body starts to agree. Megaspore probiotics can help change your microbiome faster so that your body starts to crave what actually helps it. I have no affiliation.

## Pillar #2: Physical activity

Telling somebody who hates movement that they should move more for their brain health is like telling a caffeine addict to "just enjoy decaf". I get it. If you don't like the gym or movement in general then chances are you need it more than anybody. We are alot like cars really. If we sit for too long without running then we won't start. If we put the wrong fuel in us, we shut down. I promise add 2 minutes of any type of movement for a day and then slowly increase it by a minute a week and you will be A Okay. Building consistency in a movement plan does far more than any 3 week phase of life.

Movement does a few things for our brain health. Cardio is good for our blood flow and mood. When we breath heavier than usual it increases the hearts muscle and gives extra blood to the brain. When we use our muscles like in the gym the muscles release anti-inflammatory agents that protect the brain and testosterone shoots up which helps brain repair. In short, cardio clears the fog and strength builds a strong foundation.

## Pillar #3 Sleep

It is, for some reason, normal for our society to stay up until 2 A.M. and then laugh about how inefficiently tired we are the next day. As covered earlier, sleep washes our brain in cerebral spinal fluid which helps the neurons have space to build the next day.

To sleep well requires a bedtime and wake time. It requires a dark quiet place, no caffeine anywhere near bed, and a calm mind. You may have to first get your child's sleep fixed before they will let you sleep through the night. Be sure to not take melatonin as it has been shown over and over again to limit our natural production. Don't use weed, alcohol, or other sleep aids. Instead, see the sun and move each morning. Eat healthy, move, and your sleep will often fall into place.

#### Pillar #4 ANTS

Ants stands for automatic negative thoughts. Once you clear your brain of the pesky ants, you will begin to see when others have ants crawling around. ANT colonies can be spotted by somebody staring off in the distance, breathing funny, and looking otherwise uncomfortable.

There are a handful of useful ways to address ANTS. First, your ants will begin to disappear naturally as your brain gets more healthy. ANTS may indeed, be a byproduct of the brain failing to filter out the junk we put into it. To clear your head of ants consider meditation, journaling and having long talks with good friends. If none of those works, be your own ideal version of yourself. I have never met a person who shows up consistently for themselves in their life have ANTS stay for long.

In conclusion, achieving a healthy brain is an intentional, multifaceted pursuit. It requires a commitment to nourishing your body with nutrient-rich foods, moving regularly, prioritizing restful sleep, proactively managing stress, and cultivating meaningful relationships. When you invest in your brain health, you're investing in your entire reality. It kind of freaks me out just how correlated brain health and life experience are because I then recognize the society I live in does not optimize for brain health.

## Find your support system

We all need support, but finding that support when your child has autism is less than ideal. I remember when we moved back to Arizona we thought there would be loads of support from our family. It turned out that our family was unable to care for a child with Autism. The daycare we put her in was unable to help her, the public school system was unable to help her, and at times it felt like we were unable to help her.

Eventually we reached out for government assisted support. Once she was officially diagnosed, the doors opened for therapy, aids, and even my sister to slowly integrate into a paid role. It opened up the door for homeschool funding so that we could afford to keep one parent home and teach her. The gym in our lives have always given us a two hour break to keep our sanity and the occasional church has helped as well.

If you ever feel lost, or like there is not enough support in your life, please reach out to one of the following resources. The autism community is alive and well online.

[https://www.reddit.com/r/Autism\\_Parenting/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Autism_Parenting/)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/autismparenting/>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/AutismParentsSupport>

<https://wrongplanet.net/forums>

<https://tacanow.org/>

When I picture my child thriving as an adult, what does that look like?

What traits or life skills matter most to us as parents? Why?

How do we define success-not by society's standards, but our own?

What behaviors are hardest for us to deal with emotionally? Why do they trigger us?

What do we believe our child is trying to communicate through those behaviors?

Which behaviors can we let go of? What are we okay with now that we weren't before? Why?

What behaviors are true deal-breakers for us-and why?

If I were autistic and in my child's body, how would I feel about being corrected, redirected, or accepted in this situation?

Quarterly Check In 1

What's one area of growth we're focusing on this quarter?

What's working well right now? What's no longer serving us?

Do we need to update any family rules or expectations?

How are we doing as co-parents/partners in this process? What do we need from each other?

What's something small that gave us hope this quarter?

How have we seen our child grow in the past few months?

How have we grown as parents or partners?

What did we get right lately?

Write a short letter to your future self. Encourage yourself. Celebrate how far you've come.

Quarterly Family Rule Review Template 1

Behavior	Rule	Working	Keep/Adjust/Del ete	Notes


## Quarterly Check In 2

What's one area of growth we're focusing on this quarter?

What's working well right now? What's no longer serving us?

Do we need to update any family rules or expectations?

How are we doing as co-parents/partners in this process? What do we need from each other?

What's something small that gave us hope this quarter?

How have we seen our child grow in the past few months?

How have we grown as parents or partners?

What did we get right lately?

Write a short letter to your future self. Encourage yourself. Celebrate how far you've come.

Quarterly Family Rule Review Template 2

Behavior	Rule	Working	Keep/Adjust/Del ete	Notes
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What's one area of growth we're focusing on this quarter?

What's working well right now? What's no longer serving us?

Do we need to update any family rules or expectations?

How are we doing as co-parents/partners in this process? What do we need from each other?

What's something small that gave us hope this quarter?

How have we seen our child grow in the past few months?

How have we grown as parents or partners?

What did we get right lately?

Write a short letter to your future self. Encourage yourself. Celebrate how far you've come.

Quarterly Family Rule Review Template 3

Behavior	Rule	Working	Keep/Adjust/Del etc	Notes

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#### Quarterly Check In 4

What's one area of growth we're focusing on this quarter?

What's working well right now? What's no longer serving us?

Do we need to update any family rules or expectations?

How are we doing as co-parents/partners in this process? What do we need from each other?

What's something small that gave us hope this quarter?

How have we seen our child grow in the past few months?

How have we grown as parents or partners?

What did we get right lately?

Write a short letter to your future self. Encourage yourself. Celebrate how far you've come.

Quarterly Family Rule Review Template 4

Behavior	Rule	Working	Keep/Adjust/Del ete	Notes
