

PFA Tips

For the Grandparents

We call these monthly mini newsletters “PFA Tips”. Maybe we should actually call them “Tips for Anyone that Cares About a Person with Autism”. Grandparents, this one’s just for you.

Don’t EVER say, “I’m just the grandparent”

Autism can be intimidating – it’s overwhelming because there’s so much out there, yet we struggle to figure out what is relevant for our own kids. So you may feel like you just don’t know enough – but neither do we, the parents. Anyone who has a relationship with the child has valuable input.

“You’re mean – I’m running away to live with Grandmom”

What kid hasn’t made that threat? I know I did as a child. And why not – after all, grandparents are more fun. It’s your job to spoil our kids. But for kids on the autism spectrum, consistency is key. Our kids need the same routine when they are with you that they have with us. And that includes giving them the same responsibilities they have at home. I know you’re worried that chores may put you at risk for losing popularity points, but trust me – your house is still where our kids want to run away to.

Workshops and research (and you thought you were done with school)

You have ideas, opinions, and you bring value to the table with your experience and perspective. And honestly, so often we are out of time, out of energy, and just can’t be everywhere. We could trade off attending workshops and committee meetings. When you read workshop descriptions, interpret “parents” as “family”. And community committees, like SECAC (Special Education Citizens Advisory Committee), are open to the public.

Everyone needs support

Support groups are open to everyone whose lives are impacted by autism. I really do believe the best advice you will ever get is from other families. And there are so many support groups out there. Don’t limit yourself to the group that is closest geographically. Get on multiple support group distribution lists because sometimes groups have speakers or special presentations that might interest you.

To find support groups in Maryland, call 443.330.5341 or search Support Groups on our provider database. If you prefer to connect with an online support group, visit the Grandparent Autism Network.

Once a parent, always a parent

You’re a grandparent now, but first you were our parents, and sometimes we still need support and a shoulder to cry on.

Just ask

As parents, we love to talk about our kids. Didn’t you like to talk about us when we were kids? We’ll tell you what we know. And maybe we’ll ask you what you know too (what you noticed about our child, what you’ve read or learned, etc.). You’ve raised kids, so we’ll trust your observation skills.

Volunteering keeps you young (well, that’s the rumor I’m spreading)

If you have some time you can spare, there are places that will fight over you. You could volunteer at your grandchild’s school, whether it’s in the lunch room, the playground, or for a special occasion like a class party. Not only does your grandchild get the thrill of having you at school, but



you get a first hand observation of seeing how your grandchild interacts with his or her peers and teachers. There are also organizations that would love to have you, say for instance, an organization I’ve heard about called Pathfinders.

Safety proofing isn’t what it used to be

Sometimes it can be hard to remember that a child who clearly looks old enough to be beyond baby gates might still need child locks. The safety precautions you took when we were kids may not be enough for our kids with autism. I know that when I was two years old I wasn’t smart enough to figure out how to undo the child locks – but my son with Asperger’s was. At age three he took it upon himself to teach his two year old sister how to bypass the locks. And you need to be mindful of the risks of an eloper. Unless you’re still in good enough shape to go racing down the street after your grandchild, you’ll want to pay extra attention to your doors and windows. This isn’t meant to scare you — I just want to encourage you to have a conversation about ways to safety proof your home that may not be typical for what you did for us as kids.

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The kids would love to visit with you

What we need is a break. Every time my mom has offered to take the kids, before she can finish the sentence, my children are on her front porch with suitcases in hand (and I live an hour away from her). Moms – if the grandparents offer, take them up on it. You're still alive, so obviously your mom did something right. Let her watch your kids and go see a movie. Or grandparents, offer to take the siblings so the parents can focus on the child with autism. Siblings can get the short end of the stick sometimes, so they might really enjoy that special attention from you.

Grandmom, when will I see you again?

This can be a difficult question, especially if you live far away. If you know when you will see your grandchild next, mark the visit on the calendar, or put your picture on the date. Also, try to keep in touch in between visits. Ask how the child best communicates — by phone? Does the child (or can the child) have an email account? Would the child prefer to get postal mail?

Parents, you may want to save this article for friends and family whose children aren't impacted by autism. With the current rate being 1% of U.S. children, chances are it may be the time they're grandparents.

Additional Resources

Grandparent Autism Network
<https://ganinfo.org/>

A Grandparent's Guide to Autism: An Autism Speaks Family Support Tool Kit
<https://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/community-connections/celebrating-grandparents>

IAN Research Report: Grandparents of Children with Autism
https://www.iancommunity.org/cs/ian_research_reports/ian_research_report_apr_2010

Pathfinders for Autism Online Provider Database
<http://pathfindersforautism.org/providers-services>

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