

# insights

## Be careful who you take parenting advice from

by Kate Johnson



It's not until you have kids that you realise that everyone has an opinion about how they should be raised.

The rise of the internet has just multiplied the number of voices, giving many unauthorised people a voice in the parenting space. It is no longer just our close family and friends who share their opinions with us as occurred in the past. Now there are countless expert pieces, parent blogs, chat rooms and articles on any topic you can imagine.

It's confusing enough when your kids are born without special gifts and challenges, but more so when you are a parent with a child on the autism spectrum. They have to deal with many voices including those who can be non-accepting and judgemental. It's my belief that everyone has an opinion, but not everyone has earned the right to share it.

If you're a parent of a child on the autism spectrum, how do you drown out the noise? Who do you listen to? Here are some thoughts.

### **Listen to autistic voices**

Look the advice, stories and opinions of people on the autism spectrum. Their voice shouldn't be discarded. They have lived experience and have incredible insights for you as you parent and your child. Also listen to what your child has to say. We can all learn a great deal from their lived experience. If they can share it (and this may be when they are older), then embrace this knowledge.

### **Listen to understanding professionals**

Identify a support team of professionals including your child's teacher, general practitioner, specialist health workers. They can provide you with not just greater knowledge of autism but provide you with insights into your child's capacities and strengths. Staying focused on your own child can help drown out the noise. It is easier to shake off the voices of others when you have quality support telling you the truth about your child specifically, as opposed to others expressing their general opinions.

### **Listen to family and friends who love you**

Gravitate toward friends and family who will love and support you and your child and steer clear of those who have a need to send you the latest article they've found on autism, or tag you in a random on social media. Seek out people who genuinely want to help and who are willing to spend time with you and your child. If someone's opinions are not real, positive or helpful, then you don't have to listen to them.

After a child is diagnosed, it can be so easy to go into overdrive and research for hours on end. This is normal! We want to be equipped to do our best at parenting our children. However, set boundaries when it comes to taking on other's opinions about autism and your child.

### **Steer clear of unhelpful discussion groups**

It's common for parents with children diagnosed with autism to hit online discussion groups. It can be so overwhelming to have so many voices telling you what 'they' think you need to know. Politely move on from conversations that make you uncomfortable, unless you can take the opportunity to share your perspective and use them as educational moments.

As an active parent and professional in the online space I've often experienced outlandish statements from well-meaning people. I use these situations to share my personal experience (and the strengths of my child) to debunk myths such as autism is caused by bad parenting. Be clear about how you use discussion groups. Use as a way to feel a part of a community, a source of knowledge and inspiration and a place to share your story and experiences.

All parents need to be mindful about protecting their emotions and accepting advice from trusted, knowledgeable sources. I'd suggest that it's even more important to choose well when you're raising kids with autism. Protecting your heart and listening to quality voices is an ongoing journey. But it is essential to looking after your own mental health and ensure that the main thing – your child – remains the main thing.



#### **Kate Johnson**

Kate is the Founder and Director of Spectrum Journeys Inc, a not for profit Autism service that equips and empowers families and educators as they support children on the Autism Spectrum to flourish. Kate leads an amazing team in the Outer East of Melbourne and focuses on practical Autism education as well as community projects and supporting carers. Kate is married to Joel and they have 4 beautiful children (their eldest being on the Autism Spectrum).