

Autism Parenting Magazine

Issue 126

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ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND AUTISM



Autism Parenting Magazine

Editor's Letter

It's human nature for most of us to want to love and be loved in return. The majority of people on the autism spectrum are no different from neurotypical people in this regard—but the dynamics of getting there can be extra tricky. Many of us have had to navigate awkward dates, trying our best to read any romantic signals, flirt successfully, and engage in appropriate conversation. Just imagine trying to do all that with autism also in the mix!

That's why, in this issue of the magazine, we're running with the theme *Autism and Romantic Relationships*. Our pages are packed full of practical advice for parents to share with young people starting to explore relationships, attraction, and all the confusing moments and emotions that come with them.

Among our themed content, we have an article from Karen Kaplan, MS which offers a comprehensive guide on sex education to help parents create comfortable, informative dialogue with their children. Lt. Joseph Pangaro has also penned a piece on understanding sexual identity to help caregivers accept and welcome their children's relationship preferences.

We also have an article from Dr. Rachel Schwartz, PhD, BCBA-D on the concept of teaching "love" as a life skill. She points out that while parents and therapists focus on building skills such as communication, money management, cooking, etc., it's important they don't forget "learning love" is just as important.

Dr. Schwartz comments that, for far too long, conversations around sexuality, love, and the right to love have excluded neurodiverse individuals. This has resulted in many individuals being unprepared and ill-equipped to explore healthy relationships on their own. Scary stuff. It's time to make a change!

Taking a slightly different slant on the relationships theme, autism coach Deanna Picon, BA has authored some content to help parents revitalize and strengthen their relationships with each other as the world slowly recovers from the Covid-19 pandemic.

We also have an array of articles exploring topics such as Behavior Intervention Plans, the autism assessment process, pathological demand avoidance, sensory solutions, communication, and so much more. We hope you dive in and enjoy the read!

Emily Ansell Elfer

Editor
Autism Parenting Magazine



Tips to Revitalize and Strengthen Your Marriage

By Deanna PICON, BA

THE CHALLENGES OF PARENTING A CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS CAN PUT A STRAIN ON RELATIONSHIPS. HERE ARE A FEW IDEAS THAT COULD HELP REVITALIZE YOUR MARRIAGE OR PARTNERSHIP.

“So what are you buying John for your anniversary?” my girlfriend Jean asked me.

“It depends on which John you’re talking about, because I think I married a man with multiple personalities. During this pandemic, I’ve seen so many different sides of

John, I don’t know who I’m living with anymore,” I said with a huge laugh.

“Half the time, I want to give him the biggest hug and kiss for being the most considerate and loving husband and dad. The other half, I want to lock him in the closet and throw away the key, because he drives me crazy.”



Stresses of life and the pandemic

Many couples probably felt this way about their partner at one time or another during the pandemic. Spending more time than we normally would with our significant other allowed us to see “the good, the bad, and the ugly” in them and ourselves. And there may have been a few occasions when we had doubts about our relationships.

If you’ve ever thought this way, you’re not alone. Managing a fulfilling relationship while raising a child with special needs has been, and will always be, a challenge. Between work, family responsibilities, and taking care of all aspects of a child’s life, parents are left with hardly any time for themselves, much less a spouse.

The pandemic probably added more pressure, including financial insecurity, job uncertainty, and health concerns. On top of all that, there’s full-time caregiving, remote learning, and managing challenging behaviors of kid(s). So it’s completely normal to feel exhausted, overwhelmed, or stressed out.

Fortunately, things are improving as many places around the world emerge from the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic and we slowly adjust to our new normal. Like everything else in life, nothing stays the same, but it’s important to get back on track, especially with your partner.

So how can you become a couple again while dealing with challenges and responsibilities? How can you make your relationship a priority again?

Don’t worry! By following a few important steps, my hope is that you can revitalize your relationship and keep it strong.

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A few ideas to revive your relationship

1. Give yourself some space

After isolating with your family during the pandemic, it’s time to think about your personal needs for a change. Give yourself some “breathing room” and try to get back to being “you” again, and don’t feel guilty about it.

Participate in activities that make you feel good. For example, go back to the gym, start a walking/running program, dance, get a mani/pedi, meditate. Doing what makes you happy is beneficial for you, your relationship, and the entire family.

2. Keep in mind you’re both human

Remember this the next time your partner says she/he is overwhelmed with working from home while managing a kid’s virtual learning schedule.

- Take over or help out with a task if you can
- Give each other permission to vent and “blow off steam” whenever you need to
- Don’t be critical or take anything to heart in the heat of the moment
- Be understanding of your spouse’s feelings so you avoid fostering anger and resentment

By allowing each other to be open and honest, you’ll build goodwill, trust, and respect within your relationship and deepen the bond between the two of you.

3. Take advantage of your support team

Ask family members or close friends (well in advance!) to watch your special needs child and/or other children for a few hours or a day or two. They will feel good knowing they can help. You'll have peace of mind because your kid(s) are safe and well cared for. Best of all, there are no child care costs.

4. Plan enjoyable dates

Every couple needs and deserves some time alone together to reconnect and keep the emotional, physical, and communication bonds strong. And don't feel bad for doing so. It's the best way to prioritize your relationship.

- Schedule "fun" dates for yourselves on a weekly or monthly basis. Enter them in your cell phone or computer calendar. After living in sweatpants for a year, it'll probably feel great to put on a nice outfit for a change
- Your date doesn't have to be a "night out on the town." A blockbuster, summer movie, or quick bite at a local restaurant is fine. Participate in some of the hobbies, activities, and events you enjoy
- Summer is a perfect time to relax outdoors. Have an old-fashioned picnic at a park or beach or go swimming

Most importantly, focus on your partner. Put down all the electronic devices and talk and listen to each other. And as hard it may be, don't discuss the kid(s). You'll have time to do that when you get home!



“Remember, affection and attention for your partner doesn't have to be set aside for just date nights and special occasions. Romantic evenings can be created anytime.”

5. Keep the spark alive

Remember, affection and attention for your partner doesn't have to be set aside for just date nights and special occasions. Romantic evenings can be created anytime. After your kid(s) are asleep, have some wine, munch on chips and dips, or have a scrumptious dessert by candlelight. Snuggle on the sofa while you stream some Netflix movies. It's a cozy way to wind down from a stressful day.

A little extra effort from both partners can generate ongoing intimacy and maintain a loving atmosphere at home. A tender kiss, hug, or smile in the morning or evening is a wonderful way to start or end the day. A simple "thinking of you" message by email or text can mean so much.

Tell each other: "You look beautiful in that dress," or "your cologne smells great."

Hearing those compliments can really make your spouse happy. And looking at each other as attractive partners can make you feel desired and positive about your relationship.

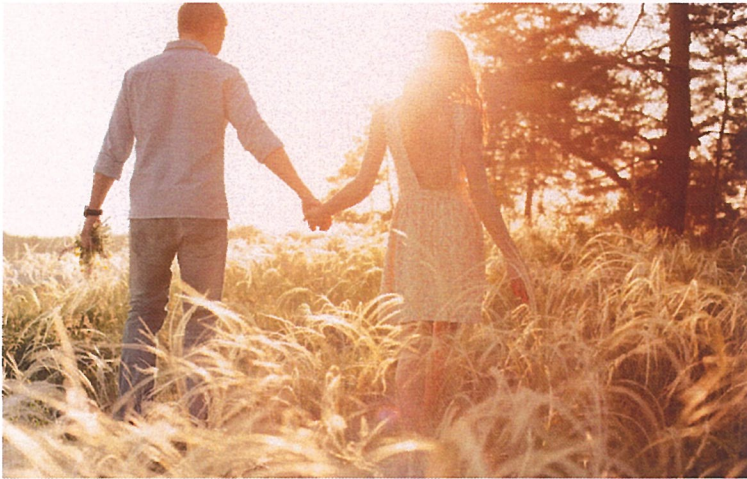
6. Surprises are welcome

Showing you care, even when there isn't a special occasion, is one of the most romantic things you can do. Don't wait for Valentine's Day, birthdays, or anniversaries to do something thoughtful for your partner. An unexpected gift or gesture is a fantastic way to enrich your relationship. Give him/her a balloon that says: "You're Amazing!" Buy something your partner really wants, like jewelry or athletic clothing.

7. Appreciate each other

Despite the negative aspects of the pandemic, it has taught us some important lessons. Life is unpredictable. It can turn upside down in an instant. We should treasure our loved ones.

Now, perhaps more than ever, it's important to express gratitude for your partner. Don't forget to say: "I love and need you," or "thanks for taking care of that for me." They're simple words, but on a tough day, a few heartfelt expressions could make all the difference.



A gift of a lifetime

After speaking with Jean, I thought about my lovable, handsome, stubborn, and thoroughly impossible husband. What would be the perfect gift for the only person who knows exactly what I'm going through? Who loves my child as much as I do and is on the same life-long journey?


Dinner at John's favorite restaurant is fine. But I also want to give a meaningful present. I'll buy John a heart-shaped frame and put a picture of us on our

“Life is unpredictable. It can turn upside down in an instant. We should treasure our loved ones.”

favorite rollercoaster ride. It was taken shortly after we married, when life was carefree and uncomplicated. It brings back such happy memories.

And now, when I look at it, I realize it's representative of our current lives. Raising a child with special needs is like riding an emotional rollercoaster, encompassing unpredictable highs and deep lows, with major twists and sharp turns along the way. But in the end, we always arrive safely on the ground with a huge smile on our faces.

Despite how crazy John makes me, he's my pillar of strength and main source of comfort. And, after all these years, with the ups and downs of our marriage, he's still the one!



Deanna Picon, BA is the founder of Your Autism Coach, LLC, which provides comprehensive support programs and seminars for parents of special needs children. Her personal mission is to empower parents as they advocate for their children while balancing productive work and family lives. Deanna is a parent of a nonverbal young man with autism.

Her academic credits include a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology and a Bachelor of Arts degree in broadcast journalism from Syracuse University. She is the author of *The Autism Parents' Guide to Reclaiming Your Life*, available from Amazon and through her website. This life-affirming guide provides parents with proven techniques and a clear-cut action plan to build a good life for themselves and their families.

Deanna is a regular contributor to *Autism Parenting Magazine*. She is the recipient of both the 2020 and 2018 "Top Parental Advice Writer" and 2015 "Top Life Coach Writer" awards.

 www.yourautismcoach.com

 info@yourautismcoach.com

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