HOMESCHOOLING YOUR AUTISTIC CHILD
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Letter from the President

Educating a child with an autism spectrum diagnosis can be a challenging but extremely rewarding mission for parents. Here at Bridgeway Academy, we have all the tools to support homeschool parents need to meet the various emotional and educational needs of ASD kids.

It is our mission to make the homeschool experience as simple to implement as it is rewarding to use. Use this whitepaper as a tool to learn about ASD in a homeschool setting. Here we have well-researched information that will debunk misnomers and myths about spectrum disorders and provide homeschooling tools, tips, and resources to support homeschool families on their educational journey. We are here to support you every step of the way!

To Your Child’s Success!

Jessica Parnell
President, Bridgeway Homeschool Academy
Section I.
What Autism Is – Debunking Misnomers

ASD, or Autism Spectrum Disorder, is the fastest-growing developmental disability in the United States, and perhaps the world. Autism Spectrum Disorder is a cognitive and behavioral disorder that seems to be on the rise in diagnosis. But thankfully, there is also a lot of research and information now available. And for a good reason! The Centers for Disease Control estimates that 1 in 68 children in the USA has ASD, or 3.5 million people, which is approximately 1% of the world’s population. Boys are three times more likely to be diagnosed with ASD, per the Autism Society.

If your child has an ASD or Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis, you know that there is no cut-and-dried picture of what you can expect when it comes to behavior, learning, and social and language skills. Autism presents with a wide range of conditions that are all characterized by challenges in language, social skills and understanding, repetitive behaviors, sensory struggles, and even cognitive delays. This range means that no child with ASD will have the same symptoms or present in the same way. Therefore, ASD is referred to as a “spectrum” for a reason. With each child comes a wide variation in how the disorder presents and what challenges, and strengths, the child will have. While some children with ASD will never be verbal or able to care for themselves, others have strong speech and communication skills, and can attend mainstream schools and colleges, successfully work, have families, and integrate into society. Only one-third of those diagnosed with Autism have cognitive delays, and early intervention services are supporting those students daily. Furthermore, an early diagnosis is a blessing because the correct educational and behavioral therapy can mean early progress for the child.

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But, a diagnosis of ASD does not mean that your child cannot have a full, fun, joyful life and grow to be a productive member of your family and society. All people are made in the image of God, including your child with ASD! Our goal at Bridgeway Academy is to empower you to support and nurture your child with the best academic support available to help them excel.

There have been many studies done on the unique nature of the autistic brain in order to better understand and, one day, cure this disease. But the brain is the most fragile and delicate organ, and one we do not yet fully understand. Rather than looking at a diagnosis of ASD as a disability, it is time we begin to see the value and benefits of the autistic brain. Here is what we do know about the autistic brain, and why you should have hope that your child can achieve and succeed despite a diagnosis of ASD!

- **Research shows** that the autistic brain has too many synapses, or connections, between brain cells.
- The autistic brain is very active and able to make new memories and learn new skills.
- Many of the world’s geniuses are or were autistic, including Albert Einstein, Mozart, Newton, Thomas Jefferson, and current child prodigy, Jacob Barnett!
- Those with autism often have better memory recall.
- Many with autism possess extraordinary abilities in math, music, memory, etc.
- One study found that people with autism concentrate more on resources within the brain for visual processing and less on impulse control, making them highly visual learners.

While there is a wide range of autistic behaviors, symptoms, and presentations, most children diagnosed with autism receive the same types of therapies and educational programming to support their unique needs.

If you’re considering homeschooling your autistic child, you are not alone. While it is not clear how many families of children with ASD choose to homeschool in the USA, those who do find homeschooling to be just what their autistic child needs to thrive academically and emotionally. But it is critical that you be prepared and equipped to homeschool your autistic child.

*Read on to find out how and why homeschooling your child with ASD could be the right decision.*
Section II.
Homeschooling Your ASD Child

Increasing numbers of parents have become frustrated with the one-size-fits-all approach to public education and have chosen to homeschool their child with ASD. Your child perceives and interacts with the world uniquely and, thus, needs a unique approach to education. There is no other child quite like yours, so how can you expect a teacher with 25-30 other students to meet the unique, individual needs of your child? When you add ASD to this equation, the problems compound, which is why the individualized approach to homeschooling could be the right choice for your autistic child.

Similarly, problems arise when autistic children are placed in “learning support” classes with other students that have ASD. Often, teachers in these classes have a generalized education degree with no specific experience in autism support. In those situations, your child could be exposed to negative social and academic behaviors that will harm your child and impede their ability to grow and learn.

Bullying is also a significant concern, and something that children with ASD are more likely to experience.

Homeschooling gives you total and complete control over your child’s environment, education, safety, and social experiences. Many homeschooling families have found the following to be the best benefits of homeschooling their child on the spectrum.

• Homeschooling provides a truly individualized program that tailors to your child’s unique needs, abilities, and interests.
• Homeschooling allows your child with ASD to take breaks, avoid sensory triggers, and sidestep social frustrations, making it easier to learn.
• Homeschooling your child with ASD will remove the social pressures and struggles.
• Homeschooling your child with ASD enables you to spend more time watching your child learn and grow, and that equals more hope!
• Homeschooling your child with ASD means your child is always safe in your care.
• Homeschooling removes the pressures of academic advocating and IEP meetings!
• Homeschooling allows for a flexible schedule, more family time, and time to schedule therapy and doctors’ appointments.

Why should you consider homeschooling your child with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

• You want more control over your child’s learning environment.
• You want your child to have an individualized approach to learning.
• You want to reduce anxiety, stress, and bullying in your child’s life.
• You want to keep your child safe.
• You want more time with your child and to see your child succeed.
• You want to know what your child is learning and to see that learning process first-hand.
• You want to choose your child’s schedule and have more free time!
Tips and Strategies

When choosing to keep a child home to homeschool, it’s important that you have as much support and resources as possible. Whether you are a trained educator or not, you can educate your child with ASD. But, you’ll need to be sure to keep three important components of your child’s education in mind when crafting your educational approach and in your day-to-day interaction and schedule. In Educating Children with Autism, the National Research Council (2002) recommended that “educational programs for students with autism include three basic components. These are the direct instruction of skills, behavior management using functional behavioral assessment and positive behavioral support, and instruction in natural settings.”

- **Instruction of an autistic child** will be in your hands with someone they trust. You will be able to choose a curriculum that best fits your child’s interests and stays away from triggers. Set up an educational routine and schedule that work for your family and child’s specific needs, including therapies, sensory breaks, meal and snack times, and more.

- **Behavioral management** will be easier when homeschooling because you’ll be able to avoid the sensory overload, frustrations, triggers, and overwhelming situations your child experienced at traditional school.

Continue use of a positive reward chart, picture schedules and cards, and other behavioral tools that work for your child and stop using what did not. We recommend setting up a daily routine in a visible place, like a picture schedule or chalkboard list, that your child with ASD can refer to each morning and at times of stress or transition.

- **Instruction in natural settings** simply means providing the right context for your child to see how the skill, concept, or idea you are teaching will work in the real world. Teaching this way will avoid generalizations and situations where your child learns a concept that he or she cannot relate to real life. For example, an autistic child may generalize when taught how to use coins and money by performing well on an assessment but be unable to use the money in a real-world situation to purchase something he or she wants. It is imperative that children with ASD are given concrete behaviors and social expectations that they can use each day. By homeschooling your child with ASD, you will be able to individualize each lesson, providing the context and real-world behaviors your child will need to know to apply the concept and relate to the world as an adult.
Section III.  
ASD Homeschooling Tips

- **Work with topic fixations.** Repetitive behavior, such as arm flapping, rocking, jumping, etc., are often used to deal with stress and anxiety. Therefore, topic-based fixations occur when children become obsessed with a certain subject, object, or theme, such as computers, trains, animals, etc. As a parent and teacher, you can use fixations to engage your child through their interests – they don’t have to be a hindrance or something that distances you from your child. Fixations are a window into their mind! Find an aspect of your child’s current favorite topic that can relate to your lessons. For example, if your child fixates on Minecraft, try learning how to code and develop video games, creating something you can do together. The challenging part of this can be balancing healthy and unhealthy fixations. If the fixation isn’t working in the classroom, remove it. You will know when to do so by remembering the ratio of 3:1. This ratio means that 75 percent of the class can be about the fixation, and 25 percent cannot. There is no easy way to know when to pull back on a fixation, but it is best to watch for a point when your child is not learning anymore, is drastically off balance, or is dysregulated, then adjust.

- **Encourage real-world socialization.** The question that often weighs the heaviest on the minds of parents of autistic children is, “Will my child be able to function in the real world?” If you are worried about real-world skills and preparation, don’t wait to start building those skills. While there are many different types of therapies for autistic children in general socialization, real-world socialization can happen anywhere, anytime! Socialization is also an area where you can use your child’s topic-based fixations to connect with them and enhance their development. If your child fixates on cars, take them to see a local mechanic; if the fixation is on a period in history, visit a museum. If your child is old enough, you can even inquire about part-time jobs at organizations in their area of interest. Jobs can be such a great experience for them, where they can practice social skills, problem-solving skills, responsibility, and so much more. And most importantly, it can all be done within their preferred comfort zone.

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- **Share your power as the authority figure with your child.** Empowering your autistic child to make their decisions about their education by putting them in a natural position of leadership will increase their confidence, and keep you focused and motivated to push through setbacks. Allowing them to make decisions also encourages critical thinking. Have the child help you choose their curriculum to include topics that are interesting to them. This approach also helps develop decision-making and critical thinking skills, two areas where autistic kids can struggle.
• **Incorporate physical exercise.** Physical movement is crucial for kids with autism and should be done daily during the homeschool routine. Repetitive physical movement such as jumping, pedaling a bicycle, or swinging can soothe your autistic child while providing the sensory input needed to sit still and learn. The curriculum for physical education is up to you, and all forms of exercise are acceptable! Read up on sports that can be done in your backyard, and consider group classes such as karate, swimming, tennis, and more, that take place at your local YMCA or local recreation center.

• **Stick to your schedule but take frequent breaks.** Children with ASD often thrive on routine and structure. Having a daily schedule that is visually posted for your child to reference is of no use if you do not stick to it. While it may be hard for you to stay structured, this choice will pay dividends of comfort and ease during your homeschooling day. While you should stick to your schedule as much as possible, chances are your child with ASD will need frequent breaks to decompress, find sensory input, or simply take a break from learning. Be sure to create a “safe spot” in your homeschooling room or fill your home with soothing items like books, music, etc., that your child can use just for these times. You can also use this spot as a reward or when your child is having a meltdown or struggling to transition from one task to another.

• **Know when to ask for help.** Asking for help is perhaps the most important thing to remember when homeschooling your autistic child. Undertaking the challenge of homeschooling a child with autism is a huge task, and it is important that you are never alone throughout the process. Your first form of support will come from your spouse and your child’s siblings, if they have any. Ask other family members to be understanding and accepting of your autistic child when they are going through a hard time. And, equip them with tools to help handle situations along with you, so that you are occasionally free to get the rest you need. Help can also come from different places outside the home. Your child’s team of medical professionals is always available, and we recommend getting to know other parents of children with autism. A quick search on the web should help you locate support groups in your area. You will likely need help choosing curriculum, classes, and record-keeping when your child reaches high school. Be sure to find an accredited learning partner that can not only guide you through these important years and course requirements, but is also a curriculum expert that understands the unique needs of children with ASD and can point you in the right direction towards the classes and curriculum that will work for your unique learner.

Find more tips on how to encourage your ASD student here.
Section VI. 
Resources and Support

There is an abundance of ASD resources out there today, but we've chosen to share with you those we believe are the most reputable and helpful for homeschool families.

The Autism Society of America - autism-society.org
Autism Speaks – autismspeaks.org
Autism Awareness Centre – autismawarenesscentre.com
Tammy Glaser’s Aut-2-Be Home Site (fellow homeschool parent) - home.earthlink.net/~tammyglaser798/authome.html
First Signs - firstsigns.org
Autism Research Network - autismresearchnetwork.org
Bridgeway and ELI HOPE Program - homeschoolacademy.com/home-school-programs/bridgeway-total-care/homeschooling-learning-disabilities

Need to know more about homeschooling your ASD student? Visit our Resources Page or set up a consultation with a homeschool specialist at 800-863-1474 to learn about our specially designed program for students with special needs. We would love to walk beside your family and support your homeschool journey!

Works Cited Research Links:
2. https://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism