

# Digital Parenting and your Autistic Child.

Part 1: Special Needs Require Special Attention



# Table of Contents

Intro: Perseverating & Tips for Autistic Brains .....	p. 4
Is Your Autistic Child Being Cyberbullied? .....	p. 6
Take Action Against Cyberbullying .....	p. 7
The Importance of Filtering & Monitoring .....	p. 8
What's All the Fuss About Filters? .....	p. 9
Sexting and the Laws in Your State .....	p. 10
The Myth of Multitasking .....	p. 14
Digital Contract for Your Family .....	p. 16

Editor: Jennifer Leonard

Design by Leaha Blair

Contributors: Kristin MacLaughlin, Tyler Percival, Annemarie Lange LPC, Charlene Underhill Miller  
PhD, Patience Domowski LCSW, Gina Badalaty, Jessica Thiefels, Lauren B. Stevens

# Special Needs Require Special Attention

Supporting a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder is challenging and rewarding at the same time. Each child, whether on the spectrum or not, has their own unique talents, triggers and things that make them tick. This guide is a resource for parents who are challenged by their autistic or special needs child's digital habits. We've compiled research, parenting tips and other assets to help guide your family's journey into the digital age.

# Perseverating & Tips for Autistic Brains

In the real world, to communicate you have to read body language, social cues, understand and provide feedback, and engage in back and forth volleys of conversation. That's hard work for people with autism. It's much easier to connect with a screen, including talking to people online instead of in person.

Children on the autism spectrum often seem to get 'stuck' on certain topics or interests, and in today's digital world, it's often around video gaming. When kids get fixated on something it's called 'perseverating'. It's when their brain gets stuck on just one topic and they can't seem to get off of it.



## **Perseverating & the ASD Brain**

Whether it's playing a game, talking about a topic, or asking for something they want, they cannot get it off their mind and tend to only discuss that one interest. They get hyper focused on one thing and are just stuck there. Perseverating is very common with children with autism and sometimes other children as well. Often children get stuck on their games because it's fun and easy for them to play and they don't have to try hard to interact like they do in real life.

## **Avoid Addictive Entertainment**

Because of its addictive nature, gaming should be limited. Children that are addicted will not want to get off the games, may even soil themselves to avoid getting up to use the bathroom while gaming, or refuse to eat unless it's at their computer desk. They may refuse to interact with peers and make friends because they only want to play video games. This can become a detriment to them in the long run, because it's important to learn how to communicate and socialize in order to survive in our world. While it's okay to spend some time in fantasy games, it's even more important to learn life lessons and social skills.

### **Set Limits**

To help reduce the addiction of screen time, set limits on the time the child can play games and watch TV or YouTube. Also limit what they are playing or watching.

### **Encourage Social Play**

Encourage more social play. To start, have a friend over to play the games with them – for a limited amount of time, and also have them spend some time playing interactively with other toys/games, outside play, etc. Enroll the child in activities, even if they are resistant at first, that encourages teamwork, social interaction, and communication/play.



### **Expand Offline**

If your child likes Pokémon video games, have them play Pokémon cards with a peer or join a Pokémon club at school. If your child likes Lego games, have them build with actual Legos, and join a social group that plays with Legos (many libraries, toy stores, and even schools offer these groups).

### **Tailor Activities**

Even if your child is resistant to anything non-gaming related they likely will eventually participate/enjoy other activities if you insist on it, firmly but nicely. Maybe the child can earn a reward such as if they participate in soccer practice today, then they can have an extra 10 minutes on the computer, for example.



# Is Your Autistic Child Being Cyberbullied?

Being mocked online can be particularly hurtful to a child, who may feel as if there is no escape from the ridicule. Research has revealed that kids with disabilities are two to three times more likely to be bullied. Especially at risk are children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), as bullies often exploit differences in communication ability and social cognition, and this regularly occurs in the virtual world. For example, the Issues in Comprehensive Pediatric Nursing state:

- 65%** of parents reported that their children with Asperger's syndrome had been victimized by peers in some way within the past year
- 47%** reported that their children had been hit by peers or siblings
- 50%** reported them to be scared by their peers
- 9%** were attacked by a gang and hurt in the private parts
- 12%** indicated their child had never been invited to a birthday party
- 6%** were almost always picked last for teams
- 3%** ate alone at lunch every day

## How Can You Tell if Your Child is Being Cyberbullied

The warning signs are often discreet for children with ASD. Increased anxiety or a change in daily routings like diet or sleeping patterns can also be a sign that something is not right. You can also search social media to find out if accounts are being opened under their name.

**The National Autism Association identifies three forms of bullying – all of which can be pervasive online:**

### Manipulative

When a child is coerced and controlled.

### Conditional Friendship

Friendship alternated with bullying behavior.

### Exploitative

Features of a child's condition are used to bully.

# Take Action Against Cyberbullying

If you are certain that your child is a victim, it's time for you to get involved to protect your child. Here are some steps you can take to protect your child from cyberbullying:

## 1. Start by Talking

Encourage them to discuss their feelings by talking about your own online experiences, weaving in the good and the bad. Make it clear that cyberbullying is not okay and should be reported right away if something makes them feel bad. It is important to remain calm so as not to provoke any more stress or anxiety from an already confused child. If your kid is having trouble discussing the experience, try simplifying the questions and options, move deliberately towards the root of the problem, working with your kid patiently.

## 2. Teach Your Child Online Etiquette

Your child should understand what is and isn't appropriate to say and do online, and that social media has rules too. Make sure they understand that they, too, must respect others online.

## 3. Limit Online Access

Set clear rules and guidelines on tech usage, including what to do when problems or uncomfortable situations arise.

## 4. Protect Your Child Offline

Is this one of their classmates? Is it someone they met at an extracurricular activity? If so, your child may also be experiencing bullying in the real world and you can address that through the proper authorities (school administration, team captain, etc.).

## 5. Don't Engage the Bully or Their Family Online

If you know who is doing the bullying, you can reach out to their parents if you have a relationship with them to discuss calmly but be careful before taking this step. Many parents are sensitive about such accusations and meeting face to face without a neutral third party may only make things worse.

## 6. Report and Document Misconduct

Rule violations can be reported to the social medium, web host or online system. Threats of physical harm, however, should be reported to the police. Be sure to keep screen shots of all comments and images, especially those that are inappropriate, threatening or profane.

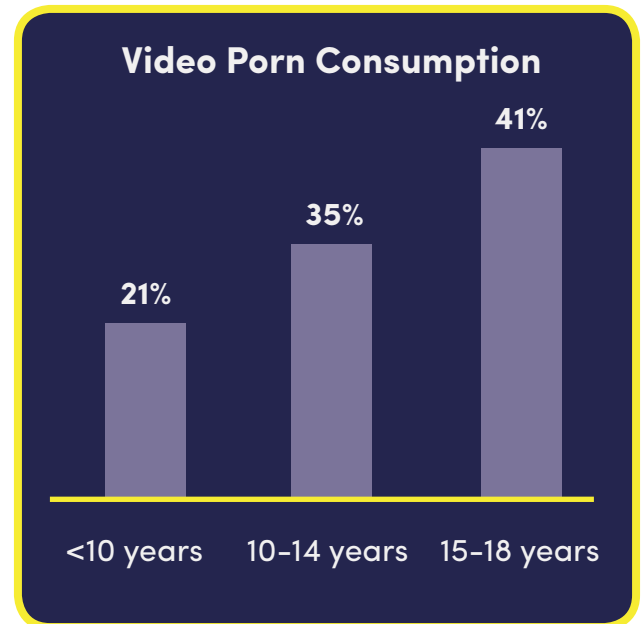
## 7. Get Your Child Actively Engaged Offline

If a bullied child is alone and friendless there is potential for them to experience depression and harmful behaviors. Help them to foster a hobby that they like and can share with others to promote healthy self-esteem.

# The Importance of Filtering and Monitoring

Psychology Today reported that children on the autism spectrum are at higher risk of developing an addiction to pornography. The protection of kids from sexually explicit material is important for all parents, but for parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, this protection takes on a special significance.

Early engagement in pornography can lead to misconceptions of appropriate sexual behavior and dependence on porn. These effects can be amplified in kids with ASD, as they have a difficult time understanding what they are watching and the consequences of porn. Preventing accidental exposure and early porn habits is crucial for the development of social and relationship skills.



## How Can Parents Protect Their Child from Pornography?

### Model Positive Behavior

Model the positive behavior you want your child to emulate. Parents know that small children mimic what they watch. If a child sees love, kindness, and cooperation, these traits are copied.

### Take Preventative Measures

Take preventative measures by installing an internet filter on PCs, tablets, and smartphones to block pornographic content.

### Explain Love and Affection

If your child has viewed pornographic content, explain to your kids that this is not a sign of a healthy and happy relationship. Explain to them age-appropriate ways to express love and affection to others.

### Communicate What's Appropriate

It is never too soon to have a conversation on what is appropriate to share with others. If your child is old enough to understand, let them know it is illegal for them to take explicit pictures or videos, view pornography, or share pornography as a minor. Most importantly, explain to them WHY sexting is dangerous behavior and the consequences that can come from it, including legal ramifications.

“ Most statistics on pornography use say the average age of a child’s first exposure to pornography is 11 years old. ”



# What's All the Fuss About Filters?

## Obsessive Internet Use

It is important to every parent to keep their kids safe from the malicious content on the internet. For parents of kids with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), internet filters can be a key tool to curb obsessive tendencies.

Those on the autism spectrum often exhibit a particular interest in one subject, be it planes, trains, a football team, or music. They will devote a lot of time to the subject and, sometimes, can develop an obsession with it. An obsession differs from an interest in that an obsession occupies so much of one's thoughts and inclinations that it undermines other important areas of one's life, such as relationships, school, and sleep. Internet use can feed these obsessions, as those with ASD will spend unchecked hours engrossed in the subject, as it is therapeutic and calming for them. This is where filters can help.



## Rationing Time on the Internet

By making use of effective filtering programs, parents can block a child's access to pages and chats containing certain keywords, meta tags, and web objects. **This gives parents more control over screen time and limits on obsessive behavior.** The National Autistic Society of the U.K. recommends rationing time spent with an interest that has become or is becoming an obsession, but such rationing can be difficult if the child has time alone on the internet. Customizable filtering is a parental control tool to employ a limit internet use, as the filter can be turned off when the child is allotted time to explore their interest.

If directed and guided, a fixation can be used to motivate an autistic child to learn and broaden their horizons. But this guidance requires direction and direction requires limits. It is important to ensure an innocent intrigue does not develop into a time-devouring obsession that limits other parts of a child's life, but instead enriches their life.





**Arizona:** Arizona's sexting law applies only to minors. If a minor engages with another minor in sexting, they could be found guilty of a class 3 misdemeanor, depending on the circumstances. Adults age 18 and older found sexting with a minor will be charged under Arizona's child pornography laws.

**Connecticut:** Minors caught sexting will be charged with a misdemeanor, as of November 1, 2010. These individuals could face up to one year in prison in addition to a fine of \$2,000.



**Florida:** For the first offense, any minor caught sending, possessing, or creating nude images of minors can receive a non-criminal violation, subject to a \$60 fine or 8 hours of community service in addition to training or instructional classes about the dangers of sexting.

**Georgia:** Any teenager who creates or possesses a sexually explicit image is charged with a misdemeanor if the teen is at least 14, the person in possession is no older than 17, and the person in the image consented to its creation and distribution.



**Illinois:** In 2010, Illinois passed a law that makes sexting between minors illegal, including if two minors sexting or a minor distributing sexually explicit images of another minor. They will be charged with a misdemeanor and ordered to receive court supervision, counseling, or community service.

**Louisiana:** If a minor—anyone under the age of 17 in this state—is found to distribute an indecent photo of him or herself to another minor may have to undergo counseling or other punishments, but will not receive jail time. If a minor distributes an inappropriate picture of another minor may be punished with up to 10 years in jail and a \$250 fine. Stricter penalties are in place for adults, including jail time.





**Missouri:** If a minor is caught possessing or distributing sexually explicit images of a minor—including photos of themselves—they will be charged with a Class A misdemeanor on their first offense, with up to 1 year in jail and a \$1,000 fine.

**Nebraska:** In 2009, a law was passed making it a crime to send sexually explicit photos of a minor via text message. Offenders under the age of 18 will not be prosecuted for receiving such images of a minor 15 years of age or older if the image was taken voluntarily and the recipient doesn't distribute the image to anyone else.



**Nevada:** Nevada's law, passed in 2011, applies only to minors who are caught sexting, with lesser punishment than if charged under child pornography laws.

**New Hampshire:** Anyone who possesses a sexually explicit image of a minor can be charged with possession of child pornography. Minors found guilty are subject to juvenile delinquency charges; adults will be subject to criminal proceedings.



**New Jersey:** The first time a minor is caught sexting, they will not be prosecuted under current child pornography laws. Under this new law, if caught sending sexually explicit images via cell phone, minors will be required to attend a state-sponsored educational program about the dangers of sending these images.

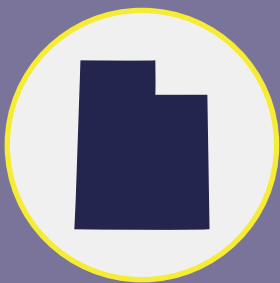
**New York:** Adults and minors who create, distribute, or possess images of a minor engaged in sexually explicit act would be prosecuted under child pornography laws. A diversion program in the state allows first-time offenders to avoid jail time, and unlike almost every other state, would not be required to register as a sex offender.





**Pennsylvania:** Minors are currently prosecuted under child pornography laws for sexting and could be subject to jail time. Enacted legislation reduces this to a second-degree misdemeanor for teens, and for first-time offenders, the charge would not go onto their permanent record.

**Rhode Island:** Sexting between minors is illegal in Rhode Island, and those found guilty will be charged in State Family Court. Minors who distribute sexually explicit images of a minor other than themselves can still be charged under child pornography laws.



**Utah:** In 2009, a law was passed that makes sexting between minors a misdemeanor rather than a felony and the minor offender will not have to register as a sex offender.

**Vermont:** Minors found to be sending explicit images of themselves will be declared delinquent in family court. For a first offense, the minor will be sent to a diversion program and will not have to register as a sex offender. The conviction can be expunged after turning 18.



**West Virginia:** Adults who create, distribute, or possess sexually explicit images of a minor will be charged under the state's child pornography laws. If convicted, they could serve jail time. Teens that participate in sexting are subject to less serious charges, like a diversion program.

# The Myth of Multitasking

According to Dr. Adam Gazzaley, a neuroscientist at the University of California, San Francisco, when you engage in one task at a time, the prefrontal cortex works in harmony with the other parts of the brain, but when you toss in another task it forces the left and the right side of the brain to work independently. When the brain takes in new information, it reduces the primary focus of the first task. When anyone multitasks by splitting their attention, they may think the mind can juggle two or three activities successfully at once but Gazzaley thinks we woefully underestimate that ability.

## Shift Focus to Unitasking

Author Sharon Salzberg shares in her latest book, *Real Happiness at Work*, that human beings seem to be unable to multitask. Salzberg recommends that we become “unitaskers” rather than multitasker. Intentionally reducing how much information we are taking in at any given time. Narrowing the scope of our attention so that we are focusing on one thing at a time as much as possible. Focusing on one task over a sustained period, increases our ability to concentrate, retain information and increase productivity. This recommendation is particularly beneficial for children with ASD.



## How Multitasking Impacts Children with ASD

Multitasking, while inefficient for most of the population, can be extremely disruptive for a child with ASD. Researchers have discovered that the brains of children with autism are inflexible at rest-to-task performance. This basically means that specific brain connections do not change or function as they should, when switching from a resting-state to a task-state. According to Victoria L. Dunckley, MD integrative psychiatrist, “children with autism tend to have a fragile attention system, poor executive functioning, and ‘reduced bandwidth’ when processing information.” Various studies have shown on tests of cognitive flexibility, participants with ASD demonstrate impaired cognitive flexibility and show impaired performance when attempting to perform multiple tasks.





Below are several strategies that many experts have found effective to assist a child with ASD, when presented with multiple task scenarios.

### **Break It Down to One Task at a Time**

According to FEAT (Families for Effective Autism Treatment), multi-tasking likely means multi-trouble, but if someone with autism is reminded to take one step at a time, they can excel at a very high level. FEAT recommends, "Tackling situations one step at a time will make the situations much simpler to overcome and not overwhelming for an autistic person."

### **Consider Increasing Time for Tasks**

Multitasking requires rapid information processing but children with ASD are typically slow information processing, frequently needing more time to process information. When not given adequate time to process each piece, they can become quickly overwhelmed. If your child seems overwhelmed consider allowing a bit more time to complete tasks.

### **Limit the Number of Tasks**

Young people with autism may also find it difficult to multitask because they stick rigidly to tasks in the order they are given to them. Dr. Gnanathusharan Rajendran, a lecturer in Psychology at Strathclyde said, "The pupils with autism achieved tasks when they were given to them singly but difficulties emerged when they were asked to interleave the tasks with each other. There was no difference in the time taken by the groups but the pupils with autism completed fewer tasks."

# Digital Contract for Your Family

- Tablet    Computer/Laptop    Phone    Game Console    Connected Toy

## You Agree To:

- Only watch videos/visit websites that my parents approve.
- Not download anything without permission first.
- Only spend \_\_\_\_\_ minutes on the tablet/phone/computer/game each day.
- I can use the devices between the hours of \_\_\_\_\_ only.
- Tell a parent if I see something that makes me feel uncomfortable.  
\_\_\_\_\_ rooms are off-limits for using any device.
- Ask permission before purchasing anything online.
- All devices should charge overnight in \_\_\_\_\_.
- I promise not to use any devices during breakfast, lunch or dinner.
- I won't let screen time distract me from homework and my favorite hobbies, like \_\_\_\_\_.
- Not share any personal information or photos without approval.

## We Agree To:

- Watch along with my child & interact while they view videos and apps.
- Keep family meals unplugged.
- Be a good digital citizen and teach my kids to do the same.
- Not text and drive.
- Review privacy settings with the family.
- Keep all device passwords.
- Turn off all screens \_\_\_\_\_ minutes before bedtime.

-----  
-----  
(Parent/Guardian Signature)

-----  
-----  
-----  
(Child Signature)

