

Tips that Improved My Autistic Child's Behavior

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This guest post was written by Chrissy Kelly, a mom of two boys with autism. You can read more about her and her family on her blog, "[Life With Greyson + Parker](#)," and also her [Life with Greyson + Parker Facebook page](#).

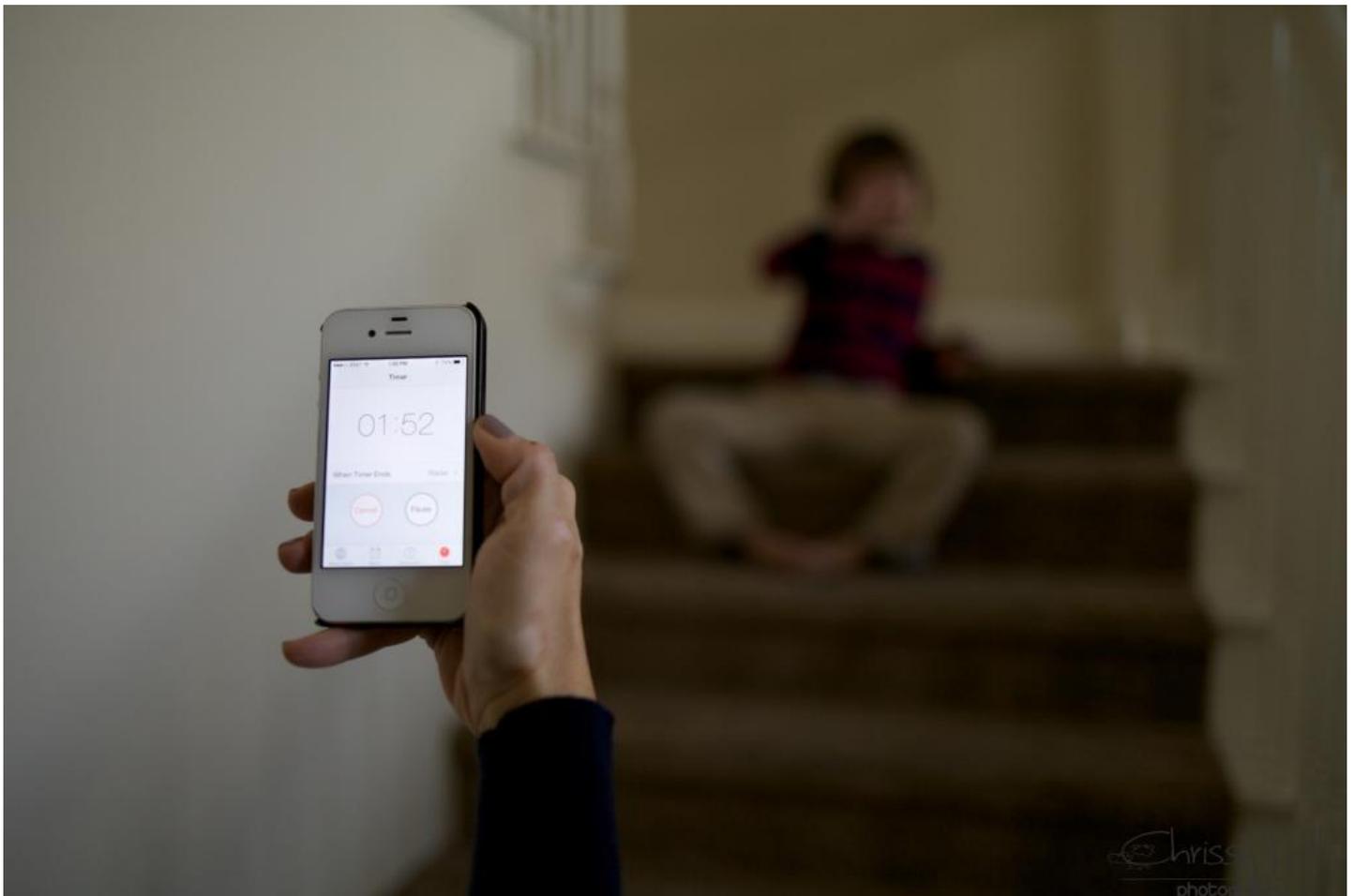


Our house has been a revolving door of Behavior Therapists over the past almost four years. Both boys put in about 20 hours a week of intense therapy. I never thought a kidless 20-something year old might be able to teach me something about my own children. The presence of autism in my life has grown my mind a thousand times over. So much of parenting children with autism is counter-intuitive. I say and do things I never thought would work, but they do. Here is a small list of techniques that we use daily that help reduce tantrums, increase understanding, direction following and happiness (theirs and mine). There is no one thing that works for all children, and there is no one quick fix, however, many of these techniques will work for many children. Whether or not they have autism.

1) Use Time to Decrease Transitional Tantrums

Many children have trouble leaving preferred places and activities. This is a BIG one for my 5 year old. There were times I wouldn't even take him to our neighborhood park because I was so scared of that awful moment when we had to leave. He was unpredictable and erratic. Sometimes he would scream and fall to the ground, or try to run into a busy street to get away from me, or lash out to hit me. It broke my heart and downright scared me.

One thing that has been life-changing for us is using Minute Warnings/Timers: Your child may need a 5 minute, 2 minute, or 1 minute warning before there is a change of activity. These warnings help the children prepare for the transition. They will begin to learn that the warning comes and then the change comes. Eventually, the minute warnings become routine, even if the next task is not.



We set a timer on our iphone.

"In five minutes you need to take a bath."

"In two minutes we are leaving the park."

This helps a child feel more in control without controlling us. When the timer goes off you have to carry through every single time. We did this continuously for two weeks before we started to see results. Now it's been years and it still works. Set your boundaries, stick to them, and follow through.

2) FIRST/THEN

Many of our other tantrums are over wanting something they can't have at that moment. A toy, a snack, a trip somewhere RIGHT NOW. Or there is something they DON'T want to do. For many of these situations we use first/then. "First ____, then ____" statements are used to help a child finish a task before getting something motivating.

"First we finish our lunch, then we can go outside."

"First we will clean up, then we can go to the park."

Depending on your needs and your child's skill set, you can either do this verbally, use pictures, or write items on a dry erase board.



Many children with autism think in pictures, so that is often the initial go to method.

It's a simple phrase that provides structure in a child's mind and helps them follow the directions at hand. It can help decrease a child's frustration because they can understand exactly what is expected of them. This works like a charm for my 5-year old, Greyson. It probably took about two months for him to understand that he would get what he wanted as long as he FIRST did what was asked of him. This does not work for Parker who is three. He does not have the same understanding of language that his brother does and he hasn't grasped anything other than he's NOT getting what he wants RIGHT NOW. We still use this language because one day when he grasps language he will understand the importance of it.

3) Reward positive behavior

Reinforcing language identifies and affirms childrens' specific positive actions and encourages them to continue their appropriate behavior. For example, to a child that shared their swing at the park you might say, "I really like how you shared and played so nicely with that little boy at the park." It's especially important to recognize behaviors that a child usually struggles with- sharing, being quiet, following directions. With these words, the adult lets the children know that their positive behaviors were noticed.

We continually point out good behaviors in areas the boys struggle. "I like how you are sharing your truck with Parker." "Good job cleaning up your blocks Parker." Recognizing good behaviors increases the likelihood that they will happen again. (Please note: this also works with husbands). In an environment with small children you are frequently saying: *no, put that down, don't do that, put that back, you can't have that- you can't eat that, NO NO NO NO*- sometimes it's so nice to recognize and focus on the good. Praise is one of the best reinforcers around.

For some children- praise means nothing. It's not rewarding, therefore, it does not increase the good behavior. In this case you must find something that IS rewarding. Sometimes a small reward is offered- a piece of candy or a token or sticker that when accumulated can be used towards a greater reward. I've heard some people say, "I don't like to bribe my child." To me- it's like getting a pay check for work. We all work for the reward, whether it be emotional, financial or edible or tangible.

4) Focus on what you want the child to do, not what you want them to STOP doing.

How many of you have screamed at your child, STOP SCREAMING?!!!! with crazed eyes and clinched fists?
(Guilty)

Minimize the use of 'don't' and 'stop.' For example, 'Walk on the sidewalk' can be much more effective than 'Don't walk on the grass' for a child who might not hear the 'don't'—or for one who isn't sure where the acceptable place to walk might be. This lets the child know exactly what you WANT them to do. 'Stop screaming' becomes, 'Quiet please', 'Don't color on the table' becomes 'Only color on the paper'. It's counter-intuitive to the ways most of us usually parent but it works. There are times when there's NO WAY around a don't/stop statement. DON'T COLOR ON THE DOG. STOP HITTING YOUR BROTHER. Use your best judgement- you'll figure out when you need to lay down the DON'T law.



Here I ignore his screaming because he was mad that I gave one of his cars to his brother when he didn't want to share.



Here I praise him, "Great job being quiet and playing with your cars."

I know, it feels a little weird at first, ignoring your child while they are screaming or throwing themselves on the ground. But when they do that, they are attention seeking and giving them any kind of attention reinforces that behavior. They will learn it doesn't work and realize they get more attention when their behavior is good.

5) Remain Calm (YOU!)

This was a hard one for me to learn and is still a hard one for me to remember! This one is especially hard because what usually happens is your child goes out of control and then you quickly follow. It's exhausting, draining and frustrating. I take deep breaths and make sure my words sound calm, even if I'm not feeling it. I remind myself that I am the adult and if I expect my child to modify their behavior then I must too. Children don't always have the language to explain what they want and need and that can be extremely frustrating for them. I have had many, many more years of practice so I need to be much better at being kind, calm and patient while I lead by example.

I can't believe how much happier they are since beginning Behavior Therapy. They are so much less frustrated and so much more understood.

Remember, parenting is a ride wild, and for the most part, everything hard we are going through with them is only a phase. IT WILL END. Sometimes all that is standing between you and your child's happiness is a little extra structure and control. If you have any questions or tips of your own, leave them in the comments.

Love someone in your village,
Chrissy

1.6k Shares

Additional Resources & Tools



How to Stay Safe During Unsafe Events

A teaching story



[Support in explaining unsafe situations through teaching stories](#)



Blog

[Helping Children with Autism Get Ready for the School Bus](#)

Visual Supports and Autism



Tool kit

[ATN/AIR-P Visual Supports and Autism](#)



**Successful
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Children
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