

# **Autism and Middle School: Surviving and Thriving**

*By Cristy James*

We just signed my son up for classes at the high school next year, and as we look forward to this new phase in his life, I reflect back on his years in the middle school. There were many trials and tribulations, but he has also matured and gained new skills and for that I am grateful. I decided to write this article to share with others some of the things that did and did not work well during these years – years that are difficult for ALL kids. It is by no means a definitive listing of all you will need for middle school, but my hope is that it may give you some insight into what you can try with your own child. For background information, my son has high-functioning autism and struggles with anxiety and depression. He attends school in the general education classroom, with the support of an aide available in the room. One of our main goals for these years was to foster as much independence as possible. I will use the term “we” to refer to my son and the host of people who helped support him, including family at home, school staff, and outside therapists.

The first obvious area that we needed to focus on was organization. Being left “on your own” to navigate multiple classrooms, teachers, assignments and a locker were all challenges for my son. We had to be sure to list out not only his schedule, but also what he would need to bring with him to each class. We planned when would be a good time to go to his locker and even when to take a bathroom break. We found that in order for assignments to get home for homework, we needed a single, accordion-style folder that went to every class, along with whatever else the teacher required. We also made sure we had access to his textbooks at home. Another skill we worked on (and are still perfecting!) is his ability to plan ahead for larger tasks. This included not only preparing and studying for upcoming tests, but also breaking larger projects down into manageable tasks and scheduling them. For example with a book report, the steps might be reading the book, making notes, organizing your topic, and then writing the actual report.

We found that one of our best tools in supporting our son was the use of technology. Unfortunately, we had to work hard to let the school allow it's use, but his iPad has proven invaluable these last 2 years. It is a central tool that is always with him, and it not only serves as an organizer, but it also helps with note taking, writing papers and several specific academic tasks. We even use alarms/reminders on it to prompt him to do things (like actually turning in that homework we struggled through!) that typically an aide would have to do. These days there are many apps that can prove useful, and I recommend you “try before you buy”. First identify the skill deficit, and then look for an app that will focus on that area. We found therapists and some disability support websites to be good sources of potentially useful apps. We also found that there's a certain “coolness factor” for our son using the iPad, which was a bonus since he struggles with social relations. I will note, however, that this is still an emotional teenager using this fairly expensive device. So make sure you pay the extra money for the replacement plan. Just saying...we learned this lesson the hard way.

Another key point that we found is that communication is even more important than ever. It's actually harder to do, but still important and well worth the effort. You really need to keep the communication lines open between school and home, plus you also need to work on how your child communicates with you and advocates for himself at school. Gone are the days of only one teacher who sends relevant information home in a weekly newsletter! I have learned to start the school year with an introductory email to all his new teachers. The letter is brief, but includes some of the top strengths of and difficulties for my son. It also encourages communication in the future. This sets the stage for a good relationship, and (hopefully!) allows you to catch things before they become a problem. Our school also allows us, as parents, to access our son's grades online. Staying on top of this helped us find where he was having difficulties, and allowed us to address them with the school. Lastly, I use the term self-advocacy to refer to when my son needed to speak up for himself. This was typically when he didn't understand what was needed for an assignment or what was expected of him behaviorally. I found this a particularly difficult area to let him take some ownership of, and even to let him experience some failures. I now realize that he really needs to develop these skills to succeed in the future. But I found that if I could keep him talking to me about what he was having troubles with, I could still help him think through ideas on how to advocate for himself and get what he needed.

I don't want to leave out the subject of puberty. It's a very real and difficult factor that complicates everything you're working on. I don't have any magic solutions but I suggest you take the time to VERY EXPLICITLY teach your child skills related to puberty. Personal hygiene and body changes are all things that you need to not only take the time to teach them about, but you also need to find motivators for them to follow through on. If your child is already struggling with social difficulties, then unpleasant odors and/or greasy hair are not going to help them out! You also need to spend time teaching them some basics of sex ed. They WILL hear lots of new terms and ideas, and you need to help them understand what is appropriate! We even found it necessary to teach our son many of the slang words that were related to sexuality, so that he would understand and be able to process what he heard other kids saying. And not repeat them...loudly...while getting off the bus!

Why haven't I mentioned academics? We found that, for the most part, we needed the same supports in place as previous years – but that nothing new really came up. There were only 2 minor things we ran into. We didn't realize how the choices of what classes he takes in middle school affects what classes he is allowed to take in high school. So he's entering high school already behind in some subject areas. The other thing we realized is that the school was providing no aide or extra support for our son in the non-core courses, such as music and shop classes. This meant a lot of extra communication with those teachers and trying to find creative ways to support him without adding more burdens to the already over-loaded teachers.

I've saved the big one for last: social difficulties. These are years where there is so much going on socially and my son didn't understand a lot of it! I'll start off with the hardest part – bullying. It happens much more often than we know. The kids are

much more smart and more subtle about how and when they choose to “tease” your child. We had to develop a very specific plan for him to deal with what kids were saying to him. We found that planning out and practicing responses for him to say in certain situations and identifying trusted adults were key factors in helping him cope with what was going on. But he still struggled and his self-esteem and depression worsened – one of the most painful things to watch as a parent! We really relied on our therapists to help him with his skills and to provide a listening/supportive ear for him. We also found it helpful to identify reliable, positive peers that he could associate with. Having someone to sit with for lunch was important. Finding activities that he enjoyed and was fairly proficient at was also important. For our son, singing in the choir and joining a small club related to remote-controlled cars were opportunities to not only gain some self-esteem but to experience some positive social relationships. My son has a friend now, for the first time in his life – someone to share his experiences with and to teach him much more effectively than I can. You have no idea how happy I am about that! And finally, regulation of his emotions, something he struggles with anyway, was even more of a challenge during these tumultuous years. Hormones and pressures and frustrations were ever-present and could turn out into a big meltdown with what seemed like little warning. The fact that he can function fairly well often eludes people into thinking that he understands things or is “doing okay.” I suggest you look for as many ways as possible to alleviate anxiety and stressors. But you also need to look for appropriate ways to “blow off steam.” We found that regular exercise actually helped, as well as having a trusted counselor to talk with. He still attends private therapy to work on his social skills, for which we have added many new skills to work on these last few years! And, again, motivation that makes sense to him is often needed to reinforce his using of those skills.

I hope that you have found these insights useful. I know that every child and their situation is different, but I’m hoping that even if you didn’t find specific answers to your problems, you could at least feel better knowing that we all struggle through these years with our children. There’s something to be said for “kindred spirits” – we can laugh and cry together! What does the future hold for us? I don’t know – the new, large high school that is looming ahead of us seems a bit scary. But we feel that some of the things we have been struggling with will “get better” with the availability of new resources there. No matter what, I’m very proud of all that he has accomplished and we will continue to work to support my son and give him the best life that we can!