



**The Ten
Commandments**
For Raising Children with
AUTISM

by Dr. Josh Smith

The 10 Commandments For Raising Children with Autism

As both a parent and a professional who works with autistic children, I understand that the process of raising autistic children can be a very frustrating endeavor. I have spent evenings crying as I consider how best to meet the needs of my children. On the other hand, I have found it too often be an extremely fun and rewarding experience. I can tell you that through consistent effort and quality professional care that autistic individuals can make good progress, and reach the point that they are able to live a high quality of life.

I know the title sounds a bit pretentious. However, I did choose the title for a reason. Fellow Hoosier, David Letterman, taught me the value of a list of ten who had some of the best top 10 list ever created. When it comes to the use of the word “commandments” I use it to express the necessity of consistency in our approach in working with autistic children, and the word commandment sounds pretty consistent to me.

The majority of the knowledge that I have received in the raising of my children. I have been blessed with four children. The oldest two of those children have been diagnosed with autism.

I have learned the consequences of the 10 commandments, because I have broken all 10 commandments in the raising of my children at one time or another. My study of psychology and the clinical work that I have done has solidified my thoughts on these issues. Raising a child with autism is a very demanding endeavor. It has stretched me in every possible way.

Nevertheless, I know that these children will improve under sound principles and continued effort. With that being said, here are the 10 commandments:

#1

IF you say it, YOU HAVE TO DO IT

This principle can be of benefit in working with all children. In working with autistic children this principle is paramount. Autistic children have a hard time processing variance. For example, if a child refuses to take a shower and then his father tells him that there than there will be no access to electronic devices. If the child throws a tantrum to which the father folds and lets him watch TV even though he didn't take his shower, then all the child has learned is to throw a tantrum to get what he wants. This is a critical reason why they like electronic devices due to their reliable response. It is vital that parents are precise with the stated consequences for both positive and negative behaviors. It is ideal that caregivers discuss and agree to the consequences for certain likely behavior in a quiet environment when the child is not present, and for all caregiver to follow-up on agreed consequence. Such as discussion can be facilitated by the treating psychologist or behavior therapist in an effort to reach an appropriate conclusion.

#10

You are the best advocate your child will ever have

A lot of people work with autistic children. These individuals may range to the degree to which they are effective in helping children with autism. There can be many people who are helpful and have good intentions in the work they perform. However, they will be limited due to factors such as client load, budgets, and policies and procedures. This can be especially true in the educational system. It is the responsibility of the caregiver to ensure that professionals work towards the child's interest in an organized manner.

#9

EXAMINE INFORMATION CRITICALLY

There is a tremendous amount of information available about autism. Some of this information is based on subjective experience with one autistic individual. The best information is based on analysis of a large number of autistic children. Ideally, this information will be obtained through the use of the scientific process. Some nefarious individuals will attempt to make money off families who are desperate for help. I remember one person showing a multivitamin that she had purchased online that said it was a “cure for autism”. Occasionally, well-meaning friends and family members will express their thoughts and opinions. It is appropriate for caregivers to maintain boundaries with friends and family members with respect to choosing the appropriate treatment for their autistic children.

#2

When it comes to verbal communication, LESS IS MORE

It is essential to remember that while verbal information may be our preferred method for receiving verbal information, but this may not be the case for autistic children. On many occasions, I have seen frustrated parents double down on verbal communication. Autistic children have a hard time processing verbal information when things are going well. This deficiency becomes much more apparent when they are upset and frustrated. When a child is throwing a tantrum, verbal communication should be limited to one basic instruction repeated every 3-4 minutes.

This can be as simple as saying, “Put your backpack away.” In response to any statements or questions other than the desired behavior, the adult should simply state, “I will talk with you about that, once your backpack is put away.”

This keeps the communication simple and increases the probability of compliance on the part of the child.

#3

AS MUCH INTERVENTION AS POSSIBLE

At times parents have expressed the concern that too much intervention can be overwhelming for their child. In fact, the number of interventions available for autistic children is staggering. Such interventions include psychological, psychiatric, behavioral, dietary, occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy, recreational therapy, and music therapy to name a few. When it comes to autism intervention, one of the few laws we know is that early intervention is the best. The most significant change comes before the age of 10 with moderate change possible before 18, and only minimal change achievable after that. With that in mind, it is advisable to provide autistic children with the most intervention possible. The two most limiting factors in this area are time and money. If resources are limited it is best to provide psychological and behavioral interventions in combination with consultation with a trusted physician.

#8

DON'T COMPARE autistic children

There is so much about autism that we don't know. While the symptoms may be similar, the intensity of those symptoms can vary greatly between individuals. Autistic individuals can show a wide diversity in degree of progression and ability across several different areas of functioning. This can be influenced by a number of different factors, some of which science aren't aware of, at present. The best basis for comparison when it comes to evaluating an autistic individual success is comparing their previous behavior to their current behavior.

#1

Focus on one thing at a time, and CHOOSE YOUR FOCUS CAREFULLY

Parents of autistic children often have a large number of concerns related to their children. It can often be overwhelming for parents to know where to start which behaviors to focus their attention. Trying to focus on too many behaviors at the same time can be a prodigious task for both the child and the parents. In my experience it best to focus on only one or two behaviors at the same time. From experience, I believe it is best to place primary focus on behaviors that are dangerous to the child or to others. These behaviors include self-injurious behaviors, physical aggression, and elopement. It can be very disruptive for an autistic child to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital. By working to eliminate these behaviors, it limits the possibility of the child having to be hospitalized. If there are no problem behaviors in these areas then parents in consultation with treatment providers can determine what problem(s) cause the most social disruption can focus on those areas.

#4

CONSISTENCY is the key

It is impossible to downplay the importance of the principle. This principle applies to every aspect of daily life: where they live, where they go, how they get there, who they see, what they do, and everything else. Autistic children respond best to consistent routine. The children that I have worked with who have the most intense symptoms is often due to a chaotic family environment and frequent change. Life is not accommodating and change and disruption can be expected. It is best to consult with professionals working with the child to help them properly prepare for change. Social stories are popular interventions that have been used in this endeavor.

#5

SPEAK VISUALLY

Autistic children tend to process information best visually. Some caregivers might process information differently, and have a hard time understanding different methods of processing information. Providers often have excellent ideas to present information visually. Internet search providers can be a valuable resource. A simple example of this could be to bring up a picture of a bank to show an autistic child to assist in communicating the fact the child will be going with a parent to the bank. Timers can be valuable to help prepare children for upcoming transitions. A variety of timers can be purchased. However, many available electronics contain a timer which can be just as effective provided that the child can see the timer.

#6

DON'T

take it personally

This is often the hardest principle for parents to follow. Autistic children will often express a preference for object over individuals. In addition, individuals on the autism spectrum express deficiencies in both basic social skills and empathy. I have had everybody fluid known to man thrown at me by an autistic child. I have been beat up in a variety of ways, and called word that would make a prison inmate blush. In none of those encounters do I believe that the child performed these behaviors due to any particular animosity against me. Instead, I believe that it was due to factors such as sensory imbalance, displaced frustration, confusion, or inability to obtain desired objects or participate in preferred activities. With that in mind, our focus is best kept on the individual's behavior and not any potential motivation on the part of the child.