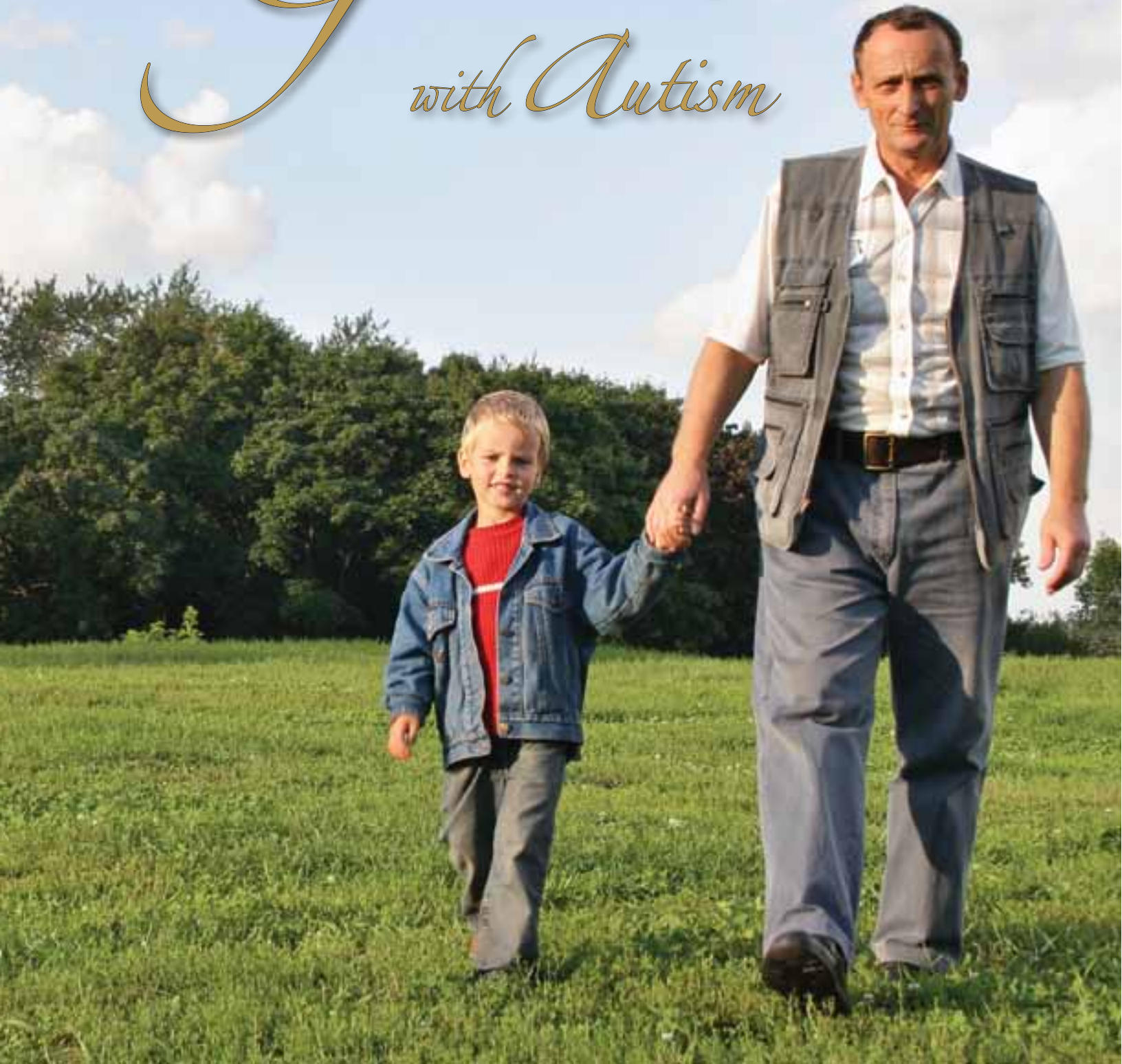


*Loving
your Grandchild
with Autism*



12 Ways to Make a Difference

By Jennifer Kruminis

The day has finally arrived and you are a grandparent! Nothing compares with the infinite love grandparents feel for their grandchildren. No longer bound by the need to juggle work, home, school and raising children into mature, self-reliant adults, the gift of grandchildren is one of life's greatest blessings. Visions of shared time together, the laughter, the hugs begin filling your head and heart. You join your own children in dreaming joyously about the people these little ones will become. The future seems ever so bright.

But life doesn't always deliver its blessings in the packages we expect. The diagnosis of autism in a child can be an abrupt jolt into a new, frightening and unfamiliar world for both parents and grandparents. While parents are primary caregivers and as such, shoulder the challenges directly, grandparents often find themselves equally saddened, bewildered and at a loss about what to do. Not only is the grandchild affected, but your own son or daughter is suffering. It's a double whammy for grandparents; what could be worse?

If you are a grandparent of a child on the autism spectrum, I know you want to help because you are reading this article. Your adult children need you; you want to find a way to ease the pain. Although you cannot cure the autism

or somehow make it disappear, (even though you would love to), you play a critical role in your family's unfolding experience. You have the power to make life more manageable for your children and your grandchild or you can undermine their efforts to deal with autism's challenges and exacerbate an already fragile situation.

It may not feel like it now, but in time you will come to know that autism is not a "death sentence." Life may not pass in the same way you envisioned when you first held your grandchild in your arms, but it will find a "new kind of normal" and take on new meaning. You may even find yourself discovering gifts along the way. Others have; it can happen for you too. Much depends on your perspective.

So, you want to play a positive role in the life of your grandchild with autism? But maybe you're unsure about how to do that? These 12 tips will get you started on the right track.

1 Support your children. Listen; affirm they are good parents and they will be able to cope. Avoid offering quick judgments and/or solutions. What parents need most is reassurance they are not alone.

2 Accept and love your grandchild. Accept who the child is, not what

you want him or her to be. This can be tall order when you are in public and a full-blown tantrum is underway! Remember, this child is not misbehaving; he or she needs to tell you something is amiss and is not capable of doing it any other way (yet). Loving our grandchildren means understanding their behaviour as communication and trying to find the message behind it.

3 Avoid judging or blaming anyone or anything. As humans we too often find ourselves searching for a reason or something on which we can lay blame. In the larger picture of your grandchild's emotional, physical and intellectual growth, negative energy is simply wasted energy. Positive energy seeks to learn, understand and support what is. Autism is a neurological disorder. Parents didn't do or fail to do anything that caused the autism. Suggesting otherwise is cruel and utterly wrong.

4 Provide financial support. Therapies, programs, resources and respite care are costly and yet they are the critical ingredients to making the lives of your children and their children with autism better in the long run. Listen to what your children say they need. Quietly reassure them you will help in any way you can.



5 Learn as much as possible about autism. There are many excellent resources online and on the market. The goal should be to increase understanding of the child's communication, social and behavioral presentation, NOT to find a cure. Information on the thinking and learning patterns in children with autism will help you connect more effectively with your grandchild. One of my favourite books to recommend is *Autistic Thinking: This is the Title*, by Peter Vermeulen.

6 Provide respite. Offer to spend time with the grandchildren or provide the financial support for parents to have time on their own. Don't wait to be asked. Your child's marriage and mental health need as much attention as your grandchild. Providing the regular opportunity for relief is an investment for the entire family.

7 Thoughtful gifts that help. Most parents will never quite get around to taking care of themselves. Gift certificates for movies, dinner, spa, and fitness clubs are a way to "force" parents to take time for themselves. A homemade meal or a house cleaning can go a long way to easing stress. Take care of your children so they can care for your grandchild.

8 Keep siblings in mind. Spend time with the siblings of the child with autism. Provide care for the child with autism so that parents and your other grandchildren can reconnect! So often, life at home is centered on the child with special needs; siblings can get "lost

in the shuffle." Special days away or planned activities give siblings the relief they need from a busy household. They need to know it is healthy to take a break from the constant demands of autism.

9 Promote independence. Give your grandchild with autism the opportunity to develop self-esteem by teaching him how to do things for himself rather than doing it for him. It is so tempting to do things for our special needs children. We can easily feel that "our babies" must deal with so much already it seems cruel to say, "Try; you can do it!" But be aware that being overly nurturing can sabotage development in a child with autism just as it would for our neurotypical children. Do not deprive them of the sense of accomplishment and pride in "doing" – but be sure to balance it with the necessary support. When you guide your grandchildren through each small step and encourage their attempts (even when they are off the mark), you build their internal sense of self. And, that is a gift of a lifetime!

10 Watch how you communicate. Communicate to the child with autism with short simple sentences, or if the child is nonverbal, with picture cards or sign language. If you want your grandchild to do something it is best to state it specifically rather than ask a question. Asking, "Do you want to rake the leaves with me?" opens the door to his response being "No." Saying, "Come rake the leaves with me. You can help me." provides an opportunity to teach, learn and bond. People with autism are often quite literal in their thinking. Watch your use of slang language or idioms. "You look like you could eat a horse." Also, avoid being loud, talking quickly and giving multiple steps at one time. Your grandchild needs extra time to process your verbal instructions, and may ignore you or become very agitated when communication is unclear. Adjust your language to their level of ability.

11 Use visual supports. Pictures, lists and diagrams are far more meaningful to most people with autism than are words. If your grandchild is upset or seems to lack understanding of something it is useful to draw a picture/diagram, list the steps that will happen or use a picture schedule. For example, a bedtime routine might go like this: 1) Eat snack. 2) Brush teeth. 3) Read story. 4) Sleep.

12 Respect the house rules. Structure and routine are essential for your grandchild's sense of safety and peace of mind. Follow dietary restrictions, routines (no matter how odd they seem), and communication guidelines that parents set. People with autism may have trouble coping with changes in routine, food, sleeping arrangements, toileting, etc. when they visit you. Their anxiety manifests through their behaviours. This is NOT a discipline (or lack thereof) issue. It is an autism issue and it needs to be treated as such.

You can make a deep and life changing impact on your grandchild by being the support his or her parents need. You may feel helpless and completely at a loss. In reality, you have the potential to make a huge difference in their lives - whether you live physically near your children or not. Support, affirmation and love are powerful offerings and will help your child's family through the challenge of raising a child with autism. As a grandparent you are a mighty force. Trust this, believe in yourself, and step in to help. Everyone will benefit. ■

Jennifer Krumins is a full time teacher, mother of three (one with autism), and author of two books: *Been There. Done That. Finally Getting it Right. A Guide to Educational Planning for Students with Autism*, and *One Step at a Time: ABA and Autism in the Classroom*. Learn more about Jennifer and her books at www.autismaspirations.com or email her at krumins@autismaspirations.com.