

Sample Letter for Use When Telling a Child That He or She Has an ASD

When we tell children that they have an ASD, we often supplement the discussion with written information to help ensure their understanding. Specifically, we give them a brief letter (on a single sheet of A4-sized paper) and also make use of the book ***How to Be Yourself in a World That's Different: An Asperger's Study Guide for Adolescents***, by Yuko Yoshida and Lorna Wing (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006). In our practice, we use this sample as a basis for writing letters tailored to each child, with that child's parents actively participating in planning the contents.

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Dear _____:

Do you know why you have been going to see Dr. _____? Even though Dr. _____ is a physician, you do not have an illness, so this is not the reason.

The reason is that you have something called autism. This just means that you have a special type of brain.

[Note: With regard to the text that follows, please observe the cautions listed below under part one.]

Many people with autism are very conscientious, honest, and hardworking. Many get involved very enthusiastically in the things they like and are also especially good at remembering lots of facts. And people with autism are usually even better than most people at observing rules, as long as they understand the rules and are able to accept them.

But many people with autism have trouble expressing their feelings in words, and they often feel that being friends with their classmates is extremely hard work and can be overwhelming. In addition, they usually don't like it when plans change all of a sudden or when things turn out differently than they had expected. When something captures their attention, they often find it extremely hard to shift their mental focus to another topic. In addition, many people with autism hate loud noises and commotion.

Autism is not an illness, so you don't have anything that needs "curing". But you do need everyday strategies that will suit you.

There are two types of strategies that are important for your happiness and the happiness of the people you spend time with:

Strategies that put the positive qualities of your autism to good use

Strategies that prevent autism from causing you trouble

An important job of the doctors and therapists at YPDC is to talk with children and help them make good use of their strengths and avoid suffering because of the things they find difficult.

[Note: With regard to the text that follows, please observe the cautions listed below under part two.]

We have seen that you are able to concentrate wonderfully on things that you like to do. For example, we know that you are an avid reader and are extremely knowledgeable about ancient world history. And you are very conscientious about your studies and about helping with chores. For example, we heard from your mother that you help her every day by getting the newspaper and putting out the rubbish. It is easy to see that you are a kind and diligent person.

We feel sure that you are capable of finding many good strategies to use in your everyday life, and we would like to help you do this. We hope that you will come back to see us again so that we can talk with you about how to use all of your good qualities to even better advantage.

_____,
Yokohama Psycho-Developmental Clinic (YPDC)

Cautions (part one):

These cautions pertain to the manner in which the characteristics of autism are to be described.

Choose qualities that the child will find easy to approve of. (These should be behavioral characteristics that he or she is already aware of having and finds acceptable emotionally. In general this awareness and acceptance will only be possible once intervention has begun and some progress has been made toward lightening the burden of stress experienced by the child as a result of everyday difficulties.)

Make sure you begin by stating unequivocally that autism has advantages.

Do not discuss disadvantages and practical difficulties in the section that describes the individual child in a specific way. Put these here at the beginning, as part of the description of autism in general.

Discuss difficulties from the perspective of how they affect or are experienced by the child—not how they affect or are experienced by others. For example, do not say, “Children with autism often do things that annoy their classmates and get them into trouble”. Instead you can say, “Children with autism often feel that being friends with their classmates is extremely hard work and can be overwhelming”.

Cautions (part two):

These cautions pertain to the manner in which the individual child’s behavioral characteristics are to be described.

Talk with parents first to help ensure that the examples you use will actually be recognized as personal strengths by the child.

Examples based on relative evaluations (“getting good grades” or “winning first prize”) should be avoided, as these can easily change over time because of external circumstances.

Include autistic traits that are positive attributes possessed by the child.

Translated by Esther Sanders

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