BRIGHT MAP

A BRIGHT MAP CAREGIVER GUIDE

After the Diagnosis

A practical starting guide for caregivers

CLEAR INFORMATION. PRACTICAL NEXT STEPS.

Support that respects the individual, strengthens caregiver confidence, and makes complex decisions easier to navigate.

FOR CAREGIVERS SUPPORTING INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE NEURODIVERSE

Welcome

Your child recently received an autism diagnosis. The diagnosis offers information; it does not change who your child is.

You may feel relieved, uncertain, validated, overwhelmed, or several things at once. This guide will help you organize the next steps without asking you to rebuild your entire life immediately.

You do not have to make every decision this week.

PAUSE, ORGANIZE, LEARN

The First Week

- Write questions as they come up
- Create one paper or digital folder for reports and notes
- Ask for copies of the diagnostic evaluation and recommendations
- Tell one trusted person what kind of support would help
- Schedule only the most time-sensitive follow-up appointments
- Give yourself permission to process the information

! **A diagnosis is a starting point for understanding and access—not a deadline to begin every available service.**

A REFERRAL IS AN OPTION TO EXPLORE

Navigating Recommendations

Recommendations may include speech, occupational therapy, behavioral support, developmental medicine, or other services.

ASK THE PURPOSE
What specific need would this service address?

ASK HOW PROGRESS IS MEASURED
What would meaningful improvement look like?

ASK ABOUT URGENCY
What is time-sensitive, and what can safely wait?

ASK ABOUT FIT
How will the provider protect dignity, communication, and family priorities?

REASSESS
What evidence will help us continue, adjust, or stop?

! **More services are not automatically better. The right combination should be individualized and sustainable.**

Insurance & Paperwork

A simple record can reduce repeated calls and missing information.

- Keep the evaluation, referrals, insurance cards, and authorization letters together
- Record the representative’s name, date, time, and call reference number
- Ask which services are covered and what documentation is required
- Request written confirmation whenever possible
- Track denials, appeals, deadlines, and next actions

! **Insurance rules vary by plan and state. Confirm requirements directly with your insurer.**

LOOK BEYOND THE SERVICE LABEL

Choosing Providers

- Goals are individualized and functional
- Caregivers receive clear explanations and meaningful choices
- The individual’s communication is respected
- Distress is treated as information—not defiance
- Progress is measured and reviewed transparently
- The provider works within professional scope and collaborates
- You understand how and why strategies are being used

! **Prioritize connection, safety, dignity, and useful outcomes—not compliance for its own sake.**

Therapy Options at a Glance

SPEECH-LANGUAGE SERVICES

May support communication, language, speech, AAC, social communication, or feeding/swallowing within scope.

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

May support sensory processing, motor skills, participation, self-care, and environmental access.

BEHAVIOR-ANALYTIC SERVICES

May support communication, daily living, safety, learning, and reduction of behavior that creates meaningful barriers.

MEDICAL SPECIALTIES

May evaluate development, sleep, gastrointestinal concerns, neurology, genetics, or co-occurring conditions.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

May address anxiety, trauma, mood, family adjustment, or caregiver well-being.

! **Needs change over time. A service can be helpful now, later, or not at all.**

School & IEP Basics

A medical diagnosis does not automatically create an IEP, and a school may not require a medical diagnosis to evaluate educational needs.

If school performance, communication, behavior, access, or participation is affected, a caregiver may request a special education evaluation in writing. The school then follows federal and state procedures for evaluation and eligibility.

! **Keep a dated copy of every written request and ask the school to explain the applicable timeline.**

Finding Supportive Community

- Individuals with lived experience are listened to and respected
- Questions are welcomed without shame
- The group does not promise cures or guaranteed outcomes
- Different family priorities and support needs are acknowledged
- Information is clearly separated from personal opinion
- You leave feeling informed rather than frightened or pressured

A supportive community should expand your options—not tell you there is only one acceptable path.

Caregiver Well-Being

Caregiving systems work better when the caregiver has support too.

- Choose one task that can wait
- Ask someone for one concrete form of help
- Take brief breaks before decision fatigue peaks
- Write down questions instead of holding them mentally
- Schedule time that is not therapy, paperwork, or research
- Tell a provider when the current plan is not sustainable

Caregiver well-being is not separate from the plan. It affects what can be implemented consistently.

Online Information: Green and Red Flags

GREEN FLAG

Transparent credentials, realistic outcomes, evidence, respect for neurodiverse individuals, and clear limits.

RED FLAG

Cure claims, guaranteed timelines, fear-based marketing, extreme protocols, hidden costs, or pressure to act immediately.

ASK

What is the evidence? What are the risks? Who benefits? What alternatives exist?

VERIFY

Discuss medical claims with qualified professionals and use primary, reputable sources.

! **Personal stories can be meaningful, but they are not a substitute for individualized clinical guidance.**

A Flexible 90-Day Road Map

WEEKS 1-4: ORIENT

Organize records, identify urgent needs, choose one or two priorities, and meet potential providers.

WEEKS 5-8: BEGIN

Start only the supports that fit current priorities and learn how progress will be measured.

WEEKS 9-12: REVIEW

Keep what is useful, adjust what is not, and add something new only if there is capacity.

This is a planning framework—not a required timeline. Move faster or slower based on your family's needs.

Questions for Providers

- What specific goal would this service address?
- How were these recommendations selected?
- How will the individual communicate assent, refusal, or a need for a break?
- How will progress and side effects be monitored?
- What will caregiver participation involve?
- How often will the plan be reviewed?
- What are our options if this is not a good fit?

Helpful Scripts

ASK FOR PLAIN LANGUAGE

Could you explain that again without acronyms and tell me what it means for daily life?

INSURANCE CALL

My child recently received an autism diagnosis. Which recommended services are covered, and what documents are required to begin?

REQUEST WRITTEN INFORMATION

Please send the coverage criteria, required forms, and next steps in writing.

PAUSE A DECISION

I need time to review this information before deciding. When do you need my response?

! **It is appropriate to ask questions, take notes, and request time to process.**

Sample School Evaluation Request

Subject: Request for Special Education Evaluation

Dear [Principal/Special Education Coordinator],

I am requesting a comprehensive special education evaluation for my child, [Name], because of concerns related to [briefly describe educational concerns]. Please confirm receipt of this request, the next steps, and the applicable timelines. I am available to discuss the concerns and complete required consent forms.

Thank you, [Caregiver Name] [Phone and Email]

State procedures vary. Keep a copy and note the date it was sent.

KEEP THE DETAILS TOGETHER

Appointment Tracker

APPOINTMENT DATE

PROVIDER AND SERVICE

PURPOSE OF VISIT

QUESTIONS TO ASK

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOLLOW-UP NEEDED

NEXT APPOINTMENT

Moving Forward

You are not behind, and you do not need to become an expert overnight.

Keep learning, ask direct questions, choose supports that fit the individual and the family, and allow the plan to change as needs become clearer.

Your role is not to create a perfect plan. It is to keep building an informed, respectful, workable one.