

CareCertify LLC

CareCertify Caregiver Training · Autism Spectrum Caregiving

AUT-07

The Do's and Don'ts of Autism Caregiving

Participant Guide

Professional Caregivers & Direct Support Professionals · A Caregiver's Guide to Autism

Updated July 2026 — best-practice & self-advocate guidance

A practical field guide: the habits that build trust and dignity, and the ones that quietly do harm.

Learning Objectives — by the end of this module you will be able to:

- State the golden rules of autism caregiving
- Apply communication do's and don'ts
- Respect stimming, sensory needs, and choices
- Protect dignity and avoid infantilizing adults
- Work consistently with the team and plan
- Handle uncertainty the right way

Section 1: The golden rules

Everything else flows from these four.

- **Presume competence.** Assume the person understands and has something to say — and treat them that way, always.
- **Individualize.** Support the person in front of you, not a stereotype; follow their plan and preferences.
- **Behavior communicates.** Read behavior as a message about a need, not as misbehavior to be corrected.
- **Dignity always.** Every autistic person — child or adult — deserves the same respect and dignity you'd want.

Section 2: Do — communicate well

Clear, patient, and honoring every voice.

- **Be clear & literal.** Say what you mean simply and concretely; skip idioms, sarcasm, and vague words.
- **Give processing time.** Ask, then wait; let the person take in your words and respond in their own time.
- **Use visuals & honor AAC.** Pair words with pictures, schedules, or gestures, and treat AAC as the person's real voice.

Section 3: Do — respect the person

Small respects, big impact.

- **Allow stimming.** Let harmless stimming be; it's how the person regulates. Only redirect if it's unsafe.
- **Honor sensory needs.** Adjust noise, light, and touch; provide sensory tools and calm spaces.
- **Offer choices.** Give real choices and control over the day whenever you can — it builds dignity and cooperation.

Respecting how a person copes and what they prefer is the fastest way to build trust.

Section 4: Do — provide structure

Predictability is a kindness.

- **Keep routines.** Consistent routines create safety and reduce anxiety.
- **Warn before change.** Give clear, advance notice of changes and transitions; use a visual schedule or timer.
- **Follow their interests.** Build activities and connection around what the person loves.
- **Follow the plan.** Use the person's support and behavior plans consistently, every shift.

Section 5: Don't — communication mistakes

Common habits that confuse or hurt.

- **Don't use idioms/sarcasm.** Figurative language, hints, and sarcasm often confuse — be direct instead.
- **Don't force eye contact.** Never say 'look at me'; eye contact can be painful and can reduce understanding.
- **Don't rush responses.** Don't answer for the person or move on before they've had time to reply.
- **Don't talk over them.** Never discuss the person as if they aren't there — include them in the conversation.

Section 6: Don't — behavior & respect mistakes

These damage trust and safety.

- **Don't punish overwhelm.** Never discipline a meltdown or shutdown — it's distress, not misbehavior.
- **Don't remove AAC.** Never take away a communication device, even as a consequence — it silences the person.
- **Don't stop safe stimming.** Don't suppress harmless self-regulation to make someone 'look normal.'
- **Don't touch without consent.** Ask and signal before touching or guiding; unexpected touch can alarm or overwhelm.

Section 7: Dignity do's and don'ts

Respect the whole person, at every age.

- **Do: age-appropriate.** Speak and interact in a way that matches the person's age, especially with teens and adults.
- **Don't: baby talk.** Never use baby talk or talk down to an autistic adult; it's demeaning.

- **Do: protect privacy.** Respect the person's body, space, and personal information.
- **Don't: pity or compare.** Skip pity, 'so high-functioning,' or comparing people; each person is their own.
- **Do: include them.** Speak to the person directly and involve them in decisions about their life.
- **Do: celebrate strengths.** Notice and build on what the person is good at and loves.

Section 8: Consistency and teamwork

The person experiences the whole team, not just you.

- **Consistent approach.** The team supports the person the same way, so their world stays predictable and safe.
- **Follow the plan.** Use the person's support and behavior plans; they exist so everyone is aligned.
- **Share with the team.** Pass along what works, what's changed, and what you've observed.

Consistency across caregivers is one of the greatest gifts you can give an autistic person.

Section 9: A do's checklist for your shift

Quick habits that add up to great care.

- Presume competence and speak to the person directly
- Communicate clearly; give processing time; honor AAC
- Keep routines; warn before changes
- Respect stimming, sensory needs, and choices
- Stay calm; read behavior as communication
- Follow the plan and share observations with the team

When in doubt, choose respect, patience, and the person's own preferences.

Section 10: Handling uncertainty the right way

You won't always know — here's what to do.

- **Ask the person.** Whenever possible, ask the person directly what they need or prefer.
- **Ask the family.** Family and past caregivers often know what works and what to avoid.
- **Check the plan.** The support and behavior plans are written to guide exactly these moments.
- **Observe & go slow.** When you truly don't know, slow down, observe, keep the person safe, and choose the gentlest option.

Section 11: Don'ts that quietly damage trust

Avoid these to stay a safe, trusted person.

- **Surprise changes.** Springing changes without warning breaks the predictability the person relies on.
- **Broken promises.** If you say something will happen, make it happen; broken promises erode trust fast.
- **Overriding autonomy.** Don't make choices for a person that they can make themselves; support self-determination.

Trust is built slowly and lost quickly — protect it with consistency and honesty.

Apply It — Scenarios

Baby talk with an adult

A coworker speaks to a 40-year-old autistic client in a sing-song, baby-talk voice and calls him 'buddy' and 'sweetie.'

The right response: → Recognize this as infantilizing and demeaning, even if well-meant. → Model respectful, age-appropriate communication — speak to him as the adult he is. → Kindly explain to the coworker why baby talk harms dignity. → Use his preferred name and speak to him directly about his own life.

A sudden change of plan

The planned outing is cancelled last-minute, and you need to tell a client who was looking forward to it.

The right response: → Do give clear, calm, advance notice as early as you can — don't spring it at the door. → Use a visual or written support to show the change and what will happen instead. → Acknowledge the disappointment; offer a choice of an alternative activity. → Keep any promise you make about rescheduling — follow through builds trust.

Key Terms

Term	What it means
Presume competence	Assuming the person understands and has something to contribute.
Individualize	Supporting the specific person, not a stereotype.
Infantilizing	Treating an older child or adult like a young child — to avoid.
Autonomy	A person's right to make their own choices, supported.
Consistency	The whole team supporting the person the same way.
Dignity	Treating the person with the respect owed to every human being.
Age-appropriate	Interacting in a way that matches the person's actual age.
Self-determination	Supporting the person to direct their own life.

Check Your Understanding

1. A golden rule of autism caregiving is to:

- A. Presume competence
- B. Assume the person can't understand
- C. Lower expectations
- D. Speak only to family

Answer: A — Presume competence.

2. Another communication DO is to:

- A. Answer for the person
- B. Rush responses

- C. Ignore AAC
- D. Give processing time and honor AAC

Answer: D — Processing time; honor AAC.

3. You should use the person's support and behavior plans:

- A. Only when convenient
- B. Never
- C. Only at reviews
- D. Consistently, every shift

Answer: D — Follow the plan consistently.

4. You must never remove:

- A. A hazard
- B. A distraction
- C. Clutter
- D. A person's AAC device — even as a consequence

Answer: D — Never remove AAC.

5. Team consistency means:

- A. Everyone supports the person the same way
- B. Everyone improvises
- C. Rules change daily
- D. Only one person helps

Answer: A — Consistency across the team.

6. A don't that damages trust is:

- A. Warning before change
- B. Keeping promises
- C. Springing changes without warning
- D. Being consistent

Answer: C — Don't surprise with changes.

7. For a last-minute cancelled outing, you should:

- A. Spring it at the door
- B. Say nothing
- C. Break the news harshly
- D. Give calm, early notice with a visual and offer an alternative

Answer: D — Warn early; offer a choice.

What You Learned

- Golden rules: presume competence, individualize, read behavior as communication, protect dignity
- DO: communicate clearly, give processing time, honor AAC, keep routines, warn before change
- DO: respect stimming, sensory needs, and choices
- DON'T: force eye contact, use sarcasm/idioms, punish overwhelm, remove AAC, or touch without consent

- Protect dignity — age-appropriate interaction, no baby talk, no pity, include the person
- Work consistently with the team and follow the person's plan
- When unsure: ask the person, ask family, check the plan, observe, and go slow

Next: AUT-08 — food, nutrition, and sensitivities, including the evidence on special diets.

Legal & Training Basis

This course is caregiver education about autism spectrum disorder, developed from current, authoritative sources including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the DSM-5-TR diagnostic framework, and peer-reviewed research. It is general education for caregivers — not medical advice, a diagnosis, or a treatment protocol. Every autistic person is an individual; caregivers should follow each person's own support plan and consult qualified professionals for medical, behavioral, and dietary decisions. Current as of July 2026.

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