

## Praise for *Turn Autism Around*

*“If your child has no words, few words, or is showing any kind of delays, Mary’s book will help, while also providing step-by-step instructions for potty training, feeding, tantrums, and more.”*

— **Temple Grandin, Ph.D.**, author of *The Way I See It* and other books

*“It’s been amazing to watch Mary’s mission to turn autism around for millions. This book will be life-changing for many children and families around the world.”*

— **Jeff Walker**, author of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Launch*

*“As a professor of brain and cognitive science and the mother of twins born at 24 weeks, I deeply appreciate Dr. Barbera’s commitment to serving and empowering scared parents who are looking, not just for answers, but for a roadmap. Dr. Barbera takes parents out of the position of waiting on experts in a broken medical system and gives them the tools they need to begin helping their children now. Turn Autism Around is absolutely essential reading.”*

— **Dr. Susan Peirce Thompson**, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Bright Line Eating*

*“Dr. Barbera’s book lays out a nice sequence of ‘what to do’ for a child with autism or signs of autism, presented by someone who really knows what to do. The timing of this book is perfect.”*

— **Mark L. Sundberg, Ph.D.**, BCBA-D, author of the VB-MAPP

*“As a parent of a newly diagnosed toddler on the spectrum, I have to say that the advice and strategies in this book have been absolutely life-changing for our family. My 2-year-old daughter, Elena, is living proof that remarkable progress can be made in those precious months of ‘waiting’. This is a must-read for any parent who is concerned about developmental delays in their child.”*

— **Michelle C.**, parent of Elena (a toddler featured in the book)

*“Mary Barbera has written the how-to, ‘action guide’ for parents concerned about their child’s development. Filled with personal anecdotes from her journey, Barbera provides practical, research-based ideas for navigating those first few years of an autism diagnosis and her recommendations will no doubt help families feel less alone and empower them to help their child.”*

— **Dr. Bridget Taylor, Psy.D.**, BCBA-D, co-founder and CEO of Alpine Learning Group

*“When my daughter began displaying speech, behavior, and socialization difficulties before the age of 3, I didn’t know what to do. I knew something was going wrong with my child, and fortunately, I stumbled across a treatment that helped her. As it turns out, not waiting for a diagnosis was the best thing I could’ve done. That was lucky. But it shouldn’t be about luck. And now, it doesn’t have to be! This is the guidebook that I wish I’d had, and that so many parents desperately need.”*

— **Julie Ann Cairns**, mom and author of *The Abundance Code*

*“This book is full of useful resources and helpful strategies to improve learning and decrease interfering behaviors. The forms, guidelines, and practical examples should be immensely helpful for those working with individuals who need support with areas such as communication, socialization, behavior, and daily living.”*

— **Lynn Kern Koegel, Ph.D.**, Clinical Professor,  
Stanford University School of Medicine

*“Mary’s information in her new book Turn Autism Around is life-changing for any parent noticing delays in their children. Following her easy, step-by-step action plans set me on a path to help my boys. If you want to turn hopeless into hopeful and empowered, this book is for you!”*

— **Kelsey G.**, autism mom to two boys featured in the book

*“I have been fortunate to have known Dr. Mary Barbera for close to 20 years and have seen firsthand the positive impact of her work. In Turn Autism Around, she shares the wealth of her experience to families who may be feeling incredibly scared and alone. Not only does she help parents and family members understand the power of early intervention, but she also empowers them to effectively deliver it. Turn Autism Around is that rare book which provides a ton of information and recommendations without being overwhelming or intimidating.”*

— **Michael J. Murray, M.D.**, director, Division of Autism Services and  
Department of Psychiatry, Penn State Health

*“Turn Autism Around is a detailed book that provides parents with actionable steps that will allow their children to learn and thrive. Mary empowers parents to be ‘the captain of the ship’ on their child’s journey to increased communication, skills, and happiness!”*

— **Rose Griffin, SLP, BCBA**, owner of ABA Speech

*“This book is truly a must-read for every parent! It will help you see the signs at the critical earliest stages and move forward with confidence to help your child. Even if your child isn’t on the spectrum, Mary’s easy-to-follow steps will deepen your relationship with your child. It’s the book I desperately needed 24 years ago when my son Sam started showing signs of autism. This book is sure to make a difference for millions of families around the world.”*

— **Shelley Brander**, autism mom of a college graduate and author of *Move the Needle: Yarns from an Unlikely Entrepreneur*

*“There is nothing scarier for a parent than watching your child fall further and further behind as you wait for a professional to tell you what is wrong—and how to fix it. Dr. Mary Barbera is the voice of reason and hope in a world of rapidly escalating autism diagnoses. She’s written the book that every parent can turn to when there’s no time to lose—and so much to gain.”*

— **Oonagh Duncan**, mum and best-selling author of *Healthy As F\*ck*

*“As an occupational therapist working with young children for over 30 years, I’m excited to recommend Mary’s new book, which will empower parents as well as early intervention professionals to take action. In very clear and concise steps, parents and professionals will learn how to help their children and clients improve language, social, and self-care skills while reducing problem behaviors.”*

— **Dore Blanchet MS., OTR/L**, Occupational Therapist and owner of Step by Step Pediatric Therapy Inc.

*“Dr. Mary Barbera’s book is an elegant guide to enhancing parenting skills for children with early signs of autism. Blending science and compassion is not only the true heart of behavior analysis but a humane and kind method for helping all children thrive.”*

— **Rick Kubina, Ph.D., BCBA-D**, professor,  
The Pennsylvania State University

*“I’ve admired Mary Barbera’s work as an advocate for years. I can say now as an autistic adult how much early intervention, the main focus of this book, played in my development. Parents, educators, and simply anyone wanting to learn more about the autism community should give this book a read.”*

— **Dr. Kerry Magro Ed.D., CAS**, professional speaker, best-selling author, and autism self-advocate

*“Mary Barbera’s book and program empowered my family to begin turning autism around. While waiting for a diagnosis and eventual professional help, I was given the tools to begin teaching my grandson to communicate and shape his behaviors. Mary’s approach is easy to learn and helped this grandma move mountains in the progress and development of our grandson.”*

— **Diane H.**, “gung-ho” grandmother

*“Mary Barbera’s action guide, Turn Autism Around, is the perfect ‘first responder’ resource for parents who are seeing the early signs of autism and who must make critical decisions concerning intervention and educational programming. It gives parents practical tools and strategies that they can begin to use immediately, even prior to the completion of formal assessments, thus taking advantage of precious intervention time that otherwise might be squandered.”*

— **Gary S. Mayerson**, attorney and author of  
*Autism’s Declaration of Independence*

*“While showcasing the power behind the science of behavior analysis, Dr. Mary Barbera teaches parents how to implement fun, child-friendly interventions, even without access to well-trained professionals. These techniques, as outlined in her book, will have positive, life-long effects for your child, enabling you to take your power back as a parent.”*

— **Amanda N. Kelly, Ph.D.**, BCBA-D, LBA, aka Behaviorbabe

*“This book effortlessly covers the wide array of child development domains that exist for all children from play to sleep and everything in between. We live in a time where many of us parents feel lost and frustrated and this book gives us all an opportunity to re-connect with confidence and lessen the stress of the day-to-day toll of society.”*

— **Megan Miller, Ph.D.**, BCBA-D, LBA, author  
and founder of Do Better Collective

*“Turn Autism Around is practical, empowering, optimistic, and highly readable. It takes its place among the small but growing number of valuable contemporary science-based resources for parents of children with autism.”*

— **William L. Heward, Ed.D.**, BCBA-D, professor emeritus, College of Education and Human Ecology, The Ohio State University

TURN  
**AUTISM**  
AROUND

ALSO BY DR. MARY LYNCH BARBERA

*The Verbal Behavior Approach: How to Teach  
Children with Autism and Related Disorders*

# TURN AUTISM AROUND

*An Action Guide for  
Parents of Young Children  
with Early Signs of Autism*

**MARY LYNCH BARBERA, Ph.D., RN, BCBA-D**



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*I dedicate this book to my sons,  
Lucas and Spencer, who taught me:*

*There is no such thing as “normal.”*

*Life is a not a sprint . . . it's a  
marathon on a roller coaster.*

*And finally . . . there is no finish line  
for me as a parent. I will never  
stop learning how to be a better  
teacher, advocate, and mom.*

*I love you both!*



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# FOREWORD

When I was three years old, my mother realized there was something wrong with me. I did not talk or behave like the little girl who lived next door. When the grown-ups around me talked fast, it sounded like gibberish. I thought adults had their own special language. I remember feeling frustrated that I couldn't communicate, so I screamed and had tantrums.

Autism wasn't widely recognized in 1949 when I was two, so I was first labeled "brain damaged" by a neurologist who suggested my mother get a speech therapist to teach me to talk. Mother also hired a nanny to help keep me engaged all day long. She even figured out how to prevent my tantrums and learned how to teach me to wait and take turns with games. And because she didn't give up on me, I became fully verbal.

I always loved art and animals, and these interests were encouraged from an early age thanks to my mother and teachers. I went on to earn a degree in psychology and a Ph.D. in Animal Science. I have been a professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University for many years and, through my inventions and work, have made significant improvements in the cattle industry.

Because of my autism books, the conferences where I have spoken, and an Emmy Award-winning movie about my life, some people have called me the most famous autistic person in the world. Many times, parents ask me what to do when they have a two- or three-year-old child who is not talking or who is showing other signs of autism, and it may be a year before they can get either a diagnosis or professional services. I try to give them hope, holding myself up as an example of what's possible.

But most importantly, I tell them they have to act quickly and teach their child early. I'm a big believer in lots of early intervention for little kids with delays. The therapy is usually very similar

for autism, speech delay, or sensory processing disorder. The worst thing you can do is to wait and do nothing.

Mary Barbera's book will show you how to start these interventions with or without an autism diagnosis. It will be really helpful to any parent with a young child who is not talking or having other developmental delays. Mary is a mom to a son with severe autism, a nurse, and a behavior analyst, so she understands how to help moms of young kids. Throughout the book, you will read about her transition from an overwhelmed parent to an autism professional.

One of the strategies Mary recommends in the book is saying words slowly and in a fun and animated way. She also encourages parents and therapists to pair words with objects and pictures. The combination of slowing words down and pairing words with visuals really worked for me, and it has worked for many other children.

If your child has no words or few words or is showing any kind of delays, this book will help. Parents also ask me all the time how to deal with potty training, feeding, sleep, tantrums, and more. Mary's book will give you step-by-step instructions for all of these issues.

You already suspect your child has a problem, so somebody needs to start working with him or her now. Mary's book shows that this "somebody" can be you.

—Temple Grandin, Ph.D., author of  
*The Way I See It* and other books

# CHAPTER 1

## Early Signs of Autism Are an Emergency—So Why Are We Waiting?

If you've picked up this book, it's likely that you are stressed, overwhelmed, and worried about concerning delays in your child. Even worse, you might be frustrated with a long wait for an evaluation or intervention services. And if your child is already diagnosed with autism, you might be feeling angry that there is no one offering you ways to make things better. Whether you feel helpless against out-of-control tantrums, worried about your child's lack of speech, or confused because your pediatrician or therapists aren't giving you answers—I understand. As a parent, I've been there, too.

Perhaps you've even asked yourself:

*Is my child just strong willed?*

*Is my child simply a late talker who will catch up on their own?*

*Is this an early sign of ADHD?*

*Is this the dreaded A-word—autism?*

*Is there something I can do to help my child, regardless of the diagnosis?*

After more than 20 years as an international autism expert and a mother to a son with this diagnosis, I have had enough. The

system for detecting and treating the earliest signs of autism and other developmental disorders is broken. And it breaks my heart to see so many families struggling and not knowing what to do.

The lines are far too long to see the right professionals for evaluations. And even if your child is already diagnosed with autism, you're likely still in line waiting to get to the right therapy or treatment. But there's some good news: you don't have to wait. In fact, *you should not*.

These may be the most important sentences you'll read in this book:

*Speech and social delays (which are often the earliest signs of autism) are an emergency.*

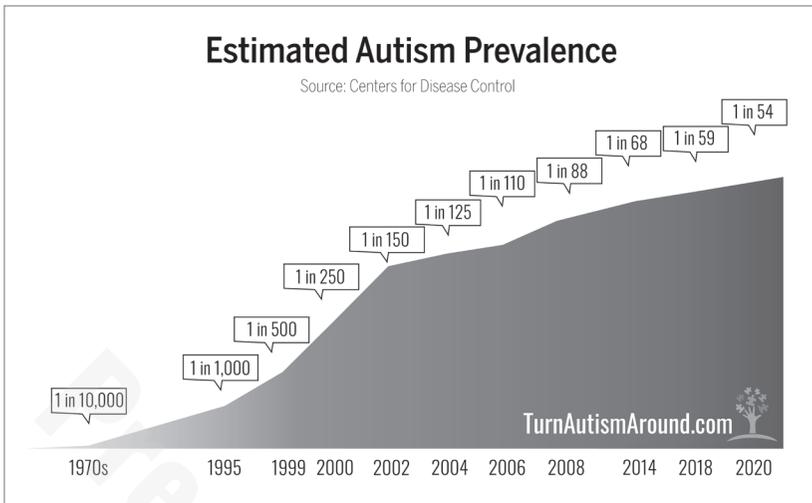
*You do not need a diagnosis or a team of professionals to begin treatment.*

*It's important to teach our children to communicate and reduce problem behaviors before they fall further behind.*

Here's what most parents don't know: Developmental disorders are quite common. In fact, 1 in 6 children ages 3 to 17 (or 17.8 percent) have a diagnosis of one or more developmental disorders,<sup>1</sup> including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), cerebral palsy (CP), hearing loss, intellectual disability (ID), learning disorders, and speech and language disorders. So if you're worried about a speech delay, attention issues, or excessive tantrums in your young child, you do have reason to worry, and you are not alone.

In addition to the alarming rate of developmental disorders, the autism rate has skyrocketed and now affects approximately 1 in 50 children. When my son Lucas was diagnosed in 1999, the autism rate was 1 in 500. In the 1970s, autism was thought to occur in 1 in 10,000, as illustrated by the following graph. There is much debate as to why so many of our children are being diagnosed with autism, ADHD, and other developmental disorders, but it's clear that the numbers are staggering.

In my work over the last two decades as a Board Certified Behavior Analyst at the doctoral level (BCBA-D), I've seen a global



health emergency arise. While the rates of autism and other developmental disorders have drastically increased, there's a critical shortage of health care providers—namely, developmental pediatricians, neurologists, child psychiatrists, and specially trained psychologists—who can evaluate and diagnose children with autism. It can take nine months to two years to get an appointment for an evaluation to determine if it's "just" a delay or if it's something more serious such as autism or ADHD. And since the symptoms of all developmental disorders often overlap, some doctors who evaluate children when they are very young tell parents to wait another six months before returning. I also know of many kids who get the wrong diagnosis (the doctor says it's "just a delay" when it's actually autism) or multiple diagnoses over time. For example, a child might get a diagnosis of speech delay and sensory processing disorder (SPD) at two years, ADHD at four years, and autism at six years of age.

In the vast majority of cases, parents are forced to wait and worry. Can you imagine a scenario in which you were worried your child might have cancer, and the pediatrician was concerned enough to refer you to an oncologist . . . but you had to wait nine months for an evaluation? Then once you were given the cancer diagnosis, you had to wait longer for chemotherapy to start? It is

heart wrenching to see families waiting as children are denied early and accurate diagnoses and treatment.

According to research, on average, children aren't diagnosed with autism until they are four or five years old, even though warning signs show up years earlier. The reality is that about 50 percent of all kids with autism don't get any therapy or treatment until they start elementary school. By that time, many of them have severe language and behavioral disorders and, in some cases, intellectual disability (with IQs below 70). This is primarily because their autism symptoms haven't been detected and treated early enough.<sup>2</sup>

Sadly, the situation is much more critical for children of color because on average, they're diagnosed and treated even later than white children in the United States. A recent paper reported that 27 percent of white children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) also had intellectual disabilities (ID), while 47 percent of African American children and 36 percent of Hispanic children with ASD also have ID.<sup>3</sup>

At recent lectures I attended, as well as in a paper published in 2020 that he wrote with colleagues, Dr. Ami Klin has said that while autism traits are highly genetic, if children with delays or signs of autism are treated very early, intellectual disabilities, language disorders, and the problem behaviors that often accompany severe autism can sometimes be prevented or lessened in severity. Dr. Klin and the co-authors suggest that this is best done by not waiting for a diagnosis of autism before training parents on ways to repair the social interactions and back-and-forth communication between a parent and child as soon as they get off track.<sup>4</sup>

Additional research shows that if autism is caught early enough and treated intensively, some children can recover or become indistinguishable from their typically developing peers.<sup>5</sup> According to the Interactive Autism Network at Kennedy Krieger Institute, two large nationwide studies show that 4 to 13 percent of children lose their autism diagnosis by age 8 but often do keep other diagnoses such as language delay or ADHD.<sup>6</sup> *Children*

*diagnosed before 30 months with less severe symptoms had the highest chance of recovery from autism.*

When my own son Lucas started showing signs of autism in the late 1990s, I knew almost nothing about autism, and I didn't realize that I was the one who needed to take action to help him. I also didn't know that turning autism around was even a possibility. Now I'm on a mission to change the outcome for all kids with autism or those just showing signs.

### **A NOTE ABOUT GENDER USE AND CONFIDENTIALITY**

Boys are four times more likely to be diagnosed with autism than girls.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, I will refer to children in this book as "he" and "his." Similarly, since the majority of primary caregivers, teachers, and therapists to young children with autism are female, I'll refer to the reader as "she" and "her." This is just to simplify the writing process and in no way negates the needs of young girls diagnosed with or showing signs of autism or the amazing caregiving and advocacy of men in the autism world.

I will also refer to you as the reader with the assumption that you're the mother of a toddler or preschool child between the ages of one and five who has either been diagnosed with autism or is showing signs of the disorder. But this book will also help if you're an early intervention or other type of professional who works with children of any age who are not conversational (and have the language ability of a young child under age five), as well as children who struggle with problem behaviors or difficulties with sleeping, eating, and potty training. The strategies work well for typically developing infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, too. So if you know, work with, or love a child age one through five (chronologically and/or developmentally) with or without delays, what you'll learn here will help you turn things around.

Note, too, that some of the families and children discussed throughout the book have requested that their names be changed to respect their privacy.

## THREE DANGEROUS MYTHS

There are three key dangerous myths in the world of autism and developmental delays that keep parents from getting their child the intervention they need.

Myth 1: Your child's future is out of your control, and there's no hope for a "normal" life. So you have no choice but to wait.

The truth is that if you intervene now, your child *can* make significant improvements and possibly even avoid a diagnosis of autism and/or intellectual disability. But one thing I've learned over the years is that there is no such thing as a "normal" child; each human being has their unique strengths and challenges.

Myth 2: You need a team of professionals, an official diagnosis, and/or insurance coverage to begin treatment.

You don't have to wait for any of those things. You can and should start today in your own home, using materials that you already have. You don't need a diagnosis or professionals to get started helping your child. You only need to assess his needs, and I'll provide simple tools for you to do that. If your child already has a diagnosis and a team of professionals on board, you still need this information. My Turn Autism Around (TAA) approach can be used by anyone, anywhere—with no experience or educational degree necessary. The strategies work because my step-by-step system is based on the science of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and B. F. Skinner's analysis of verbal behavior both of which have decades of research backing them up. Even better, my methods are child-friendly, fun, and easy to implement.

Myth 3: There isn't enough time in the day to make a difference.

With just 15 minutes of simple exercises each day, you can change the trajectory of your child's life. You don't have to start with 20 to 40 hours of therapy per week (at least not right away) to teach your child and begin to catch up on their developmental delays.

## THE TURN AUTISM AROUND APPROACH

Research shows that some kids can lose their autism diagnosis and even the most severe forms of autism (with accompanying cognitive and behavioral disorders) can sometimes be made milder. I have personally seen this many times. I know of families who truly believe that by using the Turn Autism Around approach, they have reversed speech delays, reduced major problem behaviors, and in many cases lessened the severity of their child's autism.

In my years as a BCBA-D, I have seen my unique approach work over and over again. I've treated children with or without a diagnosis who were so out of control with tantrums that they were unable to go out with their families to social events. Some were even kicked out of daycare or preschool. Yet, with my strategies, these children started to talk, point, respond to their names, and socialize within weeks . . . or *days* in some cases. Even kids who made little to no progress in traditional therapy for months or years made gains.

As a parent only and not in my professional role as a behavior analyst, I've also met families of older children who are typically developing even though many professionals thought these children had autism when they were very young. Of course, no one, including me, has a crystal ball. But it doesn't matter what you or professionals call it—everyone can change and learn. There is no finish line, and diagnosing and treating autism is complicated.

Some people say they don't believe in autism recovery and consider autism to be a gift. These advocates (who are usually fully conversational adults with high-functioning autism) suggest that we shouldn't try to change children or make them "fit into" our world. But my approach doesn't try to change a child's personality or take away what makes each child special. Instead, it empowers parents to help their children communicate, sleep better, eat healthier food, potty train more easily, and become calmer and happier. In the end, I want every child with or without a diagnosis of autism to reach their fullest potential and be as safe, happy, and independent as possible.

The information I will provide here is based on decades of research of applied behavior analysis (ABA) treatment for children with autism, as well as my experience over the past two decades of working with thousands of children with autism and related disorders. There are some key distinctions between my approach and more traditional ABA programs, however.

The Turn Autism Around approach is completely child-friendly and positive, focusing on the whole child, as well as the family, to boost everyone's quality of life. I don't recommend punishment or using force to make a child do anything, and I discourage the practice of letting a child "cry it out." Instead, I've used everything I've learned about ABA and behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner's analysis of verbal behavior, as well as my experience as a nurse, a behavior analyst, and a parent. The result is a set of simple practices that I designed to put parents at the helm of their child's journey as the "captain of the ship."

Let me tell you about some of the children who have made major progress. My client Faith went from lying on the floor screaming as many as 10 times per day as a two-year-old to thriving in a three-year-old daycare classroom at age three without any problem behaviors. Another client named Andrew transformed from having no words at all to talking in short phrases one year later.

Even children I've never met have made significant gains. Parker's parents were concerned that he wasn't speaking, but after

learning my approach online and implementing the strategies, they watched him start to talk spontaneously in a matter of weeks.

A little boy named Chino was one of my most memorable clients. When I first met him, he was 20 months old, and out of hundreds of clients I'd worked with directly, he reminded me most of my son Lucas. When Lucas was 21 months old, my husband first suggested that he might have autism. But at that time, I didn't know about the effectiveness of early and intensive behavioral intervention, so Lucas didn't receive the right help as early as he should have. Chino, on the other hand, started receiving my help before he was two and had a remarkable transformation.

When I met Chino's mother, she had three children under the age of three. She was overwhelmed and incredibly worried about Chino's delays, and she didn't know what to do. When she arranged for early intervention therapy, I was the therapist sent to her home.

When I met Chino, in addition to completing the assessments you'll learn about in Chapter 4, I also completed a standardized test, the Screening Tool for Autism in Toddlers (STAT). This interactive tool, developed by Dr. Wendy Stone, includes a set of 12 activities that measure a child's social communication skills and risk for autism. This assessment gives information about the child's strengths and needs, and it can be used to identify goals and activities to improve skills.

One of the STAT items assesses a toddler's interest and ability to play with a doll. When handed a doll along with a doll bed, chair, bottle, and cup, a typically developing two-year-old will pick up the doll, talk to her, pretend to feed her, give her a nap, snuggle with her, and do all of the things that adults do with their babies. But when I gave the doll to Chino during the assessment, he immediately dropped the doll by his side. He never looked at it, and for the entire 30-minute test, he didn't speak, didn't play, and didn't interact with me—or with any of the materials I used during the assessment. Chino was in his own little world. It was clear that he was showing signs of autism and needed immediate help.

Six months later, Chino received a diagnosis of moderate-to-severe autism. Soon, his family received insurance funds for 20 hours a week of ABA therapy. I continued to work with them, teaching my methods of assessment, behavior intervention, and social skill development, while providing oversight of his ABA program. One year later—almost exactly to the day—after many hours spent using the tools and strategies included in this book, I repeated the STAT doll test with Chino. He had not seen the doll or any of my other assessment tools since that original test. This time, when I handed him the baby doll, he immediately put her in the bed and told her “night-night.” He kissed her, woke her up, and then said, “All done night-night”—all while his mother wept tears of joy and relief. By second grade, Chino was fully conversational, bilingual, and in a mostly mainstream educational program at school. (For free book resources and to see videos of Chino’s transformation, visit [TurnAutismAround.com](http://TurnAutismAround.com).)

## MY FALL INTO THE AUTISM WORLD

Although my son Lucas’s symptoms looked just like Chino’s at 20 months, his trajectory was quite different. Back then, when Lucas was a baby in the late 1990s, he was warm and cuddly with me but had little language and a quirky obsession with letters. I was pregnant with our second child, Spencer, when Lucas began to slowly regress and show signs of autism shortly after his first birthday. Very gradually, he stopped waving, stopped saying “hi” to people, stopped doing hand motions to songs, became a pickier eater, became more addicted to his pacifier and the TV, and had difficulty sleeping. As a first-time mom, I thought Lucas was just going through a phase. I was unaware that he was getting off track or regressing.

As he approached the 18-month mark, Lucas also had no awareness of the upcoming arrival of his baby brother. And after Spencer was born, my husband, Charles, an emergency medicine physician, became secretly alarmed by our son’s failure to notice

the new baby in our house. While I still didn't realize that Lucas's lack of awareness of his baby brother was an issue, looking back on that time, we could have replaced Spencer with a plastic baby doll, and Lucas would not have noticed.

A few months later, when Lucas was 21 months old, Charles dropped the bomb, saying the A-word for the first time. "Do you think Lucas has autism?" he asked me.

I was shocked and horrified, as I'd never thought there was anything wrong with Lucas. I looked at Charles and said, "I never ever want to hear the word *autism* again."

I didn't know much about autism, especially what it would look like in a toddler. I didn't know real treatment was available or that there was anything I could do to turn autism around, so I felt defensive immediately. *There's no point pinning this death sentence of a diagnosis on my toddler*, I thought.

For more than a year, Charles abided by my wishes and didn't bring it up. But the A-word had been etched into my brain. I thought about the possibility of autism when Lucas lost words or skills. I thought about autism when Lucas failed to start talking in phrases by age two despite starting toddler preschool and then speech therapy a few months later. I felt helpless as my son continued to fall further behind.

After more than a year of worrying on my own, praying it was anything but autism, I finally did some research and found out about hyperlexia, the ability to read letters and words before you can speak. Through that research, I met a woman who had a son with both autism and hyperlexia. She suggested I look into ABA therapy for Lucas, even though I thought he was just speech delayed. "If they're recovering kids with severe autism," she said, "treating your son with a speech delay should be easy."

The woman also recommended Catherine Maurice's 1993 book, *Let Me Hear Your Voice*. As soon as I started reading it, I recognized my son in the descriptions of autism. *Oh, my God*, I thought, *I've been in denial for over a year, doing nothing*. I had no idea there was any hope for children with autism, but this book, which outlined the power of ABA therapy, taught me that up to half of kids

could “become indistinguishable” from typically developing kids with intensive behavioral intervention. As a result, I did an immediate about-face.

I got Lucas on a three-month waiting list for an evaluation at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia. He was diagnosed the day before his third birthday.

Even though we were somewhat prepared, it was still devastating to get the definitive answer. Plus, Charles and I expected a diagnosis of mild autism, but when the developmental pediatrician came back with a moderate-to-severe diagnosis, it was my worst fear realized.

I asked about recovery using ABA, but the doctor wasn’t optimistic. He explained that in his long career, he hadn’t seen kids with Lucas’s developmental delays catch up completely. While he didn’t say it outright, my denial and delay in getting Lucas evaluated and treated had been a big mistake.

On the way home from the appointment, Lucas was completely silent. He was buckled into his car seat, staring out the window. No words, no babble. Just silence.

I cried as my husband ticked off the list of things Lucas would never do—*never go to college, never get married, never . . .*

“Please be quiet,” I pleaded with him.

Even in my sadness, however, I clung to hope for recovery. It was what I was looking for, so I wasn’t willing to give up that hope. I was going to work as hard as possible to help Lucas catch up as much as he could. I felt a lot of guilt about my denial. I talk about my “fall” into the autism world because it felt like I had fallen into a deep dark hole with Lucas. I had to figure out how to claw my way out of that hole and help my son because I knew his life depended on it.

I had no idea how to start, but I dug in completely. I got him therapists, and when I found out there weren’t enough of them, that’s when I became a behavior analyst myself so that I could help Lucas more, and eventually others.

From 2003 onward, I have worked with hundreds of kids directly, trained thousands of parents and professionals around the

world, and educated pediatricians and health care practitioners on the early warning signs of autism. I started several groups to raise awareness about autism in general, and then more specifically to advocate for early diagnosis and early treatment. I wrote the book *The Verbal Behavior Approach: How to Teach Children with Autism and Related Disorders* about what I had learned. It has been used by parents, grandparents, therapists, and educators for more than a decade and is now available in more than a dozen languages.

In that book, however, I didn't talk much about catching the earliest warning signs of autism, prevention of the disorder, reversal of symptoms, or recovery. As I began to treat more and more children at younger ages, I saw hundreds of kids improve by leaps and bounds due to very early treatment. And some of them were just like Lucas when he first showed signs of autism at 21 months. This was especially true for children ages 1 to 5 who had at least one all-in, proactive parent by their side spring into action at the very first signs of delays and red flags.

My work made it clear that early intensive behavioral intervention using my Turn Autism Around approach also helped children diagnosed with only speech delays to catch up faster. The sooner children received treatment, the sooner some of them were able to reach the same developmental milestones as their peers. And those with autism who were unable to catch up completely with their typical peers were still able to make great strides. *Waiting simply puts children further and further behind.*

What about Lucas? Well, he made significant progress once he started an intensive ABA program and was transitioned into using the verbal behavior approach. But his treatment was delayed by my denial and subsequent waiting lists for almost two years from the time he started showing signs of autism. So his progress was steady . . . but slow.

I can't know for sure, of course, that earlier treatment would have made Lucas indistinguishable from his typical peers or that he would have progressed to the same degree as Chino. But I'm certain he would have made more progress if I hadn't wasted more than a year denying the possibility of autism.

I believe Lucas's life would be easier today with earlier intervention. As someone with moderate-to-severe autism and a mild intellectual disability, Lucas needs a lot of supervision and care. But he can request what he needs, take a shower, make his breakfast, tie his shoes, answer questions, sing songs, and more—all as a result of the right kind of treatment. My goal for Lucas now that he has reached adulthood is that he remains stable and as safe, independent, and happy as possible. This is the same goal I have for my younger son, Spencer, who is also an adult, and for all kids with or without autism.

This is why I have become such an advocate for empowering parents to take action and *not wait*. I want parents to have hope and not put their heads in the sand. Hoping that Lucas's issues would resolve themselves didn't turn autism around for him, and it won't for your child either.

Nevertheless, remember that “turning autism around” looks different for every child. The results will be some shade of gray rather than black or white. So I can't promise that a diagnosis of autism can be prevented or that your child's speech delay will be reversed. Your child may be like Lucas—already diagnosed with severe autism and an intellectual disability, which might mean lifetime care. Or your child may catch up completely and not receive any diagnosis. The ultimate diagnosis could be a speech delay, a learning disability, ADHD, or autism, and the diagnosis may change over time. Your child may simply be overly sensitive and have excessive tantrums. But regardless of the diagnosis or lack thereof, getting into high gear now will only make life better for you both. Using my child-friendly Turn Autism Around approach is helpful at any stage and any age, and getting ahead of the difficult behaviors and catching up with language and social skills are far more significant than the diagnosis.

### THE A-WORD

One thing you're going to have to get over is using the A-word. The woman who suggested Lucas try ABA even if he only had a speech delay gave me the permission I needed to look into autism.

The strategies outlined in this book should work when used by caregivers or professionals trying to help any young child with any social communication delays, sensory processing issues, severe tantrums or those having difficulties with sleeping, eating, potty training, or going into the community.

So if you've picked up this book and don't want to use or read the word *autism*, I get it.

But keep reading. Please.

## SIBLINGS, TWINS, AND MEDICAL ISSUES

You may be reading this book because you already have one child with autism, and you're concerned about delays or possible signs of autism in their younger siblings. Studies show that siblings have a 16 to 36 percent chance of having autism.<sup>8</sup> This means that at least one in five children who have an older sibling with autism will also be diagnosed. Siblings are also more at risk of having developmental delays that don't meet the autism diagnosis threshold. Nevertheless, the delays may present very differently in siblings, so parents who have one child with ASD often need to watch their younger children carefully for anything that may signal the need for early intervention—even if those behaviors are very unlike those of your older children. Sometimes, a younger child is diagnosed first, and then the family realizes that an older sibling has a milder form of the disorder.

There are sibling research studies at major institutions and hospitals. If you live close enough to one of them and you want professionals to help you closely monitor your baby for signs of autism, you can enroll newborn or infant siblings free of charge.

One of the direct benefits of enrolling a younger sibling in a study is that the researchers can complete developmental testing every few months and identify delays. This will allow you to start interventions as soon as possible if your baby shows delays.

I've worked with many families in which more than one child received a diagnosis of autism. I worked with one family that had three children with the diagnosis, although the signs and symptoms appeared very differently. The middle child, Jeremy, had the most significant needs. When I started working with him at age four, his IQ was below 70, and he was officially diagnosed with intellectual disability in addition to autism. After using my approach for a year, Jeremy's IQ went up by 30 points, and he was no longer intellectually disabled. In that same year, Jeremy became fully conversational and is now in traditional high school, has friends, is a star athlete, and is on track for college. His two siblings also did very well, and autism is no longer the primary diagnosis for any of them.

What about twins? Are they also both more likely to be diagnosed with autism? Research done on twins shows that there is a very strong genetic component involved, but even in identical twins, the rate of autism for both is not 100 percent, suggesting that there are environmental factors involved, too.

Here's another important point: my son and almost all my former clients with autism have had medical issues that may have contributed to or complicated their autism, including gastrointestinal issues (constipation, diarrhea, acid reflux), allergies, asthma, eczema, seizures, and autoimmune disorders, to name just a few. Even though I'm a registered nurse and married to a physician, the medical assessment and treatment of kids aren't my areas of expertise, so I won't cover them much in the book. But I will say this: your child needs a health care practitioner who doesn't discount medical issues or blame problems like diarrhea on autism or ADHD. If your child's pediatrician isn't open to addressing your child's medical needs, you may have to find specialists and/or a functional medicine practitioner who can guide you through the medical issues that could be contributing to your child's delays.

## TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE

The bottom line is that there is an epidemic of children waiting for both diagnosis and treatment. The average age for children to be diagnosed and begin treatment is now four or five years old. That's at least three years after you can use my approach to most effectively treat concerning behaviors and teach language and play skills.

*It really is an emergency for young children just showing signs.*

But if your child is older and/or has significant impairment, it's not your fault and it's okay not to panic or feel guilty. In my first book, I wrote that if it was all about how hard I worked, Lucas would no longer have autism. I now know that sometimes neurological damage is severe and permanent and this doesn't mean you failed your child or that he cannot make meaningful progress.

On the pages that follow, I will guide you through the Turn Autism Around approach. You'll receive help with eating, sleeping, potty training, speaking, imitating, play, safety, and eliminating problem behaviors. You'll meet people who have seen their children improve and a few for whom we feel confident a diagnosis of autism was prevented. You'll find out how to quickly assess your child's skills, create a plan, start teaching in small 15-minute sessions daily, find the right professionals, and advocate for your child.

So no matter the age of your child or his level of functioning right now, this book is for you. I want to empower you to move forward in becoming your child's best teacher and advocate for life. I want to equalize the playing field as much as possible by giving you and all parents around the world a clear path to begin detecting and treating autism and other developmental disorders as soon as you can.

You may be at the start of your journey up the mountain, or you may already be halfway up. You might have a short climb or be facing a long climb up a steep mountain. But no matter where you are on the mountain, I'm here to lead the way.

I know you can do it because more than 20 years ago, I was climbing that same mountain as a mom with a son who was given a diagnosis that terrified me. I had no map, so I had to make one. This book is that map.

If your child has problem behaviors, a speech delay, sleep problems, or anything that concerns you, start helping him now. Let's replace fear with hope and the status quo with progress. Let's help you become the most empowered and proactive parent you can be. Let's catch and treat the earliest signs of autism and change the trajectory of your child's life!

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