



# It's all about Trust

By: Bill Nason

The Autism Discussion Page

For the anxious, resistant child, we focus on their noncompliance and develop strategies to shape them to be more compliant. This is often perceived by the child as controlling and manipulative (because it is). We are missing the point. It is not about compliance; it is about trust. When the world is very threatening, and the child feels helpless in the face of overwhelming anxiety, protecting one's "self" from external control is essential to survival. The need to control everything around them, and to them, is a priority.

In normal development, the child, through their attachment and relations with others, develops a strong sense of self in relation to the rest of the world. A stable and definite sense of self as separate, but interrelated, with the rest of the world. This separation is established early in life through attachment to their caregivers that teach them that following the lead of others is safe and trustworthy. A strong sense of self develops out of safe relating to those around them.

For many children with autism, because of sensory issues, this attachment and sense of self that arises from it is disrupted. Children develop a very fragile sense of self in relation to the world, which severely weakens their security, creates strong anxiety and drives fear of giving up control (sense of self) to follow the lead of others. These children are not trying to make people unhappy, purposefully aggravating others, or refusing to love others. It is not a conscious choice, but a defense mechanism to protect their fragile sense of self. To lessen this rigidity means to be engulfed in a spiral of losing one's sense of self.

"To succumb to the direction of others is to lose my very fragile sense of 'self.'" Giving up control and following the lead of another is too threatening even to contemplate. Even if the event being offered is very inviting, giving up control to obtain it is too scary. Letting down their guard means possibly being swallowed up and losing their sense of "self."

"To protect my 'self,' I will adamantly and forcefully resist any attempts to give up control and follow your lead. I cannot trust that following your lead is safe and will make me stronger. I will lose my 'self.'"

How do you help? We must give up our own false sense of needing to control. As parents, teachers, and professionals, we want to teach the child to respond and comply. This is very hard for us to give up. We need to forget about the power struggle and give up the notion of complying as the desired result. We need to reframe how we interact and relate with the child. Our focus needs to be on helping the child feel "safe and secure" with us, relating with us, no threat or pressure. To be there with us, without directions, instructions, prompting, etc. To first trust just allowing us to be one with them. To share emotional experiences with no direction or pressure. This will help the child feel safe that being with you is not a threat to their security but makes their sense of security stronger.

How to do this will vary individually with each child. It requires including yourself unconditionally in what the child values, following their lead, and sharing emotional experiences around their preferences. The secret is building numerous moments of positive “emotion sharing” in their safe world to establish a strong emotional bond. Once the child feels safe in these unconditional activities, then you can start to expand by adding little variations and elaborations to what the child is already doing.

This teaches the child to feel safe and competent (to trust) following your lead, in very small increments. Over time the child starts to view you as a “working partner” with them and begins to trust following your lead. The stretching must be very small in tiny steps as not to overwhelm the child. It must also be born out of the positive emotion sharing that is the glue to establishing the trust. By building this trust, the child will start to feel safer following your lead and learning from you.

Resist the focus on controlling the child and think instead of helping the child feel safe. When they are noncompliant, they are feeling threatened or automatically resisting, placing themselves in a position of feeling threatened. Keep your objective on first, helping the child feel safe and building trust while you gently try to guide them. When resistance increases, respect their voice, back off, and reduce the demands. Let them lead and pace the interaction and become a working partner with them. Make sure to solidify the companionship by building in moments of strong “emotion sharing” to engrain memories of sharing pleasurable moments. Feel good together, sharing the experience of doing it together. That is the glue to establishing security in relating.

Is this easy? By no means. It is very exhausting; it can take a long time to break through and build a strong sense of security and trust. You will initially feel like you have failed at being a loving parent, but that is the furthest from the truth. This reluctance is usually due to neurological vulnerabilities (e.g., sensory sensitivities) not having anything to do with the loving care of the parent. It just doesn’t come instinctually and intuitively as it does for other children.

Do not question your love and parenting skills. However, the oppositional child will test every patience and regard that you have and frequently leave you feeling exhausted and defeated throughout this journey. All these frustrations and emotions you feel (often negative) are natural and try to avoid feeling guilty over them. They are temporary and will pass.

As a parent, and as a person, you will be tested and pressured by not just the child but by all those around you. People will see your child as defiant, oppositional, manipulative, a brat, spoiled, and question your parenting skills. If possible, try and find a support group (possibly online) of other families experiencing the same journey. By far, these children are the most difficult to parent, and anyone who criticizes you does not have a clue on how to support you or these children. However, it is important that you seek out others who will help you feel safe and validated.

This article was published in the brown book, [“The Autism Discussion Page on stress, anxiety, shutdowns and meltdowns”](#)