



ALL IN WITH AUTISM

HOME SUPPORT TOOLKIT



HOLLY ROBINSON PEETE

Actress, activist and mother of a son with autism, Holly Robinson Peete has teamed up with Cigna to help families go All In with Autism. The goal of this partnership is to deepen our understanding of the condition and provide navigational support for families so they can rally together to live their most rewarding lives.

Holly developed this toolkit in partnership with Cigna clinical experts to share her family's experience and her personal journey with her son RJ.

ALL IN – WHAT WORKS FOR MY FAMILY AT HOME

Neurodiverse children can become overwhelmed at the slightest disruption to their routines. Even the smallest deviation from routine can bring about confusion, sadness or aggression. Since COVID-19 and the enforcement of shelter-in-place/stay-at-home orders in March 2020, many families have experienced disruption to school and therapy, and parents have assumed the roles of teachers and therapists for their children.

As primary caregivers and advocates, parents are the best authorities on the behaviors and well-being of our children. Being proactively prepared for disruptions, such as COVID-19

or natural disasters that restrict our ability to leave home, is paramount to the continued developmental (mental and emotional) health of a child with autism spectrum disorder. These situations can catapult you from being parents to being educators and therapists. If you have not taken classes or attended workshops and conferences to gain the additional skills that prepare you to take on these roles, it can become overwhelming for your child and the entire family.



Your child may be accustomed to being in a structured environment with staff who have the expertise, training and credentials to support their unique developmental needs. Until now, most of their educational instruction has most likely been a service that has been provided primarily outside the home.



WHAT DO YOU DO?

There are many recommended approaches, and below are some options that we implemented with the support of virtual therapists. It is important to keep in mind that this is about what works best for your child and to not be discouraged if another family has a better result.

- Interactive parallel play
- Speech therapy
- Applied behavior analysis (ABA)
- Occupational therapy
- Education and resources

[Cigna Autism Page >](#)

As parents and caretakers, we have the best insights about our children. As you begin developing your own home therapy plan, always keep in mind that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. I always say if you've met a child with autism, you've only met one child with autism. Your child is special and deserves a plan that is carefully developed to address their specific needs. The goal is to help them become better learners who are confident and can communicate and socialize with others.

Create a plan that:

- Allows you to provide dedicated attention to your child
- Sets goals and expectations for learning
- Engages clinical professionals and networks
- Is flexible and allows you to evaluate what works well for your child
- Ensures you can remain patient
- Keeps you healthy

[Stress Management Resources >](#)



DEVELOP A PLAN

PROVIDE DEDICATED ATTENTION TO YOUR CHILD

The responsibilities of being a parent, provider, nurturer and spouse can be very demanding. For single parents, it becomes exponentially more demanding. Even though it is difficult, it is important to identify the times each day that can be allocated exclusively to you and your child. If possible, create an environment where you won't be disturbed and it's just the two of you. This time will help you:

- Develop stronger bonds
- Learn more about your child's needs, strengths and weaknesses
- Become a better advocate

SET GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS FOR LEARNING

The success of at-home support is dependent upon identifying the areas where your child is most vulnerable and requires the most development. Observe what triggers behaviors that cause anxiety, fear, happiness, sadness, etc. Identify the activities that require improvement.

Create a dated journal. Use technology. There are many journal apps available. Frequently update your journal as a point of reference and way to identify what works well and areas that need improvement. Do not use generalities. Be specific. If your child has trouble with a specific area, include it as an activity for therapy. Consistency is key.



BE FLEXIBLE, AND EVALUATE WHAT WORKS WELL FOR YOUR CHILD

The relationship of parent/therapist and child/student is new to both of you. The lines may be blurred initially but with time and consistency will become more defined. Be flexible. If you observe that your child responds better at a specific time of day, adjust your schedules. If you start working with your child and notice that they are nonresponsive, move your learning to a different time. This is trial and error. It is important that they are receptive and ready to learn.

BE PATIENT

Our children are more important than anything in the world to us. As parents we always have a million things that we must do. Try not to become frustrated when you do not see immediate improvement. This process will take time, and it will be rewarding for both you and your child. Take a coffee break or tea break or whatever is needed to keep you mentally focused and calm.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR MENTAL/EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

This is a new journey. In the past you have entrusted the educational development of your child to professionals. You now find yourself in an unfamiliar space where you may feel poorly equipped with the resources and expertise to support your child's educational development. Your mental and emotional well-being are critical to your ability to educate and empower your child. Take breaks to ensure that your mental health is in order. If you feel you are becoming overly stressed, there are tests to evaluate your need for professional support. To quiz yourself, visit the Cigna interactive stress test.

[Cigna Interactive Stress Test >](#)



ENGAGE PROFESSIONALS/NETWORKS

The great news is the autism community is extremely supportive, and now exponentially more resources are available than there were 20 years ago, when we received our diagnosis. Identify networks and support groups in your area to learn best practices. Your support group is a safe space where you can gather information and connect with other families who have shared experiences. It can be so comforting to learn that you are not alone.

Seek the support of clinical experts if your finances permit. If you are overwhelmed, do not feel you need to be the sole provider of your child's instruction. In a time of social distancing, you can receive services online or arrange for in-home visits. There are many resources available. Create a list of all the resources that are available to you and keep it readily accessible.

Cigna customers can also call the Cigna Behavioral Health Team at **800.433.5768** for additional help.

RJ's FAVORITE THINGS

Every child is unique and responds differently to different therapies. We tried many. Some were more impactful than others. We discovered, though, there were some that worked extremely well or better than others. I encourage parents to pay close attention to their children to get an idea of what activities work best. These are some of RJ's favorite things:

Family Pet

RJ loves animals. All animals! But there will always be a special place in his heart for his favorite dog, Harriet. A Newfoundland, Harriet was a gentle giant and always made RJ feel calmed and comfortable. When his verbal skills were very challenged as a boy, he would talk to her. Of course, a dog is a huge commitment for a family but it's one I'm so glad we were able to make. She was his best friend for 14 years. The connection between dogs and children with autism is remarkable.

Exercise

RJ absolutely loves his trampoline! Whenever he is stressed and needs to stim, he jumps on his trampoline. Stimming is self-stimulatory or self-regulating behavior. He says he always feels better when he is jumping. He always feels more calm and less anxious after being on his trampoline.

Research has shown physical activity and exercise provide a host of benefits to individuals with autism. Trampolining is just one example. Boxing and swimming are also excellent examples, and they are RJ's other favorite physical exercises. Both help develop motor skills, coordination and muscle strength, and they also promote stable posture.



Jumping, boxing and swimming are activities that allow children with autism to play alongside others without the pressures of competitive organized sports. RJ learned to swim at nine months and has always been comforted and soothed by being in water. The repetition of physical movements is well-known as a coping mechanism for kids with autism.

[Learn More >](#)

Building Blocks

RJ is extremely meticulous. Building complex structures like the Taj Mahal and sports cars are some of his favorite activities. The blocks provide quiet time but also tap into his artistic side. He absolutely treasures his completed structures.

[Learn More >](#)

Sensory Tools and Furniture



When RJ was young, we created a sensory corner for him. It was a place that he found comfort and security. He especially loved his beanbag chair, which conformed to his body, and his weighted blanket, which calmed and reduced his feelings of anxiety. RJ is also captivated by furniture that incorporates water.

Music

Music is truly the universal language. It has been a game changer for RJ: Not only does he casually play the bass guitar and piano but he also even raps on occasion if given a mic. But mostly he loves putting on his headphones and listening to music. And sometimes he loves wearing his headphones even when he is not listening to music.

[Learn More >](#)

Aquariums

RJ loves water, and aquariums are one of his favorite destinations. He has loved visiting aquariums since he was a small child. RJ is now 23, and aquariums are still some of his favorite places. To him they are magical. The soothing sounds, aquatic life and visuals are therapeutic and have a calming effect on him.

There are easy, low-cost ways to create your own in-home aquarium when you cannot go to one. Betta aquariums are a cost-conscious way to create a beautiful visual that the entire family can enjoy.

