

# Dads project

## Support Booklet



ParentingNI



COMMUNITY  
FUND



# We're all in this together

We're all in this together.

Welcome.

This booklet has been put together with the support of Maurice, Dominic and Gary. They are all dads who are involved with the dad's project, who want to reach out to other separated dads with their positive messages of understanding and encouragement.

The love for their children is unconditional - here are their messages on Autism (ASD) and hope. Autism is a developmental disorder that is characterised by difficulty in social interaction and communication.

Also included are top tips on how to look after yourself by practising self care.

The Dads Project continues to offer support to separated dads who are not only worried about the impact of separation on their children, but also its impact on their own mental health and wellbeing. The project supports dads to build on their knowledge, skills and experiences to make positive change.

The Parenting NI Support Line is available for mums, dads and carers on freephone 0808 8010 722.

For further information check out our website at [www.parentingni.org/dadsproject](http://www.parentingni.org/dadsproject) or follow us on our Facebook, Twitter or Instagram pages.

# Mental health top tips

**Mental health affects the way we think and feel about ourselves and others, and how we respond to daily life. We can find it hard to talk about mental health but communicating and sharing feelings with our children can make all the difference.**

## Make yourself available

We all have busy lives and sometimes our children may feel we are too busy to chat. Make your presence known to your child and let them know you are happy to talk and listen to them about any worries they may have. You don't need to set aside lots of time to have a chat just opening up can make a difference. Keeping it informal and taking an interest in what they are doing allows opportunities to strike up a conversation.

## Talk about your day

Set time aside each day to chat to each other about your day both the good and the less positive things that happened. Try ending the day on something positive ready for the next day.

## Notice how your child communicates in other ways

Children and teenagers express themselves in different ways not just through talking but through play, music, behaviour, body language and facial expressions. You can learn a lot about how they may be feeling by spending time with them and watching them play or engage in activities.



# A Dads Poem

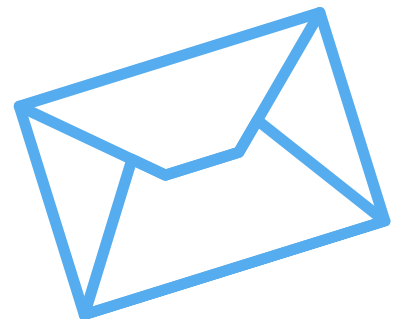
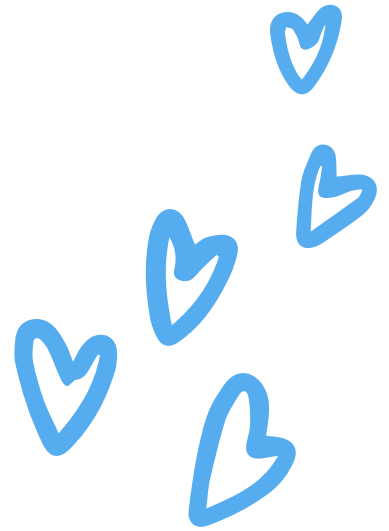
## By Gary Nash

Hi girls, its me.  
It's your Daddy.  
It's been a long time you see,  
I really hope you've not forgotten me

Lots of Love, It's me...Daddy.

It's been a very long time since I've seen you,  
And I think about you all of the time.  
I'm writing to tell you that I miss you,  
That I miss you both in my life.  
Some people will tell you differently,  
And about that, I don't even care,  
Just please, please do not believe them,  
You're all I ever think of, I swear.

I hear so many good things about you,  
But I cannot even text you or call,  
To tell you how proud I am of you both.  
How proud I am of it all,  
I've had to watch you from afar  
And see you grow up and change  
But all I want is to see you both  
Together, if even just for a day.

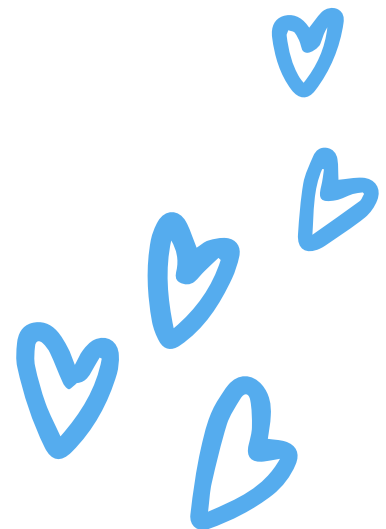


I know you may never see this letter,  
Or even know it's there,  
But it's the only way I have,  
to tell you that I love you and care.  
I care about your present,  
Your future and your past.  
Please come home, and see your family,  
It's all I'll ever ask.



Maybe I will put this on the radio  
Someday, you might even hear it then.  
It's the only way to contact you,  
As I've already tried with paper and pen.  
It's just to remind you that I miss you,  
And that I really, really love you so.  
But I'm afraid I have to go now,  
The tears are tripping me so.

So I'll leave this here for you both,  
Until the day that we can meet again.  
And I don't know how long that will be,  
I do not even know how, where or when.  
But I do know how much I love you  
And how much it makes me sad,  
That you may never get to read this.  
It's me, It's me, lots of love...

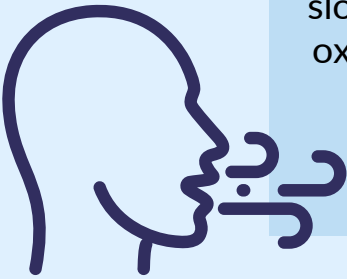


Your Dad.

# Self Care Ideas for Dads

## Dealing with stress and breathing

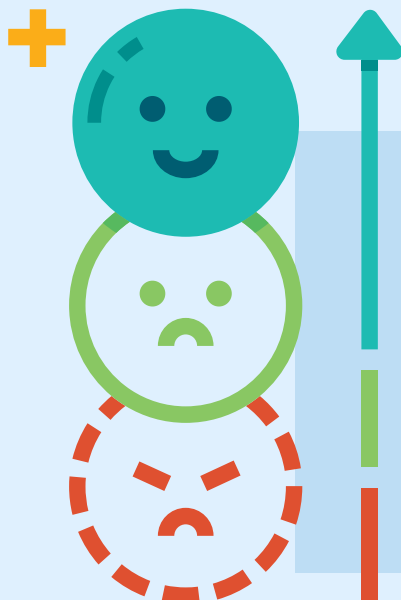
You can practice better breathing techniques. This can help to reduce stress, anxiety and panic. Take a couple of minutes to concentrate on how you breathe. When we are relaxed we take slower and calmer breaths. This also helps us to feel calmer. More oxygen keeps us working better all round. Changing how you feel physically can change how you feel mentally. Calming the physical feeling of anxiety - with deep breaths - can help to relieve an anxious mind.



## Relaxation

Find something that you enjoy and make a conscious effort to do that relaxing thing every day.

- Listening to music
- going for a walk
- tea with friends
- yoga
- running
- reading
- watching television



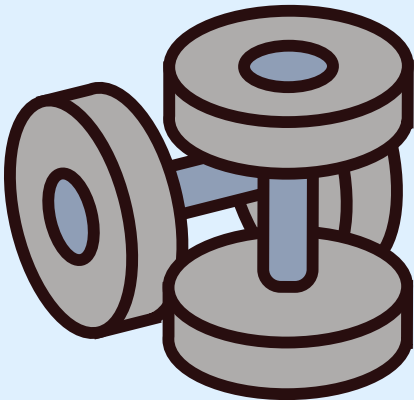
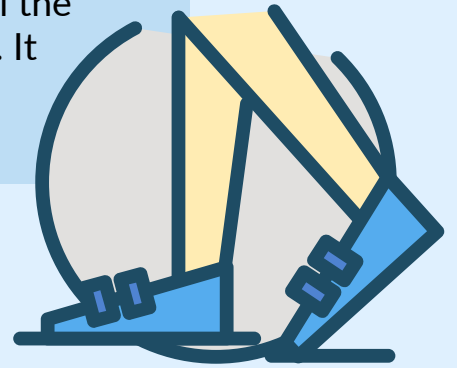
## Focus on Your feelings

Whenever possible, take a moment to focus on your feelings at various points during the day. This gives you time and space to decide if it's possible to change how you feel. This could help to improve your day or situation. The more you practice noticing your feelings, the better you'll get. The important thing is to focus on the feeling without judgement, just kindness.

# Self Care Ideas for Dads

## Walking

When you're feeling stressed, go for a walk for a minute or two. Focus on each step that you take - concentrating on how it feels to bring your foot down and then up again. Notice the movement of your body and the swing of your arms and all the related sensations and sounds you experience as you walk. It might sound odd, but this can help to focus you on the moment.

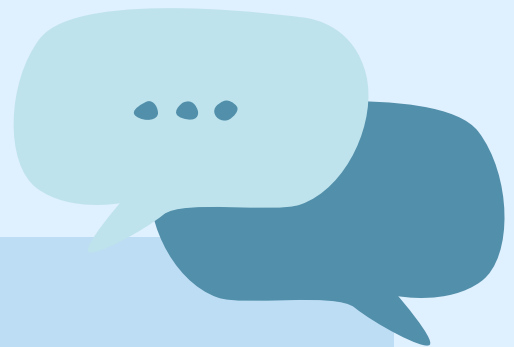


## Exercise More

Keeping active helps protect both your physical and mental health. Regular exercise will help you sleep, relax and feel better. Exercise helps reduce stress and boosts your energy levels.

## Staying in Touch

Healthy relationships can make life more enjoyable. Sharing things with trusted friends and family will go a long way. They can keep us grounded and help us put things into perspective when we are struggling to do so ourselves. Social contact and being active in your community can improve your mental health. Think about the hobbies you enjoy or the things you have always wanted to try. Doing something you enjoy will help you to feel well. Learning something new can be good for your confidence.



# Autism (ASD) from a Dad's Perspective

## Dominic's experience with Aodhan, his 3 year old son

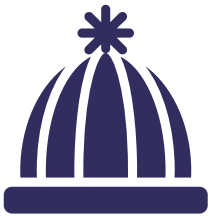
When I found out my son Aodhán was to be assessed, I was pleased to know that support agencies were involved. I don't see ASD as a disability but just a way to understand someone's functioning and behaviour. As his dad, I really want to be as involved as I can in supporting him through this process and learning about his world.

What worries me is that the assessment will take a long time and that I will be left out of the process. I am so used to finding out information about his life and welfare long after the fact or not at all and maybe, just maybe, a diagnosis of ASD could also be used as an opportunity to interfere with or limit our contact.

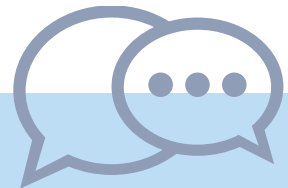
I have built up great support network and I am able to discuss my concerns with other dads who have experienced what I am about to go through. On a personal level I attend counselling to help cope with stresses and difficult feelings associated with contact issues, I practice mindful exercises and yoga and I spend a lot time outdoors keeping active.



I want to continue to be involved in Aodhan's life and develop more of an insight into understanding his world and how to help him when he is struggling. Two loving and caring parents is better than one. I also hope that his mum and I have a relationship where we can communicate better and support one another if he needs additional support



He loves hats - he likes to try them on and see others try them. He loves outdoors - going for walks, exploring in the woods, especially in his wellies. He loves playing in water - in the bath, jumping into puddles, or in the swimming pool. He loves hugs and cuddling in bed. He loves "Peppa Pig" and "In the Night Garden". He doesn't like most foods and is very fussy (except white choc button treats!) and he prefers not to talk - but he knows what is going on and prefers not to have too many people around him.



## Your advice to other dads

**My advice to other dads is don't be afraid of having your child assessed or diagnosed for ASD. This is not a mark against you, it's an opportunity to learn more about how to help your child thrive. Go to the experts and reach out for support to learn more rather than "googling" and don't be afraid to ask for help if you are struggling emotionally.**

# Autism (ASD) from a Dad's Perspective



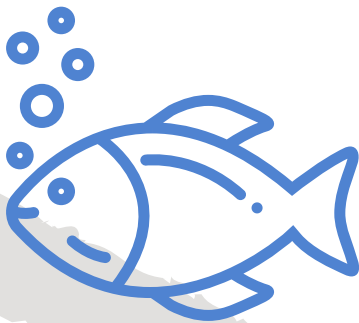
**Maurice & Adam, his 4 year old son.**

**What is autism to me? Uniqueness, acceptance, love**

My son Adam was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in 2018 aged two and a half. It has been a steep learning curve for me and even today I am still learning. My approach after Adam's diagnosis was to completely immerse myself in information by researching and making use of local ASD support service, Sensations.

To understand autism you have to see the world through the eyes of someone diagnosed, completely switch off your own perceptions of things (loud sounds, busy places, various social scenarios etc.) and understand how these things and others we may normally think little of can really unsettle and overwhelm others.

I consider myself quite fortunate. I have not really had to deal with meltdowns or what some who know no better may deem "bad behaviour", strops, being hit, punched etc (which I know through interactions with other ASD parents) can occur on a regular basis in their households. I'm under no illusion this may yet come and if it does then coping strategies will be developed. I do not and will not ever consider this a lost cause or a hopeless situation. We all need to step up at different points in life and work for the betterment of others - arguably the cornerstone of being a parent.



Adam enjoys many activities typical of any 4 year old, running, trampoline, playing in the park etc. He has proven to be a real water baby and enjoys the swimming pool. He also loves playing with sand and play dough, textures he enjoys. A real winner with Adam are sensory lights. I have picked up some light displays for him - a particular favourite of his are his "fishies", a vertical cylinder of water full of toy fish and different coloured lights which cost just a few pounds and which sits in my living room.

**Whilst I'm under no illusion that Adam's autism may bring challenges in the future, we as a family will meet these challenges head on. He is loved and adored for who he is. We wouldn't change him one bit.**

**"There's no comparison between the sun and the moon. They shine when it's their time".**



# BAKED BEEF TACOS

*Crunchy, messy, great fun to eat - A big hit with the kids.*



## INGREDIENTS

1 onion  
1 red pepper  
1 green pepper  
olive oil  
2 cloves of garlic  
1 pinch of paprika  
1½ teaspoons cumin  
500 g quality minced  
beef  
250 ml organic beef  
stock  
12 corn taco shells

### SALSA

2 ripe tomatoes  
1 spring onion  
3 sprigs of fresh  
coriander  
½ a lime

### GUACAMOLE

2 ripe avocados  
½ lime  
2 tablespoons crème  
fraîche

## RECIPE

Peel and dice the onion, then deseed and dice the peppers. Soften in 1 tablespoon of oil in a large pan over a low heat.

Peel, finely slice and add the garlic, along with the paprika and cumin, and cook for 1 to 2 minutes. Add the beef and stir until it has browned.

Pour in the stock, cover, and cook for 45 minutes, or until reduced and delicious.

Preheat the oven to 180°C/350°F/gas 4.

For the salsa, roughly chop the tomatoes, trim and finely slice the spring onion, then pick and roughly chop the coriander leaves. Combine with the lime juice, then season carefully to taste.

For the guacamole, halve and destone the avocados, then mash the flesh with a fork. Squeeze in the lime juice, add the crème fraîche, season, and gently mix it all up.

Spread the taco shells out on a baking tray and place in the oven for 3 to 4 minutes until crisp. Fill the shells with the meat, salsa and guacamole or lay everything out and let everyone help themselves.



# Useful Contacts



- NI Direct have a scheme for people to apply for money if they have been adversely affected by the COVID 19 pandemic. Check their website: [www.nidirect.gov.uk](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk)
- Citizens Advice: check for regional office numbers
- AdviceNI: 02890 645919  
email: [info@adviceni.net](mailto:info@adviceni.net)
- Housing Rights: 02890 245640
- Housing Executive: 0344 892 0900
- Lifeline: 0808 808 8000
- Samaritans: 116 123
- Parenting NI: 0808 8010 722
- Aware: 07548 530931 or 07340 488254
- Law Society (re Universal Credit):  
02890 244401
- Autism NI: 028 9040 1729 (Press Option 1)
- Family Mediation NI: 028 9024 3265
- Lenadoon Community Counselling Service -  
<https://www.communityni.org/organisation/lenadoon-community-counselling-service>
- Children's Savings Accounts with the Credit Union -  
<https://www.creditunion.ie/what-we-offer/savings/children-s-savings/>
- Headspace app - <https://www.headspace.com/>



## About the Dads Project

The Dads Project supports dads in Northern Ireland who are separating, separated or currently involved within the courts service.

The Dads Project promotes dads being engaged and involved in their children's lives. This project will help you to develop more confidence in your parenting ability and to build positive connections with other dads in a similar position in your community.

## The Dads Project aims to

- Provide services to empower and support separated dads
- Provide dads with knowledge, information and choices
- Promote children's rights to having access to both parents
- Promote the importance of children having an ongoing relationship with their dad
- Influence policy change to ensure dads are considered on an equal basis to mothers
- Educate professionals about the importance of ongoing engagement with dads

The Dads Project is a Parenting NI initiative. Parenting NI provide a range of supports to parents throughout Northern Ireland. For more information and further support visit [parentingni.org](http://parentingni.org) or call for free on 0808 8010 722.



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Parenting NI, First Floor, Unit 3, Hawthorn Office Park,  
39a Stockman's Way, Belfast, BT9 7ET, Northern Ireland  
FREE Support Line: 0808 8010 722 . Email: [help@parentingni.org](mailto:help@parentingni.org)  
Visit: [www.parentingni.org](http://www.parentingni.org)

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