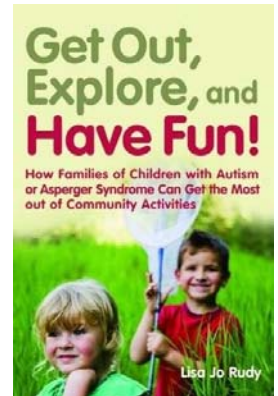




## Expert Speaks!



*Family Services interviewed autism expert Lisa Jo Rudy about her new book **Get Out, Explore, and Have Fun! How Families of Children with Autism or Asperger Syndrome Can Get the Most out of Community Activities**, published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers.*



### **WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO WRITE THIS BOOK?**

My husband and I have always worked in the non-profit world – the world of museums and zoos, science, art, theater and education. We’ve met people who make their livings building haunted houses, showing the night sky to children, diving under the sea and investigating the mating habits of snails. We’ve seen kids on and off the autism spectrum (some with significant challenges) join dinosaur digs in Montana, play first clarinet in a regional orchestra, tutor typical peers in a foreign language, show horses, sell their paintings and much more. We’ve read the extensive research that says people learn in many ways, and express what they know with or without the use of spoken language. We know that getting out, exploring and having fun is not only critically important to full and happy life – it’s also a way to build self-discovery, personal growth and bonding into the lives of children and families living with autism. It’s time to get out there and make it happen!

### **YOU ARE GETTING OUT AND EXPLORING AS AN EXTENSION OF LEARNING, AS WELL AS HAVING FUN. HOW DO AUTISTIC CHILDREN LEARN DIFFERENTLY WHEN THEY ARE OUT AND ABOUT? WHAT LESSONS CAN EDUCATORS OF INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS LEARN FROM THE BOOK?**

When kids are in school, they are taught with words, tested with words, and judged on their ability to use words successfully. The problem, of course, is that kids with autism by definition have a difficult time with both making sense of and expressing themselves with words.

Fortunately, there are many, many other ways to teach, learn, and show others your abilities. You can use your eyes, ears and hands. You can sing, play music, paint or swim. You can build a model castle, create a computer program, or ride a horse. Unfortunately, schools very rarely take advantage of the million and one non-verbal techniques for teaching or learning – and of course standardized tests make it even tougher.

My hope is that this book – and many other projects I’m involved with – will help teachers, administrators, consultants and researchers to investigate and make use of techniques used in informal settings (and the research that has already been done around the success of informal education for all kinds of learners) when they plan their lessons. Could their students learn through hands-on experimentation? Through physical exploration? Through artistic creation? Could their students express their learning through theater? Music? Or engineering design? We already know that the answers to these questions is “yes” – the challenge is to ensure that kids on the autism spectrum get the opportunity to benefit from what we already know.

## **HOW DO FAMILY UNITS BENEFIT FROM GETTING OUT AND EXPLORING?**

Autism can be an incredibly isolating disorder. Not only do parents wind up spending a huge amount of their time, energy, money and love on therapies and care – they also feel like outsiders in their own communities and families. It can be even worse for siblings who, through no fault of their own, are often excluded from ordinary activities. By getting out and getting involved in the community as it’s possible, families are able to reconnect with clubs, churches and synagogues, sports leagues... and often with their own families. Another huge plus for getting out into the world with a child on the autism spectrum is that families discover their child’s real strengths and abilities in ways that would never be possible in the school or therapeutic settings.

## **FOR A PARENT, A TANTRUM ON THE TRAIN OR A PUNCH ON THE PLAYGROUND CAN SOUR THE IDEA OF FUTURE EXCURSIONS. WHAT ARE YOUR TIPS FOR RECOVERING FROM A “BAD DAY OUT”?**

The best way to manage a bad experience is to already know, in advance, what you’re going to do when it happens. Autism parents know that it’s almost impossible to control for all possible issues, and to guarantee success. On the other hand, it’s very possible indeed to have a Plan B already in place.

Instead of taking a group of kids to the playground with one adult in charge, for example, have two adults along. That way, if an incident occurs, it’s easy to step in, end the experience, and leave the situation – without disrupting the group’s day out. At a zoo, the best choice may be to buy a low-cost membership, so that a shortened day at the zoo feels less like a failure and more like a ... short day at the zoo!

Bottom line, it will always be a challenge to involve your child with autism in typical community activities. Planning and flexibility – along with a thick skin and a sense of humor – can make all the difference.

## **WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A PARENT WHO WANTS TO GET OUT AND EXPLORE WITH THEIR CHILD WITH AUTISM, BUT MAY HAVE LIMITED TIME OR RESOURCES?**

Start small and simple. If your child loves animals, visit the pet shop. If your child enjoys music, go listen to the town band for a little while. Take a short walk in the woods, plan a half-hour at the local pool, or pick some apples at the farm. Don't spend much money, don't commit a lot of time, and don't inflate your expectations. If you have a great five minutes, you're ahead of the game!

If you're really nervous about getting out in public with your autistic child, and you want to hand the reins over to someone else, you might want to consider some of many "special needs" community options that are available. True, Special Olympians are unlikely to compete at a world-class level – but the experience of building skills, friendships and self-esteem can be a stepping stone to many opportunities in the local community and beyond.

Of course, you also have the option of exploring and having fun at home – and that's an absolutely reasonable option for many families. Whether you're dancing together to your favorite CD, playing a video game, or just playing "tickle me," you're enjoying each other's company. And that's a huge step in the right direction!

### **ABOUT LISA**

Lisa Jo Rudy is a professional writer, researcher and consultant, and the mother of a 13-year-old boy with an autism spectrum disorder. Since 2006, she has written the 'About.com Guide to Autism' (*autism.about.com*), a part of The New York Times Company. Lisa is the author of ***Get out, Explore, and Have Fun! How Families of Children with Autism or Asperger Syndrome Can Get the Most out of Community Activities***, published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers. She has more than twenty years of experience in developing hands-on exhibits, interactive games, books and activities for kids with every learning style, and has founded an inclusive summer program for children with autism in collaboration with the YMCA, written articles on inclusion for museum professionals, presented workshops on the subject, and is working toward development of related programs for the future.