First Steps Guide

The first steps after an autism diagnosis

Valentine Lecêtre
sortirdelautisme.fr
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FREE GUIDE

A FREE LITTLE GUIDE — FOR YOU, MOM

The first 10 steps after an autism diagnosis

A little guide to keep from falling apart (and to not lose a single minute)

By Valentine Lecêtre, author of *Breaking the Codes*

You have just heard the word. Autism. And the ground gave way beneath you. You're searching everywhere, crying through the night, wondering whether your child will ever speak, laugh, or hug you someday. I know. I have been there — exactly there. Before you start running in every direction, read these ten steps. They don't cure anything. They protect *you*. And it's you, above all, that your child needs right now. Breathe. You are no longer alone.

A letter, just for you

Hello, my dear.

My name is Valentine. I’m the mom of Sasha, diagnosed with severe autism at the age of two. Back when I heard the diagnosis, I had no instruction manual. I had a blank page, a child who no longer looked at me, and a husband crying in the car. No one put a hand on my shoulder to tell me: you’re going to make it, and here is where to begin.

If I’m writing to you today, it’s to do what no one did for me. To put a hand on your shoulder. To tell you that you’re going to make it. And to give you — not a miracle method, there is no such thing — but ten simple, human steps that I wish I had known in those first weeks.

In this guide you’ll find what I learned, sometimes the hard way, by walking the path. I am not a doctor. I am not a neuropsychologist. I am just a mom like you, who refused to sit down and wait. A mom who searched, read, questioned, tried, failed, and started over. And who today sees her son smile, communicate, and laugh out loud.

I promise you nothing about your child. No one can. But I promise you this: if you take these ten steps seriously, you will gain weeks, perhaps months. And above all, you will protect yourself. Because your child needs a mom who is still standing, not a mom who collapses from having carried everything alone.

So pour yourself a cup of tea. Put down your phone. And read these pages slowly. I am right here, behind every word.

With all my tenderness,

Valentine

1. Breathe before you act

The first three days are the most dangerous. That's when you drain your savings into miracle therapies, accept the first appointment that comes along, and consult a dozen websites at 2 a.m. Stop. Your child won't lose more in three days than they have already lost. But you can gain precious clarity by setting your bags down for an hour. The diagnosis is not a life-threatening emergency. It's a step. Give yourself permission to absorb the blow before you start running.

DO TODAY › Block off 1 hour in your calendar tomorrow, no screen, no phone. Walk, breathe.

AND YOU? When was the last time you breathed for 5 minutes without guilt?

2. Ask for the complete written diagnosis

Never settle for a word spoken out loud. Insist on the full, detailed, signed report. It will serve you with your national autism association, the school, the therapists, the financial-aid services — and for yourself, when doubt comes back at 3 a.m. Without this document, you are administratively invisible. Many moms wait six months for this paper because they didn't dare to ask for it. Ask for it. It's your right. And you will need it very, very soon.

DO TODAY › Send an email to the doctor requesting the written report within 15 days.

AND YOU? Do you already have this document in hand, or are you living on a vague spoken word?

3. Open your support file this week

The agencies that handle disability support and benefits often take between 3 and 9 months to process a file. Every week of delay is a week of allowances, classroom support, and aid lost. Many people wait until they've understood everything before submitting. Mistake. Submit an imperfect file NOW; you'll complete it afterward. The date-stamped acknowledgment of receipt establishes your starting point — and that date stamp can be worth thousands a year.

DO TODAY › Find the application form for your local disability-support or benefits office and fill in the identity section.

AND YOU? Do you know where your local disability-support office is located?

4. Find a human ear, not a forum

Forums are anxiety vacuums. You'll come across terrible stories, contradictory advice, brutal certainties. At 11 p.m., that will destroy you. Look for a real person: another mom, an association, a peer parent. A voice, not a message thread. These groups exist in almost every town. One hour over coffee with a mom who is 5 years ahead of you is worth a thousand pages of anonymous testimonies.

DO TODAY › Search “autism association + your city” and send an email today.

AND YOU? Do you know ONE person in real life who is living what you’re living?

5. Filter the advice, keep the essentials

The moment your loved ones find out, you’re going to receive advice. A lot of it. Often contradictory. Your mother-in-law, your best friend, the teacher, the pharmacist. They’ll all want to help. Learn to say thank you without applying any of it. You’re not obligated to explain. You’re not obligated to convince. Keep 3 reliable sources at most (a trusted professional, a book, an association), and cut out the noise. Your mental load is already full.

DO TODAY › Write down 3 reliable people/resources. Everything else = white noise.

AND YOU? What was the piece of advice that hurt you most this week?

6. Film your child relentlessly

Take out your phone. Every day. Film 30 seconds: mealtime, play, waking up, a meltdown, a smile. These videos will serve you three times over: for the therapists (better than a story), for future assessments (to measure progress), and for you (to remember there was progress, on the days you no longer believe it). Store everything in a dated folder. In six months, this folder will be your treasure. Take my word for it. I know.

DO TODAY › Create a folder called “Sasha 2026” on your phone, and film 30 seconds tonight.

AND YOU? What’s the most recent video of your child playing?

7. Look for ongoing support (ABA, TEACCH, speech therapy)

Early, intensive intervention changes everything. Truly everything. Look for scientifically validated approaches: ABA, TEACCH, PECS, Denver. Don’t fall for esoteric promises or miracle diets. Ask your national autism association about resource centers in your region — many offer free guidance. And don’t spend a year waiting to find the right method. The best method is the one that starts in 15 days.

DO TODAY › Note in your calendar: call my national autism association or a local resource center this week.

AND YOU? Which approach have you already heard of, and which one speaks to you?

8. Protect your relationship (or your solitude)

The diagnosis is an earthquake for a couple. The statistics are cruel: there are many separations in the 3 years that follow. You and your partner are going to react differently — one will take refuge in work, the other will become hyper-vigilant. That's normal. But it can turn toxic. Set aside 20 minutes a week to talk about your relationship, not about your child. If you're on your own, this is even more vital: find a friend, a sister, a therapist. You can't hold on alone.

DO TODAY › Block off 20 minutes Friday evening with your partner (or a friend). Topic: us.

AND YOU? Who are you talking to about yourself (not about your child) right now?

9. Eat, sleep, walk — in that order

You're no longer carrying only your child: you're carrying their future. That's heavy. If you break down physically, nothing else holds together. Three non-negotiables: three real meals a day (even eaten standing up), six hours of sleep minimum, and twenty minutes of walking outdoors. This isn't luxury, it's survival. I thought I could get by on coffee and willpower. I broke down at 6 months. You — don't do that. Put yourself at the top of your own list, at least for your body.

DO TODAY › Tonight: dinner + in bed by 10:30 p.m. + 10 minutes of walking tomorrow morning.

AND YOU? Which meal/sleep/movement did you sacrifice this week?

10. Keep a written record of everything

Buy a notebook. A real one, made of paper. Write down: appointment dates, doctors' names, doses, behaviors observed, progress, regressions, association contacts, and the steps you take with the support services. For 5 years, you're going to live in a fog where every detail counts. This notebook will become your external memory. When a doctor asks you "at what age was he babbling?", you'll have the answer. It's worth its weight in gold, this little notebook. It's also symbolic: you're taking back control.

DO TODAY › Go buy an A5 notebook tomorrow. Write the date of the diagnosis on page 1.

AND YOU? Have you ever forgotten an important detail because you didn't write it down?

Going further with me

If these ten steps did you good, know that they are only a doorway. In my book, I tell it all: the sleepless nights, the mistakes, the methods that worked for Sasha, the ones that failed, the administrative battles, and above all — above all — how you find joy again once you've lost it.

Three ways to keep going together:

1 — Listen to the audiobook (FR) For the evenings when you no longer have the strength to read. My voice. → sortirdelautisme.fr/audio

2 — Order the paperback (Ideo / City Éditions) To tick, highlight, and annotate. The paper companion for the first months. → sortirdelautisme.fr/livre

3 — *Breaking the Codes* (English edition) Share with English-speaking friends, family, and professionals. → sortirdelautisme.fr/breaking-the-codes

I'm thinking of you, so much.

Valentine

Valentine Lecêtre — Mom of Sasha — sortirdelautisme.fr

"You don't have to be strong. You just have to be there, one day after another."

A note on this guide. I am a mother sharing my experience, not a medical professional. Nothing here replaces the advice of qualified professionals. If you are in crisis or have thoughts of harming yourself, please reach out immediately to your local emergency number or a suicide-prevention helpline — you can find one for your country at findahelpline.com. With my Miracle Workers, and with everything I have learned, I wrote this guide so you would never feel as alone as I once did.