



Hi! My name is Stephanie, and I am a single mother of three children on the Autism Spectrum. My oldest son was not diagnosed until 2018 at the age of 8, and my two younger children followed with their diagnosis in 2019 and 2020. In the last four years I have learned quite a bit, especially about each of my children and what they need as an individual. Out of all the things I could tell you about Autism, IEP's, sensory overload, and so on; I have narrowed it down to the "Top 5 Things I Have Learned as a Single Mother of Multiples on the Autism Spectrum."

1.) Educate, Educate, Educate. I cannot stress enough how crucial it is for you, as the parent, to research and educate yourself about Autism and your child. I have spent countless hours Googling symptoms, behaviors, therapies, and how to navigate the Special Education System. I did not know anything about Autism once upon a time; I just knew that my oldest son was experiencing more than what the professionals had concluded up until that point. You will continuously learn more and more as you go, but it helps tremendously to have a decent amount of knowledge so that you are best equipped to advocate for your child (because you will need to, and more than just once).

2.) Do what works for you and your family! There is so much to already be consumed with, who needs more? When I first learned that I had an autistic child, it was an entire life adjustment. I had to become more

aware of places we went, crowds, loud noises, etc. My son, Carter, had always become upset when we went anywhere that was very crowded and noisy; I never realized there was a reason for it. We began attending many "Sensory-Friendly" activities where we lived at that time, and my kids thoroughly enjoyed that. They love attending UCF CARD events since we moved to the area last year, because I think they feel more comfortable around others that they feel just "understand them" (I feel this way, as well). I have learned that so much is trial and error, and I encourage you to get out and try new things with your child(ren); if it works that is great, and if it doesn't, at least you tried. Each of my children are autistic, but some things work for one that doesn't for the other; they have their own preferences for activities, sensory toys, triggers, and ways of dealing with emotional regulation. So, again, every child and family are different; DO WHAT WORKS BEST FOR YOU!! 😊

3.) Who has ever had to attend an IEP meeting for the first time? Who has ever felt intimidated by the IEP team surrounding you while each of them discusses "what is best for YOUR child?" I know, so have I; times THREE. I have learned SO much about the school system and how to find my way around Special Education. I have learned something huge while sitting at an IEP table, and that is how to be assertive and ask for what I want, advocate for my child through and through, and ensure that my voice is heard. I have learned not to just accept the opinions of school staff, but to voice my own (because we parents do know our children best). IEP's have kind of become my "bread and butter," and a passion of mine. I decided to seek out becoming an IEP Coach/Advocate after so many friends and friends of friends would ask for my advice for their son or daughter's upcoming IEP meeting. In conclusion, I want to preach to all the parents out there who have a child with an IEP, and assure them that as the parent, they hold so much power in their child's education.

4.) YOU MATTER!!! I have to constantly remind myself of this one, because it's so true; you matter, you're important, and you deserve to take care of yourself and your needs. I find self-care to be one of the most difficult things, because I truly don't have many free moments throughout my day, and once the kids are in bed; I feel too exhausted to do another task. Through this journey however, I have realized that it is imperative for me to find some "me" time and regroup after a long day. Self-care can sound like a cliché term because I have thought that many times as it has been recommended to me; I do now know that self-care is much more than splurging on a new outfit or getting your nails done (although this is perfectly fine to do, as well), but it is more about taking care of your mental and emotional health. Your homework is to find even a few

minutes during your day to spend on yourself doing something that you enjoy; it can be writing, drawing, reading, or just taking a relaxing bubble bath to unwind. I will be challenging myself to do the same because I forget to do this often.

5.) I don't have much of a village, I really don't have anyone besides myself to rely on; it is important to connect with others, however. Since becoming a parent of special needs, I have felt less connected to other moms and adults; I have felt like I am misunderstood in a lot of ways. I have concluded that it is vital to keep trying to find my "people," my "village;" so that I ultimately have a support system of some sort. I know many moms that are bringing their children to baseball or soccer practice school, while I am carting three children off to their weekly therapy appointments. Although I have not had many friends or family members to count on, I have consistently networked in my area and have built pretty decent relationships with therapists, teachers, and others, who have worked closely with my children over the years. All in all, whether you already have an army standing beside you AND your child(ren), or you don't; please don't give up on finding a few good gems that will make life feel a little less heavy. I never thought it was very important to do this, but as time goes on, I can see that this is not the case; I want to know others, I deserve connection, and my children very much deserve connection and friends.

Keep taking care of yourself and making yourself happy; this in return makes your child(ren) happy, as well. We are always stronger than we think or feel on some of the rougher days; but we always get through them, and it will always be better tomorrow.

Sending lots of positive vibes your way, every day,

Stephanie 😊