

# Ep #23: Back to School Series: Defining Success for Neurodivergent Children



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Lisa Candra

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You are listening to episode 23 of *The Autism Mom Coach*, Back to School Series: Defining Success for Neurodivergent Children. In just a couple of weeks or days depending on where you live the kids will be back in school. And this is a bit of a mixed bag for special needs parents. On the one hand, hello structure, on the other, change, transition, new schools, new classes, new classrooms, new expectations, new teachers, new support staff, new classmates and new challenges.

In this Back to School Series, I am going to address some of the common challenges we, the parents of special needs kiddos face and teach you strategies you can begin using now to support yourself during the transition from summer and throughout the school year. We are going to kick this off by talking about success. We all want our kids to be successful but what does this mean exactly?

If we look to the mainstream cultural narrative about success which is modeled on neurotypical children and does not account for our children who are neurodivergent, this would be something like meeting grade level expectations, getting good grades, participating in extracurricular activities. And for the most part, being seen and not heard unless you raise your hand of course. And when we apply these standards to our neurodivergent children, well, they don't measure up and we feel terrible.

We feel like they have lost the game before they even started to play. But what if none of this is true? Success after all is subjective. We can decide what success means for us and our children even if it flies in the face of everything we have been socialized to believe. And I highly suggest that we do exactly this, stay tuned to learn why.

Welcome to *The Autism Mom Coach*, a podcast for moms who feel overwhelmed, afraid, and sometimes powerless as they raise their child with Autism. My name is Lisa Candra. I'm a certified life coach, lawyer, and most importantly I'm a full-time single mom to a teenage boy with Autism. In this podcast I'll show you how to transform your relationship with Autism and special needs parenting. You'll learn how to shift away from

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being a victim of your circumstances to being the hero of the story you get to write. Let's get started.

Hello and welcome to the podcast. I hope you are doing well. Mid-August, can you believe it? I have not fully registered that in a couple of weeks I will have a high school student, just saying it makes me a little bit queasy. First comes high school, then comes after high school, then comes I just don't know what. And just like that, an unmanaged mind can start spinning into the future and catastrophizing about the unknown but not today.

Sometimes it's just as simple as that, noticing where your mind wants to go, where it always goes and then just saying no, skip ad.

Before I get to today's topic I want to thank all of you who have left reviews for the podcast. And if you haven't already, please go ahead and do so. It will only take a few minutes and your review really does matter. It helps other moms like you find the podcast more easily.

On that note I want to read a review by Mrs. Pink 2018. She wrote, as a mom of a teen with severe Autism I find Lisa's podcast to be full of the practical ideas and support I could never find in traditional therapy. She knows the emotional struggles because she's actually been there. And I love how she uses humor, honesty and real life examples to teach techniques that empower you as a parent. Love this podcast.

Well, thank you so much for that review, it really means a lot to me to know that the advice and the strategies that I am sharing have been helpful to you. And that's why I'm doing this, so again, thank you.

Okay, as I said in the intro, this is going to be a Back to School Series. It will consist of four episodes including this one all designed to prepare you for the upcoming school year. Now, when I say prepare, you might be thinking actions, all the things you have to do. And I'm not going to lie, there are a lot of things to do, you know this. And while I will cover some of this, I want to remind you where actions come in the self-coaching model that I taught you in episode six, pretty far down the line.

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There are circumstances in our lives, we have a thought about them, those thoughts create a feeling. And those feelings fuel our actions. So, while the actions, what we do and what we do not do are important, they are always driven and fueled by thoughts we are thinking, conscious and subconscious and the emotions we are feeling in our bodies. So, this is what I want to focus on but not to worry.

I will give you some practical strategies and some to-do's, or even better, in a couple of weeks my special guest who is Darren Sush, the Head of Autism Services at Evernorth Behavioral Health, a Cigna Corporation will be joining me to discuss strategies for smooth transition. You will not want to miss this. So, if you have any questions for Darren, email them to me ahead of time at [lisa@theautismmomcoach.com](mailto:lisa@theautismmomcoach.com) and I will do my best to incorporate those questions in our discussion.

Okay, onto today's topic, defining success for neurodivergent children. I am starting here because I want to shine a light on how our beliefs about what success is, drives so much of the fear, anxiety and sadness of parenting a special needs child. This is because generally speaking our views of academic, social and emotional success for our school age children are based on standards, modeled on neurotypical children and imposed on everyone else.

And look, I am not saying that these standards are serving neurotypical children, but they certainly are not serving our neurodivergent children because they don't even account for them. Just think about the typical classroom rules. So, I pulled these from different classroom posters I found on Amazon, and teachers websites, and from a couple of school districts around the country. And here are some of the most common rules that I found.

First, follow directions the first time given. Okay, are you kidding me? Seriously, the first time, does that mean I can't ask questions? What if I didn't understand? What if the directions weren't clear? Use indoor voices. Okay, what does this mean? My voice is the same inside and outside,

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please explain. Be courteous and respectful at all times. Okay, does this mean looking people in the eye? Because that's going to be a problem. Or does this mean that I can't hold my ears when my classmate with the squeaky voice is talking? Because again, a problem.

Four. Actively participate in class discussions. By actively do you mean running around the classroom? Probably not. Five. Stay seated during classroom activities and events. Okay, no, that's just not happening.

These are pretty daunting standards for most children but nearly impossible for neurodivergent kids. Neurodivergent children measured by these standards are not being set up for success. They are being set up for judgment. And here is the thing, these standards modeled on neurotypical people are everywhere, classroom rules, school curriculum, testing, there is virtually no area of our children's lives where they are not being compared against a standard that does not account for their uniqueness. Again, standards that see their uniqueness as a problem.

As long as we are participating in the society we really can't get away from these standards. But that said, we don't have to adopt them as our personal standards of success. Now, this is so much easier said than done because we have been breathing this air for a long time. But I do think that there is so much benefit to challenging these standards of success and creating our own because when we don't, here's what I see happening. First, we see our children's differences as problems to be solved.

There is a standard of what 'normal' kids should be doing and our kids aren't doing it. So, time to get to work and make them as normal as possible. Again, whenever I say normal, imagine it in quotes, and what normal means I mean it's really anyone's guess. Now, no judgment here. Being normal essentially means being safe, to the primitive our brains and our nervous systems who just want to keep us safe and protect our young, being just like everyone else is safety. Of course, we want to feel safe.

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Of course, we want our children to be safe. But just ask yourself, what is more dangerous to your child, being different or believing that there is a problem, being different or believing that there is something wrong with them because they are different?

The second thing I see happening is we don't see our children. When we are hyper aware of all the things that make our kids not like the others and hyper focused on their deficits we are not able to see them, who they are. We only see what we believe is wrong with them. And because of this we really are missing out.

Third. When we are not defining success for ourselves we don't really celebrate the small stuff. And for our kids the small stuff is actually the huge stuff. So, for example, your child is five years old and they are finally potty trained, woohoo, so exciting. And while you are thrilled by this and you are excited, you kind of temper your excitement with, well, I mean they should have been potty trained by the time they were two. I mean, five years old, that's way too old.

Or let's just say your eight year old finally knows how to recite their ABCs and again you're super proud and you really are excited for them but you remind yourself, well, I mean he is eight years old after all, he should have learned this when he was in kindergarten. So, you see what I'm saying here. You're excited but not really. You're excited but then you're still comparing it to the model of what you think it should have been, instead of just believing that this is an amazing success, period.

So, these are just some of the consequences that I see of not defining success for ourselves. We suffer, our relationships with our kids suffer and our relationships with ourselves suffer. But here's the good news, you do get to decide what success means for you even if no one agrees with you. You get to decide that your child is a raving success even if they never meet an IEP goal, even if they never play a sport, even if they never step foot into an integrated classroom.

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To do so though you need to challenge your own mental rigidity and all or nothing thinking about what it means to be a success. But to do this we need to challenge our own mental rigidity and all or nothing thinking about what it means to be a success. We need to challenge the standards that we have been force fed all of our lives to do this. But when we do this we can focus on our children's strengths and potential instead of counting their deficits and constantly trying to catch up.

And when we do this we get to see our children for who they are and not who we think they should be. Here is what I challenge you to do. Finish the following sentence, my child is successful because. And then put your brain to work on finding evidence of your child's success. You can do this by asking yourself questions like, how is my child strong? How are they resourceful? How are they hardworking? How are they loving and kind? Why is my child the hardest working person I know?

What are some examples of my child displaying their genius in a way that is not capable of testing or standards? What are some examples of my child displaying genius in a way that is not capable of being captured by any standardized test? And then finally, every day challenge yourself to spot a success, any success, big or small.

Maybe success is getting on a school bus with a new busy driver. Maybe it is wearing headphones in a crowded lunchroom. Maybe it is trying to play a sport at lunchtime. Maybe it is communicating a want or a need. Maybe it is rebounding from a setback or a disappointment. Put your brain to work on spotting success. We are so good at spotting deficits because really that's what we've been trained to do and there's no judgment there. But you can put your brain to work on spotting success and I promise you, you will find them.

And you can make this visual for yourself and your child by creating a success jar. This is just a clear jar or a container where you can add a note each day as an example of their success. This will help you remember especially on the hard days that there is always light. And you can also use

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it as a tool to foster self-confidence in your child by encouraging them to add their own examples of their own success.

Okay, that's it for this episode but before I go I want to remind you, the school year is fast approaching and now is the perfect time to have a coach. So, if you are interested in learning how you can transform your relationship with Autism, with your child and with yourself, I encourage you, schedule a one-on-one consultation with me and let's see if coaching is the right fit for you. Now is the perfect time as we begin the new school year to step out on a completely different foot.

So, you can do that on my website, [theautismmomcoach.com](http://theautismmomcoach.com). If you have any questions for me you can email me at [lisa@theautismmomcoach.com](mailto:lisa@theautismmomcoach.com). Thank you so much for listening and I will talk to you next week.

Thanks for listening to *The Autism Mom Coach*. If you want more information or the show notes and resources from the podcast, visit [theautismmomcoach.com](http://theautismmomcoach.com). See you next week.