

Autism Awareness – View from a Parent

AUTISM AWARENESS, PARENTS — BY CINDY ON APRIL 2, 2011 AT 9:32 AM

In honor of Autism Awareness Month we have asked a wonderful mother of teenage twin boys with Asperger's Syndrome to write an article and share a little about her experience with Autism.

By: Jo Ellen Hancock

I was asked by a good friend to write an article about raising teenagers with Asperger's Syndrome.

As I contemplated where to start and what to write about, I looked over at my 15 year old son Drew lying on the couch "attempting" to watch TV with us. I say attempting, because of course every few seconds he is asking us a million questions about what is happening on the show we are trying to watch. He doesn't understand the underlying implied things, didn't understand that instead of giving an answer to the question that the character asked, the actor simply gave a look. It's a good thing we can pause live TV so that we can answer all the questions and still be able to watch the show. Movie theaters, you guessed it, pretty much avoid them!! He doesn't get invited to go to the movies with friends like the other 10th graders in his school. He doesn't get invited to birthday parties or to just "hang out" like all the other kids in his school, and he knows that. He knows that he is different. Does he get picked on and have ugly things said to him, yes he does daily. Yet in spite of it all, he continues to keep his head up, keeps attempting to make friends and has even endeavored to be involved in sports at the high school. Being on the wrestling team seems to be a good fit for him and he is even thriving in the program. Now, if we can only keep him from breaking anymore bones....that would make me very happy!

I also have watched his anxiety get the better of him the last few days fueling his Trichotillomania (obsessive hair pulling) to the point of bloody bald spots on his head. The cause of this high level of anxiety- a writing assignment in Chemistry due next week. If you are familiar with Asperger's at all, you know that giving an "Aspie" child a writing assignment is equal to asking the child to sever a limb and hand it over!!

Drew's 15 year twin brother Nick, also has Asperger's Syndrome. However, he is totally different from his twin brother, in many aspects. Nick, while experiencing difficulties with the whole social thing, has benefitted from years of numerous therapies, something his brother did not get due to a late diagnosis. Nick has been able to form a small group of friends that he hangs out with. He is able to mask his disability from most people. In trying so hard to mask it though, he has gone to the opposite extreme. He will not ask questions about assignments or ask the teacher for help. He is afraid of calling attention to himself for fear that someone will figure out that he has Asperger's, especially in light of the fact that his twin brother is obviously so different. Nick then holds all of his stress and anxiety in to the point that he has explosive meltdowns at home, complete with head banging, room destroying, animal abusing and self-injurious behavior. He is your typical absent minded professor. Brilliant on many levels, but clueless to his surroundings. He is very forgetful and has difficulty with spatial awareness. He still runs into things and can never find anything. He puts his binder down on the couch to tie his shoes in the mornings and then calls me from the bus stop because he just realized he left it there. And his wardrobe...well, let's just say he's always very "colorfully" dressed. Picking my battles is a skill I learned a long time ago. Color matching is always been a losing battle, so I surrendered early on. Raising teenagers with Asperger's Syndrome, hmmm-wouldn't trade it for the world!! While it presents its challenges and I won't lie, there are many challenges- I have two of the most amazing boys in the world. They are so funny and smart! The things that come out of their literal, HONEST mouths really can be hysterical at

times!! They have been blessed with brilliant minds that keep me challenged with WAY too many questions that I have to go and look up the answers too. I'm always learning something. We never miss Jeopardy! It's always a competition to see who gets the most answers right!!

And when it comes to idioms, let's just suffice to say that there is never a dull moment in our house. When it's raining cats and dogs, we break out the kibble in our house!!1

I've learned to embrace the positive and to keep myself very involved with their education which includes making sure their teachers, coaches and anyone else who is in contact with my children understands about Asperger's. Hey, it worked for Einstein ...right?!!!

Jo Ellen Hancock works by day as a Parent Facilitator in a public school system and serves parents with children who have special needs.

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