

Discovering Asperger Syndrome

By Dan Coulter

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Getting a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome for your child is sort of like getting hit by a slow freight train. Usually, you know something's wrong. Maybe you got worried. Maybe teachers or others urged you to get your child checked out. Maybe, like my wife and I, you went through several other diagnoses first. But even though you knew something was coming, you still feel the impact when you get the official word.

I spoke with the parents of a newly diagnosed child recently. His mother said she had virtually shut down. She felt overwhelmed and almost paralyzed. She and her husband had demanding jobs. She knew how she'd planned her family's lives, but things were going to be so different.

Want the good news? You can make things get better. Sometimes amazingly better than may seem possible at first.

Don't get me wrong; Asperger Syndrome was one of the toughest things to happen to our family. But our 21 year-old son, Drew, who has Asperger Syndrome, was one of the best.

Drew is smart and funny and caring. He's also sometimes distracted and disorganized and overly sensitive. He's always tried hard to relate to people, but often lacked the tools and intuitive instruction manual to build friendships. Middle school and high school were especially tough. Academics went well, but interacting with pre-teen and teenage peers often seemed like trying to swim in storm-tossed waves while the water was calm for everyone else.

But he never gave up. During his last two years in high school, he finally starting making the kind of friendships he'd always wanted. Now he's in college. Toward the end of school breaks, he's eager to get back to the campus to be with his friends. And his life's getting better every year. It's light-years better than I could have imagined when we got his diagnosis.

If you've recently received a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome for your child, here are some thoughts.

In your mind, separate your child from his challenges. Think of Asperger Syndrome as a tiger that has attached itself to your child for life. Your child is not the tiger, but you and your child both have to deal with the tiger. Sometimes you have to get past the tiger to reach your child. But, you can also find ways to make having a tiger work to your child's advantage.

You can make things better. Absolutely. No matter what your child's challenges, you can help improve things by finding and reinforcing his strengths — and by helping him overcome his weaknesses. Spending time with a child having fun is one of the best gifts ever. When you're a child, seeing your worth in your mother or father's eyes can give you strength to last a lifetime and the courage to never give up.

People with AS often describe themselves as looking at the world in a different way. Give your child the benefit of the doubt. Not everything he or she wants to do differently is a problem that needs to be fixed. It may just be another way to reach the same goal. And he may have special abilities that can help him excel in the right job.

Patience pays off. Expect results, but not always quick results. It took my son years to learn to manage social interactions and to make friends. Years. But all the social skills coaching and positive reinforcement were worth it. Also, one of the secrets is to get your child together with kids who have similar interests. My son, for example, loves Japanese “anime” animation, and that's helped him connect with a number of friends. Drew feels his life now is dramatically better than it was in high school.

Social skills are golden. Common, everyday, social interaction is the most universal challenge for kids with AS. Helping your child learn about the give and take of dealing with people can make a huge difference in how others treat him and

how he sees himself. Some kids practice the piano. If you help your child spend that same kind of time practicing social skills, you'll never regret it.

Don't underestimate your son or daughter. It's easy to give your child a lifetime handicap by assuming he or she can't do this or that. Most kids with AS can learn to compensate to some extent for things that don't come naturally. Set high goals and help your child master independent life skills along the way. It's hard to learn to fly if you never get the chance to solo.

Beware perfectionism. Mastering a skill doesn't always mean perfecting it. Sometimes "good enough" really is good enough. Your child may make A's in school, but it may take even more effort for him to make a C or B in "eye contact" or "listening without interrupting" or other social skills. If your child is really trying and making progress, not pushing too hard for perfection can save everyone a lot of stress. And praise is a great lubricant to success. Criticism can be like sand in the gears.

Finally, look at your opportunities. You don't want your child to have problems, but helping him or her deal with those problems can bring you closer. You don't have to thank a storm for helping you get to know your shipmates — but you can be grateful for their friendship just the same. Working with your child can help you form a bond that you might have otherwise have missed.

Plenty of people without Asperger Syndrome have it rough. When I think of the problems my son has never had — drinking, drugs, violence, crime — I feel pretty lucky. As a family, we've had lots of experiences that make me grin every time I think of them. We have fun whenever we're together. Life is only as special as you make it.

Drew's life will surely be different. It will sometimes be tough. But, with our support, he's making it full, rich and meaningful.

Tiger and all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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