

of the lines from the show. He can listen to the first minute of Spongebob's music and be able to tell you which episode it is.

We get into the car, and my son will ask me — almost instantly, “Are we there yet?” I say “No.” (We haven't even left the driveway yet.) About a minute later, he'll ask again, “Are we there yet?” Again, I say “No.” About another minute later, he'll yell from the back seat, “ARE WE THERE YET?” Then I figure out, we are re-enacting scenes from the movie “Shrek 2.”

Social cues are difficult for him, as with many children with autism, and his doctors and teachers say that he actually picks up social cues from TV shows. Children with Aspergers can't “read” feelings or facial expressions. They are confused by them.

Loud noises or whirling sounds distract him. We were at a funeral for my uncle who is a veteran and my son saw the guns and had a meltdown. He knew the guns would make a loud noise and he was afraid of it. He sat at my feet through the whole cemetery service with his fingers in his ears. The sound of an aquarium bubbling about drives him to the edge. His balance and motor skills are “awkward.”

When he was younger, instead of playing kick ball he would go to the side of the playground and pick up and peel sticks. We found it was his way of getting away from the noise and de-stressing from the

classroom. Sometimes if I couldn't find him at home, I would open our bottom cupboard and he would be tucked in the cabinet by the canned foods, unlabeled the cans. Needless to say, supper was a “surprise” most nights. What would be in the unpeeled cans? Are we having peaches or corn tonight?

Things need to be in order. He LOVES schedules. He shares a room with his brother. His side of the room is immaculate while his brother's side of the room is... well... “distressed.” As long as his brother's side doesn't reach over into his side he is fine but if it moves onto his side of the room, it can make him feel “distressed.”

My son is now 10 and his school has been absolutely wonderful. They have really gone above and beyond to integrate my son into the classroom and keep me posted on his progress. His special education, home room teacher, principal and school counselor are truly involved and have read about and researched Autism to help him grow in his studies and his relationships with others there. He is only removed if there is too much stimulation or if he needs extra help on a particular subject. He still has meltdowns (mini tantrums when things become overwhelming for him) but he's learning with the help of his teachers and peers at school how to deal with those moments.

Ever since he was in second grade (due to the influence of the Disney movie

“Ratatouille”) he's dreamed of becoming a chef. My son is a terrific speller and loves vocabulary, testing me daily on if I know the meaning of this new word or that which he just learned. He has trouble with concepts or unclear, non-factual subjects, but overall he's very bright. Reading a story is difficult because stories are based on how the character “feels.”

When he had problems relating to some of the other kids, we met with his class to help them understand what he has, and they in turn have taken him under their wing, explaining to their parents, other teachers and peers about what he has and how to help him if he has a “meltdown.” It was actually pretty cute when a parent asked me what he had because their daughter came home and was telling them about the disease he has, “She said it's some type of ‘Burgers’ disease.” But it also gave an awareness to some of the students who also have learning disabilities and those who do not about acceptance and patience.

Our only hope is for his happiness. What we struggle with most is the question: Is our concept of happiness the same as his? While we as parents worry about the happiness of all our children, what will our son's future hold? Through research and early diagnosis, we can only hope that his future is as bright as he expects it to be.

I hope, with the rise in awareness of this disease, that legislation can better figure out how to fund the research needed to help so many in need.

■ by Heather Heimes

“Our only hope is for his happiness...”

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