

A Positive Guide to having a Sibling with Autism

There have been too many negative stories about Autism in the media. How difficult it is to cope, the lack of support, the lack of funding to provide intervention, and the ongoing burden that the child will be on the family, and on society. Whilst I know from first hand experience how difficult it can be living with a child with Autism, there are also many wonderful and positive experiences, and I hope through this article to share those experiences with you.

My brother Daniel is almost 16 year old, and he has Autism.

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a lifelong development condition that affects the way an individual relates to his or her environment, as well as their interaction with other people. People with Autism generally show evidence of particular behaviours in the areas of socialisation, communication and restricted or repetitive interests or activities.

Daniel was diagnosed with Autism when he was a little over 3 years of age. At that time, things were very difficult. Daniel could not communicate easily with us, so it was hard for him to express his needs. He would cry a lot, and there was a lot of tension within our family. Nevertheless, we persevered and Mum and Dad worked incredibly hard with Daniel to make sure that we both had a normal childhood.

Over the past 16 years our family has witnessed my brother's highs and lows especially on his journey through puberty. The year he turned 14 was incredibly stressful and painful for our family. He would throw tantrums due to his heightened anxiety levels, triggered by something as simple as the Internet cutting out while he was watching his TV shows on YouTube, or when something unpredictable or out of routine occurred. Unfortunately, these tantrums occurred quite frequently but our family survived it by altering his diet, increasing his regular sensory input such as Occupational Therapy, massage and trampolining, and giving him supplements to help with his mood swings and anxiety. Those months seemed like an eternity, but we persevered and worked together as a family, giving him positive reinforcement and helping him to understand that he was still a good boy. Positive affirmation was a key to making Daniel understand how loved he is and how we would continue to support him.

Nonetheless, he is still a beautiful, gentle and loving person to have in our home and he never fails to put a smile on my face. We have a very warm and close bond and he always likes to copy my actions and emulate my behaviour. This is an important way of helping Daniel to learn. When he was a child, to teach him new things, my parents would video me experiencing a new thing, or a new taste or task, and would show Daniel the video. He would see me experiencing something new and would try hard to copy and to join in.

Our first overseas holiday was a truly wonderful achievement. Daniel was always happy and he seemed to enjoy every new experience. We prepared him for the trip by creating social stories for him and saying that we were going on a

'different holiday'. We also spoke to him about the places that we were going to visit so that nothing was unexpected. We also ensured that the trip itself ran smoothly, by engaging a very good travel agent who left nothing to chance.

Daniel's favourite animal is an elephant. In Singapore, Daniel had the opportunity to ride an elephant, which was a major highlight for him. It struck me at that point in time how truly amazing he is, when I saw how happy he was to approach the elephant, even though neither he nor we, had any idea that this opportunity would present itself on our holiday.

Daniel would eat an extremely narrow range of foods until recently. We used his obsession with elephants to encourage him to eat meat by bribing him with a huge book about elephants. Surprisingly, it worked! We also bribed Daniel to have his immunisations by telling him about the overseas 'holiday in December'. That worked as well! When he overcomes these challenges it is obvious that he is proud and happy with himself.

Seeing him happy and laughing everyday fills our family with joy. He is now adaptable to all scenarios and is turning into a fine young man.

There are so many positive aspects from having Daniel in our family, especially having a sibling with whom I have such a close bond and important connection. This connection has helped both Daniel, and our family. Daniel knows that I understand him and he always looks to me for his next step. That is a real privilege.

Growing up with an autistic sibling offers many advantages that shape one's life and character, such as:

- *Perception:* Growing up alongside someone who sees the world in a unique way can help 'shape an individual with compassion, empathy and acceptance of others'.¹ We become thinkers who see beyond a face.
- *Perspective:* Watching your sibling face each day with courage and strength helps non-autistic siblings to balance their emotions and remain calm during tough times.
- *Leadership:* We are often forced to mature early in developing our inner strength to deal with chaos, emotions and unexpected situations. This helps us '...become strong, compassionate leaders...'¹ as we learn to stand up for our siblings.
- *Courage:* Living with an autistic sibling teaches us '...to have the courage to stand out...'¹ to learn to be oneself and express our ideas and opinions in public with someone who may not fit in with the mainstream population.
- *Creativity:* 'Learning to communicate effectively with an autistic sibling takes a great deal of creativity'¹ and we grow up knowing how to understand and connect with each other in our own unique way.

I created this guide to help put a positive spin on Autism, focusing on the joys, not the negatives.

The most important step to living with an autistic child is to be patient, tolerant, kind and forgiving.

When a person embraces all of these qualities, the relationship between siblings develops and blossoms.

Bibliography:

¹*Five Benefits of Growing Up With an Autistic Sibling* n.d., Autism Speaks, accessed 7 June 2015, <https://www.autismspeaks.org/node/119681>

What is autism? n.d., autism spectrum Australia, accessed 6 June 2015, <https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/content/what-autism>