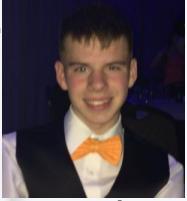


Autism.

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I can vividly remember the day that Tyler was born. My first baby, the oldest of what would turn out to be seven children. I read *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. Funny how you can know everything about the things that really mean nothing at all. Sleep schedules, how often you should breastfeed, what different cries mean. In retrospect, that was the easy stuff. When the doctor handed him to me, I smelled his sweet baby smell and nuzzled him close to my body. It was nothing less than amazing. He had ten fingers and toes, and looked absolutely perfect. Nobody would ever think that he was anything other than typical. Fast forward two years. Tyler didn't act like other kids his age. He scripted movie lines, was enamored with fans and wheels and didn't play much with other kids. My gut told me that something was off, so I made an appointment with a developmental pediatrician.

Sitting in the office that day was a surreal experience. You walk into that doctor's office, and your whole life is about to change and you don't even know it. I walked in there with Tyler, and walked out of there with an autism diagnosis and a handful of brochures. There I was, not even old enough to drink or gamble, but was entrusted with this human who was now diagnosed with a disability.

The years of raising Tyler had its ups and downs, just as raising any child does. There were the therapists in and out of the house all of the time and lots of IEP meetings. There were meltdowns over potty training, different medication trials and many sleepless nights. I can't stress enough the importance of early intervention, and how formative those early years really are. Once Tyler started elementary school, he really blossomed. He had a lot of great skills; master puzzle maker, champion at Simon, Lego king. As he moved into middle school, he joined clubs and made one friend. For him, that was a big accomplishment.

Tyler is now 18 years old. He will graduate high school this year, has a girlfriend who also has autism, and has been holding a job independently for six months. He has a strong work ethic and an innocence about him that I wouldn't trade for anything. He finds joy in the simple things in life, like sitting with his girlfriend out back watching the stars, or doing a puzzle in his room by himself. In my wildest dreams, I never imagined that Tyler would have a girlfriend. Last year, I got to watch them go to prom together. What most parents take for granted, I am grateful for.

Three and a half years ago, the baby of my brood was born. Noah was just as perfect at birth as the rest of my kids. Fast forward two years. As if doing this once

wasn't enough, God surely thought that I could handle it again. Thankfully, this time I was old enough to drink, and they stopped giving out those stupid brochures at the doctor's office. Noah started receiving early intervention services this year, and has made incredible strides.

Having two kids with autism has taught me quite a few things, that have made me a better parent, individual and advocate for kids on a daily basis.

Any diagnosis is just a label. It doesn't define who a child is. I mistakenly thought that I walked into the doctor's office with Tyler, and out with a child with autism. I really just walked out with Tyler. While I know it is easy to preach to parents, and sometimes harder to accept, it really is the truth. Your child is your child, no matter what a piece of paper says.

Don't settle or ever underestimate what a child can do. I always treated Tyler and Noah as if they did not have a disability. I potty trained them on time, took them out in the community and gave them consequences like the rest of my kids. Autism is not a crutch nor an excuse.

Focus on the positives. Autism is not the worst thing in the world. There are kids out there dying of cancer. Be grateful for what you have, or what you don't have, for that matter.

Meet people where they are. This one has been crucial in my role as an administrator. Everyone goes through the experience of having a child with a disability differently, and everyone has different expectations for what they want. I've learned over time to be a good listener, really hear what people are saying, and meet them where they are. Don't judge people, because unless you have been through it, you really don't know what it's like.



You can do this. It sounds cliche, but it's true. There's no handbook for this. *What to Expect When You're Expecting* is kind of a joke. You need a book to tell you how to feed your baby? Come on. This is the real stuff that will test what you are made of. It's work. Hard work. It doesn't come easy. There will be days that you will ask why me? There will be days that you will want to quit, but you can't, because the harder it gets, the more you have to push. This experience has taught me perseverance, unconditional love, incredible patience and has made me a stronger person and a better parent.

Tyler and Noah have brought such joy to my life, and I wouldn't go back and change anything. I often joke about how society labels people. Tyler is 18, holds a job, has good grades, is respectful and never in trouble, and has a real relationship with his girlfriend. The person that society deems as having a disability is actually doing better than most people his age. The things that Tyler and Noah have taught me shaped who I am, and well, the fact that I have learned all of this before the age of forty means that I'm doing pretty darn good myself.