

**As a Parent of a Child on the Autism Spectrum  
What is Something That you Wish Other People  
Understood about You and Your Child?**

I'm an Aspie father. My 12 year old son is an Aspie. And there are so very many things I wish people understood about my son.

1. I wish people would stop telling me I'm a hero or I'm a saint or I'm *such a good person* for being his parent. It implies that he is a burden and that I endure him. I love him! I love everything about him. And, as a fellow Aspie, I understand him! To be honest, I'm grateful I don't have an neuro-typical (non-Autistic) child because I wouldn't understand a non-Autistic child as well as I do my son. The constant implication that I'm a fictional parent from a movie-of-the-week with the melodramatic plot of overcoming a tragedy completely robs my family of its normality. And it dehumanizes my son.

My son does his homework on the bus because "it will maximize his play time when he gets home." My son is working on his third book. He wants to be a children's author as an adult, and so he's working on the second draft of a 40 page manuscript before he begins storyboarding and then illustrating the final book. How many 12 year olds do such amazing things? My son is funny, my son cuddles into my shoulder when we watch movies, my son loves his mother with all his heart, my son is decent, kind, honest and passionate.

I'm not a hero. I'm lucky.

2. I wish people would stop seeing my son as static and unchanging. The constant assumption that what he struggles with today will be a lifelong struggle has already been disproven by him. When he was 2.5 years old he was tested by a special education instructor in Albuquerque. During one of his gross motor tests he was asked to skip. He couldn't. And the teacher said *He'll never be able to skip. That's a severe sign of Autism.* SEVERE? Because he can't skip?

I didn't care he couldn't skip. And she was right...until he was nine. Then, he began skipping everywhere! He rides a bike, he rides a scooter, he zips and runs and zooms and skips skips skips everywhere. Now, the comments are *You need to tell him to stop skipping.* No, I really don't. He taught himself to skip and if that makes him happy then who does it harm?

He's now working on social skills. And it's such a struggle for him... but he's trying. And I am certain he will sufficiently close the gap that NTs will say what they say to me; *Oh, you don't seem Autistic!* It's a back-handed compliment, but it's better than getting the crap beaten out of you for simply being a little bit different. I often tell people *He's an 8 year old and a 16 year old in a 12 year old's body.* He's never *on schedule.* He's way ahead intellectually or way behind socially. But, not one of the things he's ever lagged in has been a permanent problem. He'll close the gap. And all he needs is encouragement and guidance, not judgement.

3. I wish people would look past the first five minutes they spend with him. This is the narrow window of time that he struggles with the most. He panics; can't look someone in the eye, doesn't quite know what to do, mumbles hello, squirms in his shoes and skitters away. And I can see the judgement. Teachers, principals, other parents, I see that look. I took him to a comic book convention and somehow my son ended up taking a photo with a famous actor. But, my son was uncomfortable and behaved a bit awkwardly. And the actor didn't mean to be rude, but he turned to me and made an *Awwwww* sound, as if to say *I understand your pain. I'll hug this broken child and do some good in the world for the misfortunate.*

And, I wanted to say *He doesn't need pity. He just needs acceptance. If you cracked a joke or ignored his awkwardness, he'd relax and start talking.*

My son is funny and talkative around me and my wife. He clams up with strangers and they assume he's like that all the time. They assume that brief window of time is his entire life.

4. I wish people understood that while the first couple years are rough, the rest is simply a joy. Yes, we had to deal with explosive temper tantrums. Yes, we had a three year old who would pick the child locks around the house because he thought they were a puzzle to be solved, laughing maniacally after he defeated every child lock in the house. Yes, he had insomnia (until we discovered the joy of melatonin. And my insomnia is also resolved!) But, all of that was the first three years. Since then, he's been an incredibly easy child to raise. He can be reasoned with. He can hold an adult conversation. If I explain something logically,

he accepts it. He understands how to delay gratification. And he's completely immune to peer pressure.

5. I wish people understood that the toughest part is no one invites us to birthday parties of any kind. That it's our tiny family, alone. We get it; we're a bit nerdy, we talk about Doctor Who and Star Trek, my wife reads Agatha Christie novels and I invent gadgets in the garage... and we're not talking about the Packers incessantly. It seems to me, someone at some point might have reached out to us. We've tried to reach out to other people! But, we have no sense of community because the community has decided that while it's unacceptable to bully us that doesn't mean they'll be our friend.
6. I wish people realized that my son is observing everything they do. He will tell me *I freeze up. It's so hard. And I see them judging me and that makes it even harder.* When a comedian cracks a joke about Autism or a sitcom makes a comment like *Maybe he's autistic* my son fully and totally understands these remarks. He googles news articles on the subject. He gets furiously angry when he reads something about the *Autism Epidemic*. He doesn't want to be spoken about as if he isn't in the room. Just because he isn't looking into your eyes doesn't mean his ears stopped working.
7. I wish people understood that my son is talented. He plays the guitar, he swims, he draws, he codes, he builds with Lego and he pretends beautiful stories that he then writes down... *but only when they're really good, Dad. You gotta work on a story over and over again to make it good.* And then he bounces out the door to run in the front yard and pretend his stories, honing the characters, the dialogue and the scene structure. He watches YouTube videos on the writing process and applies it to his work, first *his pretending* and then his actual writing. How can one not be impressed by such serious devotion to a craft from a 12 year old child?

My son is not my burden. He is my joy. And I wish everyone fully understood how he fills my heart with love and awe. How on earth did such an amazingly wonderful, complicated, quirky and beautiful child come from my wife and myself?