

## **Looking Back at Being an ASD Dad** by Tim Monahan ([TimMonahan@gmail.com](mailto:TimMonahan@gmail.com))

I am the father of a wonderful, handsome, happy, loveable eight year-old boy named Brian. In addition to all those characteristics, Brian just so happens to be diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Although I embraced this reality immediately, I occasionally fall into brief denial cycles. I sometimes convince myself that he is neurotypical, or maybe just a little quirky. Brian was diagnosed with ASD at age three following excessive tantrums at his preschool. He immediately qualified for early intervention preschool and spent two years in a wonderful program. Brian completed kindergarten in a self-contained classroom, first grade in a supported mainstream classroom, and this year he was moved back into a self-contained second grade classroom after his tantrums returned. I would never say that I am a model special needs parent; I'm far from it. But I know I've learned a tremendous amount about parenting over the last five years. This journey has been a difficult one, and the following are tips for anyone embarking on the same adventure and maybe looking for a little advice.

- **Don't be scared:** The first hurdle to overcome is the fear that your child might have special needs. This fear could cause you to avoid seeking help so that you never have to face the possibility that your child has ASD. You might be losing years of valuable early intervention if you allow the fear of a diagnosis to prevent action. When you are in denial, you are only denying your child resources he/she can benefit from.
- **Get a professional evaluation/diagnosis:** In all likelihood you do not possess the medical credentials to diagnose ASD, so don't play doctor. And as much as you trust your friends and family, they don't either. Focus your efforts on finding a professional that you can trust (and afford) to evaluate your child.
- **Throw all preconceived notions you have out the window, as they will probably not be helpful:** If you are still reading this, your child has been diagnosed with ASD. In my case, I associated the Autism with movies like *Rain Man* or *Mercury Rising*. My son shared nothing in common with the subjects in these films, so I thought my son couldn't have ASD. This is the time in the journey where you need to make like John Locke (*tabula rasa*) and erase any preconceived notions about ASD.
- **Don't let your child's evaluation change how you see him/her or your family:** Do as I say, not as I do. If I had it to do over, I wish I could have accepted being the parent of a child with ASD much sooner than I did. Unfortunately, I allowed my son's diagnosis to temporarily take over my life. I felt as though I had to protect my son at all costs, and I became bitter to the rest of the world. I stopped socializing with friends (especially those with neurotypical children), gave up on my pursuit of a law degree, and ultimately let my marriage fall apart, too. You are still family, nothing has changed.
- **Determine your comfort level regarding disclosure:** Ah, the proverbial slippery-slope. Do you tell the other parents that your child has ASD in advance, so that if a tantrum or socially awkward moment arises all will be forgiven? Or could leaking the ASD label just doom playdates before they start? Also, will you have a dialogue with your child about his/her diagnosis? What do you tell your family? How much do you want to reveal to the

teacher before the school year starts? These are important decisions to make; think long and hard on them.

- **Make the appropriate adjustments for your child:** No offense, but don't expect your life to be exactly like that of all the other parents. In all likelihood you are going to want to build therapy, social skills groups, and other ASD-appropriate activities into your life. I didn't care much for Boy Scouts when I was a kid (I got kicked out), but my son loves it. He can play on sports teams, but only if I am there coaching him. Also, you are going to spend countless hours learning about special education programs, and you might need to hire an advocate (or even attorney.) If you can't get the support from your local school district, you might have to send your child out of district, or even move to another town (I did.)
- **Surround yourself with an appropriate support group:** Lend support whenever possible, and don't be too proud to ask for support when you need it. I have been lucky because my friend, family, and co-workers emerged as my core support group. Finding the asperger/Autism SPectrum Education Network (ASPEN) has also been a godsend.
- **Continue to live the life that you always wanted to:** It was five years ago that my son was diagnosed with ASD. I wasted far too much time thinking that his diagnosis needed to be the central theme in my life. It does not. Today I am able to be the best parent I can be to Brian but still live a full life. Since getting my act together and figuring out all of the above, I have branched out substantially. I have made many new friends, taken up writing again, acted in a play, become a regular at CrossFit, started two part-time second careers, traveled extensively, taken up hiking/camping, and much, much more. Life is good!