



A Brother and Sister ... and their Life with Autism

by Carolyn Leigh Kellerman

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"I never thought eleven years ago, when my husband and I got married, that I would be where I am today. I never thought I would have two kids on the autism spectrum," says Patti Crockett of Millville.

Patti's son, Carter is now 9 and her daughter, Cailleigh is 6. Both children are autistic. Both were born with no signs of Autism and for the first few years , reached their milestones "on time."

At age 3, Carter began having meltdowns; however, these were not your normal temper tantrums. According to Patti, these "meltdowns" were temper tantrums times ten. Carter also had obsessions. He was first fixated on Blue's Clues and Dora the Explorer's backpack. Carter would wear the backpack everywhere, and if you tried to take it off, he would begin one his meltdowns.

After some time, Carter began stimming. Stimming is a repetitive body movement that self-stimulates one or more senses in a regulated manner such as arm flapping, body spinning or rocking, lining up or spinning toys or other objects and repeating phrases.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF AUTISM

1. Problems with social interactions
2. Impaired verbal and nonverbal communication
3. A pattern of repetitive behavior with narrow, restricted interests
4. By age 1, most children should answer to their name more than half the time
5. Issues with textures

In December 2006, the family began noticing changes in Cailleigh as well. They had just moved from Florida to New Jersey, but before leaving Florida, Cailleigh received her MMR shot. "She wasn't making eye contact anymore; she would just run from one thing to another. She was exhausting," states Patti. Patti believes her autism has something to do with the MMR shot.

According to Dr. Eric Dorn, a board-certified pediatrician at Advocare Marlton Pediatrics, "there is no scientific basis for such a relationship between vaccines and autism." Dorn says autism is diagnosed more frequently in boys than in girls, although the reason is unknown. "Some experts believe there may be a genetic component for that and also boys may be diagnosed sooner than girls because of some of their intrinsic behaviors," explains Dorn.

His advice for parents who think their child may have autism would be to be assertive with their pediatrician and to get the ball rolling with evaluations as soon as possible. "Nothing makes me feel better than to send a child for further evaluation, and find out they do not have autism. I would rather be more cautious with developmental milestones and autism screening than less cautious."

The Crockett family was in need of medical advice when things began to take an arduous turn. Carter was 5 and they still didn't have any answers for his actions. At the same time, their daughter Caileigh was becoming more demanding. Caileigh's tantrums were now two hours long and included kicking and hitting about four to five times a day. She had trouble sleeping and would run out of the house. Caileigh had lost almost all of her language abilities and was mainly pointing to communicate with others. "All I wanted to do was lock myself in my room and never come out. I thought every day, how am I going to do this again tomorrow? I don't think my family and friends knew exactly how bad it was for us or how depressed I was. I felt trapped and isolated," explains Patti.

The two children started receiving therapy from their school. According to Patti, Caileigh had an excellent intervention team at the Millville public school. As soon as Caileigh began preschool, the intervention team approached Patti to evaluate her for autism. Patti admits at snapping back and saying, "She is not autistic. What mother wants to hear those words?" She did allow for the evaluation to take place though and since then, Caileigh has received, Occupational Therapy, Speech Therapy and Applied Behavioral Analysis with her and is making progress.

At the same time, the family found a specialist for both children but had to wait a long time for an appointment. After meeting with specialists, Carter was diagnosed with Asperger's with ADHD and Caileigh was diagnosed with Autism. It was at that point that Patti began to ask herself questions. "I just broke down. Why me? What did I do wrong? I never drank or did drugs during either of my pregnancies. I felt like a total failure." After some time, Patti got her confidence back and said to herself, "Ok, now I've got to get to work."

It has been a battle for Patti and her husband taking care of both children, however, things are more in control these days. Patti is so appreciative of Caileigh's school. "If it was not for all the teachers and staff at the Child Family Center in Millville and our Behavioral Specialist, the principal, all the way down to the secretaries, my daughter would not be who she is today," says Patti. "For the first time, my daughter told me she loved me." "I love you" is a rare thing to hear from a child with Autism.

Carter has been off and on medication and has recently been displaying more signs of stimming and scripting of television shows. They are now trying to make a decision whether or not he should be back on medication again.

Patti looks forward to seeing what the future holds for their children and in the mean time, she has a team. "My husband is the best thing that ever happened to me, we are a team. Without him I couldn't make it through this journey. They say more than 85 percent of parents with an autistic child get divorced; we are part of the 15 percent that are making it work!"