

## Meeting Challenges: Student Lives With Autism

*Morgan Cummis*

Like any mother, she wanted her son to have a life full of friends.

But he had trouble making friends.

Born in 1999, J (not his real name) was a very quiet boy. He had trouble communicating well with other kids, and they often thought he wasn't interested in playing with them. He also struggled with learning in school. He grunted and pointed sometimes instead of speaking.

Something was wrong.

His preschool teachers suggested that his parents have J tested. "We had a battery of tests, which was frustrating since there are waiting lists and paperwork -- and of course we wanted to help him right away," his mother remembered. "The tests took weeks, and the process involved lots of doctor visits-doctors watching him play and interact-as well as trips to a genetics expert and a neurologist."

J's mother was overcome with worry. Had she done something wrong during her pregnancy?

Then the diagnosis came back -- J was on the autism spectrum.

Autism is a neurological disorder that ranges from an extreme ability in some areas -- such as math -- coupled with weaknesses in other areas, such as social behavior and communication. Autism can cause severe learning disabilities, including persistent repetition and self-harm, according to the National Autistic Society. Hence the term "spectrum."

"We were sad because we felt so helpless and didn't know what to do," J's mother said.

After J was diagnosed, doctors prescribed the medication Adderall. While on the medicine, J's temper became very short, and he lost weight. His mother noticed his personality changing as well.

J's parents did some research that led them to take him off the medication, and instead they started him

on therapy and consulted a nutritionist so he could get treatment without risk of bad side effects.

"The downside is that Adderall is paid for by insurance -- the physical therapy and nutritionist are not," J's mother said. So far, J's family has spent \$50,000 on his treatment, but a close family friend has spent up to \$100,000 on their autistic child, J's mother said.

Life for J and his family changed after his diagnosis. His father started working from home so he could take J to therapy and doctor's visits. His mother began sharing her feelings and ideas with other parents going through the same experience. J was seemingly oblivious to his condition; he didn't seem to recognize it until he was older. He didn't know he experienced the world differently.

"I didn't know I had autism," J said. "I used to be emotional. Sometimes I'd be a bit sensitive, in class -- I'd cry over little things or

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just get mad. I never really knew I had autism as a kid."

A few years after J's diagnosis, his father went back to working in the office, and his mother worked part-time so she could spend more time helping J. The part-time job also helped pay for some of the therapy insurance would not cover.

When J was in elementary school, his family moved to Fort Mill. J's family couldn't adjust to the new setting alone, his mother admits. A friend of J's at elementary school was also on the spectrum, and his mother helped to care for the boy while his parents were at work.

He struggled the first few years in elementary school and had to repeat fourth grade. Meanwhile, his parents tried to find therapy that would work for him.

"I remember back in grade school one of the doctors telling us that he would probably never go to college, and we were devastated," J's mom said.

Eventually, J's parents met with therapists and teachers affiliated with the Fort Mill and Charlotte Mecklenburg school districts.

After J repeated the fourth grade, he advanced with his classmates and eventually had to tell his parents and instructors he needed a more rigorous and challenging course of education. Thereafter, J was provided with speech therapy and one-on-one time with teachers.

"It was pretty frustrating having most people treat me like a 5-year-old and barely being able to have a serious conversation with anyone," J said.

Today, J is an honor student and is no longer involved in therapy. "He's a good kid and works hard and shows a lot of promise," one of J's current teachers said.

J is interested in going to Denver University where he aspires to be a graphic designer.

"I am so proud of J, because he works hard and is excited to go to college in a few years," J's mother said.

J says symptoms were much more severe when he was younger, but as he's matured he's been able to open up. He doesn't let autism hold him back, he said.

"He is one of the most compassionate people I've ever known," J's mother said. "Sometimes I think that might be because of what he went through when he was little. He just really goes out of his way when he thinks any person or group is being treated unjustly."

In gym class freshman year, he recognized an old acquaintance from middle school and felt comfortable enough to re-introduce himself. His friend has introduced him to others.

"He is a very selfless human being," another friend said. "He doesn't focus on himself very often. He's out to amuse and please his friends."