

Don't try to change, start by understanding!

Looking back at a wonderful year full of great milestones by our little boy. But every milestone comes with hard work and sometimes you have to take a step back to grow again. Taking a step back is good for all of us. It's a good way to reflect and to take care of yourself and better support our children, with or without a diagnosis. But most importantly, we have to listen to our children. That's why I love the theme of this year's World Autism Month 2023, "Don't try to change, start by understanding", by Autism Speaks. I feel blessed to share my story on the spectrum with our son and support other parents in their journey as well. But also, to create awareness via social media and increase the understanding and acceptance of Autism in this world.

Our son was 2,5 years old when he got diagnosed with ASD and I still remember every single moment. Getting a diagnosis of Autism isn't cool and people don't really talk about it, but you are not on your own. I'm here for you and during our journey, there were so many people there for us. "We're better together!" That being said, we embraced his diagnosis and started working on his development immediately. There was literally never a dull moment for this little boy, he benefitted from all kinds of therapy like Speech Therapy*, Occupational Therapy* and Behavioral Therapy*. We did it all and he would still come back home full of energy. Looking back at those years, there were a lot of mixed feelings and we still thought we would lose the diagnosis eventually, but we have learned that accepting the diagnosis is a life-long process with many phases and that's ok. With time, the difference with his peers became bigger, even though his growth accelerated during covid. But neurotypical children show more development after the age of 2 years. We worked hard at the Crystal Academy in Coral Gables, our second home. Run by a lovely family and a great team, until we graduated last year. Since last year, our son has been attending the TikVak Center. This amazing facility is dedicated to giving children on the spectrum the opportunity to reach their highest potential with individually designed learning plans and to build a bridge to achieve inclusion in a typical classroom setting. The best part for us, is really their inclusion opportunities within the classroom and in social settings with the children of their neurotypical school. It literally made me cry when I saw them all together performing for their holiday show, it was a wonderful Christmas present.

We will continue the hard work, and autism will likely be a part of our family for life. However, we don't need to talk about it every single day. We live our life just like every other family. We count our blessings with our three boys and how they interact with each other, all in their own way. Where the oldest is very caring and helpful because he is aware of the situation, the youngest makes no exceptions. He loves to interfere with his brother's nicely organized toy cars, for instance. The 'best' of both worlds and a perfectly natural way to learn how to deal with different situations in the real world. I cherish every moment, and I'm grateful for the affection our little boy shares with our family which isn't something we take for granted. His kisses, cuddles and smile fill me up with love and give me the power to be there for him. We have a very special connection which goes beyond words. But there are days I wish we could understand him better. We will continue to follow his lead, by listening, looking and understanding what he needs. We don't want to change him, we want to support him by finding his rainbow on the spectrum. This year he showed us his passion for drawing, I recognized this talent in him, and we opened an Instagram account @Find_Your_Rainbow_ for him to showcase his work. There're no restrictions in life and just like Roald Dahl said: "Those who don't believe in magic will never find it"

By Sharon van Tienhoven - @MiniAndMeBySharon

Speech Therapy - Speech therapy can help people who have difficulty speaking to communicate better.

Occupational Therapy – Also known as OT, an occupational therapist works to develop skills for handwriting, fine motor skills and daily living skills.

ABA Therapy - Also known as ABA, Applied Behavior Analysis is a therapy based on the science of learning and behavior. It is an = intensive approach to improving social behavior among children with autism. It's the most common therapy for autism in the United States.

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