

Practical Ways to Help Parents of an Autistic Child

I met Katherine, Megan and Nick several years ago, the day I became Megan's voice teacher. Until that time, I'd never interacted with a family affected by autism. I gained fresh understanding as our second lesson began.

Megan had brought her guitar so she could play a song she wrote. When she opened the case, however, she burst into tears.

Her brother, Nick, is a runner. While he loves to ride in the car and do errands, the autistic teen also loves to take off before getting into the car. Megan had chased after him that morning and lugged him back to the car where he kicked and flailed in protest. Somewhat bruised herself, she didn't notice the crack in the instrument until she opened the soft case in my presence.

Tears overflowed. But as she explained what happened, she also expressed forgiveness toward her brother, knowing he hadn't intentionally hurt her prized possession. Instead, he acted on a warped instinct, as many autistic children do, and fought for freedom when he needed protection.

Katherine, Megan's mom, later shared, "Most of the time we're so busy when we're out that we don't notice he's a spectacle. But I get it. He's a 16-year-old in a harness with headphones to help his sensory issues. We have little privacy."

Once while in a store during Nick's Elmo faze, it took him over 20 minutes to return a video to the shelf. Even though they owned a copy at home, he always wanted another. Trembling hands finally did the right thing, and that day a passer-by complimented Katherine, "You have the patience of a saint."

But many others stare, point and make fun of Nick. Some have even gone so far as to tell Katherine she needs to beat him more.

With 1 in every 57 children diagnosed with autism, learning to respect those with non-neurotypical expressions remains an important cultural challenge—for adults and children alike.

How can we help?

- “Just ask,” Katherine said. “There’s obviously something different about us. Don’t stare. Just ask. I’ll tell you.”
- Katherine well remembers both times women complimented the way she handled Nick in public, so dare to cross the divide and offer a kind word. Those matter.
- Invest your time in a family affected by an autistic child’s limitations. Learn their needs. Accept their child’s unpredictable behavior. Integrate their family with your own—even if it’s uncomfortable for a time.

As a well-oiled female emotion machine, I find it enlightening to remember that God created people on the autism spectrum—people who weren’t designed to experience whims like me. Learning from them and seeing the world from their perspective enhances my own. {eoa}

Susan Schreer Davis *lives with her husband, their cat named Eggs and the challenging effects of mitochondrial disease. She leans on humor, her dysfunctional family and faith the size of a mustard seed to maintain hope. Learn more about Susan, her latest book and many songs at .*

This article originally appeared at .