Metamorphosis of the Mother in Me

Autism's transformative effects on family…

BY ISABEL ALEXANDER

Although I just received my high school diploma, I've been a mother for almost a decade. And by that, I don't mean I'm eligible to be on one of those hit sensation teenage pregnancy shows. I became a mother at the tender age of eight, when my younger brother was diagnosed with a regressive form of autism. My parents, sensitive to my naïveté, explained to me in simple terms that David got sick and might never be able to talk. While autism had robbed my brother of his most pivotal skills, I myself lost a quintessential childhood. Once spunky and extroverted, I spent the next several years slipping slowly back into my cocoon.

My parents had converted our basement into a therapy room, and various nutritional supplements crowded the kitchen counters. While many kids my age were enjoying carefree lifestyles filled with purchases and play dates, my afternoons were spent doing homework in hospital waiting rooms, partaking in David's intensive home therapies, and listening to my parents' hushed, anxious conversations about how they planned to pay for all of the related expenses. As I watched my parents try to hoist my brother out of a seemingly endless and hopeless abyss, David became my child too.

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Part of me hated it. Not because I didn't want a child under my watch, but because David became an extension of me, and my heart ached. For most kids, childhood is characterized by imagination, curiosity, and perpetual
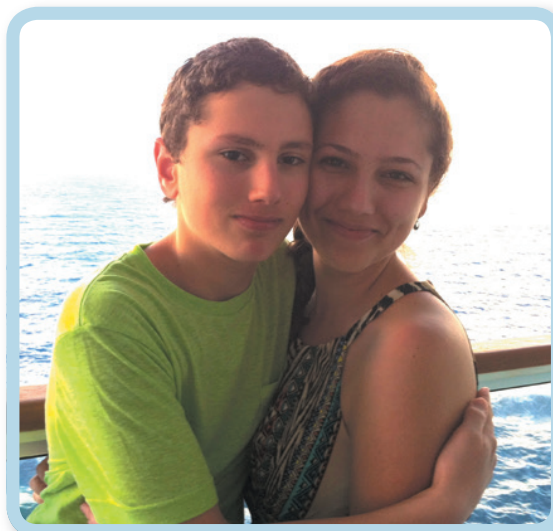
▲ **TEAMWORK**—Isabel became an integral part of her brother David's various treatments and therapies.

play. It brims with experimentation and adventure, silliness and laughter, joys of discovery and triumphs of learning. Childhood is the first step taken, the first word spoken, the first tooth lost. It is the carefree splashing of rubber boots in freshly-formed puddles, the spurts of flamboyant dancing in the middle of a grocery store, the clinking of utensils at a plastic kitchen set, the dozens of questions asked during a single car trip. It is defined by cherished memories never to be forgotten and a primal love for life. For David, childhood was void of these remarkable experiences and was instead scorched by an inescapable curse. He couldn't feel it, but I did.

During those years, our house was never empty. Therapists filtered in and out of the basement like bees, their voices crawling out from under the drawn curtain.

At eight years old, I considered those voices detached, fake, and inappropriately hopeful at a time when David's prognosis sounded like a death sentence. As I grew older, however, these voices shifted from nuisance to consolation, from something that I pushed out of my life to something I embraced. My mother began to feed the scheduled therapist at our dining room table, and my after-school snack became a time of laughing and learning as we exchanged stories. Soon, I was participating in the therapies myself, having joined a community of people who invested incredible time and energy in hoisting David out from his disability. Having a brother with autism launched me on a path of becoming a therapist myself—whether it be through mentoring blind adolescents, teaching handicapped kids how to ice skate, or even just counseling my own friends.

Over the past ten years, a combination of intensive therapies, dietary interventions, individualized learning programs, and a nurturing school environment has enabled David to emerge from behind the shell of autism. He is now an intelligent, functional, self-motivated, and compassionate teen. As our relationship evolved into more of a typical siblings' love, David is starting to look out for me (even though he hates to admit it). However, the "mother" in me is still very much alive. Although I am about to leave for college, I take comfort in knowing that David will always be my child. ◄