

## Be a Friend of Autism

*First in a Series*

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**April is Autism Awareness Month**

Kelly Weaver and her daughter, Gillian, have been running errands and have already made three stops. Kelly is contemplating whether to head home or make a quick stop at Whole Foods. She decides to get groceries. She walks in with Gillian in tow and grabs a couple items when her 10-year-old daughter drops to the floor. She sits in the aisle, almost in some form of protest. Other curious shoppers walk by glancing first at Gillian on the ground then at Kelly, with questionable expressions. What would your thoughts be? "What a bad parent...I would have handled that differently...That child is spoiled..." For Kelly, her first thoughts are, "I'm pushing the envelope, I've done one stop too many." She looks down at Gillian, takes her hand and leaves the store.

Gillian has autism. Autistic children can shut down any time. "They can have something happen at a sensory standpoint that can be overwhelming," Kelly, owner of the Alexander Leigh Center for Autism, says. "This can be their form of communication to tell us they don't want something anymore or don't want to be somewhere."

Autism is a developmental disorder that impairs social interaction and causes problems with verbal and nonverbal communication. In a nutshell, many autistic children need defined structure, require pictures and visuals, take things very literally and interact in strange ways. Flailing their arms may be their only form of communication.



It's difficult to fully understand what having autism is like. People with autism have a difficult time making connections. Imagine trying to understand what someone is saying if you don't know the meaning of the words, like they're speaking a foreign language. Now try to express your thoughts, although you're unable to speak. Living with this developmental disorder is extremely frustrating. For us women, Kelly relates it to having PMS. You're feeling under the weather, you may not want to talk to anybody and you don't want to be touched. All you have to do is say that. "For autistic children, their bodies feel strange like this every day, but they're unable to speak," says Kelly. "It makes it hard for them to get their point across."

Autistic children have a difficult time fitting into mainstream society, let alone making friends. Kelly believes it's partially due to a lack of education and acceptance that stems from a lack of exposure and understanding of autism. "I think tolerance comes from the parents and trickles down to their children," Kelly says. "If parents create this 'Oh, that child's different,' it's projected, but if the parents are accepting then their kids are accepting."

It's important parents set a good example for their children as well as educate them on information not offered in school. Teach your child about disabilities and autism. After all, these children are children too, they just happen to have autism. "It's like a child who wears glasses or has bad acne," says Kelly. "It's a characteristic." Although these children do things differently, it doesn't mean they're different. Gillian rides horses, plays the piano and makes her bed—it just isn't at the same level as a typical kid.

Although we can't live in a perfect world where we have an "Ah-Ha" moment and everyone understands and accepts autism, it's important to do the best you can to educate your child about autism and how these children can be great friends too. "I would tell a child, 'They're just like you, except their brain doesn't work the same way,'" Mary Doeseckle, a Horizon Elementary teacher of autistic students, says. "They go to school like you and their parents are trying to teach them how to be like everyone else, but it takes time." Autistic children, even the high-functioning ones, don't have good communication and socialization skills, so they come off quirky. Most don't understand how to play, like things that aren't age-appropriate and talk to themselves. "But they need models to teach them how to play so they can learn," Mary says.

The best place to start is to find a common denominator between your child and an autistic child. Maybe they both like karate, enjoy transformers or love to play dolls. Teach your child to have patience with these children, be a good teacher and show these kids how to play. "[Autistic children] may take their cars and put them in a line," Mary says. "Instead of lining them up, show them how to play with the cars another way." They also appreciate options. Tell your child to ask them questions like, "Would you rather play cards or do you want to ride bikes?" It may take time for the child to process everything and answer, so it's important your child remains patient.

Teaching your typical child to play with an autistic child is extremely beneficial. Your child will learn good leadership, listening and communication skills. He/she can discover and understand the differences that come with different people and realize that it's okay to be atypical. "It's up to those who don't have problems to be good teachers and caretakers," says Mary. And it's beneficial for them. "Our children with autism need to be taught how to interact and engage with typical children in the same way typical children need to be taught how to interact with children with autism," Kelly says.

