

PARENT GUIDE

Suffolk's One & Only

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A Labor of Love



by Sharon Sexton-Braun

Raising a son with autism on Long Island.

Autism, a subject that continues to mystify doctors and scientists, is one of the most dreaded words a parent wants to hear. So like any other parent, I was devastated when my first born son, William, was diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at the age of 3. However, my reaction quickly changed from distress to determination, as I immersed myself in literature and information online about the condition.

Seven years later, after endless hours of research and education, I launched a new Web site, www.AutismEdu.com, and company, AutismEdu LLC. I have also designed an interactive CD-ROM entitled *Operation Communication* designed to educate other parents, caregivers and professionals on how they can help teach the children they work with. It provides straightforward examples of how you can increase the use of functional, purposeful language in children with ASD in everyday situations.

Autism, a developmental disability that is typically diagnosed within the first three years of life and impacts the child's ability to communicate and relate socially, is currently detected in one in 166 children, according to the Autism Society of America (www.autism-society.org).

For me, the journey has been a labor of love.

I felt the more I knew about autism, the better I could advocate for my son. It was important for me to get out there and help as many people as I could. I wanted to share some of what I had learned with those parents whose children had just recently been diagnosed, as well as with the professionals who work with these children.

The information that I learned struck a personal chord and inspired me to advance myself academically. A few years after my son was diagnosed, I made the decision to go back to school and earn a Master's of Science in special education from Dowling College. I have also completed a graduate-level certificate program from the University of Albany in autism and am currently in the process of applying for Board Certification in applied behavior analysis. Today, I teach part-time through Long Island Developmental Consulting, Inc. (LIDC), whose director Karen Mulcahy-Walsh worked with my son early on in his education.

In addition to assistance from LIDC, I reaped the benefits of Long Island's resources for autism. I found that attending seminars at the Cody Center at Stony Brook University gave good information. I also attended monthly meetings and conferences at AHA/AS/PDD, a Long Island-based organization providing support and education for families, individuals and professionals affected by asperger's syndrome, high functioning autism and other pervasive developmental disorders.

Long Island provides excellent resources for parents who have a child with a pervasive developmental disorder. In particular, the Cody Center, the AHA/AS/PDD and Dr. Bobby Newman, Ph.D. were all instrumental in helping me get appropriate services for my son.

The more knowledgeable a parent is about the disorder and the more familiar they are about how to educate their child in the natural environment, the better off the child will be and the more gains and

progress the child will make. I truly believe that one of the main reasons why my son has come so far and made so much progress is because I incorporated teaching into our daily lives. That's what I want to offer other families with my CD-ROM.

Operation Communication is the first in a series of CD-ROMs. The second, *Challenging Behavior: Strategies for Reducing and Eliminating Challenging Behaviors in Children with Pervasive Developmental Disorders*, is expected to be available in 2007.

I want to share what I know with other parents and professionals so that other children with ASD can benefit from my experience.

People frequently ask how my son is doing. William is a student in the Sachem School District and will be in a typical 5th grade classroom this fall. He's been in a regular educational setting since kindergarten. Although William receives speech and special education services, he is working on grade level, participates in band and chorus and takes the ELAs just like all the other students.

One of my main ambitions is to reduce the negative stigma that is commonly associated with autism. There is still so much misconception and ignorance surrounding what autism is and how it manifests itself. There is such a range of ability and each child with an ASD is so unique—it's not a one-size-fits-all type of disability.

Advocating for autism awareness is just one of my undertakings. As a certified special education teacher, I remind other parents of children with special needs to never underestimate their abilities and to remember that they know their children better than anyone else, even professionals.

The best part for me is that I am doing something I am passionate about. I can make a difference in so many people's lives. That's really important to me. Everyone deserves to have the best life they can possibly have.

Sharon Sexton-Braun is a mother of two boys, ages 4 and 10. She received a Bachelor of Science in psychology from SUNY Stony Brook and a Masters of Science in special education from Dowling College. In addition, she has completed a three-course graduate level certificate program in autism given by V. Mark Durand, Ph.D. at the University of Albany. She works part-time with her husband as the CFO of their company, Lounge Lizard Worldwide, Inc., a Long Island-based advertising and design firm. Braun also works part-time as a special education teacher with young children with autism, ages 3-6, through LIDC, Inc. She is currently in the process of applying to become a BCBA (Board Certified Behavior Analyst). Operation Communication has been accepted for distribution by www.autismtoday.com, Product Development Associates (www.disabilitytraining.com) and AAPC (Autism Asperger Publishing Company).



For more information about Sharon Sexton-Braun and AutismEdu LLC, visit www.AutismEdu.com or call (631)581-1000, ext. 13.