

What is it like being a parent of a child with autism?

My heart goes out to parents who care for children with physical disabilities, bound by the constraints of wheelchairs, ramps and oxygen cylinders. When you see such families you instantly feel sympathy and empathy for the challenges that they have to face on a daily basis. They are the families that you think of when you think of a child with a disability. If you met my son you would not think that he was “disabled”. He’s a bright, lively, articulate eight-year-old boy, who despite what you read about autism has a huge imagination, will give you eye contact, can show empathy, is sociable and can tell the most amazing lies that would give any politician a run for their money. (He once told me that David Cameron had been helicoptered into school for the day!)

So he doesn’t quite fit the mould of the stereotypical child with autism, which is often presented to the world in TV and books. Autism is often described as a hidden disability for this very reason. He looks like any other eight years old, until.... he’s climbing over the safety barrier in the wildlife park, tapping on the glass of the lion cage, being told off by park keepers and being looked at by the other parents. Or placing the winning Dr Who sonic screwdriver on eBay without our knowledge. Or the police knock on your door because they have been called by “someone” in the house for the second time. That’s when it starts to become visible and you wish that there was some way of showing that he is a complex child with additional social and emotional needs and not just a “naughty boy”.

When I was asked to write about being a parent of a child with autism for World Autism Awareness week I didn’t know what to say as every child experiences autism differently and so every parent has a unique experience too. I can only write about what it’s like to be a parent of *my* child. At times it’s exhausting, stressful and extremely challenging. However, at other times, it is fun, entertaining and never, ever dull! We have all grown and learnt as a family through having a child with additional needs and our older daughter Ella is thinking about becoming a therapist as a result of the skills she has developed being a big sister. We have all extended our knowledge on the various obsessions that have come and gone over the years, such as snakes, ammonites, Dr Who and my personal favourite was Jonny Depp and the Pirates of the Caribbean phase!

Just like the onesies that the children wore on Wednesday, autism comes in a spectrum of different shapes, sizes and colours. There is no “one size fits all” when it comes to autism, every child and their families will have a different experience and understanding of what autism means to them. Autism awareness week is about understanding and celebrating the differences in autism. It’s about recognising those differences in children who are not “playing by the rules” in the park, pool or classroom and looking beyond what could be seen as “naughty” behaviour. And it’s about, for one week, removing the invisibility cloak of autism and really seeing, knowing and understanding the child who wears it.

Mum of a child in Sycamore Class

<http://www.autism.org.uk/get-involved/world-autism-awareness-week.aspx>