

April is Autism Awareness Month

A spectrum is often used as it relates to color. So many colors to the rainbow within each color its own pallet of shades and permutations...and as you move one color to the next, some aspects of the new color are more vibrant and interesting than the prior and other shades may be downright unpleasant. It is also no surprise that Autism is described in this same manner, a spectrum. Autism is a group of disorders that exhibits differently in each child, no two are the same.

On the whole, Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are characterized by impaired social interaction, difficulty with verbal and/or nonverbal language (recognizing nonverbal social cues) with some children exhibiting varying degrees of repetitive behavior patterns or obsessive interests. All of these patterns can affect a child in either a mild or disabling form, with each child having varying degrees of impairment in language and nonverbal language. As our knowledge and recognition of the autism spectrum grows, more and more children are being diagnosed with even milder forms "high functioning" spectrum disorders. It seems the spectrum is ever expanding and where it overlaps with "typical" behavior can be debatable. Within the autism spectrum there exist certain constellations of behavior patterns and deficits which can be defined as subtypes such as Asperger Syndrome, PDD-NOS, and childhood disintegrative disorder, to name a few.

Autistic spectrum disorders can be diagnosed both at an early age and even later on in childhood for those children with milder forms. There are some distinctive behavior patterns that tend to define spectrum disorders:

- impaired ability to make friends with peers or to initiate and sustain interactive play with peers
- impaired ability to make eye contact or respond to their names
- impaired ability to initiate or sustain a conversation
- absence or impairment of imaginative and social play
- stereotyped, repetitive, or unusual use of language; sometimes "scripting" repeating monologues from favorite movies, or "parroting" repeating back spoken language with either no or limited receptive skills
- restricted patterns of interest that are abnormal in intensity or focus
- preoccupation with certain objects or subjects
- inflexible adherence to specific routines or rituals

I have a son with ASD. It has been a journey for us as a family and not always an easy one. But one of the many things we have learned as a family is to focus on what one CAN do, not on the negative, and to try to develop the gifts that are given. This is true for any child. It is a trap to define a person based on a word or set of behaviors. Everyone has a consciousness and deserves to be respected for who they are, not for what they aren't. I feel strongly that these kids have unique talents that, given the right education and support, can develop into sustainable careers. They need to be challenged and to have high expectations placed before them. This is how all children learn.

We have had the immense privilege of working with some educators in our community who are true heroes. I have a special bond with the staff at Harvest Park preschool. Dr. Mark Sundberg, who is in charge of the vision of the preschool, is not only a brilliant doctor but also an approachable and fascinating speaker. We are lucky in our community to have such a talent in our school district. There is a special place in my heart for the teachers and aids at Harvest Park preschool. They have the task of teaching these kids how to begin their journey of speaking and socializing in a world that can sometimes be daunting. Teachers Shannon Montano, Shannon Rosencranz and Suzanne Roberts are rock stars. There are also the very talented teacher aids who are such a huge part of the kids experience: Janet, Patty, Christine, Laura among others. At the Grove, Mr. Rad is a leader in our community who has the passion to promote a mentorship program between the Harvest Park preschool and Walnut Grove which enables the children to learn from each other. Educators such as Mrs. Aderman have the vision to see how her class can play with and mentor children at the Harvest Park preschool and teach them how it is to be a friend through laughter and friendship. There are the many teachers at the grove who work with kids with special needs and I salute all of you. And of course the families and friends of these uniquely talented kids need the recognition for the very special journey they take together.