

## **A Professional's Perspective**

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Five years ago I was teaching Speech and Debate in a public school when a parent informed me that she wanted to enroll her son--who had Asperger's Syndrome-- in my class. I didn't hesitate to accept him, and he became an involved participant in my class. Something about him made me take a liking to him and made me curious to learn more about his disorder.

When I saw an episode of *Nightline* featuring autism and ABA I said to my husband, "Can you give me a year to be successful doing that?" He agreed and I quit my full-time position with to work 20 hours a week with a drastic reduction in salary. My goal was to learn all there was to know about ABA from the ground up. The experiment was a successful and ultimately I ended up co-founding an ABA based school in Virginia.

From early on other professionals encouraged my progress because the principles and practice of ABA seemed to come naturally. Quickly my gift became my passion. I love seeing the "Eureka...I got it!" look in the kids eyes when they master a new concept and everything connects. My favorite part is the first time a completely non-verbal child laughs. That's the kind of thing that makes me cry in the car on the way home at the end of the day. The small successes and breakthroughs make all the struggles and hours of repetition worthwhile.

My approach is to treat each child as an individual and consider the whole child rather than compartmentalizing specific needs. Using ABA as the core, I bring in things like sensory integration techniques and music in as necessary. The biggest challenge for me is dealing with occasional feelings of disappointment that occur when a particular child doesn't achieve something I want so much for them to accomplish. I know I expect a lot from them, and high expectations can't always be reached—but that doesn't stop me from trying. Basically, my expectations make me work harder to find different ways to teach something if a child just doesn't get it.

Families who are best able to cope with the frustrations of having a child with a developmental disorder are those who are able to live in the moment. The ones who are always looking ahead and wondering “will my child ever be able to do this or that?” are continually frustrated and tend to get stuck in a “why me?” mentality. Parents who are able to look at their child and accept what their current needs are and help the child to work on what needs to improve in the present are those that are most successful. If a child is 3 years old don't get bogged down with what he or she will be capable of at age 12 or 20, doing that is counterproductive.

Some families seem to want and expect their children to change overnight. In the case of autism there is no magic bullet, just a lot of effort and hard work. These families get frustrated with a particular method and switch philosophies at the drop of a dime. Since one of the biggest developmental needs of children with autism and Asperger's is consistency, my advice to parents out there is to do your research, choose a plan of action, hire the best people you can and then have the faith to let it go. Don't overanalyze

the situation, make a decision and get involved in making whatever you choose successful.

I've worked in several states and the one thing I've noticed is availability and access to resources varies. Here in Texas, we are ranked 48<sup>th</sup> or 49<sup>th</sup> in funding for special education, but it still matters where you live and what school attend. Frankly, it's the parents themselves that can make the most difference. When a group of parents unite and push and fight to make changes or receive a new service they have tremendous power to make a lasting difference for all children involved.

**Jennifer's Advice to Parents:**

- Do what you know is best for your child.
- Even if "they" have tons of degrees, don't be scared or intimidated into doing something you are not comfortable with for you or your family.