

A mother gives roots, wings to an autistic son



ON Mother's Day it is important to remember the women who have given us "roots" and "wings."

The "roots" come from the protective and loving environment a mother nurtures in the home so that her children will one day have the "wings" to set out on their own.

Of all the mothers we celebrate today, those with autistic children are among the most special because they are blessed with a remarkable reserve of selflessness. I know this from personal experience, since my wife, Jackie, is one of those special mothers. We are the parents of three sons: two teenagers and an autistic 9-year-old, named Ben.

Autism is a disorder that affects the ability to communicate and relate to others. What's frustrating to those of us who have autistic children is that very little is known about the disorder or the cause of it. Instead of dwelling on those things, Jackie focuses on what she can control, but it isn't easy.

Since I teach at a college away from home, Jackie shoulders the responsibility of parenting our three sons during the week. I try to offer as much support as I can during the weekends and vacations. As much as I would like to believe

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that I could assume the same responsibility, I know it's not true.

An autistic child poses a unique and trying set of challenges for a parent because of the variety of ways the disorder shows itself. Ben is a naturally mischievous kid with a contagious smile. He can be disarmingly affectionate, like when he gives a big hug after stirring up trouble around the house. In that sense, we are fortunate because many autistic children are sensitive to touch and do not like to give or receive hugs. Not much else can be taken for granted.

Ben cannot eat the same foods as other children. Sugar and wheat products have a severe effect, ranging from difficulty in concentrating to a frustration level that often results in a "meltdown," the equivalent of a full-blown temper tantrum. As a result, Jackie spends most of her weekend preparing special foods, including fruit smoothies, wheat-free pizza and sugar-free cookies.

Because Ben is extremely sensitive to large crowds and noisy environments, he cannot attend the local public school.

Instead, Ben goes to a special education school. There are only three other students in his class, and the teachers know their abilities and needs as if they were their own children. It is an excellent but extremely expensive school. Jackie took a part-time job so we can keep Ben at the school. Somehow she manages to find the time each night to review math and reading skills with him so he will be able to progress along the lines of a normal first-grader, though he is three full years behind that grade level.

What's most painful for Jackie, however, is helping our son relate to others his own age. Ben can't interpret social cues. He is extremely self-conscious around other children. Though he desperately wants to interact with them, he doesn't know how.

The kids in our neighborhood shun Ben. Even some of the parents are uncomfortable with him. The discomfort might come from a personal insecurity, an inability to communicate or to respect his differences. But the bottom line is that they don't want him around. I can't begin to describe how hurtful that is for Jackie. She realizes that she can't protect Ben from being alienated, but it's difficult to accept that fact. If Ben weren't autistic, he'd be playing Little League baseball, riding bikes and going to parties with those

kids instead of staying at home. As a result, Jackie has expanded Ben's social network to include classmates and teammates from the Challenger Baseball and Special Olympics bowling leagues in which he participates. Cousins and his brothers' friends are also part of Ben's social circle. Although they are older than his peer group, they offer him respect, affection and friendship.

Ben is fortunate because Jackie is unconditionally committed to helping him overcome his limitations. She has created a safe, nurturing environment for all three of our sons in order to give them the "roots" they need to grow.

While we are concerned about Ben's ability to develop the "wings" to set out on his own one day, I know that Jackie will never abandon that hope.

At the same time, I've come to believe that Ben, like other autistic children, is a special gift. His feelings are expressed more passionately than other children's are. And, like his mother, he loves our family unconditionally. Together, they remind me about the truly important things in life — faith, hope and love.

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