

# Autism hits close to home for many



BEN IS A mischievous kindergartener with a contagious smile. He can be disarmingly affectionate by

giving a big hug after stirring up trouble around the house.

He loves "Thomas the Tank Engine" (and rewinds the videos constantly), challenging puzzles (something he can do quickly without looking at the picture for guidance), and wrestling with his older brothers (a release from his frustrations).

In his short life, Ben has also made his dislikes clear. They include crowded places, making conversation (he speaks in sentence fragments), and being with people who are not family members (which often results in a "meltdown," once confused as a "temper tantrum").

If you haven't guessed, Ben is autistic. To researchers, he is a statistic. He means much more to me. He's my youngest son.

Until recently, there was little hope for youngsters like Ben. While the most severe cases were once dismissed as "uneducable," autistic children tended to be alienated by their peers and condemned to a life of dependency.

But recent federal and state legislation offers hope that autistic children will be able to lead productive lives.

Autism is a neurobiological disorder that affects a person's ability to communicate and relate to others. Until the 1980s, the number of cases in the United States was thought to be between one in 5,000 and one in 1,000. But the statistics have skyrocketed in the last decade.

According to the most recent U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention report, autism and related disorders such as Asperger's Syndrome affect one in 150 children, mostly males. The CDC estimates that 560,000 people in this country have autism or a related illness and the number of Pennsylvanians diagnosed with the condition has risen by more than 2,000 percent

## COMMENTARY

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of us who have autistic children is that little is known about the disorder.

Initially, my wife and I believed that childhood vaccines containing the preservative thimerosal caused the disorder. But the autism "experts" discounted that theory in favor of a "genetic susceptibility."

More recently, another study suggested that autism is prevalent in children whose fathers were over age 40 at the time of conception. Our son might fit into that category because I was 41 when he was born. Neither theory, however, relieves the guilt or heartbreak a parent feels.

I used to believe that Ben's condition was punishment for some injustice I might have committed earlier in life. I was embarrassed when he would have a meltdown in a public place. I envied other fathers who had "normal" sons who could play sports.

I grieved for my son, realizing that he might not be able to do the same things or learn at the same rate because of his poor social and communication skills and the inability of school districts to meet autistic children's educational needs.

While the "Education for All Handicapped Children Act" requires that all children regardless of disability be guaranteed a free and appropriate public education in "the least restrictive environment," autistic children represent a spectrum of cognitive abilities and disabilities. They don't fit neatly into any category, though many public schools have attempted to create programs for them.

But recent federal and state developments have given greater hope to families like ours. The federal government now recognizes autism as a "public health concern." As a result, the House

## ON THE WEB

For more information on autism and related disorders, contact the Autism Society of America at (800) 328-8476 or go to [www.cureautismnow.org](http://www.cureautismnow.org).

vices and Education Appropriations Subcommittee passed a \$16.5 million bill for fiscal year 2008 that would increase autism research funding and calls for another \$30 million for autism early detection and intervention programs.

While the Senate must pass its own version of the funding measure, and a conference committee will decide the final amounts for this year, this legislation is a crucial first step in combating autism.

Similarly, Pennsylvania has made great strides in helping to meet the needs of individuals and families living with autism. In February, the Department of Public Welfare launched a Bureau of Autism Services, which provides expertise and support for state agencies that serve Pennsylvanians with autism.

The initiative was spearheaded by state Rep. Dennis O'Brien, an advocate for children with autism.

In addition, the Rendell administration recently announced a one-time mini-grant opportunity, which will help individuals and families gain access to community services and supports.

I am grateful for these efforts. Only those families who have loved ones with autism can understand the struggle.

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. He has no pretense. And he loves our family, unconditionally.

Ben came into this world to remind our family about the important things in life — hope, patience, and love.

Now, perhaps, we can do more for him.

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