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## Especially Gifted

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# Especially Gifted

by Brad Shaw

Kris and I drove home from the specialist's office without speaking. Jacob, then three, sat in the back blankly staring through the window. We had spent months traveling from one doctor's office to another. Something was wrong with Jacob, but we didn't know what. I'd initially feared profound deafness. However, that wasn't it at all.

I finally broke the nauseating silence. "It's not as bad as the alternative," I said without much conviction, referring to deafness. Kris shot me one of her looks that says "You're an idiot." I get those a lot.

The doctor's words ricocheted in my head like a racquetball gone mad. "Your son is autistic," she had told us that afternoon at the end of her evaluation. My mind kept trying to digest the word, "autistic," but it had limited capacity to do so. The sum of my education concerning autism came from Dustin Hoffman's role in *Rain Man*. Thoughts and emotions of Jake swam in my head. They circled—around and around. The interior of the car seemed too small and there was too little air to breathe.

"Oh, then he has a special gift," I ignorantly quipped to the doctor. She smiled knowingly at my remark while Kris shot me another of her looks. "Sometimes that's the case," the doctor said emphasizing "sometimes."

"Sometimes that's the case, but not always."

Jacob's speech had developed normally up to about 18 months. We didn't notice at the time, but his communication ended rather abruptly. That is, it didn't just taper off. But, we didn't realize that at the time. So, we thought the deterioration was gradual. When it occurred to us that Jake was no longer communicating, we began seeking one professional opinion after another. As is often the case with parents of autistics, we first concluded Jake was losing his hearing. I hated the idea of a son with machinery protruding from his ears and one

who used his hands to make speech.

I had been raised that you did not question God. His decisions were wise and thoughtful. However, I had to call him to task on this one. I was confused and angry. Angry with God, and that was strange territory for me indeed. I feared I would grow bitter.

If I never hear another person say, "God only sends 'special' children to 'special' parents," it'll be too soon. Only people with normal, healthy children say that. Try hearing one parent console another with that gem at a special child's workshop or symposium. I used to have to bite my tongue when people said it to me fearing I'd scream out, "My son bleeps instead of making words. If I let go of his hand he'll dart into the traffic. He's four years old and in a diaper. You'll have to excuse me if I don't feel so 'special' today."

Jacob is our oldest. He was almost four when his brother, Jordan, was born. Being our first, we had nothing to measure by, and therefore lived in a quasi-ignorant bliss. But, as Jordan got older, and experienced new and wonderful things, we began to realize some of what we'd missed with Jake.

Last night we watched Jordan struggling to put his shoes on. At only 19 months Kris and I are amazed at his extensive vocabulary and motor skills. He kept repeating, "shoes, shoes, shoes," as he struggled with the task of getting them on his feet. He's a beautiful, blond-headed, blue-eyed boy. His success with the shoes was limited, but he'll soon get the hang of it. We pray Jacob might learn to put his on in the next couple of years.

Jordan now gets invited by friends and relatives to parties. I realize the words, "Thanks for inviting Jacob over, but perhaps some other time," have never crossed my lips. Even our families seem eager to keep or baby-sit Jordan, with little or no mention of Jake. Yes, Jordan is at a "cute" stage. Yes, he's now beginning to talk and do those silly



things that people find amusing and comical. Yes, he is a pleasure to be around. Jacob, on the other hand, when left unchecked, will wreak havoc on a household. Things that are not in the "right" place will be upended or otherwise damaged. He cannot take or follow even the simplest command. If not watched closely he will escape the house and dash for the street. Jake is a beautiful boy, but an easy keep he is not.

There are varying degrees of autism, from mild to severe. Jacob falls into the moderate category. He is still devoid of any form of language. He spends much of his day covering his ears with his hands. The doctor said that is probably because he is bothered by sounds on a frequency that you and I cannot hear. Kris has a stronger faith than I that Jacob will learn communication on some level. He is unusually strong and large for a child his age. He is generally a docile, loving boy, but he does have bouts of frustration and anger that lead to short spells of violence.

Jake is not kind to his clothes. Shirts are for chewing. It is not uncommon that a dark, wet ring will appear on the sleeve of a shirt before we arrive at a destination. Kris sometimes takes an extra for these occasions. We do not know if the chewing is a nervous habit or if he is fulfilling some kind of need from lack of stimulation. I sometimes wonder if he will gnaw a hole through the shirt.

He spends most of his time driving his VCR and pacing his room. I say "drive" for there is really no other way to explain it. On every tape he owns, there are certain scenes that must be viewed, re-viewed, then re-viewed again. If he has an unnatural ability, it is that he can play a movie, hit rewind, walk the appropriate number of circles in his room, and arrive at the play button at exactly the same moment every time. It really is phenomenal, if not hell on the VCR. Without exaggeration, we have thrown out enough damaged tape players to have purchased a new car. But, the VCR is one of his few forms of play, so we tolerate the expense. It is troubling for me to watch him circle

his room. Usually this is accompanied with hand flapping and squeaks and bleats he makes with his mouth. The doctor told us this is "self stimulation," or stimming for short. He generally stims when angry or confused. Confusion can follow a simple rearranging of the furniture. We learned long ago that the more things stay the same, the more they should.

I have come to accept peace where I can find it. Kris and I are truly blessed people. Jacob, unlike so many others like him, can be touched and hugged. He will, on occasion, make eye contact. In those rare and special times, when I find Jacob smiling at me with those deep blue pools that are his eyes, I, for just a moment, get to glimpse into his soul. In that brief time I get to tell him all the things a dad should say to his son. He, in turn, gets to tell me it's not so bad, and that everything will be all right. And, for a fleeting moment, a door is opened and we share the same space.

### *Merry Christmas, Scrooge*

Kris and I decided not to put up a Christmas tree this year. The family called us Scrooge, but we decided the price was too high. Jacob cannot cope with that much change in the house. From the time it goes up, until several days after it comes down, Jacob is a wild man. Things get broken; small children get hurt; sleep is elusive. I don't exaggerate. Jacob does not deal well with that much change.

When the family asked what Jacob wanted for Christmas, our reply, "money," must have seemed calloused and uncaring. But after a few years of making him sit by the tree as we opened his presents as quickly as we could, for Jacob can sit for only a short time, we tired of the facade. We would hand him his shiny new toy, only to watch him try to hold it between his knees, or fling it into the air so he could stim as it crashed to the floor. On the rare occasions he would hold and look at a new possession, his expression seemed to say, "Tell me



again what the hell I'm supposed to do with this?"

I try reading to Jacob. It is a fiasco. A scene to rival the best that the Three Stooges have to offer. I hold the book, and boy, and try to read and turn pages as he swings his elbows, squirms violently, or attempts an escape over my face and down the back of my chair. My efforts are futile. When I put aside the book and begin to wrestle or tickle him, then his interest is piqued, and he will stay. Otherwise, no dice.

Sometimes, after an extremely strenuous bout of wrestling or tickling, Jacob will go surprisingly relaxed in my arms. It is in his relaxed state I get those rare moments of eye contact. It seems only at those times we truly commune. I ache, knowing there's something he wants desperately to tell me. I know he knows something is not right; that something is broken.

I think he wants to say, "Here, Daddy, fix it."

