



Unique Diagnosis Brings Unique Joy

When Kim and Tony's son, Matthew "Matty," was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, they experienced all the normal pangs of fear and uncertainty. How would he find happiness and health? How would they? While Matty's physical and emotional health may always be a natural concern for this suburban Kansas City family, it doesn't take away from their everyday enjoyment of raising and loving kids – with or without special needs.

Nine-year-old Matty likes horses, balloons and silk flowers from Hobby Lobby.

It's an eclectic mix of interests, but it's those simple things that bring him joy and contentment. And that's all his mom, Kim, needs to bring her the same happiness.

Matty has autism spectrum disorder which does make him different, but it doesn't make Kim's pride and enjoyment as a parent any different.

1-2%
of the world population
has autism
spectrum disorder.

"What I've learned for myself, and what I try to emphasize with other parents, is that having a child with autism certainly changes your family in many amazing and challenging ways, but it doesn't change how much enjoyment you will have with your child," says Kim.

Kim knows this because she and her husband, Tony, are also raising 7-year-old Dylan, who's not on the spectrum. Kim and Tony experience happiness with their two sons in different ways, but it's the same kind of happiness.

Kim admits she didn't always feel this way. But thanks to faith, family and friendships forged with other parents of special needs kids, she's learned to count her blessings and embrace the gift – and gifts – of Matty.

"When Matty was diagnosed at the age of three, I jumped in right away, researching therapy, finding support groups and locating other resources," says Kim. "And I found some wonderful groups in our community and church we could join. Just being able to connect with other kids and parents has been a huge help."

Kim says one important part of Matty's therapy is to stay goal-oriented. Right now, they're focused on finding new friends, engaging hobbies and good summer camp options.

The wins can sometimes be small, but the celebrations and rewards are always significant. "Matty strives for many of the same developmental milestones that other kids do when it comes to communication and behavior, it just takes him longer," says Kim.

Kim says Matty's favorite reward right now is cash. Just like the rest of the world, money is a powerful motivator for Matty. Pretty normal.

"As parents, we experience the same thrill of achievement and happiness that everyone else does when their kids do well," says Kim. "We're on an amazing journey, it's just a different one."

Tips for Parenting Children with Special Needs

Kim shares her advice for what to do if your child is diagnosed with special needs.

- 1. Become an expert on autism – and your child.** Study everything you can about autism spectrum disorder. Read journals, blogs, websites and family stories. Also, be an expert on your kiddo. Know what makes him tick, what soothes and what motivates.
- 2. Become an advocate.** Speak up when you don't understand something. Ask questions and get second opinions. Take action if you don't receive the attention or care you need.
- 3. Become an active listener.** Doctors and therapists will give thorough answers and the reasons for their conclusions. Let them talk. Don't interrupt. Focus and then follow up when you need clarity.
- 4. Become a joiner.** Having a child with autism can be lonely and frightening. Find and join local support groups. Join online communities. Get involved with research and charitable foundations.
- 5. Become a balanced caregiver.** Caregiver stress is real. Don't neglect your personal needs and the things you enjoy. Set limits and reserve some time for yourself.

APRIL IS *Autism Awareness Month*



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