

AUTISM Disorders NOW affect 1 in 150 children, and 1 in 94 boys...

Updated July 20, 2008

I would love to tell you all a bit about our family in hopes of getting the "word" out about any misconceptions of Special Needs children and Autism in general, **as we have 6 biological kids, ALL of which have Autism or ASD, except for the ONE who is diagnosed rather as ADHD/Dyspraxic.** (It really irritates him if we do not "include" him in the count!) Anyhow, I will attach a story as published recently in a nation-wide newsletter from AGRE for your reading, which we wrote at their request. We are featured on page 5 of their Newsletter, but that was the understandably "condensed" version of our story, as originally written.

Our hope is to dispel any myths regarding Autism or ASDs, and to enlighten parents and educators as to **the importance of EARLY DETECTION, and EARLY INTERVENTION.** Apparently, we have been told we are very intriguing from the outside looking in, yet perfectly "normal to us"! - Again, our point however is to bring awareness and hopefully enlighten parents to the earliest signs and symptoms which are often misunderstood and dismissed, in order to give those children an optimal chance for achieving successful and happy lives. I have also done public speaking as to this issue as well, and people have appreciated and responded well to our candid, yet casual, open, and accepting demeanor, about a subject that can often be so demoralizing for parents and people in general. Boy, you are getting more than you bargained for, huh?! ;)

Anyhow, actual AGRE Newsletter Publication also linked on "contacts" page, and I will follow the pix below with the "full version". Thanks for taking the time to educate yourself as to any misconceptions regarding Autism Disorders and kids with ANY "needs" in general!

Updated story in full follows pix, with newest pix inclusive of baby daughter, Layla, currently 11 months. Sorry, I know it is long, but we have a lot of kids! Hopefully you will at least get a laugh out of our very "eclectic" family and outlook regarding it! Again, seriously though, we would love to bring awareness and hope to others by high-lighting our family in cooperation with you if anyone is interested...see how deceptively "normal" we appear!? (Thank goodness for Photoshop!) Enjoy! - c

OCTOBER 2006



OCTOBER 2007



Hi there!

We are the Conn Family, currently living in Lincoln, California, (just outside Sacramento), and are made up Mom (Christina) and Dad (David) and now 6 kids, Yes, we are "done" after our latest arrival as far as more kids go - really this time! Our four boys are Dakota age 11, Noah age 8, Tristan age 7, and Dillon age 5. Our daughters are Gianna, just turned 3, and baby sister Layla at 11 months old. Dakota, Noah, Dillon, and Gianna are formally diagnosed with Autism or ASDs, Tristan with ADHD and Dyspraxia with Sensory Dysfunction, and even Layla is already being serviced for developmental delays and deficits associated with Autism (as her siblings displayed), and is suspected to follow suit with an early diagnosis as well. All of our other children receive specialized services as well, and have from a very early age, and have therefore been able to be mainstreamed into general education classes with much success, ONLY AFTER and BECAUSE OF having those invaluable early intervention therapies. Can you guess from the photos which child is NOT on the spectrum? I will reveal that later.

Upon our realization that our first son was Autistic, it was an absolute blow, although from our own research and readings, we did not need someone to "tell" us - it was quite evident from his characteristics and behaviors from a very early age. Having not known ANYTHING really about Autism other than the movie "Rainman", we thought his life was over, as was ours. That time seems so detached from our perspective now, almost embarrassing, and guilt ridden. Someone once said to me that "It doesn't change the way you feel about your child - you still love them as much is not more", and that has always stuck with us, because it is true. Our children, to us, are still the brightest, cutest, greatest kids in comparison, as are every parents' children to them. And since we do not know any differently, all seem very normal to us - this is just our family and our kids, as great as any other at times, or as irritating and annoying as any other child can be at times - they are just simply our kids, and that is how we see them, and want others to see them.

That is not to say that there are not struggles that come with this disability, as with anything else in life. But the earlier the intervention, the better the outcome, so we focus our efforts on ensuring early and continued intervention to help them and us deal with any obstacles, and because of that, they have made HUGE strides, and manage to function in many environments where they used to flail. With that being said, imperative for us is a sense of humor. Again, we do not want to make light of the disability, and we know that we are lucky with our kid's current level of functioning, but at the same time, we just do not "see" it. They are just our kids, all great, with their own idiosyncrasies, ranging from moody, to anxious, to fidgety, to paranoid, to picky, to non-stop talking about nothing relevant, to you name it - but so are we as parents! (It had to ultimately come from our combined gene pool anyhow, so who are we to talk!) **Our kids do not get a separate set of rules from other kids or society, and we still have the same expectations for them as any parents would have for any child, and that is how we live our life.**

As a teacher myself, I have come to realize that there is a GREAT misconception about ASDs, and a HUGE **lack** of awareness about them. I have seen kids come through my classrooms with struggles, that have had clear characteristics of the disorder, but because they tend to be higher functioning than the "stereotype", they remain unrecognized as such, by both parents as well as professionals. Some parents are against the "label" as they fear it will stigmatize their child, when in our opinion, that "label" only serves as a vice for better understanding, and to best service the child for optimal success. When was the last time you saw a child walking around with a labeling "banner" on his/her head anyhow? If a child has issues, peers and teachers know regardless of what you choose to call it, if anything. Because of that, I now lead a group that supports empowerment for ALL children with needs, whether it is Autism, CP, or something undefined, in order to promote awareness for ALL parents of children with any needs. That being said, I do not consider myself the "Face of Autism" or anything for that matter - **I am just a Mom like any other, with kids who are great, but still drive me crazy at times!**

We talk openly about Autism in our family and to others, and discuss it openly and often with our children as well. We do not want them to feel any stigma attached to it, as they will hear the term often. Our 11 year old is the only one who really "gets" it to some degree at this point, but hopefully the others will eventually have some understanding as well. In fact, he will try to use it as an excuse to us to test the waters if he gets reprimanded for something by saying something in response to the effect that "Sorry, but I'm Autistic and I guess Autistic kids can just not learn lessons...." - (Nice try kid - doesn't work though.) We have even done presentations to his class about disabilities in general, and about him being Autistic, and he allows kids to ask him questions about his behaviors, such as his frequent stimming noises and hand-flapping. We also do

public speaking events at times and he joins me in the presentation and discussion. Having Autism in our family is as normal as having brown or blonde hair - just not a big deal, as we make it clear that we ALL are different in some way.

People often have asked us if we were/are "worried" that any new baby, and/or babies in the past would have the same "issues" as our other kids. When we thought about it, which we really didn't, we would be surprised if they didn't, looking at our track record. But that **NEVER** has been a consideration to us when deciding to have another child. We just wanted another child because we wanted another child, (well, and because I wanted some "girls" on my team as well). The "Autism" thing was just not a factor in the decision. We just simply did not see it that way (but keep in mind that we do diligently and persistently advocate to ensure they continue receiving the appropriate services). Oh, and to answer some commonly asked questions, no, we are not Mormon, (not that anything is wrong with that), and yes, we know what causes pregnancy – for us, “immaculate conception” of course, after this many kids! **No one needs to feel sorry for us - we are no sob story - we are lucky enough to have 6 great kids, and wouldn't change them if we could.** Hey, anyone can have a family of "typical" kids, but how many families can say they are as eclectic as we are?! At least we are consistent!

Keeping that consistency in mind, we are one of the many families that exhibit some genetic link for the disorder, and have donated our blood and kid's blood to world-wide research. (And let me tell ya, getting 6 disordered and sensory ridden kids to offer up their blood took some serious bribery!) We partake in any research that we are logistically able to, and encourage others to as well, as just the information gained from one family like us may some day assist in providing the answers or solutions for many future generations to come. Autism is not our life, it just happens to be part of it, like MANY other families today, some of whom unfortunately do not even realize it. Our hope is to bring more awareness about it, so that those who are affected by or with it can be greater understood, and thus lead happier, more successful lives.

And by the way, are you still wondering which child is NOT on the spectrum from looking at the picture? It is Tristan in the glasses. Instead, we just tossed a "lazy eye" his way to make up for it. He is far too "street smart" and social to qualify as being on the Spectrum, but still does have sensory issues, and is rather diagnosed as ADHD with Dyspraxia. Another genetic quality we will add to the list! He is probably, as I type, trying to figure another plan to traumatize his parents for his own enjoyment!

Our hope and "goal" per se, has **nothing** to do with "hey look at us - we need to 'famous' ", (as if... - more like 'infamous' at this point!), but simply to bring awareness. That is why we talk so openly with others and especially with our children regarding it as well, so that they **KNOW** nothing is "wrong" with them. However, our kids will be the first to tell you that something **IS** wrong with us, their parents, as they announce to whomever will listen that "...mom and dad have special needs too..." - thanks kids! Similarly, we bring our kids along to whatever event, so that people can physically SEE them and talk WITH them, to witness what EARLY intervention can truly accomplish for children. (Don't get us wrong, they make NO sense at times, babble about things of relevance ONLY to them, for just a couple examples, and ARE STILL clinically ASD), but no matter - they are simply just "kids", first and foremost.

Kids are just that - kids. But with that being said, you can not help a child if you do not know the underlying cause of their issues, and that is something we would definitely like to bring awareness to. **Autism CAN be quite obvious in some, but at the same time, it can also be unrecognized or misdiagnosed in others, and it is NOT always synonymous with "RAINMAN" and/or obvious irreparable dysfunction.** So that is only the tip of the iceberg for our story, (believe it or not), but the moral is, **we are just a family like any other...it just so happens that we have more kids than most, and our kids happen to have Autism, but are "perfect" just the same, as they have learned to cope only because of early detection and early intervention.**

Again, please pass it along to assist in spreading the "word". We hope to inspire, in a positive, upbeat manner, even with humor at times to “lighten” and hopefully “enlighten” others regarding the often solemn subject of Autism, or any Special Needs for that matter. Thanks again, for taking the time to learn about us, if you even made it this far! Was that enough information for ya? Sheesh – sorry, nice “briefing”, huh?

Sincerely,

The WHOLE “Conn Fam”

Christina, David, Dakota, Noah, Tristan, Dillon, Gianna, and Layla – YIKES!