

Introductions

"Hello, we have autism..."

I find it difficult to introduce myself these days. Having moved to our present home less than a year ago, I am frequently required to introduce myself and my family. The dilemma: Do I announce our autism immediately and wait for the gasp? "Hi, I'm Alyson Beytien and I have three sons with autism." (gasp! silence! stunned look!) I've always wanted to be introduced as "Stunningly beautiful and amazingly intelligent" but that will take a lot more sleep and plastic surgery!

Introducing my sons is more complicated than a single sentence can accomplish. Spencer is 17 years old, 6'1" tall, 150 lbs., and has a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome. He is beginning to understand sarcasm and humor, does not like to be jostled or touched by others, loves video games, baseball, and eats only white food. Joshua is 15 1/2 years old, 5'9" tall, 160 lbs., and has a diagnosis of High Functioning Autism (although on any given day, he is not functioning well at all!) Josh is currently interested in Dragons and Wizards, Garfield, loves to surf the internet, read, draw pictures, eat at Burger King, and needs to know his schedule for the next 6 months or he has an emotional breakdown. Zachary is 14 years old, 5'8" tall, 140 lbs. and has a diagnosis of autism. He loves Burger King, wants to do anything his brothers do, uses an augmentative communication device, likes to throw rocks into the Mississippi River and swim. Zach struggles with anxiety and aggression, and works harder than anyone I know to participate with other kids.

And even having told you that, you cannot truly understand my family. The boys have come so far in their ability to enjoy and live their lives. Each day I am amazed at what they do. Zachary spontaneously said, "I love you Mom" just 2 weeks ago. Would the incredible joy of that moment be understood by the casual person who wants to know who we are? Joshua is the most loving, funny, "quirky" boy and says the most outrageous things! Will his Sunday School teacher be able to see the humor in his comments if she doesn't know the way he thinks?

Spencer has come so far that I question whether to tell his diagnosis to the other kids who come to our home. But if I don't, and he falls apart over losing a video game, will they ever come back? My boys' disability affects every aspect of our lives, but it is not the defining description of who we are as a family, or as individuals for that matter. I could also say that I am a quilter, gardener, scrapbooking fiend, pianist, consultant, educator, wife, sister, daughter, and friend. If I did, would

they still gasp and give me stunned looks?! Just as my sons are also people beyond their autism, so am I a person beyond being their mom. But if you don't know about the autism, do you truly know about me?

My husband and I have worked with our sons to help them understand their disability. To know the words and to understand the ways in which their disability impacts their lives. Not to give them an excuse nor a label. This information has provided a platform to tell us how they think and process their world, and an opportunity for us to discuss with them how others might think or feel differently than they. We began discussing their autism with them when our first son, Spencer, was in the fourth grade. For a while after that, he introduced himself as "Spencer Beytien. I have Asperger's Syndrome and my brothers have LOTS of autism." That sure got a lot of attention! And Joshua frequently introduces himself alongside his current interest—"Hi, I'm Josh Beytien? Do you like Big Boy 4-6-6-4 steam locomotives built in the Roanoke shops of Virginia in the 1930's?"

I frequently hear the comment, after people meet me, that I am "not what they expected." Makes you wonder what they did expect of a mom who has 3 kids with autism? (Or any of us moms for that matter!) A straitjacket? Bitterness? Dark circles under my eyes? (Oh, wait, I DO have those!) Sometimes I wonder, will everyone look at us differently if my introduction includes the diagnosis? Will they look for problems that aren't there? Or without knowing the diagnosis, will they have the understanding to forgive the social indiscretions? I'm uncertain which is the best route to take.

The reality is that I am simply a mom. I have good days and difficult days. I cry, laugh, worry, and live like everyone else—just more intensely and frequently than most! I want to make the best decisions I can for my boys. I want them to be happy, healthy, and know that they are loved intensely. Stress, Laughter and Joy live side by side in our home—and their names are Spencer, Joshua and Zachary.

Alyson Beytien is a popular national/international speaker, parent/teacher trainer and mother of three sons with autism. She is a consultant and trainer for school systems throughout the country on educating individuals with autism. Alyson has a degree in Early Childhood Special Education and is in the Masters Autism program at the University of Kansas. She is the moderator of a DVD training series, "Family to Family: A Guide to Living Life When a Child is Diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder". She is also a columnist for the Autism Spectrum Quarterly magazine and host of the web/radio program "Family to Family" on AutismOne.org.