

## 4 lessons I've learned from battling my son's autism

*Is autism affecting a member of your family? If so, here are some tips I've learned that just might help.*



### Nora Elsberry

Although raising a child is normally filled with expected ups and downs, the challenges of parenting become extreme when a child suffers with additional mental and physical needs.

My youngest son, Asher, was diagnosed with [autism](#) just before his 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday. At the time I had noticed that Asher wasn't meeting his language or physical milestones, but had no idea that autism existed or the trials it would soon bring to my family. So, I understand now why I experienced denial, depression, confusion, anger, and despair following Asher's diagnosis.

But luckily, that wasn't the end of the story. While parenting a child with special needs is still a challenge every day, I have gained some valuable insights that have helped me along the way. The four lessons I have learned are to celebrate every step, rely on others, trust first, and love unconditionally.

### Celebrate every step

From the time Asher was born, teaching him has required a lot of effort. I remember when Asher turned 3; he wasn't able to say or even point to what he wanted. Instead, he often chose to scream at the top of his lungs. Finding the situation intolerable, I taught myself the first 100 [signs](#) from American Sign Language hoping to provide Asher with another option for communicating with me.

Now, I've seen other children watch a parent or video and immediately pick up on signing, Spanish, or a new dance. It just seems to happen naturally. But for Asher, every

step along the way usually had to be broken down, simplified to its most basic element, and used in multiple settings before it would click.

So, after many repetitive weeks, the day finally came when I saw Asher slowly put his fingers together to tap out the “more” sign for additional crackers—his favorite food at the time. Although this was a simple gesture from him, my reaction was immediate. I screamed and jumped and clapped for joy while Asher beamed at me with pride. This beginning attempt at communication may have seemed small, but it was really the starting point for something much bigger—Asher learning to speak.

In fact, all of Asher’s delays in language, [sensory development](#), movement, and social cues have helped me to appreciate the small things in life—blowing a kiss, playing in the sand, or waving good-bye. Nothing is insignificant to me anymore. Each accomplishment has been a triumph; every step forward, a blessing.

[“Little things make big things happen.”](#)

### **Rely on others**

As a parent, I wanted to believe that I was all my child would ever need; that my love and efforts were enough. But when I finally realized the extent of my son’s limitations, life became overwhelming.

It was during this dark time that I forced myself to attend [a parent support group](#). Although I felt entirely alone, I soon realized that I wasn’t. The parents I met became a vital resource—directing me to useful state services, guiding my learning about autism, and filling me with feelings of love and acceptance.

I also came to depend on the patience, knowledge, and expertise of therapists, [autism professionals](#), and naturopathic physicians. Their advice brought hope, taught Asher valuable skills, and improved his health in numerous ways.

Ultimately, every encouraging word, reassuring hug, and professional contribution we have received is part of the reason that Asher is now thriving in a 4<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, learning to play the piano, reading at grade level, and building large marble roller coasters for fun.

[“Many hands make light work.”](#)

## **Trust first**

Throughout this journey, I've experienced heartache and confusion as well as relief and joy. But through it all, I've tried to remain teachable and open to new experiences. Although I don't have many answers, I trust that God does. That is what keeps me moving forward.

Looking back, I found that answers often came in random and unexpected ways—such as when I discovered my new neighbor was also an amazing occupational therapist or when I bumped into a mother at the library who had three children with autism and lots of timely advice. Little-by-little I obtained guidance while trying to help Asher overcome his biggest developmental delays. Trust put into action eventually became [faith](#).

[“Faith makes things possible, not easy.”](#)

## **Love unconditionally**

I don't believe the battle against autism is ever fully won. Some of Asher's symptoms have been overcome, some have been weakened, and some remain the same. But my definition of success has also evolved over time. I've learned to accept that autism is a part of Asher and always will be, but it doesn't define who he is.

Instead, I choose to celebrate *everything* that makes him unique—his deep blue eyes, cute “happy” dance, silly giggles, quiet example, and unfailing spirit included. He has been my greatest teacher all along, showing me how to speak with soft words, laugh everyday, seek originality, marvel at the beauty of innocence, and—above all else— love without reservation.

[“I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love.”](#)

## Final thoughts

Parenting has never been an easy task, but it can feel completely overwhelming when struggling to raise a child with special needs. Questions often arise such as, “Will my child ever learn to eat vegetables, make a true friend, or become independent someday?”

But by choosing to focus on the lessons that life is trying to teach, and writing them down once in a while; I’ve learned that small efforts can be rewarded in big ways, that I don’t have to face the struggle alone, that trust is powerful, and that love *can* conquer all. But above all else, I’ve learned to keep moving forward.



Asher with his big brother, Jonah  
Photography by Yan Liu

### *About the author:*



#### **Nora Elsberry**

Nora Lynn Elsberry, a Utah native, is a creative soul who delights in her family and learning something new everyday. She loves blogging, biking, interior design, picnics, driving through the canyons during fall, digital photography, long walks, finding new restaurants, TED talks, and music...just to name a few.