



GARRETT WAS
**God's
Child
First**

When our son was diagnosed with autism, I prayed to know how to “fix” him. But I soon learned that he was not broken.

By April T. Giaque

Garrett, an 11-year-old boy with autism, experiences the world with a mixture of pain and agitation every morning, every afternoon, every waking hour. He is hypersensitive to many of the sounds, textures, and sights to which all of us are exposed daily, but for him, such exposure leaves him anxious. Wouldn't *you* seek to shut off the pain and the agitation? It makes sense that Garrett is trying to do just that—stop the sound, sensation, sight, and nausea that interrupt his daily life. I've worked with Garrett since he was a day old. Garrett is my son.

Of course, not all people with autism experience or react to it the same way Garrett has. The manifestations of autism are different for each person. But because Heavenly Father knows all of us, He will guide us as parents, leaders, teachers, and physicians to know how to best reach His children, including those with disabilities. He has done that for me. Here, I wish to tell a little bit about Garrett's experience with autism and how Heavenly Father has helped us better understand our son—who was first His son.

Garrett is one of five children born to my first husband and me. The first three of our children, including Garrett, have autism spectrum disorders. My first instinct as a mother is to hold and wrap a child in warmth, in touch, with life. Mothers want to protect their children, teach them, and interact with them in the form of cooing, smiles, hugs, tears, and kisses. And it's natural to expect some type of response to all that you are giving your child. But from the very beginning, Garrett has been hypersensitive to sound, touch, smells, and food textures. As a toddler and young

child, he recoiled at touch, vomited most foods, and buried his head, face, and body into stuffed animals, pillows, and blankets.

Relying on Prayer and Inspiration

At first I would pray and pray to find out what to do to “fix” our child. But through the gentle workings of the Spirit I learned that Garrett was not broken—I just needed to learn to see him through all of the challenges. I came to know that he is special and was sent to us and that I could learn from him. I needed to exercise my faith in Heavenly Father and His plan of happiness in order to see Garrett, his gifts, and his potential, not just his external behaviors.

Such faith was crucial in seeking to understand Garrett. In his early years, until he was about four years old, Garrett knew how to communicate in only one way: crying. Was he in pain? Was he trying to tell me something? “Maybe this is just how it's going to be,” I thought. Disheartened and not knowing what to do, I continued to pray. Eventually the challenges associated with our children's autism contributed to the end of our marriage. I began raising our children by myself, until I married a man who has been a great help in dealing with these challenges. We have had two more children.

The answer came to enroll Garrett in a local school program for children with autism, a process in which I saw the hand of the Lord. With Garrett's participation in the program, I learned how to recognize Garrett's talents. I was taught more constructive methods of communicating with my son and understanding what he was experiencing daily. Through these things, my

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"Autism is a disability with characteristics that vary across a wide spectrum. While persons with autism can't be identified by their physical appearance, they have similar attributes that can be observed. They usually have difficulties with language or communication, social skills and behavior, often due to sensory difficulties. Children with severe autism may be nonverbal and seem unaware of other people. Those with mild autism can appear to be incredibly smart, but may seem very odd in social interactions. Most people with autism are somewhere in the middle. Even though they have difficulty expressing their feelings and relating to others, people with autism still sense how others feel about them.

"Whether a person's autism is mild, moderate, or severe, it is commonly accepted to be a lifelong developmental disability. The exact causes of autism are unknown; however, it is a brain-based disorder. It is clear that individuals with autism are born with the disorder or born with the potential to develop it. Autism is not caused by bad parenting."



As difficult as it was to switch from my own logic to listening to the Lord and following promptings from the Spirit, our family is better off for my having done so.

children and I started to see our Garrett! With faith and in time, I also developed perspective to be able to anticipate his needs.

For a long time, I sought to constantly monitor situations to prepare myself to handle Garrett's reaction to unexpected sounds or smells, or, when possible, intervene to prevent the long tantrum that could ensue. If Garrett were my only child, this model of protection and building a bubble around everything might have made sense. But over the years, I have amended my initial response of "sheltering" and creating controlled environments because in the end, they were creating more of a disability for Garrett and our other children than I first thought.

Since relying solely on my own knowledge clearly wasn't working, I once again leaned on Heavenly Father for direction. I stopped building the "perfect bubble" for Garrett to always live in and instead felt guided to build a "safety bubble" for him—a place to go when

he has been pushed to his breaking point and needs a place to calm down. For instance, if things at school have been noisy and loud and a lot has been expected of him, I provide a place for him to decompress when he comes home, perhaps allowing him to sit in a quiet place and draw. Garrett's meltdowns have been greatly reduced through strategies and accommodations like this one, all based on the guidance of a loving Heavenly Father.

What I Have Learned

What I have learned from Garrett and our other children who fall within the autism spectrum is that they are children first and people with autism second. I imagine that it is much the same way that our Heavenly Father sees all of us: we are His children first, and we have trials and experiences second. Our children want love, attention, help, success, and praise. They want their pain to be eased, and they want to feel hope. They enjoy life differently than many people do, yet their needs and wants are similar to those of most everyone.

What I have learned from my Heavenly Father is to be more like Him as a parent. I've learned to stop, to think, to listen. I've learned to keep my communication with Him open. And I've learned to have what our family calls "a bendy brain"—to be flexible—when looking at the situations life throws at us. This means exposing all of our children to life experiences instead of isolating ourselves.

Finally, I've learned how rewarding all the effort, the sleepless nights, and the hard work really are. Yes, raising children with special needs takes faith and patience, but they give me back more love than I could ever imagine. And I've learned that however unknown the path may seem, the Lord will always guide us. ■

MY BROTHER AND AUTISM

One day when I was seven years old, my family and I went to the park. My mother pulled me aside and told me she needed to tell me something important. She told me that my brother Pedro had autism. She explained that it was a condition that would affect his thinking and his ability to communicate. She asked if I understood. I nodded, but really I didn't know what she meant. Then she asked me to help watch over him as his older sister. That of course, I *did* understand. I had been doing it all along.

Being Pedro's sister has been a blessing for me. He helps all of us be better. He wakes up our family in the morning and gathers us for family prayer and reminds us about family home evening. He is a great example of keeping the Sabbath, and it always makes me smile to hear him encourage us not to do certain things by saying, "No, today is Sunday." If only we all understood the important things as well as Pedro does.

I remember when he was ordained a deacon. It was a very spiritual experience for our whole family; we felt the Spirit so strongly.

I know that even though my brother has autism, he is very special. I know that Heavenly Father loves Pedro and sees him in ways that others don't. Sometimes people call Pedro *retarded* as an insult, but perhaps they don't understand what they're doing. They don't understand how frustrated he gets when he does not comprehend something. They don't see how much he understands with his heart. They aren't there to observe him offering hugs to friends and family or greeting people he does not know. They don't see his ability to notice nearly everything or his capacity to make our family laugh.

I know the Lord put him in our family for a reason. Pedro reminds us of the powerful admonition in Matthew 18:3: "Verily I say unto you, except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."

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MORE ON THIS TOPIC

For more on autism, please see these articles at LDS.org:

- Chad E. Phares, "A Good Example," *Friend*, Oct. 2009, 18–19.
- Sandy Tanner, "Hayden's Friends," *Friend*, May 2009, 42.
- Kathleen L. Peterson, "The New Disabilities Web Site," *Ensign*, Mar. 2009, 40–45.
- Sally Johnson Odekirk, "We Know Jeffery," *New Era*, Mar. 2009, 10–12.
- Joseph B. Wirthlin, "Come What May, and Love It," *Ensign*, Nov. 2008, 26–28.
- Andrea Worthington Snarr, "Cultivating Sensitivity to Others," *Ensign*, June 2008, 59–63.
- Annie and David Braithwaite, "A Letter to Tommy," *Ensign*, Aug. 2007, 9.
- Cindy Gritton, "Joshua's Walls," *Ensign*, Mar. 2007, 26–29.
- Richard M. Romney, "Jason Alford of Huntsville, Alabama," *Friend*, Mar. 2007, 18–20.
- Anne Collinson, "Sowing Seeds of Love," *Ensign*, Jan. 2007, 62.
- Kelly M. Smurthwaite, "Unexpected Hero," *New Era*, May 2006, 36–37.
- "Embracing Members with Special Needs," *Ensign*, Aug. 2005, 12–15.
- Gayle M. Clegg, "Teaching Our Children to Accept Differences," *Ensign*, June 2004, 40–44.
- Donna Alldaffer and Richard M. Romney, "Cameron Blackwell of Jeffersonville, Indiana," *Friend*, Aug. 2002, 20–22.
- Karen T. Sheets, "'Sing More!,'" *Ensign*, July 2001, 23.

You can also find more information about autism—including ways to help, teaching tips, and additional resources—at disabilities.lds.org.