

Living with Autism: Caring for Christopher

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Foster Carer

Christopher is almost 18 and a charming young man who likes to have the latest Superdry top and smart trainers. He likes music and the NOW CDs. He is tall and handsome. In fact he is almost like a typical teenager. The only difference is Christopher is autistic.

I first met Christopher when he was 2 and I began to foster him. At that time he did not have a diagnosis of autism. He came with a label which said he had global developmental delay. Christopher came with more toys than a toy shop but his favourite item was a bunch of drinking straws which he would flick in front of his face. I guessed he was autistic but it took another 18 months to get a proper diagnosis of autism and a severe learning disability.

Caring for Christopher has not been easy and we have on many occasions asked ourselves why? Why we do this? Why does he behave like he does? Why can't he just learn? Why, why, why: so many questions and very rarely the answers we wanted to hear.

We have learnt a lot while caring for Christopher. We have learnt from our mistakes and most of all we have learnt from him. Little did we know when we took him on how challenging he would be and how many tears we would shed.

We have had moments when we have doubted our ability to care for Christopher like when I had to attend A and E as he kicked me in the stomach; I fell backwards and thought I had broken my wrist. We learnt not to get too close when he was having a meltdown and this has never happened again. We had months and months of him smearing faeces at bed-time, ripping pyjamas and wrecking his room. All this tested us to the limit but still we continued to care for him.

He hated having visitors in the house and would play up once they arrived. We gave him a timer indicating how long the visitors were staying. Friends and family were very good and knew when it was best to leave.

One good piece of advice we were given when we first started having behaviour difficulties with Christopher was "choose your battles". I think it was true that we wanted everything to be sorted at once. It took us a while to realise we were not going to change everything overnight. We would sit down and decide on a couple of issues that were causing us problems. Whilst we saw these issues as problems Christopher never did: it was just what he had to do. Like needing the same CD six times or having the same pair of trainers when he has grown out of the previous pair regardless of whether they still make them or not.

Once we had decided on which issue we would tackle, we would put all our energy into that problem. Now Christopher is reluctant to buy the same CD because he has to spend his own money and he is reluctant to spend it.

People frequently ask us why we do what we do. This is a hard question to answer and it is true to say that on more than one occasion we have asked ourselves the same question. Christopher cannot help the fact that he is autistic. He did not ask to be born autistic. He just is. Despite the challenges we have been through he has grown and matured into a fine young man. He tries hard in everything he does and each little step is a huge step for Christopher. He recently joined the queue in the coffee shop and ordered himself a hot drink and a cookie. He waited for his change and carried his tray back to the table without support. I was so very proud of him.

As he approaches 18 we have made the decision to continue to care for Christopher when he enters the adult world. We will continue to fight for what is best for Christopher and know that the next stage of his journey may well be a difficult one. He dislikes change and things being different. We need to be

there for him when the going gets tough.

We could not have done this without the support of his fantastic school, the respite provision that allowed us at times of crisis to have 8 nights break from Christopher a month and Professor Besag and his team who were always there to listen and offer advice.

GP comment.

What have I learned from this paper?

A touching account of a foster carer's experience on raising a child with autism. It highlights the important issue of early diagnosis and the difficulties healthcare professionals face in making the diagnosis of autism, which can often get confused with a learning disability or developmental delay. An inspiring story that can offer hope to all those who find themselves in similar circumstances and as a GP provide us some direction on how to advise and where to signpost families with similar difficulties in the future.

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