

Autism and Fatherhood

Alan Hobbins

Father of two children with autism

I had a great role model for my own journey into fatherhood: my own dad. He was a traditional father I guess, putting food on the table, working hard to provide for the whole family while at the same time looking after the kids.

For me, it was a fantastic childhood, and as many of my friends did not have their own fathers in their everyday lives, he became a sort of surrogate father to them. He loved football and went everywhere with my two older brothers who both played at a decent level; he took me and my younger brother, plus many of the kids on the estate where we lived, to play run-outs (a version of 'hide-and-seek' played on a vast scale) in the local parks and marshes. I believe that my father's example made me sure of the type of father I would want to be to my own children.

When my son, Patrick, was born - and later my daughter, Grace, - I suddenly found that all the attributes of my own father had, seemed no longer relevant any more. My son was diagnosed with autism when he was six, although we had concerns at a much earlier age when his speech was delayed; my daughter was born a few years later and she received a similar diagnosis. My son found making friends difficult and the one time I tried to take him to after-school football he refused to play because he said all the other kids had a different colour top to his so there was no way he could play. So, I could not take him to football like my dad took me and there were no groups of friends to play run-outs with, although I am not sure kids these days play run-outs anyway.

I suddenly found myself at a loss as to how I should be a father to my son. He was much closer to his mum, even as he got older, and I must admit that I felt a bit excluded. With my daughter, I was further unsure about what my role entailed. Her autism was diagnosed at a much earlier age and was far more severe. She hardly slept for the first three years and during the first eighteen months I was regularly going out in the early hours of the morning, driving around in the car, as this was the only way to get her to go to sleep. My wife and I have only just started sleeping in the same bed again after ten years of sleeping in separate beds, as both our children would not sleep in their own beds on their own. I was working full-time in London and my wife was working weekends. As you can imagine, this put enormous pressure on our relationship and would have consequences for our health later on. Although in some ways I was closer to my daughter when she was very young, she also became closer to my wife as she got older. It's hard to know if this was somehow my fault as a father or just a natural consequence of their autism.

I was yearning for advice and guidance, but I had no idea where, or who, to ask.

At the start, I did not know anyone with autistic children. My own dad was not sure how to help and it was only when the children started going to school that I came to know other fathers in a similar situation. As my wife would surely point out, however, I am not the most out-going and talkative person in the world and one of the other attributes I got from my own father was stoicism. I keep my emotions in check and do not allow other people in, especially people I have only just met and barely know. So, there I was, not sure how to be a father to my kids and with no-one I could, or was willing to, turn to for advice. I guess I turned to work, and paid less attention to home life. This was not intentional and I am not sure even now if this is what I did, but my wife felt at the time that I appeared not to care how she was feeling; how she was coping with taking and collecting the kids from school and all the form-filling, meetings, panels and a hundred other things you must do to access the available help for children with disabilities.

I lost my own father in 2008 and shortly after that I was made redundant. Losing someone who held such an important place in my life was very hard to cope with, especially as I was struggling with being a father to my own children. Losing my job was, in hindsight, a blessing. I spent a year attempting to

find a full-time job but without success. Therefore, at the start of 2010, I took a part-time job. The year I spent out of work opened my eyes to the struggles my wife had every day and now I was in a position to help with these day-to-day activities. We both found we were now working together and sharing in the emotional strain that raising two autistic children entails. Work was still important to me but by working part-time I could still support my children and my wife while gaining the self-esteem that work, for me anyway, provides.

I now find myself in a much better place. Do not get me wrong, every day is still full of struggles and pressures on me and my family, but I now feel better able to cope. My son now has a small group of friends and although team sports are still a struggle for him, I do take him and his friends to the park to play football; swimming and ten-pin bowling are other activities we do together. My daughter's behaviour is still very challenging, but I now better understand her needs and wants, and our relationship is now much closer.

I now realise that it is important to keep talking to your partner, to discuss how you both feel and to try and share as much as possible, in all aspects of your children's up-bringing. This is true of all children, but I believe is especially so for children with special needs. The important thing to hold onto is the belief that things will get better; it may take time with lots of ups and downs along the way, but you will get there in the end.

GP Comment.

What have I learned from this paper?

1. This paper highlights how the diagnosis of autism affects not just the patient but also the immediate family and carers.
2. The writer had a good childhood and was ready to model the fatherhood of his children on the very positive experience he had of his own father but the diagnosis of autism in first his son then his daughter changed all that.
3. He was put under great strain, both physically and emotionally.
4. Although his own experience of fatherhood was not what he had originally imagined, he has been very courageous in making the necessary various accommodations in his life.
5. It was wonderful to read the last paragraph that gives indications of glimmers of hope, and light at the end of the tunnel.

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