



# Be the Parent Your Child Needs

**Tanya White**

My husband and I have six children. Jude is the second oldest. He was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder just before his second birthday. Although Jude presented some signs of autism when he was very young, the diagnosis came as a surprise. The feelings I had after the diagnosis were probably similar to those of other parents who have children with autism. I was worried, devastated, needed time to grieve, and wondered what his future would bring. Jude was non-verbal until shortly before his fourth birthday. He made very little eye contact with others and typically chose to play alone. When Jude was younger, he had a difficult time communicating with others. He sometimes threw things or banged his head against the wall when he was frustrated. Jude has been in speech, behavior and occupational therapy. We have good days and bad days. There are nights when we sleep, and others when we don't. There are social and family events that we can go to, and others we have to decline.

Before I had children, I remember watching a close family friend whose oldest son is autistic. When I saw some of the difficulties she was going through, I remember thinking that I could never be that kind of mom. Now, years later and with six children of my own, I realize that I have to be whatever kind of parent my children need, whether they are autistic or not. We all need to be the kind of parents that our children need.



### Jude Needs a Patient Mom

As I mentioned, Jude didn't speak until he was almost four years old. I remember the first time he said, "Mommy." I had been waiting for so long to hear that word. When he said it for the first time, it made up for all the other times when he didn't say it. It meant more than a thousand words, and was well worth the wait.

Jude often has trouble communicating his thoughts and feelings. It's difficult for him, and for our family, when we don't understand what he is trying to tell us. There are many instances in which being a mom of a special needs child requires tremendous patience. I am learning to be a patient mom.

### Jude Needs an Observant Mom

As a family, we are always monitoring Jude's state of mind to see if he is in a red zone or a calm zone. We are constantly paying attention to his triggers, and trying to determine which calming techniques work for him and which ones do not. I am learning to be an observant mom so I can be proactive instead of reactive.

### Jude Needs a Mom Who Will Advocate for Him

Jude has always advocated for himself and his needs. When we first moved into a new house, Jude would go into the closet or his room in order to self-regulate. He wasn't verbal at this point, but he knew that he needed to be by himself. With five brothers and sisters, it wasn't always easy for him to find some alone time. Jude also knows that when he is getting frustrated, he can go into the den and use the computer to print logos, an activity that has always calmed him.

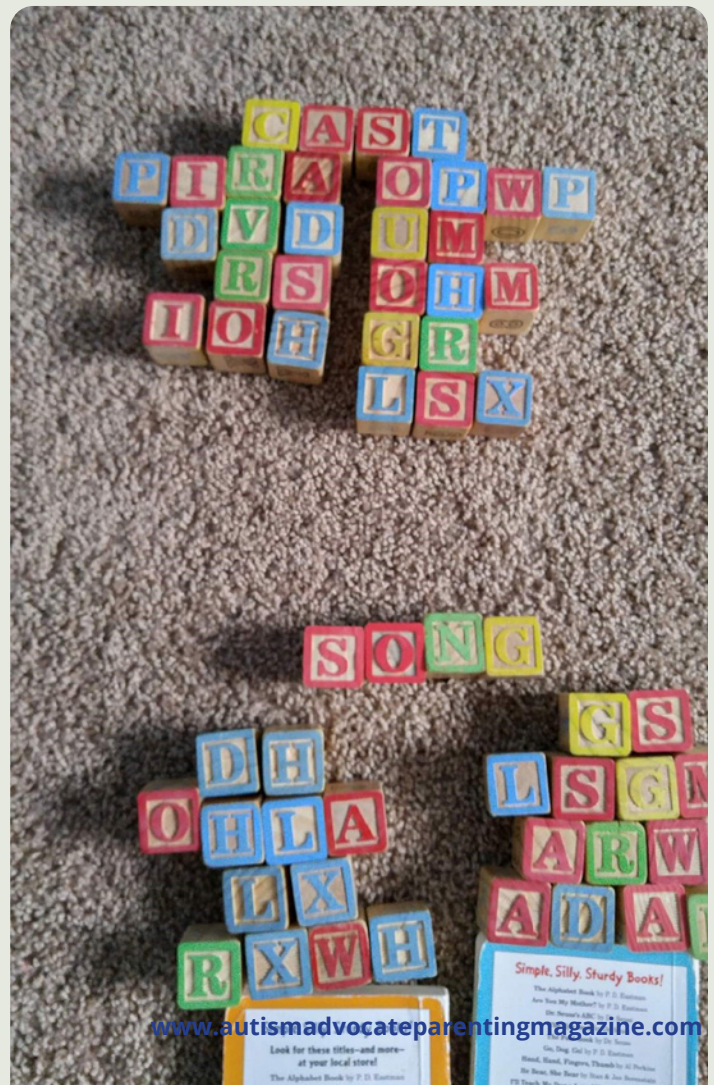
When Jude first started school, we spent many days and weeks advocating for his needs with the principal, the teachers and the support staff. We know Jude best and we refuse to have anything but the best care and supports in place. I am learning to advocate for my son's needs and to teach him how to advocate as well.

### Jude Needs a Mom Who Appreciates His Unique Qualities

Jude is amazing and has a prodigious memory. Jude carries a black rectangle with him wherever he goes. He holds it up to visually frame things and to remember the image. I can just imagine the treasure house of images that he has framed in his mind. Before he turned three years old, and well before he could read, he would take letter blocks while watching a movie and spell out the words "Pixar" or "Dreamworks." He would memorize the look and order of the letters, and spell out words. Jude is fascinated by movie credits. I think he likes how everything lines up. It is his favorite part of every movie, and he will often print off the credits as one of his preferred activities. He can remember exact words and phrases from books we read years ago. He can sing the theme songs for movies that we have only watched once. His memory is amazing. I have easily learned to appreciate Jude for his unique and amazing qualities.

### Jude Needs a Mom Who Talks About Autism

The topic of autism is an ongoing conversation in our house. We often have to explain to Jude's younger siblings why he doesn't always eat at the table with us, or why he gets an iPad when they don't. We have open conversations about the challenges that Jude faces and how we can support him. While we do have difficult moments on occasion, I know that having Jude in our family has helped our other children to develop a strong sense of empathy. They appreciate what other people might be going through, and understand that life can be a little tricky when you have someone like Jude in your life. Since I want my children to be open, accepting and loving towards others with differences, I am trying to be a mom who is comfortable talking about autism.





## Jude Needs a Mom Who Has Support

I could not be successful in my autism journey without the help and support that I receive. Parents with a child on the spectrum need to use the supports that are available to them. These could come from the government, neighbors, friends that are in similar situations, or family members. This journey is difficult, especially at the beginning. If you don't have that support, it can be overwhelming. I have learned that I need to be at my own best in order to help Jude. I will do whatever it takes to get the support I need to be my best.

## Jude Needs a Mom Who Won't Give Up

When I look back at the moments that were difficult, I remember wondering if I could really do this. There were nights when Jude wouldn't sleep in his room, so we had to sleep in the hall in order to be closer to him. I wondered if we would be sleeping in the hall for the rest of our lives. There were some moments in my life when I questioned my ability to raise a child with autism. Sometimes I felt that I wouldn't be able to make it through the next day, week or month. It's important to trust that things will get better. Something will come along to provide relief. There is light at the end of the tunnel. I can do it, and you can do it, too. Through it all, I am learning that this can be a tough journey, but that I can never give up on my son.

Every child with autism is perfect in his or her own way. Even if the child is doing things that are frustrating or challenging, it's not up to the child to learn, it's up to us. We need to figure out how to support our children. I feel really blessed to have Jude in our family. He has taught me that I need to get to work and figure out how to be his best advocate. I am constantly looking for answers. In all honesty, however, it's when I turn to Jude that I learn the most. Jude has opened my eyes to the differences that exist in the world. He has taught me that we need to be more loving and caring, and to accept other people's differences. He's taught me that we can do hard things as parents and as a family. He's taught me that we can learn and grow from our challenges. He's taught me that I can, and will, be the mom that he needs me to be.



Tanya White and her husband, Quenton, live in Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta, Canada, with their six children and dog Piper. She is a stay-at-home mom (for now), and loves it! When she is not chasing children around or tending to her garden, she loves to paint or do anything crafty. If there is anything she wants to teach her children, it is to stand up for themselves, and to stand up for those who cannot. Everyone is different in his or her own way, and we can all treat each other with kindness.

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