

“The Power of Music – Jack’s Journey Out of Silence”, by Francine M. Andersen

I have a background in classical music and work in an arts-related field, so it’s not surprising that I have a strong belief in arts education. Before becoming a Mom I pictured myself finger painting with my baby, singing silly songs and sharing my love of the arts. I couldn’t wait to see my baby’s face alight with wonder at the discovery of playdough and paints, or hearing a live musical performance for the first time. But it wasn’t until my firstborn son Jack was nearly 3 ½ that I truly understood and appreciated fully, the incredible power of the arts.

Jack was 2 ½ when he was first given a diagnosis of “PDD-NOS”, a type of autism-spectrum disorder (ASD). Over the next few years, he would be labeled as having “mild autism”, “high functioning autism”, “autism spectrum disorder” and “autism”. That first diagnosis was such a shock at the time – I thought, “that’s not possible! My son doesn’t have autism – he doesn’t sit in a corner rocking back and forth oblivious to the rest of the world!” Jack was incredibly bonded to his father and me. I thought children with autism couldn’t demonstrate affection. I can clearly remember telling my husband when we took Jack to the psychologist that, “we were just going through with the evaluation to rule *out* autism” – because he certainly was not autistic! I had a lot of stereotypical views about autism in my head that I’ve since learned are not true for every child “on the spectrum”.

In hindsight it was clear that Jack was not a typical baby from birth. He was hypotonic, or “floppy” and overly fearful and sensitive to unfamiliar environments, people or certain sounds. I remember spending the better part of every Gymboree class holding and soothing him because he would get so overwhelmed. But as first time parents we didn’t know any better. It wasn’t until Jack was 9 months old and it was obvious he still could not sit up on his own, that our pediatrician became concerned and we began the ongoing process of evaluation, diagnosis and therapeutic intervention. I also had the “benefit” of having a niece with similar developmental delays. So, we were fortunate to seek Early Intervention services early on. Jack began receiving physical and occupational therapy when he was 12 months old. Speech therapy started at 18 months, but it would be another 18 months before his words began to emerge.

For Jack, every single milestone that most parents of typical children take for granted came slowly and with great effort. Things most children learn instinctually, like clapping hands or playing with a toy had to be painstakingly taught. Most difficult of all was teaching Jack how to interact with other children. It was painfully difficult to bring him to the park or even to therapy. When Jack would see another child, his instinct was to either ignore the child as an object or attack him or her. When friends or family came to visit, Jack would physically attack me. When he got older and was able to walk, he would hide in his room. It seemed like he would never be able to relate to other children. I sadly wondered whether he would ever have a “real” play date or a friend. I wondered if he’d ever bond with his baby brother who was 6 months old when Jack was first diagnosed with ASD.

From very early on I noticed that Jack could be soothed by music. Young children with autism have “meltdowns” that are like a nuclear version of a tantrum, stemming from a fear or frustration, and made worse by their inability to communicate. From infancy I discovered that I could soothe Jack during a meltdown by singing soft, repetitive lullabies – even in situations like

the doctor's office during an EKG or on an airplane when he was in a full-blown panic attack. It was as if the music reached in and gave him an anchor to hold onto.

Other than "Mama and Dada", Jack had no spoken words until the age of 3, although he did have some hand signs that I had taught to him. When he did finally begin to speak, it was exceptionally difficult for him and single words came extremely slowly. Because of his low muscle tone, Jack had very poor oral motor skills and as a result could not easily form the sounds of the words. It's a bit like how a stroke victim can understand language but not be able to get their mouth to make the words. And yet, long before Jack could put two spoken words together, I realized he was "singing" along with songs that I would play for him in the car. Somewhere along the line he latched on to the "A B C" song as one of his favorites and it became one of his bedtime lullabies.

When Jack was nearly 3 ½ I took him to another state to visit my family. We were at my sister's house and several of my nieces were there. My nieces had tried to engage Jack to play but eventually gave up. Instead Jack retreated to the kitchen by himself and was methodically opening and closing the silverware drawers, over and over, as a type of "autistic-stim". My sister and I were chatting, when I noticed my nieces sitting around the dining room table. They were practicing sign language and began to sing the "A B C" song while using the signs. The next thing I knew, I noticed Jack had stopped opening and closing the drawers, and look up, and *smile* at my nieces. He walked right up to the table next to the girls and began to sing along with them!

It was so simple. It was so powerful. It was a miracle happening right before our eyes! It was the first time I had ever seen Jack engage with another child. The music had reached out and connected him with my nieces in a way that nothing else had been able to do. At that moment he was right there with them like any other typical child. I understood then the immense power of the arts to touch and connect a human soul. It is something that is unique to our human experience. It was a moment I will never forget.

One year later, Jack is talking more and more – and singing too! And he still asks me to sing him the "A B C" song at bedtime. Jack continues to receive speech, occupational and music therapy, and is in his second year of an incredible public school program for PreK students with autism, all of which have had an amazing impact on his development. A lot of people would be surprised to know he'd ever been given an autism spectrum diagnosis. There have been numerous occasions over the past year when I would hear Jack singing a new song he learned in school – even when he could not answer the question, "what did you do in school today?". Recently, we took a trip for the holidays to visit my family. I wanted to cry at my sister's house when I watched Jack take my nieces by the hand and say, "come play with me." What would be four simple words for most other children was nothing less than a small miracle to me.