

I joined a very special parent 'club' when my son, and only biological child, was diagnosed with autism. Jordan was two and a half at the time. It was a devastating shock that launched a difficult period, filled with painful emotions. I sank into depression, cried, felt envy, anger, fear, anguish, and contempt for friends who seemed to blindly take typically developing children for granted. Like a crazed animal, I searched for information, frantically seeking to regain some semblance of life as it had been before.

Until his diagnosis, I had worked for years as a clinical social worker in private practice, with no counseling specialty. My husband's chronic progressive multiple sclerosis prompted moving to a bigger city, for improved medical and professional opportunities. It was just after the move that we discovered Jordan had autism. Only then, after regularly being asked my specialty, did I define one for myself. I came to realize how my "club" membership qualified me for an important professional emphasis. At that point, I resolved to give myself a year to concentrate on learning everything I could about autism, get my son in an appropriate program, and allow myself to begin to grieve the loss of the dream for whom I expected my child to be.

When the year was over, I indeed emerged, teeming with passion for my work, with the specialty of living with disability in the family. In retrospect I see this as one of Jordan's numerous gifts to me. He brought me satisfaction and fulfillment in working with hundreds of parents who have grown to understand the importance of giving voice to feelings, as a part of healing. I have come to appreciate the phenomenal strength and spirit of those of us who are members of this club, not to mention the courageousness of our children who live with the challenge of autism everyday of their lives.

Lisa Lieberman is a Lake Oswego clinical social worker in private practice with over 20 years of experience. She is a national speaker, having presented to numerous audiences on a variety of disability related topics. She will be doing a regular column for Rain Kids, and welcomes your questions and comments concerning the emotional impact of parenting children with autism. Lisa always would like to hear from families who are interested in being interviewed from a strengths perspective, concerning ways in which they successfully manage the challenge of caring for a child with autism.