

Autism: The new doorway — Pt. 1

Today my son was diagnosed with autism - or ASD. I wasn't terribly surprised. If anything, I was relieved. Three years of searching for one answer had finally come to an end and a lifetime of questions was about to begin.

It started at Frank's two-year-old well visit when the pediatrician noticed that Frank wasn't talking at all and barely engaged with her. She recommended that we seek services from Infants and Toddlers, who provided Frank with in-home speech therapy and visits from a special educator who worked with us on improving his behavioral and social skills. His favorite teacher, Ms. Sandy, blew bubbles with him to teach him how to shape his lips for vowel sounds. She even met us at Brad's, our favorite produce farm, to pick strawberries!

While Frank made progress in some areas, he wasn't growing in others. At times, he seemed to be moving backward. He pinched when he couldn't find the words he was looking for. He had poor sleep habits. He devised elaborate, but dangerous, techniques and mechanisms for getting to the food and toys he wanted without having to ask for help. (The kid's got some serious engineering skills!) He became infatuated with certain cartoon characters (Mickey, Scooby Doo, Curious George...all the classics) and had meltdowns during transitions or when plans were changed.

The hardest part has been keeping him safe. I explained to the doctor that Frank ran in front of a bus on the second day of kindergarten. Since then, he's almost always got an adult keeping an eye on him at school. I think of them as his guardian angels. I was concerned about sending him to public school after Collin and I have spent the past three years at St. Joan of Arc, but through God's divine grace our new home has granted Frank the opportunity to attend a small school that offers him the resources and setting he will need to succeed.

Still, we recognize that there is a long and winding road ahead for Frank. As a teacher, I am aware of many of the obstacles he will need to face and overcome, as well as the impact he may have on other students in his class. His behaviors can be disruptive, but with the right kind of therapy, he will learn coping skills that will

enable him to function in high-stress and over-stimulating environments like classrooms, bustling public places, and, eventually, church.

A lot of times Frank acts out because he's bored. He cut a hole in his sweatpants last week because he breezed through the book his class was reading. He reads at a first grade level in kindergarten and even writes and illustrates his own little books about the adventures of Curious George and Tinkerbell.

The doctor also advised us that Frank may have a lopsided academic development. He may choose to only participate in and complete school work that is relevant to his interests and miss out on the material to be gained other subject areas. Modern math, in particular, is difficult for autistic students who tend to think there is only one way to solve a problem, not several. I'm not sure I agree with her though. Frank's ingenuity is visible in the cities he builds from blocks and the intricate connections he makes between the things he sees every day.

It's hard to say what Frank's future will be. Frank's ASD seems to be relatively mild. The doctor and social worker who met with us said that they don't think he will need to live with us forever. He will probably be able to find and keep a job he loves. Who knows? Maybe he will start a family. I can't let my mind wander too far into the good or bad things that might happen in Frank's life.

Tomorrow, I will reveal the things I know for sure so far.