

Early Years

My pregnancy with my son was perfect. He was highly active in utero but the pregnancy had no issues. He was alert and calm at birth, but suffered from what I thought was colic. After weeks of sleepless nights, and 6+ hours straight of crying a night, I realised that he would sleep well and peacefully if he was directly in contact with me all night. This has continued even now, at five years old. He has to be in physical contact with someone in order to sleep. As an infant, he was relaxed but alert. He rarely babbled, but had an amazing ability to communicate his needs with his body language. He was up and running independently at 9 months and hasn't slowed down since then! We struggled with some feeding issues from early on, despite using baby led weaning and allowing him to independently feed from 6 months. Meal times were always messy and stressful, and he had a limited diet. He would refuse to eat for days at a time if he was presented with food that wasn't a "safe" food.

Seeking Help

I first took him to a paediatrician when he was around 2 years old, as I had concerns about his eating and the frequency and intensity of his tantrums. He was becoming aggressive towards me, and I was finding it difficult to manage. We were referred on to see a psychologist who started the process of testing for autism. During this time, he was attending a childcare service, and they flagged behavioural and aggression difficulties. Autism strategies, such as visual schedules and sensory aids, were put into place, with very limited success. Eventually the behaviour escalated to a stage where the childcare employed a 1:1 aide for 15 hours a week, and he could not attend outside of those hours. At this stage, I was feeling overwhelmed with my inability to parent, so I reached out for help, first with an early childhood intervention provider (who was as perplexed as I was), and later with 'Child FIRST'. I took a parenting course specifically for children with a disability, and worked with a social worker for a few hours a week to try to manage the things I was struggling with. I felt completely unable to control my son, at home or in public, and his aggression was becoming dangerous to all around him. Eventually we left that childcare after I became aware of physical abuse and exclusion towards my son. I entered the Queen Elizabeth Centre for a week's stay, for intensive parenting help. The professionals there noted that my son required a high level of care at all times, that he had severe eating difficulties and that further support was required. After leaving, I had a social worker provide an intensive in-home, 8 week parenting support program, of around 15 hours a week. With her help, we tried regular autism and ODD parenting strategies, with limited success. These strategies would be effective for a couple of days and then stop working again. During this time, he was enrolled in a new childcare centre, who employed a 1:1 aide and reduced his hours to 12 hours a week in order to manage his aggression and noncompliance. Towards the end of that year, his psychologist attended a seminar in the UK about PDA, and came back to me with her suspicions that this applied to my son.

Discovering PDA

Reading through the information about PDA was like someone had finally turned on the lights. I had answers and an understanding as to why everything that everyone had tried in the past had been unsuccessful. We enrolled him into kindergarten this year, with the knowledge of PDA, and were able to prepare the staff for his needs. Understanding that I needed to reduce demands and work with my son in a more cooperative and respectful manner has made a huge difference to us. He was also recently diagnosed with severe ADHD, and has started medication, which has improved his focus, reducing the frequency that others need to place demands on him. Next year we start school

and I feel better prepared for the challenges he may face. He will require a modified program and a 1:1 aide to ensure that he thrives at school, and that is okay! Finding out about the existence of PDA has changed everything for us, and I strongly believe it needs more recognition in Australia and New Zealand.