A Teacher’s INTUITION

Karen Eriksen was not prepared for the train of events set in motion by her son’s school report.

It was Year 2 school-report time. Our son had never been an easy child, but we were relaxed. We’d had frequent positive updates from his teacher and expected quite a good report. And there it was, the big white envelope. The report’s negative summary took us completely by surprise.

We met with our son’s teacher, who elaborated on our son’s sometimes unusual behaviour in the classroom. He was very set on classroom routines, she said, didn’t cope with change very well, was prone to meltdowns and interrupted her often. On the other hand, he had an amazing wealth of knowledge. But he sometimes had problems concentrating and finishing his work – hence some of the average results. Recess and lunch times were problematic and they had been sending him to the library to avoid conflict with his peers.

The word Asperger’s was mentioned for the first time.

Asperger’s syndrome is an autism-spectrum disorder that describes children with non-verbal-communication problems. Children with Asperger’s can lack empathy and miss social cues.

They often have remarkable knowledge in one field of interest, and a fantastic memory. This is true of our boy, who is a walking dictionary. Kids with Asperger’s are often seen as eccentric or odd, and can be overwhelmed by the demands of daily life and become the object of bullying. The concentration necessary to function normally, and the accompanying anxiety, can lead to mental and physical exhaustion. Their subsequent frequent meltdowns can cause peers to distance themselves, especially as they get older. They can also be affected by gross-motor-skill problems or clumsiness. If most of the kids in the schoolyard are playing handball, our boy becomes isolated because of his lack of coordination.

After meeting our son’s teacher, we were in shock. The possibility of Asperger’s had lifelong ramifications. We went through denial, despair, tears and feelings of helplessness.

Luckily, we found a brilliant young psychologist who could see our son quickly. My son and I filled out lengthy questionnaires, and he was tested for hours, including having to interpret people’s feelings from photos of different facial expressions. Reading people’s expressions is hard for people with Asperger’s.

I thought he did quite well, but the verdict was textbook Asperger’s. This has led to frequent sessions with a psychologist, who is trying to help my son understand his emotions, anger and frustrations, and deal with them in an appropriate manner. But the main help will come from us.

After working our way through a mountain of books on Asperger’s, we are still in two minds about where our son is on the autism spectrum. Unlike many others with Asperger’s, he will look people in the eye and greet them properly. He enjoys his friends’ company, tries not to dominate play, and in team sports does his best. He doesn’t seem to be very sound or light sensitive, and doesn’t show unusually repetitive behaviour.

We now know things are not that bad. He will just need more guidance and patience. Knowing as much as possible about our child gives us the best shot at helping him lead a contented life. Therefore, we are immensely grateful to the teacher who had the courage to point us in an uncomfortable direction.