

JEFFREY: From Worrisome Childhood to Wonderful Adulthood

By Carol Stock Kranowitz, MA



Jeffrey at 19

December 2003: My sister-in-law Nomi calls. She is worried about her precious grandson, Jeffrey Simonoff, almost two years old.

During his first year, Jeff has wowed us with his precocious behavior. At six months he began to talk. At eight months, he stood up and ran, skipping the intermediate steps of crawling and walking. With outstanding motor skills, he could climb, pull himself under the monkey bars, and outshine his little peers on the playground equipment.

But, Nomi frets on the telephone, these days Jeffrey is having frequent meltdowns. He has become a fussy eater with poor digestion (due to not-yet-diagnosed celiac disease). He resists baths and getting dressed. He doesn't sleep soundly, so his parents Melissa and Randy, and siblings Brynna and Benjamin, don't either. Jeffrey can't play well with other toddlers. He hits. He bites. And recently he has stopped talking.

"He may have a developmental problem," Nomi says. "It's called autism."

December 2021: "Looking back," Jeffrey's mother Melissa says, "I guess I was in a fog. I remember the pediatrician

noticing how Jeff shook his head and rolled his eyes. Also, he banged his head. I said, 'Oh, he does that because he likes the sound.' The doctor said, 'That's unusual behavior ... but I'm not sure it's autism.' I heard that and thought, 'Huh? Where did THAT idea come from?'

"Things began to add up," Melissa continues. "In his playgroup, Jeffrey didn't respond when his name was called. I thought he might be hard of hearing. At 18 months, he had a hearing test but wouldn't respond or point to the correct ear, and the audiologist thought he had an attitude problem. Then, after a three-hour psychological evaluation, the psychiatrist advised me that Jeffrey was autistic."

The family was at the threshold of a new world. Once they got the message, Melissa and Randy (for whom the diagnosis was not a surprise) got to work. They set out to learn everything they could by reading about autism and sensory processing differences, attending conferences, consulting with educators and therapists, and interacting with experienced and supportive families.

At 19, Jeffrey is doing great! Living at home, he helps out by cooking dishes such as gluten-free quesadillas and pineapple curry. He delivers meals for DoorDash, using his mother's car until he has saved enough to buy his own. At Pike's Peak Community College, where he's on the Dean's list, he studies computer coding, calculus, and physics. ("As for physics," he says, pointing a finger toward the sky, "now, that's really something!") He will transfer to University of Colorado in Colorado

Springs as a junior.

In a couple of recent Zoom gatherings, we talked about Jeffrey's path from worrisome childhood to wonderful adulthood. Here are some stories about what he has learned.

Getting in Sync with Deep Pressure: Squeezes and tight spaces help Jeffrey get in sync. He likes being under weighted blankets and feeling headphones press against his skull, often without sound. He says, "I like all the things that claustrophobics don't."

As a little boy, his "Time Inn" place was his sleeping bag. He would cram it with stuffed animals and then squeeze himself in among them. (See my article, "Time Inn: A Welcoming Accommodation," AASD, May-July, 2020).

When he got overexcited or began to stim, his parents would hug him or squeeze his hands. Tactile and proprioceptive input to his skin and body continues to be calming and organizing.

Remembering "One Mean Teacher and 30 Kind Classmates": Jeffrey says, "Other kids saw me in a positive or neutral light. Mostly, I wasn't bullied. But in third grade, some of the kids would knock me around. The teacher ignored bullying.



Jeffrey at 3, with funny eyeglasses

She was actually hostile. She took away a Bakugan toy, even though fidgets were in my IEP, and didn't return it until the end of the year. I needed it! I couldn't find the words to tell her. That year, I went through a phase when I was at a low point and felt suicidal."

Randy says, "When we saw marks on his body from being bounced against the walls when the teacher wasn't paying attention, we went to school to talk to her. We tried to help her understand his needs, but she was not very responsive . . . it was so painful." He swallows. "Jeffrey has learned he must speak up for himself."

Fortunately, most teachers and classmates have been terrific. Melissa says, "When Jeffrey was in sixth grade, we went to a Parent/Paraprofessional/Teacher (PPT) meeting to discuss his IEP. The teacher said, 'Jeffrey doesn't have one advocate in the classroom,' and our hearts sank, because we thought things had been going well. Then she said, 'No, not one -- he has 30!' She was a wonderful teacher, and he was surrounded by 30 really kind kids."

Dealing with Criticism: Jeffrey found joy in the physically and mentally challenging martial art, Tae Kwon Do. His regular instructor understood when Jeff needed a bathroom break or a drink of water to deal with symptoms of celiac disease. One day, when Jeff was 15, a different teacher refused to permit a break. Hypercritical (and hyposympathetic!), this teacher said, "You always take too long. You fool around in there." Jeffrey was so angry that he refused to attend classes for several years.

Telling his story, he says, "I was depressed, hollow, not fulfilled. I wanted the physical activity, but this teacher turned me off. I had to learn to ask for help and not just walk away. I'm better at asking now. I'm ready to go back. We are social beings; we need other people."

Drawing: "I draw to calm down and to express myself," Jeffrey says. "I draw with a pencil. I don't like pens. Pens have a

lot of issues. They open themselves to mistakes. I can't correct them. I draw anime, manga, Japanese art forms. I want to go to Japan, learn more about the art, and maybe work for Nintendo. I post my drawings on Reddit."

Smiling, he points to himself. "It used to be so hard to take criticism. Now, it's OK to put myself out there to be critiqued."

Being Autistic: Jeff says, "I don't have a big problem with autism." He frowns, concentrating. "I'd say there are just a few small autistic behaviors . . ."

Here are three.

Jeffrey holds up one finger. "I speak formally. But I don't always get the words out, even though I've always been more mentally mature than other kids. I have apraxia. My problem is word retrieval. It's frustrating when you have ideas but can't say them, and when people don't listen."

He holds up a second finger. "As for my emotional baggage, at times I become over-reactive, which I'm not proud of, and sometimes I just don't show any emotion. And it's hard to read other people's emotions."

Melissa gives an example of how Jeffrey is learning to understand emotions. She turns to him and says, "When the dog died, and I needed your help to take his body to be cremated, I was so, so upset, but you didn't react at first because I was calm. But later, Jeff, you hugged me and offered to drive us home because you came to understand how much more upset I was than you were. You showed true compassion."

Jeffrey nods, pleased.

Randy says, "How about impulsivity? Tell Aunt Carol about the bear spray." Jeff laughs and says, "Yes, let's have at it." He holds up another finger. "I have to think hard about not being impulsive -- like the time I pulled the pin on the bear spray canister. You see, it said, 'Pull the pin.' I felt like the instructions were telling me that I must do it. Other kids would know not to do just because that's what the instructions say. And not in the kitchen, I guess."



Jeffrey's pencilled art

Being Human, Being Known: "I think of myself as basically normal. I'm human. I try not to be eccentric. I don't think of myself as being at the top of the heap with my computer skills and art, and I'm not going to blow my horn. Trying to be humble. But I want to... to somewhat stand out. Not to be a famous celebrity, not like the Prime Minister of Japan or anything like that, but to have the just-right kind of personality: to make my mark doing something I do well. I would like to be known."

If only Jeffrey's grandmother could see him now! ■



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processing differences (SPD) and, with Joye Newman, on fun movement activities in the "In-Sync Child" method.

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