

Stirring Up the Gifts: Autistic Living

By Kia Smith



Autism is a neurological disorder that interferes with a person's ability to communicate with and relate to others. This disorder is becoming more prevalent in our society and affects approximately 1 out of 150 births in the United States.

When Carla Tyrell, Ms. Black Georgia 2006, found her home affected by autism, she wasn't sure how to react.

Tyrell describes her reaction to having her middle child, Jared, diagnosed autistic as a mixture of confusion and hurt. "I knew he was extremely smart because of his quick response to recognizing complex shapes from flash cards, such as hexagons and octagons at just 14 months, and all of a sudden he's regressing. I was a little hurt. I was a little confused. I was wondering why my child. Why me?"

For the first year and a half, Jared developed normally. "When he was born he was normal—a very quiet child, very good. He was born at 10 pounds which was abnormal," Tyrell laughed. Tyrell did notice that Jared had what she described as a sixth sense.

"When he was about 18 months he told me that I was pregnant with a baby girl," Tyrell stated. Jared, who is now 8, was referring to his 5 year old sister. "From that time on, from 18 months on, he regressed. He just started acting a little different."

When do signs appear and what are they?

Signs of autism usually appear by the child's third birthday although a medical diagnosis is often not received until later. Jared, who started experiencing symptoms when he was 18 months, was not formally diagnosed until he was 7. "By 3 years old, they came up with a Significant Developmental Delay, SDD, which is just a basic term. They can't give a diagno-

sis until they get older. I just got a diagnosis for him last year."

While the signs of autism vary, the sensory systems of autistic individuals are extremely different from that of other people. They are more sensitive to light, sound and touch. However, the degree to which they are affected varies from person to person.

"I can explain it like this," stated Tyrell. "If someone tied your hands

unable to learn. "A lot of them have a learning disorder," explained Tyrell. "They cannot learn the way that certain people teach them. Not to say that they can't learn, but they're not learning the traditional way we would learn." The key to ensuring autistic children reach their fullest potential is making sure they work with knowledgeable professionals who can help them further develop academically, mentally and socially.

Jared's teacher is a prime example. She has studied autism and uses unique techniques to make sure her students are learning and comfortable. The instructor uses pictures, computers and audio devices to help students retain information. She also dims classroom lights and plays classical music so students can concentrate better.

Therapy is another activity in which all autistic children should participate. Jared attended Kidsplay Therapy Center in Loganville, Ga. Kidsplay Therapy offers resources to parents and doctors who need a nurturing environment for occupational, physical or speech therapy for their children or patients. While at Kidsplay Therapy, Jared

participated in occupational and speech therapies where he learned skills that would help him better communicate and interact with others.

Tyrell acknowledges the fact that not all families with autistic children can afford to place their children in therapy. "I have insurance for my son, so I can get him therapy," Tyrell stated. "A lot of people who have low income or who can't get insurance, it's going to be hard for their children to get therapy in order for them to be productive in society. That's a major concern of mine. What's going to happen to the [children]?"



Carla Tyrell (center) pictured with her husband, Pete, and their kids: Jared, 8, Jade, 5, and Jordan, 13.

behind your back so you couldn't do anything, then they put a bright light in your face so you can't see anything, put loud music in your ears and something bad-tasting in your mouth with a piece of tape over it, what would you do? What would you do if you can't do anything? Wouldn't you scream? They're experiencing something that they can't explain because they can't talk."

Autism and Schooling

One common misconception about autistic children is that they are

Dealing with the Stigmas

Often people write off autistic children as dumb or unintelligent. Dealing with people who don't understand your child's illness is always difficult, but the situation is even more difficult when it is the child's teacher who doubts his abilities. "Last year I had a problem with his teacher. As far as teaching him, she was not able to get any information to him. Basically she was telling me that he can't learn," Tyrell stated. "I said, 'That's not true.' I believe in God, I believe in the power of God and I know what God can do. And with that belief in mind, I would go home and teach him things on my own with a rhythmic tone, and he would pick it up. How can someone like that not learn?"

As far as dealing with others who aren't familiar with Jared, Tyrell's reaction is simple. "I don't make an excuse for Jared. He is the way he is and I can't help it. He can't help it. People might look at him a little strange if he does something weird, and I'll just say he's autistic, and people understand instantly."

Questions Answered

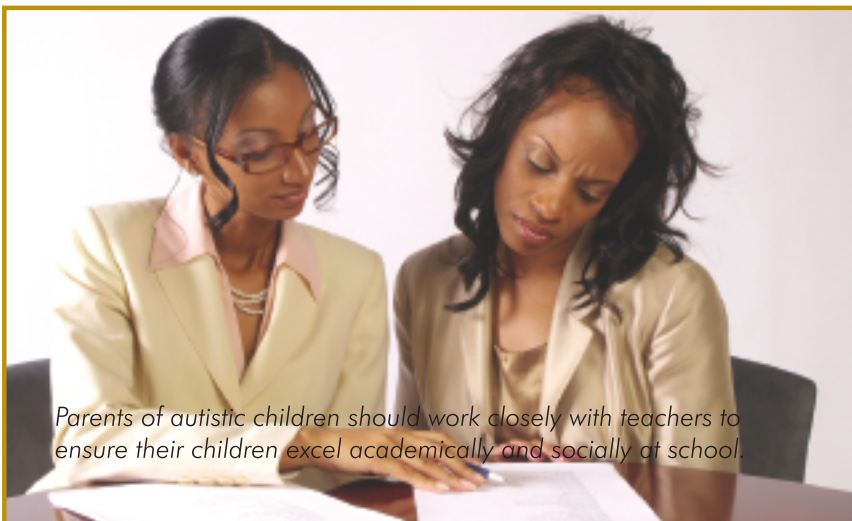
Tyrell no longer asks herself, "Why me? Why my child?" All of those answers have been settled in her spirit. "The more the years go by,

I see why," said Tyrell. "I'm supposed to be doing what I'm doing today. If I didn't have this child, I would not be able to help other children. Even this whole Ms. Black GA thing, I was not trying to get into a pageant. Somebody saw my picture on the website because I'm an actress. They wanted me to get in there, so I said I'm going to do that and go ahead and launch something for my son. God has a plan."

Tyrell is using her experience with autistic children and her position as Ms. Black GA to help other par-

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1 out of 166 births in the U. S.**

ents of autistic children deal with their situation. Stir Up the Gifts is Tyrell's proposed program that will offer resources, programs and assistance to autistic children and their families. Tyrell's program will be based in Dekalb County, Ga., and eventually expand to other areas. Tyrell, who is a filmmaker, also plans to produce and direct a mini-documentary that deals with autism. **BH**



Parents of autistic children should work closely with teachers to ensure their children excel academically and socially at school.

Tyrell reigned as Ms. Black GA in 2006. For more information about Ms. Black Georgia, Carla Tyrell and her projects please visit www.msblackga2006.com.

Signs of Autism in Children

- Does not respond to his/her name
- Can't communicate his/her needs
- Has delayed speech skills
- Does not follow directions
- Appears deaf at times but not others
- Does not point or wave
- Stops speaking or babbling
- Throws intense or violent tantrums
- Has odd movement patterns
- Has uncooperative behavior
- Does not know how to play with toys
- Does not smile when smiled at
- Has poor eye contact
- Prefers playing alone
- Is independent for his/her age
- Does things "early" for his/her age
- Appears to be in his/her "own world"
- Not interested in other children
- Has unusual attachments to toys, etc.
- Walks on his/her toes