

Chapter 5

Fathers' Perspectives: Supporting Your Child on the Autism Spectrum Through Their K–12 Journey

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ABSTRACT

I am a dad. Not a common dad. Rather, I am uncommon. Uncommon and very much like Dan Marino, Doug Flutie, Joe Mantegna, Sylvester Stallone, and Ed Asner. We are all dads to children with autism, or, as I will call us, “Autism Dads.” Having a child on the spectrum is a unique dad experience. And having a child that receives an autism diagnosis can be surprising. Adjustment to this new information can take some time. When we have a family member with autism, each family member’s role must shift a little with unknown expectations. This chapter has the purpose of sharing from one dad to another some of the important steps you should consider taking to support your child on the autism spectrum in the kindergarten-through-high-school academic journey. First, a discussion of relevant literature and finally some tips and suggestions based on experience are presented.

INTRODUCTION

Learning that your child is on the autism spectrum can be surprising. Trying to figure out how to help your child can be challenge. In this scenario, fathers have a unique role to navigate. The following chapter will share some ideas about the father’s unique role in helping their child on the spectrum navigate school, learning, teachers and friends.

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REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A brief definition of autism may be in order. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a lifelong condition characterized by very mild symptoms to severe impairments in communication skills, social interactions, and unusual behaviors that interfere with independent functioning and interactions with others. ASD may cause financial, social, and emotional difficulties that negatively affect the entire family. With an examination of this definition, it is clear that fathers of children with autism will have some unique challenges in front of them. Literature highlights this unique experience and the unique role of the “Autism Dad.” In the following sections of this chapter, I will offer some ideas and strategies for fathers helping their children navigate the kindergarten through senior year school system.

Unique Experience

What has it been like to be a father with a child on the spectrum? This is an interesting question to explore. Everything about it is unique. For example, as a father, I have always seen myself as responsible for discipline and structure, to maintain a healthy order and provide the structured framework a child needs to grow and develop in a properly socialized fashion. I believe many fathers have this innate instinct and it’s an important part of how your children see you. However, with autistic children, their perception of you is likely something you will never understand completely. And further, their capacity to make the kind of cause and effect connections fundamental to understanding how and why you respond to their behavior, good or bad, are not necessarily there. For example, the application of a punishment to discourage a particular behavior may not be the most effective way to address a problem. Many times my child would shock me with their complete misunderstanding of why I was

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