

I am the mother of a 6 ½ year old boy (Robert) who is autistic. For those of you who only know about autism through Dustin Hoffman or Bruce Willis movies, let me assure you that the majority of autistic children don't fit into that category.

Autism affects approx. 1% of the population. It is a neurological disorder which affects all autistic children differently. The main problems that they have are speech impairment (some never talk), socialisation problems and behavioural problems.

Robert wasn't quite 2 when he was first diagnosed and he spoke only a couple of words. He would take our hand and lead us to the cupboard or fridge to initiate what he needed.

When he was 2 ½ he started talking more and with the language came the behavioural problems. If he was angry or frustrated, he didn't know how to express it and would have tantrums instead. He had a lot of anxiety also and he hated having his nails and hair cut. I would have to wait until he was asleep to do it. We tried to take him to the hairdressers but he would just be screaming and no one would even let us in to their salon with him

When you have a child with a disability you have to make a lot of hard decisions, things that could affect them for a long time to come. When Robert was 3 we were offered an early intervention placement for him at Autism Qld in Sunnybank. Because we live on the Gold Coast it meant putting a 3-year-old on their bus to travel there and back three times a week. It was one of the hardest decisions we made it was also a good one in the long run.

When I saw the Qld University offering families like us an opportunity to participate in the Stepping-Stones Triple P, that was an easier decision. I didn't know anything about the program but we were willing to try anything once especially if it meant making our lives easier.

We were going through a very rough patch with Robert when we started and I was being hit or he would dig his nails into me and I had a lot of scratches from him. Going to the shops was becoming impossible and if he had a tantrum people would stare and it would make the shopping trip very difficult and highly stressful.

Triple P showed us ways to control the behaviour and taught us that getting into a routine would make our lives easier and better. It all sounded so simple and the best part was that once we put into practice what we were taught at each session, it did actually work.

Eventually the things we learnt became routine and seem so normal that we just got on with it and if had a problem we could just go back and look through the workbook and try one of the varying methods we had been taught to try and improve things. If it didn't work one way then we could look for a different way as we had been shown many different techniques which could be adapted for various situations and for all ages. One of the other great things about the program is that it can be adapted and used for all types of disabilities which is great because all disabilities are different and every autistic child has different traits.

It also taught us that we could have time out to ourselves without feeling guilty. In having a break it would actually mean we were in a better frame of mind to look after Robert.

Before doing Triple P we had devoted every waking minute to Robert. I had given up work and just worked at home doing our books making my life very isolated and I had no opportunity to meet other people. I thought the only meaningful thing I would do with my life would be looking after Robert. Triple P taught me that I could still contribute to the community and they showed me how important it was that I make time for myself and still

have time for Robert.

One of the other important things I learnt and still use frequently, is that bribery if used properly, can work wonders.

I wish I could show you what Robert is like today and how much he has changed from when we began the Triple P program. If you saw us out today, you wouldn't think he was the same child.

When we go to the hairdressers, he walks in and sits down – his only complaint is that it has to be a man that cuts his hair.

When I need to cut his nails, he lets me and he sits still till I'm finished – he still wants a lolly when we are done but it's a small price to pay. We even managed to take him to the dentist without any problems last year. Even I scream when I know I have to visit the dentist!

The incidental learning techniques we learnt have paid off. Robert can read well above his grade and has a very curious mind. He loves watching documentaries, can tell you anything about dinosaurs, knows all the planets and who Yuri Gurgin is. He even teaches me things I never knew.

As for me, well I can now go to work without worrying about whether or not I am doing the right thing and I am helping in the running of the newly opened Autism Support Centre on the Coast, something that I enjoy doing and something that helps Robert.

I just hope that all the families who have a child with a disability have the opportunity to see this video as our family is living proof that it can make a huge difference to their lives.