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Jessica Heaton

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People Think My Son is Psychotic

Laura and Daniel Avery like most expectant parents wanted their first-born child to be picture-perfect. They were young, newly-wed, and recently graduated from the University of Utah. Like many couples, they struggled with the feelings of fear and anxiety that come along with weighing the pros and cons of having kids. They decided that despite their apprehension, they wanted to start immediately trying for a baby. Less than a year later, Spencer Bryson Avery was born. He was a perfectly healthy baby boy. Both mother and baby recovered easily from the delivery and were discharged early from the hospital. Today, Spencer is now six years old. He is now so severely disabled that Laura and Daniel wonder if he will ever get married, maintain employment, or even be able to make it through the first grade.

Long before any major concerns, The Avery’s had a happy and responsive infant that sprouted into a seemingly healthy toddler. I know Laura because she was my co-worker. I remember how excited she was throughout her pregnancy and how up until she quit working, she would tell us stories about how amazing it was to be a mother. Laura had decided to quit working as an account executive when so she could be a stay-at-home mommy. She had had worked very hard through school to get the career of her dreams, but she felt like her time would be better spent with Spencer at home because she felt like he needed a full-time parent. Daniel

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was paid entry level salary at a small computer software company, but it was enough to enable him to provide for his family. The newly-wed couple was content and close to having everything they had ever hoped for.

Although Spencer was their little angel sent from heaven, there were some minor hiccups in his early development. The Avery’s had been eagerly anticipating their son’s first word, but Spencer had yet to talk even at twelve months old. Spencer was not crawling by age when most babies are already walking. Most infants start walking around a year of age, Spencer was a year and a half before he took his first steps. The women of mothering experience in Spencer’s playgroup told Laura to just “wait and see” and “be patient”. Spencer did eventually start talking, crawling, and eventually walking by eighteen months old. His motor skills developed gradually in comparison to other children who are usually walking and talking at one year of age.

Despite developing at a slightly slower pace compared to most children, Spencer behaved much like other kids his age until he was in preschool. At three years old his behavior started to change dramatically. He stopped talking. Spencer would instead point to things that he wanted. He wouldn’t use his words, even if he already knew the words to use. He also stopped wanting any kind of physical forms of affection such as hugging or cuddling. He would scream, wail, and sometimes hit Laura when she went to pick him up. He became very preoccupied with Legos, he would put rows of them together and pull them all apart. He would do this repetitively for hours at a time. Laura remembers feeling as if her child was slipping away from the world. At this point, The Avery’s feared that something was very wrong with their son. They scheduled an appointment with Spencer’s pediatrician. The pediatrician referred Spencer to a child

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psychiatrist. Their visit with the psychiatrist didn’t bring The Avery’s any consolation. Their fears were confirmed after she went on to tell them that Spencer might have Autism. Getting an exact diagnosis was going to require routine visits under observation. Autism is a condition that affects the normal growth of the brain, so that the individual has difficulty with day-to-day living. There is never a one-size-fits-all behavior pattern for Autism, and children exhibit varying degrees of the disorder in terms of severity. The psychiatrist told The Avery’s that there were symptoms that Spencer shared with other children suffering from the disorder, which include: repetitive mannerisms, temper tantrums, persistent preoccupation with parts of an object, limited interests, and social alienation. The psychologist also went on to tell them that it was unlikely that Spencer would recover. Laura cried. Daniel had to take a moment to leave the room recollect himself. The couple was devastated. Over the next few of weeks, The Avery’s tried to wrap their heads around the idea that their son may have a condition that was not only un-curable, but also degenerative. After a few more visits involving clinical observations and testing, Spencer was diagnosed with Autism.

I sit with Laura as she recalls Spencer’s fifth birthday. She tells me the details of what happened with a hint of sadness in her voice. Spencer had a big birthday party that included Spencer’s relatives and kids from his kindergarten class. While the adults conversed, the rowdy kindergarteners were laughing and playing with each other. Spencer sat in an isolated corner playing with his Legos. When his grandmother touched his shoulder to encourage him to interact with the other kids, he stood up quickly, backed up against a wall, and screamed at the top of his

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lungs. Laura rushed over to calm him down, but Spencer kept screaming until his cheeks flushed and he began to choke for air. He continued to scream despite his mother’s efforts to console him. Not knowing how to react, the guests cleared out after whispering among themselves and exchanging uncomfortable glances. When Spencer had finally noticed that the room was empty,

he then calmly resumed playing with his Legos. Spencer is now six years old and he is very different from other children in his first grade class. Spencer rarely speaks or interacts with

anyone other than his parents. He spends most of his school days in an isolated classroom intended for children with special needs. The Avery’s wonder if keeping Spencer in school is doing him any good. His parents struggle daily with the challenges that Autism has brought to their lives.

Laura says that caring for a handicapped child is unbelievably difficult. She also wanted to make it very clear that she loves her son unconditionally and that nothing about Spencer’s Autism would discourage that. I asked Daniel why people without children should care about Autism, he said “More children are diagnosed with Autism every day and it’s unfortunate that people will have an ignorant attitude about things that don’t affect them personally. Imagine that your cousin, niece or nephew screams bloody murder every time you try to give them a hug. People think my son is psychotic.” Autism is becoming more prevalent and a situation similar to Spencer’s can happen to anyone. The Avery’s hope their story will inspire people to educate themselves about Autism.

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Spencer behaved much like other kids his age, up until he was about three years old. His behavior started to change dramatically. He stopped talking. Spencer would instead point to things that he wanted. He wouldn’t use his words, even if he already knew the words to use. He also stopped wanting any kind of physical forms of affection such as hugging or cuddling. He would scream, wail, and sometimes hit Laura when she went to pick him up. He became very preoccupied with Legos, he would put rows of them together and pull them all apart. He would do this repetitively for hours at a time. Laura remembers feeling as if her child was slipping away from the world. At this point, The Avery’s feared that something was very wrong with their son. They scheduled an appointment with Spencer’s pediatrician.

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