# What Do You Do If Someone You Love May Have Autism?

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**"Massimo has Autism. Are you surprised?"** the doctor from Philadelphia said when Massi was sixteen months old. My husband Alex said he was surprised and set out to prove the doctors wrong. If I am being honest with myself, I was not surprised at all.

**At 12 months of age, Massi didn't speak, make eye contact or respond to his name.** He only would laugh when you threw him up in the air or look at you when you made a really loud noise. Our Pediatrician, Dr. Dana Sless with Brighton Pediatrics in Egg Harbor Township had me fill out a questionnaire at Massi's well visit. The results concerned her and she recommended that I contact The New Jersey Early Intervention System (NJEIS). She didn't come out and say that Massi had Autism, but she did mention it as one of the things that could be causing his delays. Certainly Alex and I were worried, but our oldest son Paul was two years old, I was pregnant with Rocco and we were leaving in the next few days for Disney World, the happiest place on Earth!

**Hoping for the best,** I pulled myself into believing that Massi wasn't talking because his brother was talking for him and that he wasn't responding to his name because we called him Massimo and Massi interchangeably. And really how important is eye contact anyway!? We went off to Disney with pits in our stomachs, "It's a Small World" jingle in our heads and a suitcase of denial.

*Massi on his first birthday!*

Every single time we stood as a family to take a picture the photographers would say, "Look at the camera and smile." Massi would not look. Every singlt time the photographer would ask us what Massi's name was. He would then say "Massi, look over here buddy." Massi still would not look at the camera. It was not until the photographer or his assistant made a really loud noise that Massi would turn and look at the camera. I realized on that trip, that something was really wrong with our baby.

## What is Autism?

If you search the Internet for a definition of Autism you'll find many different results. That's because Autism comes in many forms and if you know one child with Autism, you truly only know one child with Autism. At its core, Autism is a complex neurodevelopmental disorder that appears in early childhood and is characterized by difficulty in social and communication skills including using language, understanding abstract concepts, forming relationships and communicating with others the way that many of us easily do every day. In New Jersey 1 in 45 children has autism.[1]

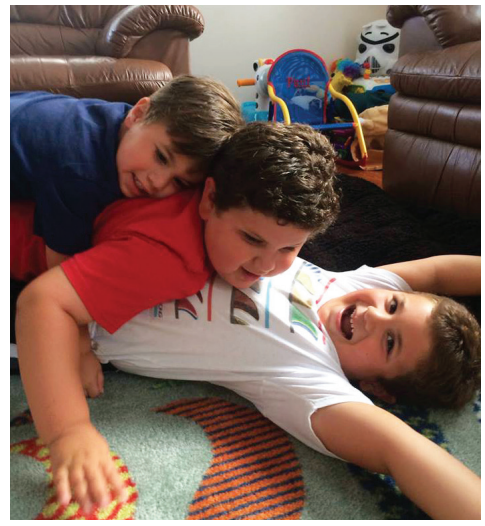
Many Doctors will tell you that early **diagnosis and intervention play a crucial role in the ultimate success of a child's outcome**. When we came back from Disney I made an appointment with NJEIS and CHOP for an Autism evaluation. My next call was to FACES 4 Autism. Ken and Isabelle Mosca created FACES in 2002 after their son Kyle was diagnosed with Autism. When I called Isabelle I knew that I had to do something for our baby. Isabelle put me in contact with a number of different people and local resources. I contacted Sue Elmer whom Isabelle recommended for speech therapy. Within only a few sessions with Ms. Sue, Massi said his first word!!!!

## Living in Denial

We had not yet seen the doctor in Philadelphia and Massi was starting to really come along thanks to his speech therapy sessions with Sue and the beginning of Early Intervention services. I started to doubt my earlier concerns. I started to take my husband's approach and set out to prove the doctor's wrong. Denial is a much happier place to live, in the moment.

My denial house came crumbling down shortly thereafter. All of the kids were playing together and the extent of Massi's delay truly hit me. My nephews, Jerard and Caprio, who are about nine months younger than Massi, were playing with this red box that had a yellow lid with holes of various shapes. Inside the box were toys in the shape of the holes. The idea was for the child to put the shape through the appropriate hole.

**I'll never forget that moment.** Massi had been in therapy for two months working on putting the shape into the right hole and there was Jerard, nine months younger than Massi, playing with this toy with ease. It just seemed like such a silly and easy game for Jerard, but yet for Massi he had to actually work to be able to do that.



*Paul, 6-years-old, Massi, 5-years-old, and Rocco, 3-years-old*

## What do you do if someone you love may have Autism?

When a child you love is diagnosed with a developmental delay or neurological condition like Autism, it can be a very scary, lonely time for the family. Alex and I had so many questions about our family's future, and while we are blessed to have many friends and family that love us dearly and were incredibly supportive, it was hard to find anybody who could truly relate to what we were going through.

**I cannot thank FACES 4 Autism enough**, as well as all of the therapists and teachers in Massi's life who have helped him become the fabulous little guy he is today. He has grown in leaps and bounds and while I am afraid he will always struggle to keep up both academically and socially, I can see the pieces of the puzzle fitting together easier and easier as the years progress and am excited about his future.

***If you think your child may be delayed developmentally or have a neurological condition like Autism, call your family physician or see a developmental neurologist. Reach out to FACES 4 Autism online at FACES4Autism.org or call Isabelle Mosca at (609) 412-3750.***

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