

Raising a Child with Autism: A Love Story I Never Expected

If you had asked me a few years ago what motherhood would look like, I probably would have given you a typical answer. I would have talked about first words, little conversations, hearing “Mom, watch this!” from across the room. All those small, everyday moments that seem so ordinary—but mean everything.

Motherhood turned out differently for me.

My daughter, Clair, is on the autism spectrum. And loving her has been one of the most challenging, emotional, humbling, and unexpectedly beautiful experiences of my life.

Expectations vs. Reality of Motherhood

Being a mother or parent never turns out exactly as expected. But one of the hardest parts about parenting a child with autism (that no one really prepares you for) is the communication gap.

It's looking at your child, the one you carried and cared for, and realizing you don't always understand what they need. It's the moments where she's frustrated, reaching, upset... and I'm left guessing. “Are you hungry? Do you want your toy? Are you tired?” And sometimes, none of those questions are right.

There is a very specific kind of heartbreak that comes from not being able to understand your own child. And an even deeper one from knowing they can't tell you what's on their mind. An action as simple as asking for a drink—something most of us wouldn't think twice about—can feel like climbing a mountain for her. And as her mom, you feel that weight just as heavily.

Then there's the part that's hard to admit out loud—the comparison. You see other kids her age talking, asking questions, telling stories, just... communicating, so easily. You smile; you're happy for them, you truly are. But there's a quiet ache that sits with you. Because while other parents are hearing full sentences, you're applauding eye contact. While they're correcting pronunciation, you're celebrating a single word. And sometimes you go home and wonder, “Will we get there?”

Maybe you will. Maybe you won't. The reality of parenting a child with autism is that you truly can't predict what each day will bring. But sometimes, a shift occurs, whether or not you're prepared for it.

Recently, at almost four years old, I've started to see Clair flourish. The communication I've yearned for is progressing. The understanding I've tried to nurture is growing. And the connection we've always felt is finally starting to show up in ways I can hear and see.

And then, one day, she said the words I had been waiting so long to hear.

"I love you, mama."



Four simple words. Ones that many parents hear early on—but for me, they carried years of hope, patience, and love behind them.

It wasn't loud or perfectly clear, but it was hers. And it was everything.

She wrapped her arms around me, holding on tighter than she ever had before, and I just broke. I buried my face into her shoulder and cried in a way I didn't know I could. We stood there, rocking back and forth and holding each other. And in that moment, it felt like the whole world

paused. It was like she knew—like she understood how long I had been waiting, how hard I had been fighting to hear those words. Like she knew I needed it.

Even now, every time she says, “I love you, mama,” I feel it all over again. The tears still come, just as quickly, because it’s never just three words. It’s every therapy session, every sleepless night, every moment of doubt, every ounce of hope that led us there.

How One Life Touches Another

Autism impacted my family long before my daughter was born.

My nephew, Freddy, has severe autism, and his journey has been incredibly hard to witness. There were moments where his frustration became so overwhelming that it turned into self-harm—hitting, biting, hurting himself in ways no child should ever feel pushed to do. Watching that as an aunt, and even more so watching my sister Wendy experience that as his mother, changes you irrevocably.



Not long ago, Wendy made one of the hardest decisions a parent can—to have Freddy admitted to the hospital for both his safety and hers. There is no version of that decision that feels okay. It’s not something you ever imagine doing. It’s not something you want to do. But you do it because you love your child enough to choose help, even when it breaks your heart.



After several weeks of treatment, though, Freddy began to thrive in the hospital.

With structure, support, and the right tools around him, he started learning coping skills—ways to calm himself down, to regulate, to find even a small sense of control in a world that often feels overwhelming to him. For the first time in a while, there was hope—real, tangible hope—that these skills would carry over into life at home.

And for a moment, they did. He's home now, where he belongs. But autism doesn't follow a straight line.

Regression is one of the most heartbreaking parts of this journey. It's when a child learns something new—something you celebrated, something you held onto with everything in you—and then suddenly, it's gone. Words disappear. Skills fade. Progress feels like it slips through your fingers no matter how tightly you try to hold onto it.

It can feel like taking one step forward... and five steps back.

And for parents, that emotional rollercoaster is exhausting in a way that's hard to put into words. You celebrate, you exhale, you think maybe you've turned a corner—and then you find yourself starting over again. Not because you failed. Not because *they* failed. But because autism is unpredictable like that.

Wendy's starting to experience that again, witnessing Freddy's behavior change and regress. And no, it doesn't get easier the second time. Now you know just how much hope was tied to that progress.

And still, she shows up every single day. Because that's what parents do.

A Bond That Can Never Be Broken

Like many parents of kids with autism, I don't raise my daughter alone, but alongside my other children. Wendy and I have 8-year-old boys who are just a month apart. My son, Brenden, is older than Clairra, and my youngest nephew, Sammy, is a year younger than Freddy.



The kids may all be close in age, but their personal experiences as siblings and cousins are wildly different. And maybe not what most people would call “typical.”

But they are something incredibly special.

Brenden and Sammy are always ready to help—not because they're told to, but because they want to. Because they love their siblings in a way that's instinctive and protective. They observe more. They understand more. They grow up a little faster than most kids their age.

Instead of a carefree, typical childhood, my nephew Sammy's world looks different. Freddy needs constant attention, and simple things like getting dressed or leaving the house can become overwhelming for him.

What might be an easy Saturday for other families—a trip to the park, a picnic, a gathering—often isn't possible for Sammy's family. When Freddy is overstimulated, plans change, and life shifts back inside the walls of their home.

Sammy has learned to adapt in ways most children never have to. He watches his brother closely. He knows when something is coming before it even happens. He knows when to step away, when to give space, when to stay close.

And he's seen moments no child should have to witness, like the day four paramedics came to take Freddy to the hospital for the care he needed. He's learned things no child should have to learn, like how to dodge a flying tablet. And through all of it, Sammy doesn't complain. He understands in a way that feels far beyond his years. I'm in constant awe of his inner strength, but I also know it weighs heavily sometimes.

Still, Sammy wouldn't give up his role as Freddy's protector for the world.



My son Brenden shows his love in a different way. Every time my daughter says something new, it's like he wins the lottery. He'll come running to me, full of excitement—

“Mom!! MOM!! Sissy just said, ‘Watch TV!!’”

Those moments are just as crucial to him as they are to me. At school, he asks his teachers about Clairra—if she's having a good day or a bad day, and if they need him to step in. He carries her with him, even when she's not there.

And then there's the part that's hard for the kids—the part we try to explain, but that doesn't always feel fair. Because the truth is... it isn't always fair.

There are days when Clairra and Freddy will only eat certain foods because of severe food aversions. So they might get chicken nuggets, while Brenden and Sammy are expected to eat their vegetables. There are moments when we use candy, rewards, or other approaches to help them through something small—because their brains work differently, and they don't always process right and wrong in the same way. And the boys? They notice. They understand... but it doesn't always make it easier.

As parents, we find ourselves saying the same thing over and over—

“They're different.”

“Their brains work differently.”

“We have to do this for them.”

And while it's true, it doesn't erase the fact that we are treating the kids differently, because we have to. That struggle is real.

But somehow, through all of that, these boys love their siblings fiercely. They celebrate their wins, protect them in ways that are beyond their years, and show a kind of compassion that most adults spend a lifetime trying to learn.

Because there's a part people don't talk about enough—the joy. The joy hits differently.



Embracing the Joy

When your child reaches a milestone, it's not just exciting; it's everything. A new word, a new way of communicating, a small breakthrough—those moments feel huge. You don't take anything for granted, because you know how much it took to get there.

My daughter is one of the funniest people I know. She dances like no one is watching—full of joy, full of energy, completely unapologetic. It's the kind of freedom most of us lose as we grow up. Clair's silly, expressive in her own way, and she sees the world differently. Honestly, it's kind of beautiful.

And my nephew Freddy? He is stubborn in a way that could drive anyone crazy—but we've learned to see it differently. That boy knows what he wants. There is strength in that, even on the hardest days.

One of the most incredible things about children on the spectrum is how deeply they know their people. They may be reserved with others, they may not engage the way people expect, but when they trust you—when they feel safe—they open up in the most genuine, meaningful ways. There is nothing surface-level about their love.

It is intentional. It is real. And it is deeply felt.

Autism has changed the way I see parenting—and honestly, the way I see life. It has taught me patience I didn't know I had, strength I didn't know I needed, and gratitude for things I might have otherwise overlooked. It has slowed me down in the best way, because when progress isn't guaranteed, you learn to celebrate everything.

This journey doesn't look like what I imagined. It isn't always easy. There are hard days—really hard days. There are moments that break you, and moments that build you back up again.

But there are also moments of pure joy, deep connection, and overwhelming pride.

And when my daughter looks at me now and says, "I love you, mama," I know something for sure.

This may not be the path I expected... But it is exactly where I'm meant to be.

