

“Is Your Son On the Spectrum?”

**In her own words,
Alysia K. Butler, who has a recently diagnosed son, describes her
experience being part of the autism community.**

The question was slightly jarring to me. My son and I had just walked into a gymnastics class for kids with autism. We had received his diagnosis only three weeks before and we hadn't shared our news with anyone except for close friends and family. It was the first time we had been anywhere that was just for kids like mine and I wasn't really ready to talk to a total stranger about it.

“Yes,” I answered, trying to keep the conversation short.

“Hi and welcome! That's my son over there and my name is Sandy. How old is your son? Do you live in town? How long have you known your son was on the spectrum? What was his diagnosis?” I really didn't want to answer her. I wasn't even sure we belonged at this class and all I wanted to do was pay attention to my son to see how he was responding to the class. I watched the other kids as they came in – six boys and one girl – and my first instinct was that we were in the wrong place. One little boy was crying, another was spinning in circles and another one was running in all different directions. My son's not like that, I thought to myself. This isn't us.

And then I looked at my Henry. I watched him hold tightly to his one-on-one helper's hand as they walked on a low balance beam, but he wouldn't look her in the eye when she talked to him. I watched him try to run away to jump into the comfort of the sensory foam blocks and become so focused on that foam pit that he couldn't move on to anything else. I listened to him babble while he swayed back and forth on the rings and saw the terror in his face when the noise level got up too high. The tears welled up

in my eyes. We did belong here. This was the right place for him. We had found a safe place for him to exercise and develop his muscles in an environment that understood his special needs. For so long we had avoided the “regular” gym classes, music classes and playgroups because of his behavior. No one here was giving me the usual disapproving looks we get when we're out places and Henry starts to act up. I took a deep breath and turned to the mom.

“Hi! My son Henry was diagnosed with PDD-NOS a few weeks ago. We do live in town. In fact, I've seen your son at the preschool that my son attends. How long has your son attended classes here?”

It took everything I had to have that conversation, but it was such a relief. This other mom was reaching out to make a connection – to find someone else who struggles on a daily basis like she does – something I myself had been desperate to do for weeks and months. I was instantly welcomed into a community of people who “get it.” No one batted an eye when Henry buried himself under the foam blocks at the end of class so he didn't have to leave. I got comforting looks of understanding from all the parents and teachers when he had a major meltdown leaving the gym and big thumbs up from everyone when we finally got our shoes on and went out the door. These were moms and dads who shared my daily difficulties of just getting out of the house. Finally, we were somewhere that felt like we belonged.

“Will we see you next week?” asked the mom.

“Absolutely,” I replied.