



THROUGH
Katherine's
EYES



*By Catherine Grant, MSPAS, PA-C
The Urgent Care Center of Richmond Hill*



Most children love going to the fair; just the energy felt when you arrive in the parking lot is enough to get most kids wired and ready for some fun! The bright lights, roar of the rides, the ring of the games as people win, and the smell of cotton candy are intoxicating. They are alluring to most every child. Imagine, however, arriving at what is supposed to be one of the most fun places and experiencing something quite different. This is life for some children suffering from autism.

You pull into the parking lot, and you're already overwhelmed by the bright lights and can hear the roar of the generators keeping all of the chaos going. You get out of the car, and it seems the sounds have magnified to a deafening degree. You squint your eyes to keep out the neon glare of the lights and an overwhelming smell of a barnyard mixed with sugar seems to permeate your being. As you near the ticket booth there are hundreds of people moving in different directions and talking loud enough to compete with the generators, ringing and rides. "Step right up, step right up," booms from one of the speakers competing with the 70s rock-and-roll music from something that is moving very fast... people are screaming...they seem scared. Your brain can't filter all of this input... You are in overload and try to shut it all out.

Clockwise: Catherine Grant, MSPAS, PA-C, The Urgent Care Center of Richmond Hill; Catherine with her parents.



When Katherine's mom answered the door, she greeted me with a warm smile and invited me into her home. She was putting away the last of Christmas and making sure they had everything for school to start back while Katherine was playing in her room. I was wearing my scrubs, which, in hindsight, was a poor decision. Katherine was playing with her favorite Christmas present, Yo Gabba Gabba figurines situated on her bed's Yo Gabba Gabba blanket. Our initial interaction was a little rocky. I am blaming the scrubs, but soon after we met she was wearing her beautiful smile and her blue eyes were sparkling.

Katherine and her parents moved to Richmond Hill six years ago. "We thought it would be a better place to raise our daughter and we heard the schools were great," explains her mom, Shambre. Katherine is a fourth-grader at Carver Elementary School whose favorite food is "fruit!" She loves riding her scooter and looking through magazines—tearing out the interesting pages. Although Katherine is much like other 11-year-olds, she loves her teacher, Mrs. Dolan, her pediatrician, Dr. Seibert, and wants others to accept her; she is also different in many ways. Katherine does not

enjoy going to the circus, the fair or even the grocery store. These activities and many more are not only unpleasant for her, they are overwhelming and cause her a great deal of distress. Katherine was diagnosed with autism at age five, before that her parents had never even heard of it.

Autism is a developmental disorder that manifests in early childhood. It is estimated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that 1 in 110 children in the United States are autistic and boys are four times more likely to develop this disorder than girls. Autism occurs in all racial, ethnic and socio-economic groups, and—like most conditions—it affects those with it to varying degrees. The signs and symptoms of autism begin before the age of three and affect them throughout their lives. However, with early intervention and consistent therapy, symptoms may improve over time. At this time it is still unknown what causes autistic disorders to develop, although it is thought that genetic abnormalities, complications during pregnancy, exposure to toxic agents and infections prior to, during or after delivery are all possible contributing factors. Contrary to popular belief, there is much evidence showing that childhood vaccinations are not linked to autism.

Katherine's parents first noticed that she was "doing things a little slower than other kids about her age" when she was around two. "She was a late walker, but so was I," reflects her mom. Over time Katherine began to develop other symptoms that concerned her parents such as hand-fidgeting, rocking and delayed speech and language skills.

"Childhood vaccines are much less stressful to the immune system today than they were thirty years ago. Although children receive more vaccines for more diseases than were available years ago, the immune reaction to each vaccine is much less, because we have improved the vaccines over time. If you combine all twenty childhood immunizations given today, they cause less stress on the immune system than one DTP did thirty years ago. This is why there has been such a dramatic decrease, over the years, in side effects such as fever.

Childhood vaccines today are all also mercury-free (with the exception of one brand of flu vaccine, which is not carried by SouthCoast Pediatrics office in Richmond Hill). In recent months it has become public that the Wakefield paper, which initiated the concerns over a link between vaccines and autism, was deemed fraudulent and that the outcomes were falsified. If there ever was a time to protect your child from preventable diseases, it is now."

— Keith Seibert, MD

"Katherine just wasn't doing things the same way other kids her age were" says Shambre. Her parents both remember feeling like something was wrong, but they weren't sure what. Katherine began seeing more doctors when she was diagnosed with epilepsy (also known as seizure disorder), which happens to be fairly common with autism. It was then that her diagnoses were established, and her parents began their quest for knowledge and understanding.

Autistic disorder is a neurobiological disorder that affects the perception of the world around you and thus your reaction to it. People with autism often experience heightened senses of sight, sound, touch, smell and taste making what would typically be experienced as non-threatening, a hostile environment.

It is important, as a community, for us to realize when we see a child that may not be behaving as we think he should, to not assume that this child is the product of poor parenting. They may have an underlying medical condition such as autism that causes behavior that most people do not understand. For this reason, offering a compassionate word as opposed to criticism to the mom or dad at Kroger with their hands full seems the only answer. As a community, we should not only

increase awareness, we should also embrace acceptance of all members of our community. This includes focusing our energies toward a better understanding of these developmental disorders. ✧



Are you concerned your child may have a developmental disorder? Below are some possible red flags published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A person with an Autism Spectrum Disorder might:

- Not respond to their name by 12 months
- Not point to objects of interest by 14 months
- Not play "pretend" games by 18 months (such as feeding a doll)
- Avoid eye contact and want to be alone
- Have trouble understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own
- Delayed speech and language skills
- Repeat words or phrases over and over
- Give unrelated answers to questions
- Have obsessive interests
- Flap their hands, rock their bodies or spin in circles
- Have unusual reactions to sounds, smells, tastes, looks or the way something feels.

**This list is not comprehensive and cannot be used to make a diagnosis. If you are concerned that a child exhibits some of the characteristics listed above, discuss them with your Pediatrician.

If you or someone you know is affected by a developmental disorder, there are resources available to help. Some of these include: Kicklighter Resource Center, Inc. and The Matthew Reardon Center both in Savannah, Georgia. There is also an autism support group in Richmond Hill called the Autism Support Corner (912.445.0233).

References: cdc.gov and aap.org

Writers Note:

Thank you Dr. Seibert for your contribution of information related to autism.

