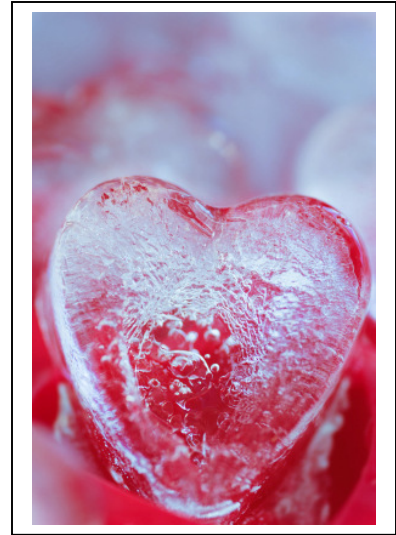


I Need Ice!

By Ferren L. Korr

As I type this, Griffin peeks over my shoulder with an ear-to-ear grin plastered on his freckled face. Griffin is almost always smiling. He must have inherited this cheerful birth defect from his mother because I have spent most of my life in a perpetual grimace. Griffin's mom, on the other hand, smiles enough for the both of us. In fact, she still proudly lives up to her childhood nickname of "Sunny."



In an especially good mood, Griffin contorts his neck to get a better look at my monitor. Still craning and straining for a clearer view, he excitedly asks me if the words I am writing are all about him. In a way, they are. But really, above all else, they are about accepting what life has given us and making the best of it.

Griffin has autism, and he is not just inattentive, distracted, or hyperactive. I could sugarcoat it by saying he is merely developmentally challenged or "differently-abled." But the truth is, no matter what label we use, Griffin is significantly hindered and disabled by this perplexing disorder. Every minute, of every day, autism is a huge part of our lives.

Developmentally and socially, Griffin, at twelve, is much like a three-year-old. He has numerous repetitive behaviors, stims and tics. Griffin's disability is not subtle; it is constantly apparent. It interferes with his school work, social relationships, and ability to perform basic life skills. He needs significant assistance with most things twelve-year-old kids take for granted.

When out in public, Griffin knows he must conform his behavior so as not to invade the space of others or cause serious discomfort to anyone else. This means holding in his stims and keeping himself "under control," so to speak. This is difficult for Griffin. Try to stop yourself from blinking or swallowing for ten minutes and you might get some idea of what Griffin must endure.

Since being out in the world is such a struggle, we try to make home a complete sanctuary for our son. He knows he can completely let loose at home. Cackling, hand flapping, jumping, yelling, and barfing are never out of the question. The noises wafting from our house must make our neighbors wonder what kind of evil experiments we are conducting on our kids.

Sunny and I often wonder what's going on inside his head. She sometimes describes her theory using the analogy of an old style office Rolodex. The cards inside his mind furiously spin around

and around. Occasionally the Rolodex stops for an instant and Griffin blurts out whatever thought is on the selected card. Then the Rolodex starts to spin again.

I think of the bouncing balls the State Lottery uses to pick Lotto numbers on Saturday nights. All the ping pong balls bounce around in the air chamber. One finally pops out and that's Griffin's thought for the moment. Either way, it's pretty hectic in there.

Whatever is going on in his brain, sometimes, letting loose at home is not enough of a release for Griffin. He gets headaches after spending too much time trying to behave "normal" for the benefit of a sometimes callous and non-caring public. When he gets such a headache, the only remedy that helps is a freezer bag full of ice placed on top of his head.

Griffin gallops around relatively gracefully while balancing the ice pack on his cranium. An impressive feat of coordination for a kid who can't put on his own socks, runs like Herman Munster and dances like Elaine Benes from Seinfeld.

After one particularly rough day in public, Griffin needed ice. I was standing by the refrigerator when he stumbled past me in search of his mommy, who was just getting out of the shower.

Sunny is always amazed at how incompetent our kids must think I am because they ask her for everything even if I am more accessible and available at the moment. Little does she know that this is just the fruition of my master plan.

I keep acting incompetent until they stop asking me for stuff. Putting too much milk in the Coco Puffs, or making the oatmeal too hot a few times, quickly relieved me of breakfast duty. This scheme worked brilliantly for the laundry as well. Who knew you shouldn't mix colors and whites in hot water? By continuing to offer my assistance after repeated past failures, I *seem* helpful without actually having to *be* helpful. Truth be told, this depiction of my incompetence is more exaggeration and wishful thinking than reality. In all seriousness, raising a child with special needs is hard work and I do my fair share around the house. However, there are certain types of situations where only a mommy's touch will do. For Griffin, headaches send him straight to Sunny.

Anyhoo, upon reaching the bathroom and seeing his mom, Griffin blurted out the only two things on his mind at the that precise moment in time,

"I SEE YOU NAKED! I NEED ICE!"

Sunny and I knew those two phrases were not related. Griffin did not need ice because he saw his mommy naked. He needed ice because he had a headache. His mommy happened to be naked because that is how most people take a shower. However, that unfortunate confluence of circumstances has haunted Sunny ever since. Whenever my daughter or I see Sunny in any stage of undress, even if it is just kicking off her sandals, we yell,

"I NEED ICE!"

This has done wonders for Sunny's self-confidence and my love life. Therapy is going well and our psychologist believes Sunny may one day be able to take a shower without locking the door and turning off the lights. Griffin remains completely unaffected by the incident, although he does seem to smirk whenever Hayden or I tease his mother about it.

There was a time when we didn't think he would ever talk. Now, thanks to the sometimes obsessive chatter, Griffin isn't the only one in the family who gets headaches. Oftentimes Griffin makes us want to imitate him and hold our ears and scream,

"I NEED ICE!"

In our family we use humor as a coping mechanism and also as a way to bring Griffin into our world. We try not to coddle or baby him. Quite simply, he is a member of the family and he gets the same razzing we give each other. Not only does poking fun not hurt him, we think it makes him stronger.

Many times Griffin's compulsions are exhausting and draining. Occasionally, making light of his more obsessive behaviors dissuades Griffin from continuing them. Rather than caving in and playing along with his disruptive conduct, we tease him. By not giving him the response and feedback he desires, sometimes the unacceptable behavior ceases, at least temporarily. Griffin doesn't necessarily always recognize the humor in the situation, but we find it to be a gentle way to nudge him into more appropriate and tolerable behavior.

Best of all, it lifts our hearts and puts smiles on our faces. We have discovered that, by finding and recognizing the humor in our lives, we are better able to survive it. Laughter allows us to move through tragic circumstances and is integral to our peace of mind. We choose to be optimistic because, well, it just feels better than wallowing in sorrow, grief and self pity.

And, I guess, in retrospect, it's been Griffin all along who has taught us this important lesson, in not taking our lives or ourselves so seriously as we navigate life with autism. Over the years we've discovered many different ways to use humor to diffuse difficult or awkward moments and to raise our spirits. But none have had the instant and magical effect as,

"I NEED ICE!"

BIO

Ferren Korr lives in Florida where Griffin inspires him every day. This story is just one of many he is compiling for a book on the lighter side of raising a child with autism. Ferren welcomes email at Sunstark411@yahoo.com.

Copyright © Autism Asperger's Digest. April 2010. All Rights Reserved. Distribution via print or electronic means prohibited without written permission of publisher.