

The Dilemma of Disclosing Autism

**Sandy Petrovic, RN, BSN and
David Petrovic, BA, MAT**

To tell, or not to tell? Disclosing my son David's autism was a dilemma that evolved throughout his childhood, and it then became *his* quandary to handle. Following the format of our book referenced below, we will share both our perspectives, starting with mine as a mother.

The issue of disclosure was simple when David was a toddler as he was nearly nonverbal until age three and displayed unusual behaviors and aggressiveness. A diagnosis was expected, and I accepted and comfortably shared it with my family and friends. As David's progress over the years led him to a life outside of mine with broader social interactions, the issue became more challenging, especially when he mainstreamed from his special needs school to eighth grade. Disclosures to academic professionals were required so that needed accommodations could be made to help improve David's performance, especially after a disastrous experiment at the start of high school underscored this necessity.

Would it also be necessary to inform his classmates? I continually weighed the risks versus the benefits of telling David's peers. Would they reject and exclude him? Would they tease or bully him, or share the information indiscriminately? Since his differences were obvious, would keeping quiet have the same outcome, missing the opportunity to properly educate other youth? Would explaining his autism and differences help others understand and accept him, leading to friendships? Would it increase David's comfort with peers and decrease his stress?

While David could recite the "definition" and components of Asperger's based on past discussions, on a personal level he was in denial and did not fully understand how it affected him. I realized that his comfort with his autism would affect the quality of his disclosures, and this, in turn, would affect the reactions of those he told. I was also not sure how to counsel him on the content, extent or timing of the disclosures, as well as *who* to tell. Since tactful and sensitive discussions were necessary to support his

self-esteem and optimism, I deferred to his pediatric psychologist, and I supplemented her efforts at home. It was a process during which David came to know, understand, and **like** himself — a bonus beyond learning about effective disclosure.

David slowly began sharing his autism with peers when he felt prepared and ready. Over time, rather than striving to be like others, he did what was necessary for him to thrive as an individual. The risk of rejection due to disclosure might still exist, but I believe the benefits exceed the risks. Now let's hear from someone who dealt with the dilemma firsthand.

David's Perspective

In my special school, I never noticed my peers' differences and was not even very aware of my own. It was an accepting environment, and everyone received individual help and attention. When I got to high school, everything changed for me. I was embarrassed about my autism! I was afraid that if people found out, I would be shunned and excluded. I felt that if I took on this "label," I would be confined within the barriers of a certain group, particularly the "special needs group." While I respected those that made up this group and did not look down on them at all, I did not want this to be my only social outlet. I wanted to have the power to forge my own path. To be my best self, I had to learn more about my situation before I could tell others. Therapy and family support helped me with acceptance, understanding, and how and what to share.

Even though I grasped all this information, I was still hesitant to "come out" to my peers. When a situation came up in which I was called a "creeper" by one of my classmates, I knew that I could potentially change her outlook by disclosing. However, I did not take the initiative to tell the young lady. The time and place were not right, so I said nothing. Several weeks later when I was hanging out with a group, someone asked me why I did the things that I did. I was ready and seized the opportunity. Once they understood me better, those peers became my friends. I realized that telling people gave them greater insight, not only about autism but also about how it shaped me as a person.

I didn't — and don't — just walk up to a random person and say, "Hi! I'm David! I have autism!" I treat it like my Tourette's. Unless I'm "ticking," I don't tell everyone I meet. It is different with each person, group and social setting. When talking with my sports friends, I would highlight how my coordination is affected. With my theatre friends, who are closer, I would share the deeper realities of my fears and insecurities. I have never had a bad experience or regretted telling anyone. When it comes to me and who I am, sharing my diagnosis with classmates was one of the best decisions I have made.

Now that I'm 27, I have experienced many more situations where my style of disclosure applies. I summarize it best in our book:

In my private life, such as with dating and other social situations, my philosophy is not to disclose right off the bat. I first want others to get to know the person behind my autism. I find myself revealing pieces of my diagnosis as they naturally and appropriately fit into the conversation. (370)

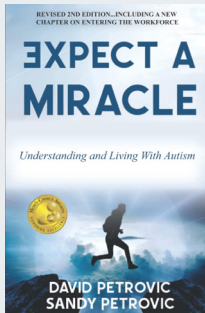
By letting people into my heart and my soul, I can then show them how my head and mind work. If I find someone I care about and could develop a social relationship with, I use the mind **and** the heart to decide when and how much I could potentially tell that person. Ultimately, my disclosure to anyone is all about "a feeling."

I feel the same about disclosing a learning difference and/or the need for accommodations in the workplace or at a job interview. One should never feel the stress of being obligated to disclose, just as with a medical issue. However, it is important to recognize the instances that could make this discussion relevant. An example of this is when the person's condition is starting to cause problems with job performance or communication with colleagues. Should those moments present themselves, I believe that the individual should go straight to the person in charge (either physically or virtually), explain how the difference is affecting his or her performance, and then express the accommodations needed that would allow him or her to thrive.

Obviously, I am extremely comfortable talking about my autism — not everyone is. Whether it is with professors at school, people at work, or peers in social situations, I feel that the extent of disclosure is a personal choice that should bring comfort and peace to the individual who is disclosing. One can share differences and needs without necessarily revealing a diagnosis... I do believe that a benefit of disclosing early is the ability to receive the proper mentorship and accommodations, but not everyone needs to know — and not every detail needs to be shared. (370-72)

The first week of school, I always inform the students in my classes that I have autism. Using myself as an example, I reveal that despite any differences or setbacks persons may have, they can achieve their dreams. I have never disclosed directly to my students' parents but presume that the students did. There has never been any negative feedback — rather, the opposite. It is not an issue since their children's educational needs are being met to the fullest degree and, in many ways, I am adding to their experience.

I believe that disclosure has enabled understanding, accommodations and self-advocacy to help my fulfillment on all levels. But nobody's situation is exactly like mine, so we raise the questions to help people come to their own conclusions regarding disclosure. Personally, I have taken disclosure to a whole new level. My life is literally an open book! Please consider giving it a read!



Work Cited:

Petrovic, David, and Sandy Petrovic. Expect a Miracle: Understanding and Living with Autism. Revised 2nd Edition. KDP, 2022. Print and eBook.

Synopsis: Written from each of our perspectives, this book enables an intricate understanding of life with autism. Covering the challenges and victories of each developmental stage from toddlerhood through young adulthood, it addresses topics such as sensory challenges, bullying, college preparation and success, acclimation to the workplace and more details about disclosure. Filled with tips, strategies and lessons learned, the book would be of interest to those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their loved ones, professionals who teach and counsel them, and employers or co-workers.

<https://www.amazon.com/Expect-Miracle-Understanding-Living-Autism/dp/B09NRBVGXR/>



Work Cited:

Petrovic, David. See ME: The Invisible Autistic Boy. KDP, 2022.

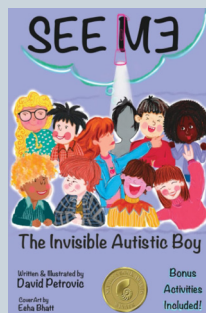
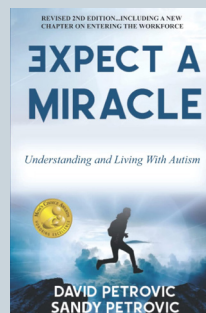
Synopsis: See ME is based on a true story of an autistic boy who felt invisible. A peer then changed everything, inside and out! Watch David emerge and transform in this tale of kindness, worthiness, acceptance, and the power to make a difference. Part 2 explains autism in a kid-friendly way, and the activities of Part 3 reinforce concepts. While this book may inspire children who have experienced challenges or special needs, it is intended for ALL children to encourage compassion and teach valuable lessons (ages 7 to 12).

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BDXLYMSJ>



Sandy Petrovic, RN, BSN, tutors students in a community college nursing program. She is also a public speaker alongside her son, when requested or fitting for the audience.

David Petrovic, BA, MAT, is a national speaker, including his presentation of a TEDx Talk in 2016. He is a happily employed middle school teacher certified in language arts and social studies. He recently earned a Master of Arts in Theology (Pastoral Theology Specialization) with aspirations to teach high school, and he is considering a vocation with the Catholic clergy. David enjoys acting and theatre.



Website and blog: <https://petro-autism.com/>

For information only. Views, recommendations, findings and opinions are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Autism Advocate Parenting Magazine Inc. or anyone otherwise involved in the magazine. The magazine and others are not responsible for any errors, inaccuracies or omissions in this content. The magazine provides no guarantees, warranties, conditions or representations, and will not be liable with respect to this content. Please read our full terms [here](#).