

# Educating a Child With Special Needs

*From the Eyes of a Parent*

by ASHLEY FESTA

Kim Cutcher felt as though her entire world changed when her eldest son, Justin, was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome.

She was relieved.

"We had been searching for answers since he was 18 months old," says Cutcher.

Justin, 13, had had behavior problems in school for years, and his teachers told Cutcher that she and her husband, Craig, needed to address the issue. Even family and friends said bad parenting was the source of the problem.

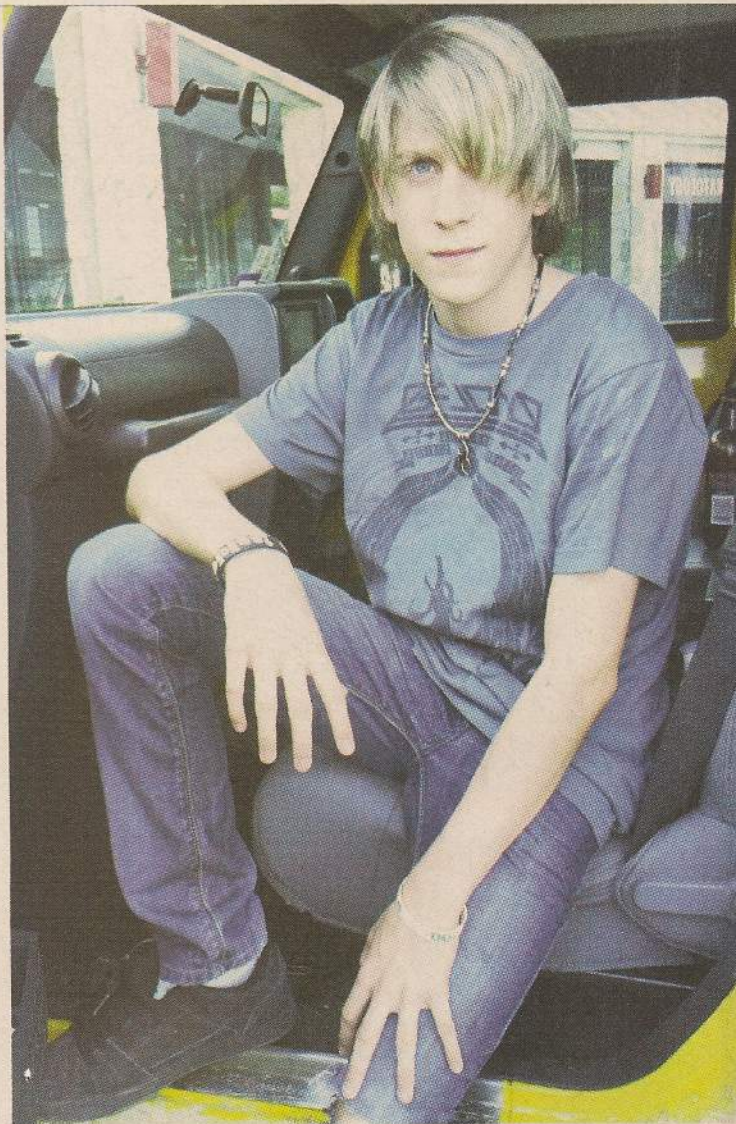
In May 2010, the Cutchers took their son to see a neuropsychologist who discovered the boy suffered from Asperger's, an autism spectrum disorder. Like autistic children, those with Asperger's often have difficulty communicating and interacting socially, and they tend to be particularly averse to change.

In the classroom, the fluorescent lighting, noises or a smell sometimes would bother Justin. The trigger would cause him to become disruptive, but his teachers thought he was simply misbehaving.

"Teachers started listening to us because of the formal diagnosis," says Cutcher.

The Americans with Disabilities Act, which many people might know as ADA, outlines a wide variety of rights for citizens with physical or mental disabilities. To help prevent discrimination in schools, the ADA includes the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA. Under this section, public schools are required to offer education "in the least restrictive environment appropriate" to the student's needs.

Schools are required to develop Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to fit the needs of each child. These programs are developed and reviewed annually by the child's teacher, parents, the child if possible, an appropriate agency represen-



tative and others at the parents' and agency's discretion. A parent has the right to request a review from a state educational agency and can appeal to a state or federal court.

That's the ideal situation.

So what happens when parents object to the quality of education their child is receiving? Do school programs always work out exactly as outlined in the IDEA section of the disabilities act?

Not always, but Cutcher has found Justin's teachers to be accommodating when they are informed about his special needs. Because Justin appears physically normal, Cutcher calls his disorder an "invisible disability" and says in some ways it is more difficult to deal with than a physical limitation.

Justin learns in a mainstream classroom, rather than with a special education group. At the beginning of his sixth-grade

year, Cutcher sat down with Justin's teachers to discuss his disability and the special needs he would have. Because his handwriting is illegible, Justin has been allowed to write using a keyboard, and whenever something in the classroom causes him to feel anxious, he has a special card to put on his teacher's desk that allows him to step out of class, no questions asked, to gather himself. Then he returns to his seat.

"He doesn't get extra time for tests because that's not his weakness," says Cutcher.

Several weeks into Justin's seventh-grade year, Cutcher discovered that although she had provided all the information to the school, several of Justin's teachers still did not realize he had been diagnosed with the disorder and, as a result, wasn't always receiving the accommodations he needed. She immediately put in a call to the vice principal to work out an IEP for the year.

But soon after her visit, she received a call from the school regarding a bullying incident. During the call, Cutcher discovered that the school principal and counselor were both still unaware of Justin's disorder. She was furious. After a three-hour meeting in which she explained her concerns and focused on what could be done to promote awareness in the future, a fledgling plan was developed for Justin.

"It was a really good thing," Cutcher says. "It didn't feel good for us, but good things are happening."

She praised the school's vice principal. "It seems like at least at Justin's school, things are going to change," says Cutcher.

Heather Gonzales helped plan an IEP for her 11-year-old daughter, Carsyn, who suffers from a number of physical disabilities, including Tourette syndrome, attention deficit disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, a partially corrected club foot, and developmental, oral and verbal dyspraxia, meaning she has partial loss of the ability to perform coordinated movements. One of her biggest hurdles is a Chiari malformation, a structural defect in the cerebellum that blocks the flow of cerebrospinal fluid to her spinal cord, causing a range of coordination problems. She cannot read or write, and she attends special instruction rather than mainstream classes.

"I am demanding and have expectations" of the school, says Gonzales. "But I don't expect them to just come up with a plan. I partner with them."

Because her daughter cannot write but can type on a tablet, Gonzales made a request for an iPad. Though the school did not purchase the iPad, Carsyn was provided with similar technology to accommodate her needs.

"Everybody that's a part of her team is willing to take the extra step to not only benefit Carsyn, but all the children," says Gonzales. "I don't know that anything is lacking right now."

However, she admits she's nervous about Carsyn's transition from elementary to middle school.

But Carsyn has already made a move from one school to another. When her teacher went on maternity leave at the elementary school she was attending, the principal, who has a background in teaching special education, went to Gonzales. "She said, 'I don't think we are meeting her needs here.'"

The principal accompanied Gonzales and her daughter to another school with a more advanced program. When Gonzales explained how difficult change was for her daughter, the principal rearranged her schedule to personally observe Carsyn's reaction to the new class.

"She personally invested in one child," says Gonzales. As for her daughter, "Carsyn was a different child in that classroom. Her anxiety level came down."

Gonzales admits her good experience likely puts her in the minority.

"I realize they can't do everything for Carsyn. And that's OK. I can't do everything for her either," says Gonzales.

The parents agree that developing an IEP is a partnership and cannot rest on the shoulders of only one party.

"I give them my own little set of tools," says Cutcher.

"I don't want him to have special accommodation when he's just being obnoxious," she says. "If he's pulling something, we're going to be on the side of the teacher."

Ashley Festa is a freelance writer based in San Antonio.

## Resources

For more information, contact:  
Office of Special Education  
and Rehabilitative Services  
U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20202-  
7100  
202-245-7468 (voice/TTY)  
[www.ada.gov](http://www.ada.gov)

While all public schools are required by law to offer education "in the least restrictive environment appropriate" to the student's needs, San Antonio is fortunate to have other educational facilities that provide opportunities to

youngsters with disabilities:

- Sunshine Cottage  
603 E. Hildebrand  
San Antonio, Texas 78212  
210-824-0579  
[www.sunshinecottage.org](http://www.sunshinecottage.org)
- Monarch Academy at Morgan's Wonderland  
5235 David Edwards Drive  
San Antonio, Texas 78233  
210-479-3311  
[www.monarchacademy.net](http://www.monarchacademy.net)

### After School Program

- Eva's Heroes After School  
@ Nellie M. Reddix Center  
4711 Sid Katz  
San Antonio, Texas 78229  
210-694-9090  
[www.evasheroes.org](http://www.evasheroes.org)