

# MANILA BULLETIN

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## How a child with Asperger's helped his father become a better parent



A FATHER'S LOVE. Emerito Pascual chose to be a stay-at-home dad for his son Miggy – and he does not regret that decision.

MANILA, Philippines - MOTHERS outnumber fathers. This happens during school- and clinic-related activities like assessment, team conferences, and other meetings concerning the education of children with autism. It is not unusual to hear mothers wishing their husbands can get more involved with their children with autism.

Dr. Robert Naseef, a psychologist and director of the Center for Autistic Children says: "It comes from the general trend that men have a hard time facing things they can't fix. They feel powerless and inept when they can't simply work harder to fix their child's disability."

Dr. Naseef, who specializes in families of children with disabilities, added that

husbands probably feel more powerless than their wives do. "By being less involved in the daily interaction with their children, fathers tend to have a somewhat longer period of denial about the

disability and its implications. When men do express their feelings, they tend to show anger or frustration."

The good news is more and more fathers are now not just more involved with raising and educating their children with autism.

Fathers have also found fulfillment in parenting special kids.

Like our Angel Talker this week – Emerito C. Pascual, a 30-year veteran of Philippine marketing communication wars and a guerilla marketing licensed coach/trainer; and proudly, the father of 16 year-old Miggy.

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It's been three years since we last took a family vacation in Baguio. Anticipating the five-hour drive from Manila, each one of us brought along a music CD – '70s CD for me and my wife Marie; rock for my first-born son 17 year-old Jam; and the entire collection of indie CDs for my second son, 16 year-old Miggy.

The rule was we would take turns listening to our kind of music, one CD at a time. Everyone got equal airtime. This is how it has always been in our family: we respect each other's taste in music.

The same kind of democracy applies to restaurant choices. Every Sunday after church, the family would have lunch in a restaurant of his or her choice. And we take turns every week.

With our music choices, mine was folk rock, a bit mellower, good for those long drives while Jam's rock music was easy to take, as I was into heavy metal rock too during my younger days. But Miggy's was a bit hypnotic --- riffs that last for eight minutes. It's like strains of jazz, new age, world music and electronica all rolled into one. Quite frankly, I heaved a sigh of relief when Miggy's turn was over, although he had a few CDs that I really liked and appreciated.

Miggy has always been "different".

We noticed that, at 18 months, he was unusually unresponsive. We decided to have him checked by a developmental pediatrician. What the doctor told us was short of devastating: that Miggy had a disorder, that his development was not according to his age, that it would take countless therapies, that we should brace ourselves for what Miggy would be -- or would not be.

The doctor said that Miggy had PDDNOS, or Pervasive Disability Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified. According to Autism Speaks website, this is a condition on the spectrum that exhibits some, but not all, of the symptoms associated with classic autism. This may include difficulty socializing with others, repetitive behaviors, and heightened sensitivities to certain stimuli.

How I understood that term was: Miggy could have autism.

I remember the silence that stood between my wife and me as we were driving home. So many unforgiving and unfair questions rushed through our heads. What should be a short drive going home seemed like forever.

I don't recall now how long before my wife and I accepted Miggy's condition and decided to heed the doctors advice, applied early intervention, and sent Miggy to different therapists.

My wife very patiently nurtured Miggy.

All throughout his growing up years, Miggy's tantrums were volcanic, short of nuclear. My wife was the only one who could calm him down. Jam and I would always stand helpless when Miggy would rage at some long lines at the fast food center, at not getting his food on time, at hearing music that he didn't like.

I tried hard to discipline him, treating him like a normal child, instead of as a child with special needs. This would eventually lead to shouting matches and both of us feeling sorry and frustrated with each other and for each other. It really didn't surprise me that Miggy connected with my wife better. Of course, it hurt me, it pained me.

## **MAKING TIME**

After countless sessions with numerous therapists, Miggy started to progress and turn into a one, young lad. His development is now according to his age and he excels academically. He is now 16 and in his third year at a progressive school. He looks forward to his junior-senior prom.

He has Asperger's Syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder that is characterized by significant difficulties in social interaction, along with restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour and interests. It differs from other autism spectrum disorders by its relative preservation of linguistic and cognitive development. He still has his quirks, but he has become more patient, more considerate, more mature. He is less volcanic --- his outbursts are definitely less frequent but when he does have one, he is able to control himself more by going to his room and processing his outbursts by himself. When he is ready, that's the time he talks to you.

## STAY-AT-HOME DAD

I took a break from corporate life almost two years ago after spending more than half of my life in corporate world. It was the best thing that ever happened to my relationship with Miggy.

Because I am now a stay-at-home dad and just work out of home, I see my sons more often now. I sometimes prepare merienda for them when they get home from school, and have dinner together.

Miggy comes to me when he needs help with his homework. And I now understand him better ---- maybe not completely, but at least we now connect.

I now know how to talk to him, discipline him without us getting into heated discussions and feeling sorry and frustrated. I now know what drives him, what motivates him, what ticks him off, what frustrates him --- and so in the process, I am able to get under his skin and communicate with him in a way that he understands. He is now more receptive.

With Miggy, I learned how to be more insightful. Truth be told, both my sons Jam and Miggy (especially Miggy) helped me become a better parent.

It has been a long journey for both me and Miggy, for my wife Marie, and my eldest son Jam. Driving home from Baguio, I cannot help but marvel at how God has made all of these possible, of how He has given us so much strength to deal with this, and at how He paved the way for me and Miggy to connect with each other.

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For wives whose husbands are still undergoing what Dad Emi went through in the beginning with his Miggy, here is the advice of Dr. Cindy Ariel (a psychologist for over 20 years, also in Philadelphia, who specializes in treating anxiety, depression, and relationship concerns):

Allow your husband to come to terms with and get to know your child in his own way and at his own pace.

Keep your husband informed about your child and what you learn about him and his autism; leave the information around for your husband to pick up and take a look at in his own time.

Encourage and support your husband to get more involved with your special child; you can let your husband know how his seeming lack of involvement or interest makes you feel; but no accusations.

If your husband has a particularly hard time accepting your son's diagnosis, then some counseling or therapy could be helpful.

But first try to gently nudge him along and to talk to him about your feelings and his with regard to your son.

Continue to encourage positive family interaction as much as possible.

(Source: About.com)

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ASP will hold back-to-back seminars on Feb. 26: "Vocational Training for Persons with Autism" in the morning and "The ABCs of Job Coaching" in the afternoon. Both seminars will feature Landa Bautista,

curriculum director of The Learning Center.

ASP City of San Fernando Pampanga Chapter will be showing "Alyana" (a documentary film on autism in the Philippines), also on Feb. 26. For more details, log on to [autismsocietyph.org/blog](http://autismsocietyph.org/blog).

*Dang U. Koe is the national president of Autism Society Philippines, a not-for-profit family support organization with 48 chapters nationwide, and almost 7,000 family and professional members who are working together to create an environment that helps persons with autism spectrum disorder to become, to the best of their potentials, self-reliant, independent, productive and socially accepted members of society. She is a sought-after seminar and conference speaker on autism. Her 17-year old son Gio, diagnosed with autism, propels her to be a passionate autism advocate.*

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