

HOW TACA HAS HELPED MY FAMILY

An Important Essay by a TACA Dad

I walked into my house after another brutal commute from my office. My wife, waiting for me at the door, promptly asked, "What are you doing tomorrow?" Oh no, I thought since tomorrow was Saturday I had planned on surfing and lying around all day with the kids. Sensing that my plans were about to be thrashed-- like most plans of any family that has a child with Autism--I meekly inquired, "Why?"

"I need you to go to this meeting about how to deal with school districts." "There will be lawyers there that you can talk to, and other parents, and advocates, and no school people and....." "Okay, okay" I finally blurted out, where is it? "It is at TACA" my wife explained. "TACO, what the heck is TACO?" My wife sternly corrected me, "It's called Talk About Curing Autism, T-A-C-A! and you are going."

Great, I thought to myself. Another meeting filled with psycho Autism moms trying to out-do one another on who is getting burned the most by school districts. Don't get me wrong, there are some good groups out there, but lately they have been just plain old bitch sessions--no pun intended! Try being the only man in the group too. God help you if you dare to suggest a solution. But in the end, I will do anything for my 6-year-old boy who has Autism so I ultimately bite the bullet and plan to attend.

On the drive to the meeting I stop to get some coffee because I know I am going to struggle to stay awake. Or sometimes I envy my son's ability to "tune out" when people just go on and on. With coffee in hand I show up to this church in Costa Mesa with about 75 to 100 other folks in the room. Some are chatting away like old pals, some are know-it-alls, with their this is what you HAVE to do; some are wild-eyed, deer in the headlight parents who haven't got a clue about what to do for their children with Autism. And me, with the here we go again, what will I get out of this meeting that I have not heard before attitude.

Over the din of the pre-meeting mingling I kept hearing this one very loud voice. When I finally found the source I saw this very excitable woman running from place-to-place, arms flailing, barking commands, "find your school district group and have a seat." All of this with a tremendous smile on her face. Hugging people left and right as she moved throughout the room. My first impression, who was this crazy lady and how can she be so happy?

"My name is Lisa Ackerman and I want to welcome you to TACA," said the crazy woman. She then went on to explain what TACA was all about. How TACA provides the information and connection to improve the quality of life of people with autism in their families. How it provides help for families who just received an Autism diagnoses. Finally, and most important for my family's stage of the Autism journey, how TACA provides a community by connecting people with each other and the professionals who can help them.

We then broke up into our groups and this particular meeting was helpful in that I met some parents who shared some successes they had with our school district. Later, this

would prove to be helpful for my son's educational placement when I implemented the strategy the parents shared with me. I thought to myself, it is really nice to have a meeting that offers real solutions, not just theories or laws that most meetings just spew out to us parents. When the meeting ended I really want to thank the Crazy Lady and made my way through the crowd to do so. "Hi my name is," and before I could finish she gave me big hug and welcome. A little off guard, I stammered, "You have a fantastic meeting and I will definitely be coming to more." We talked for a couple of minutes and as I finally left I had a good feeling that this meeting was different. Its entire focus was how to help families today, not in the future, but now which is desperately needed and greatly appreciated.

I arrived home and before my wife could ask about the meeting I commanded, "You need to make sure that we have a baby-sitter for the next meeting because we are both going, and the leader, Lisa, she's full of energy and she has a child with Autism and log onto their website because it has a ton of resources ..." "I knew you would like the meeting" my wife finally broke in, "and I know all about the website."

The following month, my wife and I both attended the meeting. At this one we met the "Mineral Lady". I am horrible with names so I always give some kind of description for people. My wife says even when you know their names I still call them by it. She's right! The "Mineral Lady" is in charge of ordering products from the same vendor that we use to buy our son's sorely needed minerals and supplements--only at a 40% discount! Our family struggles mightily with the financial strain that Autism brings and we always have to make sacrifices to make ends meet. With two other small children in our family, they too have felt the financial sting of this dreaded disorder. This savings opportunity is a Godsend for us.

We also met the "Lotion Lady" who sells lotions, soaps, shampoos and other products that our son can use. Many other similar products contain chemicals that our son cannot tolerate and we can use the Lotion Lady's product for everyone in our family. And then there is the "Library Lady" where we can check out books. And the Barbozas (the one name I remember) who bring Starbucks to the meeting. If anyone brings me coffee I will remember their name!

It has been almost a year since we have been attending TACA meetings. During this past year it has more than met my expectations since that first meeting I attended. But there was one area that my wife and I were really having difficulty with. As any family that deals with Autism can attest it is a serious drain on any relationship. The divorce rate for our families is 80%. My wife and I have both had our times when we both just wanted to give up. So when Lisa said that TACA was going to offer couples counseling at TACA's expense we were all over it. The only problem was that there were only 10 couple slots available and with TACA's numbers our chances were slim. Lisa told everyone that an announcement would soon be on the website on how to sign-up. "First come, first served," she said.

I was stuck in traffic on the 110 Freeway heading to my office when I checked my Blackberry and noticed an email from TACA. It was the announcement to sign-up for the counseling session. Being stuck in traffic, it gave me a chance to dial the number in the

email and call the counselor who was going to provide the sessions. I was told to leave a message and I did, all the while thinking I was probably too late. My wife called a few minutes later saying she just saw the email and also called.

That night my wife got a call from the counselor. We were both one of the first callers! Therefore we had are choice of the times slots which worked out perfectly for us.

We have attended four of the sessions so far and have learned that our problems are not unique. That in order to have a successful relationship, even with the strain that Autism presents, that communication is key. We talk now. Not just about Autism, and the kids, and school districts and doctors and medicines and supplements. But about us as a husband and wife. This is something that Talk About Curing Autism can take tremendous credit for. TACA, and especially that "Crazy Lady", Lisa Ackerman because her devotion and dedication for families that struggle with Autism, has given our family a new vision and new hope not only for our son but for our entire family.

Signed,
A dad of a Long Beach TACA Family

Editors note: Special thanks to Tom and his family for capturing how TACA helps families. We appreciate the kind words. These words were part of a contest to win JACK FM tickets to Jacks First Show in August 2006.