Autism Breakthrough

The groundbreaking method that has helped families all over the world

RAUN K. KAUFMAN

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About the Book

If your child has been diagnosed with autism, this book is for you.

When Raun Kaufman’s parents were told that their son was autistic and would probably spend his life in an institution, they decided to look for their own solution. They joined Raun in his unique, isolated world and connected with him there. They then gradually lead Raun out of his disorder and his life changed dramatically. Raun now teaches his parents’ Son-Rise method all over the world and has written this book to help families everywhere connect with their children and improve their lives.

Autism Breakthrough explains autism and its associated behaviours from the child’s viewpoint and shows parents how to apply the practical strategies of the Son-Rise programme. Wherever your child may be on the autistic spectrum, this book will provide hope, support and new ways to break free from autism.

About the Author

AS THE FORMER CEO of the Autism Treatment Center of America, Raun K. Kaufman conducts lectures and seminars worldwide. In addition to his work with families and professionals over the past fifteen years, Kaufman brings a distinctive qualification to the realm of autism treatment—his own personal history. As a child, he was diagnosed with severe autism and recommended for lifelong institutionalization. Instead, his parents developed The Son-Rise Program, which enabled their son to completely recover from his autism with no trace of his former condition. His story was recounted in the best-selling book *Son-Rise: The Miracle Continues* and the award-winning NBC-TV movie, *Son-Rise: A Miracle of Love*. Now an international speaker, author, teacher, and graduate of Brown University with a degree in Biomedical Ethics, Kaufman has completed lecture tours in the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Poland, Spain, and Portugal. He has written articles featured in journals such as *Good Autism Practice* and *The Autism File* and books such as *Silver Linings* and *Cutting-Edge Therapies for Autism 2010–2011*, and he has been interviewed by media such as National Public Radio, BBC television, Fox News Channel, the London Telegraph, and *People* magazine. Kaufman was the recipient of the Best Presenter award at the national Autism One conference, given to the winner of their nationwide survey. He is currently the Director of Global Education for the Autism Treatment Center of America and serves on the advisory boards of the United States Autism and Asperger's Association (USAAA) and the Autism Hope Alliance (AHA). He cohosts the radio show *Raun and Kristin: Bringing Hope into Your Home* on Autism Approved Radio.

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Praise for *Autism Breakthrough*

"*Autism Breakthrough* provides enormous help to those who care for someone with autism. His chapter on helping people with Asperger Syndrome is a revelation."

–Lawrence P. Kaplan, Ph.D., founder of the US
Autism & Asperger Association (USAAA) and
author of *Diagnosis Autism: Now What?*

"*Autism Breakthrough* is remarkable. Raun K. Kaufman has done a stellar job weaving together sensibility, science, and the meticulous learning from his own life experiences as a boy with autism. He presents an approach that is accessible to all parents; a way of being that empowers them to become the "expert" for their child. Building on parents' innate desire and ability, he provides an easy-to-understand framework and practical exercises that help nurture and nourish children's minds and bodies—things you can do with your child in your own home. Raun shares the eye-opening perspective that turned his life around and that has helped countless children around the world."

–Julie Matthews, BS, NC, leading autism diet
and nutrition specialist, cofounder of Nourishing
Hope®, and author of *Nourishing Hope for
Autism: Nutrition & Diet Guide for Healing Our
Children*

"*Autism Breakthrough* is truly a unique, amazing book and absolutely essential for parents of and professionals working with children on the autism spectrum. Raun K. Kaufman provides a well-written, accessible (and humorous!) breakdown of The Son-Rise Program. The program, shown to improve communication and social skills in people with autism, uses a rich set of treatment procedures grounded in scientific principles, with current research attesting to its efficacy. Indeed, if I had a child with autism, I would definitely, with no question, select The Son-Rise Program to help him or her."

–Cynthia K. Thompson, Ph.D., distinguished professor of communication sciences and neurology at Northwestern University and world-renowned researcher in the brain and language processing

"With *Autism Breakthrough*, Raun K. Kaufman has done what few else in the field of autism treatment today would dream of doing. He has empowered parents to take charge again, given them real hope for positive change, and armed them with specific tools and techniques to make those hopes a reality for their children. My own son fully recovered from autism to become the president of his sixth-grade class today (in a regular, mainstream school) thanks to my family's adoption of the very principles of The Son-Rise Program that Raun explains in *Autism Breakthrough*."

–Wendy Edwards, M.D., pediatrician, B. Sc. N., F.R.C. P. (C)

"Raun K. Kaufman's book, *Autism Breakthrough*, is an amazing resource to help you right here and right now to make a huge difference in your child's progress. His supereasy-to-digest guidance on using the techniques of The Son-Rise Program is a game changer. Given the program's record of success, the Autism Hope Alliance has funded families to take The Son-Rise Program courses at the Autism Treatment Center of America. My own son is the beneficiary of the principles explained in *Autism Breakthrough*. I gave birth to my son, but The Son-Rise Program gave him life."

–Kristin Selby Gonzalez, president, Autism Hope Alliance (AHA)

“Raun K. Kaufman has given humankind a roadmap for our journey to unravel the autism mystery. In my forty years in the field of disabilities, I have observed how well-intended behavior therapists, with their sophisticated behavior plans, have created more unwanted behaviors than benefits. *Autism Breakthrough* provides common-sense approaches on how to establish harmonious, humanistic relationships based on trust and unconditional allowance and acceptance. *Autism Breakthrough* is a successful guide to empower people on the autism spectrum to relate and thrive in our day-to-day world, and a significant contribution to the awakening of humanity to neurodiversity.”

–Ken Routson, author of *The Gifts of Autism &*
Alzheimer’s and Beliefology

“*Autism Breakthrough* truly breaks through the ‘autism is a lifelong condition’ paradigm and shifts hopelessness to hope. As occupational therapists and international lecturers, we will be highly recommending this wonderful ‘user-friendly’ resource with all the principles, strategies, and techniques needed to support children and adults with social-relational challenges.”

–MarySue Williams and Sherry Shellenberger,
creators of the Alert Program® and authors of
Alert Program® books, games, and trainings

“Insightful, personal, and accessible. A hopeful message, and one which only a person that has looked through the eyes of an autistic child could offer. Autism Breakthrough is a must-read for all parents of special children. Its depth will touch you and the practical advice will empower you to join your child on their journey toward achieving their unique and limitless potential.”

–Alex Doman, coauthor of *Healing at the Speed*
of Sound and founder and CEO of Advanced Brain

Technologies, creators of The Listening
Program®

Any references to ‘writing in this book’ refer to the original printed version. Readers should write on a separate piece of paper in these instances.

Autism Breakthrough

The groundbreaking method that has
helped families all over the world

RAUN K. KAUFMAN

EBURY
PRESS

To my magnificent parents.
You believed in me when no one else did.
You helped me when no one else could.
You’ve been there for me like no one else has.
“Thank you” doesn’t even scratch the surface.

To the wonderful staff of the
Autism Treatment Center of America.
My colleagues, my partners, my dear friends.
You’ve given such love and caring to so many families.
It’s been my joy and privilege to walk this path with you.

To all the parents out there with special children.
You possess a depth and intensity of love for your children
that nobody else in the world can touch.
I hope that, by the end of this book, you will see that you are
the best thing that ever happened to your children.

To all you special kids still waiting for the people
around you to see and appreciate your specialness.
You’re perfect exactly as you are.
And there’s nothing you can’t accomplish.

ONE

My Recovery from Autism and the Myth of False Hope

YOU LOVE YOUR child more than anything in the world.

In the early days of your child's life, long before any diagnosis was made, there may have been a hundred different hopes, dreams, and plans you had for your child. Maybe some were as simple as cuddling with your child or playing peek-a-boo. Perhaps some were as far-reaching as your child's high school graduation or wedding day.

But then your child was diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder.

You may have felt that many doors were suddenly closed to the child you love because this diagnosis is often accompanied by a long list of dire predictions.

Your child will never talk.

Your child will never have friends.

Your child will never hold your hand.

Your child will never have a job or get married.

Perhaps even: your child will never love you. You may have been told to discard many of those hopes and dreams and be "realistic" in the face of your child's diagnosis. Certainly, there are many, many parents who have heard the pronouncement: "Autism is a lifelong condition."

No one could fault you for feeling grief-stricken, scared, or even angry. You have just been told all of the things your child will never accomplish—as if it had been decided ahead of time. But before reading any further, it is crucial that you understand this: you don't have to accept the limits placed upon your child.

Your child has the capacity for learning and communicating, for experiencing real happiness, and developing warm, loving, and satisfying relationships. Your son or daughter can learn to enjoy affection, play a game, and laugh at something silly. He or she can learn to savor the experience of being hugged or held by you. That moment when your child spontaneously looks into your eyes with genuine joy and connection—that is something you can have, not just for a fleeting second but on a sustained basis. Do you ever imagine your child playing football, joining you on a bike ride, going on a skiing trip with you, playing with other kids at the park, or doing something in the future such as going to college? These events are possible. Children on the autism spectrum are capable of great change, including recovery.

Who am I to tell you this? I'm someone who's been there —not where *you* are, but where *your child* is.

I used to be autistic.

I know, I know. That one's a bit hard to digest. You don't often find "used to be" and "autistic" in the same sentence. This is truly unfortunate, because it points to the intense pessimism and utter hopelessness with which autism is viewed by the people doing the diagnosing. Do you know what my chances of recovery were, according to the specialists assessing me?

Zero percent.

That's right: 0%.

Here's what happened.

MY STORY

When I was a young boy, my parents (authors and teachers Barry Neil Kaufman and Samahria Lyte Kaufman) saw that

I was developing very differently from my two older sisters. I cried incessantly and inconsolably. When I was picked up, I let my arms dangle loosely at my sides.

Before my first birthday, I suffered a severe ear and throat infection, compounded by a violent allergic reaction to the antibiotics prescribed. My life briefly hung in the balance. After a battery of hearing tests, my parents were told that I appeared deaf. As months passed, I seemed increasingly cut off, spiraling ever deeper into my own world.

I stopped responding to my name.

I ceased making eye contact.

I appeared alternately repulsed by and oblivious to the sights and sounds around me.

I appeared deaf to a loud noise right next to me and then mesmerized by an almost inaudible whisper in the next room.

I lost all interest in other people, but I would remain transfixed by inanimate objects, staring at a pen, a mark on the wall, even my own hands, for long periods of time.

I didn't want to be touched or held.

I spoke not a word (nor did I cry, yell, point, or do anything to communicate my wishes), displaying a total muteness that stood in sharp contrast to my earlier crying marathons.

And then something startling: I became fascinated with the simplest of repetitive activities, spinning plates on their edges for hours on the floor, rocking back and forth, flapping my hands in front of my face.

As my condition worsened, my parents raced from specialist to specialist, trying to find out what was wrong. Tests. Tapping pencils. Shaking heads. More tests. (Keep in mind that, in 1973, the year I was born, autism was much less common than it is now, affecting one out of every five thousand children. The latest study from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) puts the incidence of autism at one out of every fifty children while in the UK the National Autistic Society gives a figure of one in one hundred children.) Soon I was diagnosed as severely autistic. My parents were informed that my IQ was less than 30.

What can feel like a devastating diagnosis is not really due to the autism diagnosis itself. The devastation comes primarily from the *prognosis*—all the things parents are told that their child will not do and cannot accomplish.

Like many parents today, my parents were told that the prognosis was certain. I would never speak or communicate in any meaningful way. I would never prefer people over objects. I would never emerge from my solitary world and be “normal.” Moreover, I would never go to college, have a career, or play football. I would never fall in love, drive a car, or write a poem. I might, one day, be able to dress myself or eat with utensils, but that was the ceiling of my possibilities.

My parents, seeking solutions, were given only grim pronouncements. They searched for a light at the end of the tunnel and were given only dark predictions. Over and over again, it was drilled into my parents’ heads: autism is a lifelong condition. The specialists explained that, when I got older, my parents would need to look into permanent institutionalization so that I could be properly looked after.

I am still astounded at what my mother and father chose to do in the face of such a damning verdict. They didn’t believe what they were told. They didn’t write me off. Instead, they turned their backs on all the dire prognoses. My parents looked at me and saw possibilities, not deficiencies. Instead of looking at me with fear, they viewed me with wonder.

And so they began an experiment. They began by seeking to create an environment where I felt truly safe. They didn’t push me. They didn’t try to change my behaviors. They sought first to understand me. Think about this for a moment. How often do we really do this—with *anyone*? People behave in ways we don't understand all the time. For most of us, our knee-jerk response is to try to get that person to change—whether that person is our partner, our friend, a shop assistant, an employee, our parent, or, indeed, our child. When do we ever *begin* our response by truly seeking to understand without pushing, to provide the other person with an experience of safety and caring without trying to get him or her to change? How amazing that my parents began from this most kind and useful place.

Having heard thousands of parents tell me about their experiences with their children's diagnosis and treatment, how they were given a laundry list of things "wrong" with their child, this description from the opening page of my father's book *Son-Rise: The Miracle Continues* touches me deeply:

> His little hands hold the plate delicately as his eyes survey its smooth perimeter. His mouth curls in delight. He is setting the stage. This is his moment, as was the last and each before. This is the beginning of his entry into the solitude that has become his world. Slowly, with a masterful hand, he places the edge of the plate on the floor, sets his body in a comfortable and balanced position, and snaps his wrist with great expertise. The plate begins to spin with dazzling perfection. It revolves on itself as if set in motion by some exacting machine. And it was.
>
> This is not an isolated act, not a mere aspect of some childhood fantasy. It is a conscious and delicately skilled activity performed by a very little boy for a very great and expectant audience—himself.
>
> As the plate moves swiftly, spinning hypnotically on its edge, the little boy bends over it and stares squarely into its motion. Homage to himself, to the plate. For a moment, the boy's body betrays a just perceptible movement similar to the plate's. For a moment, the little boy and his spinning creation become one. His eyes sparkle. He swoons in the playland that is himself. Alive. Alive.
>
> Raun Kahlil—a little man occupying the edge of the universe.
>
> Before this time, this every moment, we had always been in awe of Raun, our notably special child. We sometimes referred to him as "brain-blessed." He had always seemed to be riding the high of his own happiness. Highly evolved. Seldom did he cry or utter tones of discomfort. In almost every way, his contentment and solitude seemed to

> suggest a profound inner peace. He was a seventeen-month-old Buddha contemplating another dimension.
>
> A little boy set adrift on the circulation of his own system. Encapsulated behind an invisible but seemingly impenetrable wall. Soon he would be labeled. A tragedy. Unreachable. Bizarre. Statistically, he would fall into a category reserved for all those we see as hopeless … unapproachable … irreversible. For us the question: could we kiss the ground that others had cursed?

Coming from this reverential vantage point, my parents asked themselves what they could do to understand me and my world. The answer began with something that my mother did. She wanted to understand me—and also to show me that she accepted me as I was. That I didn't have to change to be loved.

So she began to join me in my repetitive, supposedly autistic behaviors. I would sit on the floor and rock … and she would rock with me. I would spin a plate on its edge … and she would spin her own plate next to mine. I would flap my hands in front of my face … and she would flap with me.

My parents so respected me that they focused totally on what *my* experience was—not on whether I looked strange or different to other people.

Hour after hour … day after day … month after month, my mother waited. Patiently, my parents waited.

Every once in a while, and only while "joining," as my parents came to call this true participation in my interests and activities, I glanced at my mother. I smiled at her. I grazed her with the tips of my fingers.

And as my parents began to truly understand my world, as they communicated in a thousand different ways, over and over again, that I was safe, that I was loved, that I was accepted, something astonishing happened. A connection began to form. Slowly, carefully, I began to peek out from behind the veil of my special world. Tentatively, I began to join them in theirs.

As my mother spent hour upon hour on the floor working with me, she made herself my friend in my world. In so doing, a bond of trust evolved. She cherished and celebrated every look, every smile, every moment of connection for which my parents had waited so long. She cheered me on with every small step.

As my relationship with my parents and the world of people strengthened, my mom and dad continued to build an entire program of therapy around me. They helped me to increase my social connection to them and to others, encouraging me to play with them, to look at them, to laugh with them, to take their hands. They constructed interactive games based upon my burgeoning interests, such as animals and airplanes. At every turn, they accomplished this with a deep caring, encouragement, and support—never pushing, always inviting.

Can you imagine it? They embarked on this experimental journey after hearing nothing but hopeless predictions for me. They continued to reach out to me when I gave them nothing in return.

And they persevered in the face of consistent criticism. Learned professionals told my parents that their "joining" would reinforce and increase my "inappropriate autistic behaviors." These professionals chastised my parents for doing the opposite of the behavior modification techniques they recommended—and for having "false hope," for putting their time into an unproven (and just created) approach that "had no hope of succeeding." Family members expressed grave doubts and concerns that my parents were "doing their own thing" and not leaving my treatment in the hands of professionals who "knew best."

Remember, too, that, in those days, the world of autism treatment was a barren wasteland. There were no nightly news stories waxing on about the latest treatments or detailing the lives of families with children on the spectrum. There was no Autism Awareness Month.

My parents witnessed children being jolted with electric shocks, tied to chairs, placed in dark prison-like rooms, held down—and were told that this was progress, the best modern medicine had to offer.

To help me, they had to walk in the opposite direction, alone. Without any support, they supported me. They worked and waited. They persisted and persevered. Not knowing what the future held, not requiring my reciprocation of their love, care, smiles, and cheers, they gave me every chance.

For three and a half years, they worked with me, painstakingly building a bridge from my world to theirs.

And it all paid off.

I recovered completely from my autism without any trace of my former condition. (Go to www.autismbreakthrough.com/chapter1 to see some childhood photos of me and my parents.) The years of work, the late nights, the persevering in the face of ongoing criticism, the love and dedication—it bore the kind of fruit it was never supposed to bear. It produced the outcome it was never supposed to produce. And I've lived the life I was never supposed to live.

THE CREATION OF THE AUTISM TREATMENT CENTER OF AMERICA

My parents developed this innovative, home-based, child-centered autism treatment program because of their very personal experiences entering my world. At the same time, the method they created was based upon what autism actually is—a difficulty connecting and bonding with others—rather than how autism is typically treated—as a problem of inappropriate behavior that must be extinguished, altered, and retrained.

They called their approach The Son-Rise Program.

There were several factors that made their approach unique. First, it was created by parents. That alone was a gigantic departure from the doctor/professional/lab-created norm. Second, my parents began with the premise that children on the autism spectrum are capable of limitless growth. Third, they started by joining me in my world rather than forcing me to conform to theirs. Fourth, they used motivation, rather than repetition, as the doorway to learning. Moreover, they focused on having a nonjudgmental and welcoming attitude with me, seeing that my responsiveness was largely dependent on the attitudes and emotions of the people working with me. And, finally, unlike every other treatment they saw, my parents prioritized human interaction over academics and tasks such as naming colors, adding numbers, and brushing teeth.

But until my recovery was complete, none of these concepts had spread beyond the walls of our house. Until my father wrote a book about it.

Shortly after my recovery in the late 1970s, my father wrote a best-selling book recounting our story entitled *Son-Rise*—now updated as *Son-Rise: The Miracle Continues*. (My father has written eleven other books as well.) Our story was then turned into an award-winning NBC television movie in 1979. As a result, people began to approach my parents for help.

In 1983, they founded the Autism Treatment Center of America (ATCA), part of a nonprofit, charitable organization. (As part of this not-for-profit organization, I’ve witnessed an incredible amount of generosity. So many sincerely giving people have donated money specifically to help families with children on the autism spectrum, allowing the ATCA to provide over $1.7 million in financial assistance last year alone.) The ATCA serves as the worldwide teaching center for The Son-Rise Program. It is situated on a gorgeous hundred-acre campus in Sheffield, Massachusetts. (I never appreciated how beautiful the campus was growing up. Only after living in Sweden, England, Ireland, Boston, southern California, and Portland, Oregon, did I realize the property's beauty.)

The Autism Treatment Center of America is a training facility for parents and professionals. (In the past, people have mistakenly concluded that the ATCA is a residential facility for children, which is not the case). It offers five-day programs during which parents learn how to use the techniques of The Son-Rise Program with their own children.

The beginning program, called The Son-Rise Program Start-Up, is important to remember because I will be making reference to it in many of the case studies we will be discussing. Parents and professionals attend the Start-Up program *without* their children in order to learn the fundamentals of The Son-Rise Program techniques. The course focuses on areas such as language, eye contact, facilitating interaction, teaching new skills, dealing with challenging behaviors, constructing an appropriate learning and sensory environment, creatively challenging your child, training others to work with your child, and sustaining an attitude of hope and optimism about your child. The course is very interactive, with lots of activities, video examples, question-and-answer sessions, and breakout "high-functioning" sessions for parents of children with Asperger's syndrome and similar diagnoses. So when I reference the Start-Up in case studies during later chapters, you will know what I'm talking about.

LIFE AFTER AUTISM

After my recovery from autism, I went to regular schools, and my friends and teachers had no idea about my history unless I told them. That was nice, because I was a minor celebrity on the ATCA campus, and that wasn't something I really savored as a teenager.

I was a very social kid and I had a wide circle of friends. Academically, things also went quite well. I went to my local public school growing up, but I spent my last three years of high school at an academically rigorous prep school.

Throughout this period of my life, I really didn’t think that much about my history of autism. Sometimes, though, it would hit me.

At my high school prom, a couple of my buddies and I put on our tuxedos, picked up our dates, and pooled the money we had saved to rent a white stretch limousine with a giant sunroof. We thought we were pretty cool rolling into school standing on the seats with our heads and the top half of our bodies poking out from the top of the limo.

As the night was beginning, I remember feeling so happy, so excited, but also a little wistful. This was the final night of high school. I had two close friends in the car, with dates we cared for and a seriously fun night ahead. And I knew that I was experiencing the waning light of my childhood, my old friends, my high school experience. In the fall, I would be beginning college.

As I was drinking in the emotion of the whole evening, I had the sudden realization that none of this would have happened were it not for what my parents did to help me—not my prom or all the years before it, not my friends or the matches I played on the tennis team, not my classes or the many Sundays I had spent on day trips with my family, not my first kiss or my last exam. I had to catch my breath at the enormity of it. For a moment, I stood captivated by a deep sense of amazement at how different my life could have been.

And then my friends called to me, and I left my thoughts behind and tumbled back into my life, enjoying my prom, like millions of typical kids in typical towns across the nation.

Four years later, I graduated with a degree in biomedical ethics from Brown University. I spent my third year of college participating in an exchange program at Stockholm University in Sweden, and, after graduation, I got a work visa that allowed me to spend a year in London, England, and Cork, Ireland.

In Cork, I linked up with a family who had a little boy with autism and volunteered in their Son-Rise Program for a time. This connection would prove to be especially important, as, seven years later, I was able to be of help to that little boy's mother when she was diagnosed with bone and lung cancer and given a 5 percent chance for survival. (That was ten years ago, and she's cancer-free and in excellent health—yet another example of how not buying into dire predictions can pay off.)

During my time at college and after graduating, I spent four summers working at, and then helping to manage, a summer program for teens on the campus of Wellesley College. Later on, I worked at an educational center for school-aged children in Boston and then opened and became the director of the same kind of educational center in southern California. These two jobs were seminal experiences for me, as I switched from a business focus to an education focus. I found the experience of working with kids to be so meaningful that it overwhelmed my interest in the business world, at least for a while.

I get asked by many parents about my love life. (And, yes, it can feel a bit strange to be asked for romantic details by someone you just met.) Though I don't think it's appropriate to go into detail about my former girlfriends, I will say that I feel very lucky in this regard. I have had the good fortune to be with some truly wonderful and caring women in my life. Although I am not yet married, I have found a very meaningful sense of intimacy and fulfillment in these relationships.

Because it is specifically relevant to this book—and because she specifically granted me her permission—I will, at various points, discuss one of my past girlfriends and her son (with names changed, of course). The reason for this is that she has a son with autism (we'll call him James), and while we were together, we co-ran her son's Son-Rise Program. I so loved and treasured my time with James, who was five and six during that time. I also had many different experiences with him that inform this book, over and above my professional experience working with parents and their children.

James's mom is an incredible woman on every level. She is an outstanding mother to James. She has a boundless energy and a sparkling intelligence that is so wonderful to be around. She's also pretty funny: when I asked her to choose the name that I would use for her in this book, she chose Charlotte because that is her favorite *Sex and the City* character. To me, she was a loving, tender, and devoted partner. Although our relationship did not ultimately work out, she remains one of my closest and dearest friends.

To answer a question I get asked a lot: no, I don't have any remnants of autism. I don't secretly crave a plate to spin, and I don't find social situations in any way difficult. I'm just a regular guy, living my life. Ironically, it is the interpersonal arenas that come most easily to me; I'm not so hot at the areas I should be good at, given my history—organization, routine, technical subjects. Go figure.

Since I get a lot of skeptical questions about autism recovery in general and mine in particular, let me go a bit further here. As a culture, we are still very much stuck in the "autism is a lifelong condition" paradigm. The problem here is that this mind-set cuts our children off at the knees and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I have spoken with parents who have been told—by people who have never met me—that I never recovered and am spending my life in an institution. On the rare occasions when I have met with people who made these claims and they see what a “typical guy” I am, they reverse their stance, instead saying that my autism was a misdiagnosis and that I must never have had autism in the first place.

Aside from the strangeness of them not noticing that they just switched positions, I find this claim interesting for the following reason. Remember the Son-Rise Program mom I was discussing earlier who recovered from cancer? (I know this seems like a left turn. Bear with me.) No one has ever approached her and said, “You know, since you don’t have cancer now, you must never really have had it in the first place.” Apparently we are willing to take one of the most deadly illnesses in the world and accept that people can recover, but when faced with a three-year-old child with autism, we are unable to accept anything other than a life sentence. This baffles me.

In the end, people can say what they will about my story because, although I may be the first, I am certainly not the last. For over a quarter of a century, parents from across the globe have been attending training programs at the Autism Treatment Center of America—putting in their time, energy, and love—and achieving remarkable results with their own children. Many children after me have made full recoveries. What are we going to do—say that *all* of them never had autism?

Of course, every child’s journey is unique. I have seen so many children who, though they have not made full recoveries, have made astronomical progress. I’ve witnessed children with no language learn to speak. I’ve seen friendless children blossom into social kids with close friends. I watched as adults in their thirties left institutionalized environments to live on their own, with jobs, friends, and romantic partnerships. There are so many kinds of growth that our loved ones on the spectrum can achieve, and each one of these is a victory.

However, it is important that we acknowledge that recovery is possible so that each and every one of these children is given a chance. Though we can never predict where each child will end up, I know that my coworkers at the ATCA and I feel that the only ethical choice we have is to treat all of the children and adults that we work with as capable of recovery. That way, we aren't cutting children's chances off ahead of time, and we are ensuring that all children and adults get as far as they can go.

I can certainly tell you that, for me, working with all of these parents and seeing the depth of their love constantly renews my appreciation for my own parents' journey to help me. I am so grateful to have the opportunity, with the Autism Treatment Center of America's dedicated staff of over seventy, to enable parents to help their children in the same way.

THE EXPERIENCE BEHIND THE TECHNIQUES

I wrote this book so that you can use my experience for your child's benefit. It is packed with what we could call autism intel: the inside scoop on what is going on with your child and what you can do to address the core issues of your child's disorder. This information isn't limited to my personal story of recovery or my experience with James. It encompasses my experience working with children and families throughout my life, and professionally since 1998, and the vast know-how contained in the decades of work done by the staff of the Autism Treatment Center of America.

In my case, I have spent over a thousand hours working individually with over two hundred children on the autism spectrum, worked with over a thousand families in-depth, and addressed more than fifteen thousand people in lectures and seminars. And now, after serving as CEO of the Autism Treatment Center of America from 2005 until 2010, I am its Director of Global Education.

Many of the other senior staff at the ATCA have considerably more experience. My parents have been teaching The Son-Rise Program for thirty-five years, and several of the other senior teachers are approaching or exceeding twenty years. They have all worked with families from a vast assortment of cultures who have children with widely varying diagnoses spanning the entire age spectrum from toddlers to mature adults. It would not be an exaggeration to say that there is no type of situation that they have not seen. The knowledge and experience of all these devoted individuals stands behind every principle, strategy, and technique you will read in this book.

For these people, their work with families isn't a nine-to-five job. It's their life. For example, my older sister Bryn and her husband William have been working at the ATCA for more than twenty years. But autism has also touched them in a very personal way—and I don't mean because Bryn had an autistic brother. When their daughter Jade was two years old, she began to exhibit a wide range of autistic behaviors. She would cry for hours. She had very little language. Her eye contact was rare, and her interest in people was fleeting. She was very sensitive to any sensory input (sights, sounds) and would scream when any sound became overwhelming or when too many people would look at her. She did not want to be touched. She spent much of her days engaged in repetitive "stims," repeatedly lining up toys or shaking a box filled with marbles, using the exact same motion over and over again.

Bryn and William set up a full-time Son-Rise Program for their daughter. I left my job running that educational center in southern California and moved back to Massachusetts to be a part of Jade's program, and to help out at the ATCA for what I thought, at the time, would be one year.

For me, working with Jade was one of the high points of my life. I truly cannot do justice to this experience with words (though I will do my best!).

Two aspects of my time with Jade made it very meaningful to me. The first is that, even with all of my personal and professional experience, I didn't fully grasp what the experience of having a special child and running a Son-Rise Program over time was like until I participated in Jade's program year after year. As I witnessed the intensive work, effort, creativity, and love that Bryn and William put into working with Jade, I developed a deeper, more profound understanding of exactly what my parents did for me. I have always been enormously grateful to them, but I just didn't get it on a visceral level until I had my time in Jade's program. (And, certainly, I internalized this understanding on yet another level during my later experience with Charlotte and James.)

The second facet of my experience that so moved me was Jade herself. I had such an amazing time with her! She was so precious, and I felt continually honored to step into her world over and over again. I found that, when I was with her, I was able to bring forth the most loving, caring, and creative parts of myself. This emotional connection has affected every moment I have worked with children since.

This is what I wrote back in 1999 about a pair of Son-Rise Program sessions I had with her, which took place one and two years into her program, respectively.

> SEPTEMBER, 1998: The boat lists from side to side as it makes its way through the wavy ocean. Jostling around in my seat, barely able to keep myself from tumbling overboard, I look across the deck at Jade, who seems miraculously unaffected by the bounce and tip of the small, unstable boat. She sits in her self-constructed seat, staring intently at her stuffed animal (Ernie from *Sesame Street*), a small smile playing across her smooth, otherwise undisturbed features.
>
> To the untrained eye, our boat might appear to be a purple blanket laid out across a white carpet, with pillows arranged at one end in a makeshift chair and a single scarf perched on the other end. As far I am