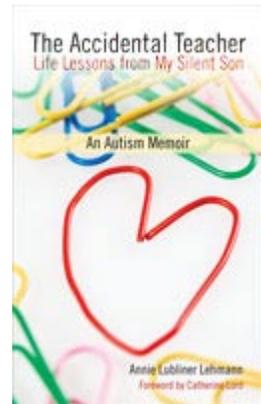


The Accidental Teacher: Life Lessons from My Silent Son
Annie Lehmann
<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=1403971>
The University of Michigan Press, 2009

Q&A with Annie Lehmann, author of *The Accidental Teacher: Life Lessons from My Silent Son*

Having severe autism does not stop Annie Lehmann's son Jonah from teaching her some of life's most valuable lessons. *The Accidental Teacher*, a heartfelt memoir about self-discovery rather than illness, uses insight and humor to weave a tale rich with kitchen-table wisdom. It explains the realities of life with a largely nonverbal son and explores the frustrations and triumphs of the Lehmann family as Jonah grew into a young adult.



Annie Lehmann, a freelance writer for more than twenty-five years, has published articles in many newspapers and magazines, including the *New York Times* and *Detroit Free Press*. She joins us now to talk about her book *The Accidental Teacher*.

The University of Michigan Press: Your son Jonah has autism. For those people who aren't familiar with the condition, what does that mean, on a day to day basis? What are his symptoms?

Annie Lehmann: Autism is a neurobiological disorder that affects a person's ability to communicate and relate to others. How autism impacts an individual however, varies widely so that one person with autism might attend college and live independently while another, with the same diagnosis, might be nonverbal and require 24/7 supervision.

When Jonah was diagnosed, autism was still a rarity with an occurrence rate of 15 in 10,000. Today the number of people said to be affected by autism spectrum disorder is 1 in 150 making it more common than pediatric cancer, diabetes, and AIDS combined. It occurs in all racial, ethnic, and social groups and is four times more likely to strike boys than girls.

As for symptoms, three crucial areas of development — social interaction, language and behavior are impaired.

In my son Jonah's case, his use of language is negligible, attention span is extremely limited and he needs to be physically moving all the time. He has no concept of danger, is very impulsive and because of this requires constant and close supervision.

UMP: How did you first discover he had autism?

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AL: From the beginning his muscle tone was poor and he didn't reach developmental milestones on time. He was evaluated by a variety of developmental specialists, but there was no consensus about what was wrong.

Finally, when he was 3, we took him to a child psychiatrist who said, with full confidence, that Jonah had autism.

It was hard for us to believe at first especially because Jonah didn't exhibit the resistive behavior or tantruming often associated with autism. But when we took a closer look, we realized he had many of the signs. Eye contact was poor and the only language he used had to be modeled. There was no spontaneous or self initiated play and everything he did required some physical or verbal prompt.

UMP: *In the book, you talk about many different treatments that you and your husband agreed to in attempts to "cure" Jonah. Can you describe some of those?*

AL: When we were starting out, there weren't what you might call "treatments." But I'd read Barry Kaufman's "Son Rise" and was inspired by his story of curing his son. He and his wife developed an intensive, one on one home based program, which encouraged following the child's lead, or "going with" the child in order to build a trusting relationship.

Our rule was that if something wasn't invasive or medically questionable it was worth trying. At worst it would cost time and money and even if what we tried did not work, doing anything seemed better than doing nothing at all.

We tried vitamins and a restrictive diet. We had a brief encounter with Facilitated Communication, which involves a facilitator who holds the arm of the child while he types what he wants to say on a keyboard. We also tried auditory integration therapy a method that is said to retrain the acoustical reflex muscle. All that was required was that Jonah wear headphones ½ hour twice daily for two weeks.

UMP: *Did anything work? Are you still trying?*

AL: It is hard to know whether anything we tried helped yet we were certain that nothing we did hurt. Who knows — perhaps things might have been worse had we not done what we did.

However, one thing I will say for sure— from a personal standpoint I think everyone in our family benefited from the one on one program we ran. We learned how to be with Jonah in a different, more accepting, way. Such close supervision helped him learn very basic self-help skills like eating and dressing although even these days, he sometimes needs the verbal prompts to complete tasks.

These days we no longer try interventional things but we are always trying to think outside the box in order to optimize the quality of his life.

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Recently, for example, we created a job for him that allows for his extremely limited attention span and need to be constantly moving.

You know the big back-breaking trays of water bottles we all hate schlepping home from Sam's and Costco? Jonah loves going to warehouse stores because of all the free food samples; and actually likes lifting heavy objects (which some might call sensory integration therapy). If he drops the bottles, they are unbreakable and if he is having a "bad day" there is some flexibility built in to delivery times. An aide works with him, but he is providing a service and doing something that everyone involved benefits from. We've been doing this for a couple of weeks and so far so good.

UMP: How has the experience of raising Jonah changed you and your family?

AL: Jonah, without intending to, has been our greatest teacher. That is why I titled the book "The Accidental Teacher."

He made me appreciate how complicated simple tasks really are when they are broken down to the sum of their parts; he taught me to get tough even though I never thought I had it in me. We have learned that hope is something you can cling to but not necessarily rely on and that the biggest gift you can give your child is to trust yourself.

Because of him we have learned to look outside the box and never take anything for granted. But most of all I like to tell the story about when he turned 13, which under different circumstances would have been the year he would have been a bar mitzvah, a young man, who could fulfill the obligations of his Jewish faith. Though his understanding is limited, he was unable to shoulder the traditional obligations of a young Jewish man. But I explained that he inspired others to do good deeds on his behalf. Without realizing it, he has impacted many lives in positive, lifelong ways. As I say in the beginning of my book, he has managed to speak volumes without saying a word.

To read more about *The Accidental Teacher: Life Lessons from My Silent Son*, visit the University of Michigan Press website at: <http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=1403971>

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