

I am a parent fairly new to SEN myself. My little one was a lockdown baby and toddler so as my life as a parent was restricted, I didn't notice anything unusual about my little one apart from lack of communication. However, he could count up to 10 using his fingers and say some letters of the alphabet.

I had a virtual developmental check with a nursery nurse practitioner when my little one was 18 months, and he wasn't reaching his developmental milestones in all areas. The nursery nurse completed the same assessment 6 weeks later and then we were placed on a waiting list to see a Paediatrician and Speech and Language Therapist. There were still no face-to-face appointments so I knew it would be a long wait.

Whilst we were waiting, I was constantly worrying that it was something I was doing wrong. I convinced myself if he slept more, ate more solids etc that the developmental milestones would be achieved. I was really affected by the virtual meetings with the nursery nurse and felt so lonely and isolated with my thoughts and feelings. I was referred to Healthy Minds where I could join in with a weekly virtual meeting to talk to other parents experiencing perinatal mental health difficulties.

It was only when I was able to start taking my little one to soft play, parties, and toddler groups again that I noticed social and communication differences between my child and others. Things that other children his age and younger would do he just could not do without lots of support. I started to write things down to tell the Paediatrician and the Speech and Language Therapist as I thought it would help. That's when it clicked that my son could be autistic. I didn't tell anyone this as I wasn't sure if it was all in my head.

We started having sessions with a Speech and Language therapist when my little one was 2 and a half years old. We had our first appointment with the Paediatrician when he was aged 3 and a half years old. We were put on the Social Communication Pathway and the Developmental Pathway and we were referred to Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, and for a social communication assessment. This is the first time that autism got mentioned by a professional. My little one's nursery had written things down to mention at the appointment about how he was at nursery.

I came across 'Twinkleboost' which was based in Radcliffe and was for children with speech and language difficulties. I started taking my little boy there once a week and that is where I felt like he fitted in and I could talk to other parents who had toddlers with communication difficulties. I started getting emails about Bury's Local Offer and joined a virtual group for parents of children with SEND. It helped so much as I felt like I had no one to talk to that understood. This is when I also decided to do a parental request for an Education Health and Care (EHC) Assessment as my little one was due to start school that September.

It was difficult doing it all alone but it gave me the confidence to tell my mum that I thought my little one was autistic and how I was trying to get him the support he needed for school. The EHC Assessment request got knocked back at first which I found very stressful especially as I was going through pregnancy with my second baby. It was around the same time that my little one got his autism diagnosis, aged 4. The other parents I had met through the groups helped and guided me through the mediation process for the EHC Assessment. I felt more determined once I had the autism diagnosis to get my little one the support he needed, and finally, my son was issued with an EHC Plan. All my hard work and dedication had paid off just before I gave birth to my second baby.

I have recently done an autism awareness course with 'Spectrum Gaming'. I found it to be really useful and insightful especially as it was done virtually by a young autistic man which makes it more personal. I highly recommend following 'Spectrum Gaming' on Facebook as they deliver some very

good training material. I also have attended some 'Bee Inclusive' early years summer holiday activities which we really enjoyed as we can find playcentres and busy environments very stressful and overwhelming. We are looking forward to being involved in the primary school ones this year.

I have been speaking to a few other parents that have been going through the diagnosis and EHC Assessment process who like me did not know who to email, phone, speak to when going through the process. I enjoy helping other people and like to give back to others like other parents have done during my own battles this last year. I have helped a few parents during the diagnosis and EHC Assessment process with what to do, what to write, who to speak to, who to get evidence off etc. It's things like this that I didn't know about until I went on the first initial virtual meeting with other SEND parents.

As a new SEND parent the main positive message I would like to give is you have got this!