

Signs I was autistic as a child that my parents didn't recognize at the time

I watched the movie *Life, Animated* (about an autistic man who learned to talk by echoing Disney films) with my family last night, and at the point where the parents of the man realized that he had memorized the lines of every single Disney film, my mom blurted out: "You did that!"

She told me that when I was a toddler, I had memorized the words to all of the books they would read me, and would say the next sentences in the books unprompted. That's how I taught myself to read. I asked if my neurotypical sister had done the same thing, and she said no.

Which got me thinking: what were some other signs my parents didn't pick up on at the time? I asked my mom, and here's what we've come up with:

- **Memorizing and echoing the exact words of every single story book my parents read to me**, which led to me teaching myself to read starting at around age 3 (as previously mentioned)
- **Lots of echolalia and palilalia**. The three biggest phrases I repeated were "Bad boy, [classmate name]." "Sack, Nonie!" and "Noinee Noo Noo!" The first phrase was echolalia. I would repeat it on car rides to and from my daycare center as a 2 year-old, as a result of my teacher constantly scolding a classmate of mine who was always doing disagreeable things. The second two phrases were palalia, and I repeated them at random times because I found the phrases incredibly funny (Noinee Noo Noo was my unique twist on "Naughty Noo Noo," from a Teletubbies episode where Noo Noo the vacuum cleaner steals the Teletubbies' toast. To this day, I maintain that it's an absolutely hilarious scene)
- **Extreme auditory sensory sensitivity**. I would scream and cry at the blender, vacuum cleaner, public toilets flushing, sirens, and many other things. My mom had to devise a system for getting me into public restrooms as a child, which was to go into the same stall as me and cover my ears while I went to the bathroom and washed my hands. Otherwise, I would have meltdowns.
- **Lots of extremely long and violent meltdowns, starting as an infant**. I was a very colicky baby, and I basically never stopped screaming. As a toddler, I had screaming-crying meltdowns basically once a day. My parents thought they were temper tantrums, and were genuinely concerned about my moral character. They thought I was just "being a brat." I was locked alone in my room a lot as a child while having meltdowns, because they thought I was having temper tantrums & they had no idea what to do.

- **I spoke early but walked late.** My earliest pre-verbal babble was at around 5 months, and I started speaking coherently at around 9-10 months, before I had even turned 1 year old. On the other hand, I couldn't walk until 18 months, and I never crawled normally either.
- **Lining up toys and building with blocks instead of playing pretend.** I loved to line up my Fisher-Price Little People, putting them on the schoolbus and then taking them off again, and I loved lining up & building with blocks, dominoes, and legos. I didn't do much pretend play until I was around 5 years old, and even then, it had to involve other people- not just my toys.
- **Extreme attachment to my pacifier.** I actually didn't stop using my pacifier at home until I was almost 5 years old, because I was so attached to the sensory input it gave me. I ended up with a significant overbite.

There are definitely more things I forgot to mention, but this is a pretty decent list for now. If you're the parent of a child who you think might be autistic, and you see your child in these signs, it's worth consulting your doctor about.

I ended up being diagnosed with Sensory Processing Disorder at age 7, PDD-NOS at age 8, and then Aspergers at age 9. But my parents had been taking me to doctors and asking what was going on since I was a toddler, and none of them considered the possibility that I could be autistic- primarily because I'm AFAB and my parents were told that "girls can't be autistic."

Awareness of autism and the different ways autistic people present our traits has increased a lot over the past two decades, so I wonder what might have happened if I was born in 2015, let's say, instead of 2002. I probably would have been diagnosed sooner, and my parents probably would have found better ways to understand and accommodate me.

I hope that this list helps parents who are in a similar position to the one my parents were in.

~Eden 🐸