



I Was Diagnosed With Autism Right Before I Started High School

I was the "weird" kid who said random things out of the blue, the one who just couldn't read body language.



COURTESY OF MADELEINE FELDER

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My parents knew I was different from an early age.

When I didn't learn to walk until I was nearly two they knew something was off. I also had practically no social skills. In fact, I was the "weird" kid who said random things out of the blue, the one who just couldn't read body language. These social shortcomings definitely made me a target for bullies.

My mom took me to my pediatrician, who referred me to specialists, who officially diagnosed me with a motor skills disorder. I'd never done well on standardized tests. I required extra time and the use of a computer because my handwriting was illegible; this was a symptom called dysgraphia, and it's a common part of being autistic.

I knew I was different from the other students but I didn't exactly have a name for that difference. Autism just wasn't on my radar.



At that point, I was still too young for them to officially diagnose me with autism but some doctors thought I could be on the spectrum. It wasn't until 7th grade that I got the official diagnosis: autism. But this wasn't shocking. I knew I was different from the other students but I didn't exactly have a name for that difference. *Autism* just wasn't on my radar.

My diagnosis came right as I was prepping for high school, which meant I'd have to deal with navigating high school knowing I had autism. High School was different than middle school – bigger and more challenging. One of the ways my parents made it easier was to get my official documentation done. The report done by a neuropsychologist said that I was officially autistic, or, more accurately, that I had Non-Verbal Learning Disorder, which is an autism spectrum disorder. It was weird to think I had autism because I sort of thought I was too "normal" for such a serious diagnosis. I didn't know a person could have autism and be like me. I didn't realize you could even be in school.

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The official paperwork didn't change my day-to-day life, but it changed my school life. The paperwork gave me the necessary accommodations I needed to complete school successfully. It meant I got extra time on standardized tests, use of a computer in class and other attention. But having a learning difference also meant I had to advocate for myself and my needs, which were different than those of my classmates. I learned how to ask for help and extra time. I think I even benefited from learning this new skill, because in college I'd have to advocate for myself the whole way.

I had to work harder in all of my classes. I'd spend hours on homework and extra credit work to keep my math and science grades up. I went into class at lunchtime to meet with teachers before tests and went for tutoring support. I wanted to succeed. I wanted to go to college and have a "normal" life, which meant spending extra time on everything.

I wanted to succeed. I wanted to go to college and have a "normal" life...



Most of the people I made friends with and who would be my core group of friends for the next four years had some type of learning difference. They had dyslexia, ADHD, or dysgraphia, and the list goes on and on. We would often see each other in our school's

learning support center getting tutored or doing homework. This group – and the school itself – was supportive and I needed that.

As a high schooler, I started going to social groups and learned how to read body language and have normal conversations. I wasn't bullied as much in high school because people had mostly chilled out. I also wasn't popular enough to have attention on me. I stuck to my own group and stayed away from the general high school drama.

As I went through high school, I became more comfortable talking about my learning difference. I even joined the Learning Difference Club at my school and a city-wide club for students.

I wanted to show others that autism wasn't bad – it was just different.



The group gave me the support and encouragement I needed to talk about my autism publicly. Eventually, I was speaking on panels to other students across the Bay Area. I wanted to show others that autism wasn't *bad* – it was just different.

I've heard stories from other kids who really struggled – kids who couldn't advocate for themselves, and who wouldn't get them extra testing time. In fact, they were punished for being "disruptive." These stories are what keep me speaking out and educating others.

As an autistic college student, I realize I'm here because of the support I received from others. Plus, I've gotten older and learned more about myself. I learned that I *can* live in a foreign country for a year with no big issues (I studied abroad in Spain). I *can* navigate planes and trains and cities with no problem. I've learned that I *can* get college education.

I've learned that autism doesn't define me.



But most of all, I've learned that autism doesn't define me. And really, I've succeeded in life because of and in spite of my autism.

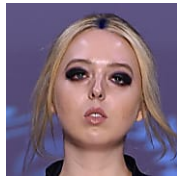
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