

Coping With Autism

Toledo Family Explains Life of 5-Year-Old With Neurodevelopmental Disorder



Ricky, 5, center, and Marcus, 4, left, run away from their father Richard White at their home in Toledo, Monday afternoon.

Chris Geier / cgeier@chronline.com

More Awareness Sought About Disorder

By Bianca Fortis
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TOLEDO — Ricky White is in many ways just like any other 5-year-old.

A kindergartener at Toledo Elementary School, he enjoys running around his backyard, playing with his toys and watching TV.

But when he was still a baby, his parents, Amber and Richard White, observed that he wasn't developing as quickly as they'd anticipated he would.

At first, doctors told them just to give Ricky time — "He's

just a kid," they said. But then Ricky's development began to move backwards; he even began to lose his ability to speak.

At the age of 2, Ricky was diagnosed with autism and sensory integration syndrome.

"We were shocked," Amber White said. "We didn't expect anything like that."

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects about 1 in 88 children. It's one of three conditions that make up the autism spectrum. The other two are Asperger syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified.

There's no known cause for the disorders; genetics, mercury and certain drugs have all been linked to the autism spectrum. A 2008 Cornell University study even concluded that states with heavy rainfall had higher rates of autism.

White was told that the viral infection she had when she was pregnant with Ricky could've caused the disorder.

"There are so many different theories," she said. "It's hard to know what's what."

The Whites have another son, Marcus, who is 4 years old.

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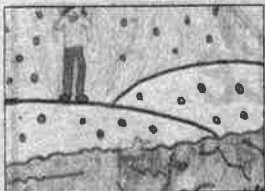
POSSIBLE 'RED FLAGS'

A person with an autism spectrum disorder might:

- Not respond to their name by 12 months of age
- Not point at objects to show interest (point at an airplane flying over) by 14 months
- Not play "pretend" games (pretend to "feed" a doll) by 18 months
- Avoid eye contact and want to be alone
- Have trouble understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own feelings

- Have delayed speech and language skills
- Repeat words or phrases over and over (echolalia)
- Give unrelated answers to questions
- Get upset by minor changes
- Have obsessive interests
- Flap their hands, rock their body, or spin in circles
- Have unusual reactions to the way things sound, smell, taste, look, or feel

Source: CDC, <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/signs.html>



Weather

TONIGHT: Low 47
TOMORROW: High 56
Few showers
see details on page Main 2

Weather picture by Hannah Baker, fourth grade, Onalaska Elementary School

Magnolia House

Home Opens for Former Inmates / Main 3



Deaths

Toland, Eldon LeRoy, 87, Chehalis
Zard, Curtis "Cork" Dean, 62, Chehalis
Hughes, Lavina, 81, Chehalis

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Autism: Lewis County Autism Coalition Created in 2010 to Help Families

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"They have the same DNA, they've had the same vaccines," White said. "But one's fine, and the other has autism."

The family also has to be aware of Marcus's needs, and allow him to do activities that are typical for developing kids, such as going to the movies with his dad.

"It's about finding a healthy balance," White said. "In some ways Marcus has had to grow up a lot faster because he has to understand how his brother is."

White said one of the greatest challenges in raising Ricky has been throwing away every expectation she had of having her first child.

"I can't think about the future, I have to think about the day to day stuff," she said. "I can't worry about what high school is going to be like when I need to get through grade school."

Ricky is non-verbal. He can say only three words: "Mama," "Dada," and "wow." To communicate, he points to pictures or objects. His parents are also trying to teach him sign language.

"It's a matter of getting to know him and his language," White said.

White's mother moved in with the family, and White's husband's parents live next door. She credits a strong support network as being key to raising a child with autism.

"There isn't a huge amount of people that can watch him," she said. "You can't just call anybody."

One symptom of autism is hypersensitivity to touch; to help Ricky sleep, he uses a 16-pound weighted blanket at night. Before the blanket, White would have to lay in bed to comfort him, making a decent night's sleep difficult to come by.

He's a picky eater, too; he'll only eat specific foods like peanut butter sandwiches and certain fruits. If they try feeding him anything else, he'll gag and vomit.

A strong support network and therapy have helped Ricky make progress.

"It's little things," White said. "He can stay sitting at the table for dinner. That was huge, the first time he did that. And he can sit still while I read a book to him."

BUT SOCIAL SITUATIONS remain a problem: if White takes him shopping, he'll try to pull items from shelves or throw a tantrum.

White said other customers often stare and sometimes even made rude comments to her, sometimes vilifying her for not being able to control her child.

She said she sometimes has to apologize to customers, but won't deny him the opportunity to build tolerance for social situations.

White believes many people just don't understand what autism is.

"If people took 15 minutes of their time to read and educate themselves, there would be more understanding, more empathy," she said. "If a few more people understand it, it might reduce bullying and make their lives a little easier."

A lack of understanding of autism is a widespread problem, which is why April is Autism Awareness Month.

Carol Miller is the Autism Project Coordinator at the Washington State Department of Health. She said autism has likely been around for a long time, but people didn't know what it was.

"In the past, sometimes people would say it was bad parenting when they'd see children acting up or kids getting thrown out of daycares or schools," she said. "It's really that (children with autism) process information differently, or maybe cannot express themselves. The more people learn about it, the more valuable it is to their perspective."

Miller helped develop an autism guidebook at the direction of the governor's office. The book is a comprehensive guide with information for families and caretakers about how to care for individuals with autism spectrum disorder.

She is also a member of the Lewis County Autism Coalition, which began in 2010 in response



Chris Galer / cphotojournal.com

Above: Ricky White, 5, plays in the backyard of his family home in Toledo.



At left: Ricky hugs his father Richard in the backyard of their home in Toledo as they play in their Toledo backyard.



CONNECT WITH SUPPORT
The Lewis County Autism Coalition, formed in 2010, provides resources for families. Learn more at lc.autismcoalition@gmail.com or www.facebook.com/pages/Lewis-County-Autism-Coalition/301507823202463

At left: Amber White holds her son, Ricky, 5, at their home in Toledo. "I can't think about the future, I have to think about the day to day stuff," she said. "I can't worry about what high school is going to be like when I need to get through grade school."

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to a growing need for support, information, diagnosis and therapy services in the community.
Rayna Austin, a teacher at the Infant-Toddler Development Center in Adna, is also a member of the Coalition. She said she has been a teacher for 31 years, and has seen an increase in the number of children on the autism spectrum.
"We used to only have one, maybe two children that we were working with at any one time," she said. "Now it's three, four, or more."
According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, rates are increasing. In 2000, 1 in 150 kids had been diagnosed, but some experts believe the increase in numbers is really a result of better diagnoses. One of the goals of the Coalition is to track local numbers. Members are also working on a county-wide needs assessment and are

planning a conference focusing on autism for the fall.
White is involved with the Coalition as well as a family support group. She was also recently hired as a parent to parent coordinator for the county's Family Support Network where she'll help other families like hers.
She said it helps to meet other families in similar situations.
"In the beginning, you feel like you're all by yourself," she said.
A child's diagnosis can be disorienting, she said; parents often experience months of grief.
Sometimes people ask White if she would've made the choice not have Ricky if she knew he'd be born with autism.
"There's no way I'd trade him for anything," she said. "He has his own way of seeing things. He makes you slow down and really look at everything."

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