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Moraga Grandma Creates the ABCs of Asperger's Syndrome

By Andrea A. Firth



Jo Mele with her grandson Nick.

Photo provided

Moraga resident Jo Mele has worked in the education field for over 40 years. After graduating college with a degree in elementary education, she taught kindergarten, and when she moved to Moraga, she worked as the art teacher at Rheem School. After a 13-year stint as the town's Director of Recreation, she now serves as the Executive Director of the Emeritus College at Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill. While her students are bit older these days—Emeritus College offers non-credit classes, tours, trips, and lectures for those 50-plus—Mele is committed to helping people of all ages explore and understand their world.

So when Mele's 10-year-old grandson Nick was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome (a mild form of autism) four years ago, her first step was to learn everything she could about the condition. The second step was to share this knowledge with Nick's teachers and classmates. To make the information accessible, Mele created the ABCs of Asperger's Syndrome, tying the 26 letters in the alphabet to words that explain the symptoms and behaviors of the condition. Mele later updated the alphabet to reflect Nick's personal experiences as well.

For example, Mele's ABCs start with A is for Aloof. Mele notes that kids who have Asperger's are often onlookers, not participants, and when Nick says that he does not want to play with other kids he just doesn't know how to get included. E is for Eye Contact, H is for Hyperactive, Q is for Questions. . . . Mele's list, which was recently published in the April issue of Parents magazine, provides a comprehensive description of the syndrome.

Mele knew early on that Nick was different from other kids his age. In preschool he had difficulty organizing his muscles to run, skip, and throw a ball in a coordinated way. In kindergarten he wore a striped shirt every day by choice. Sitting still was impossible. He had difficulty focusing and was often overwhelmed by the noise and distractions in the class-

room. Nick complained that sometimes other kids "just didn't get him."

"Nick is a nice, bright child. He just had some quirky behaviors," says Mele. She says as students and teachers learn more about Asperger's syndrome, they come to better understand Nick.

Individuals with Asperger's syndrome can learn the social norms that are not as hardwired for them, says Mele. They can work on eye contact, develop techniques to manage stimuli (lights, noise, movement), and practice conversation. But a little less small talk may not be such a bad thing, thinks Mele.

When Nick was visiting his grandmother one day, he seemed very quiet, so she asked why. "He told me, 'I don't have anything to say,'" Mele says laughing. "I love the honesty in his response. It makes perfect sense."

What Mele says she has learned most from spending time with her grandson is that we need people like Nick, because they think outside the box. She cites Nick's obsession with building things as an example. Mele recalls reading Nick the story of the Three Little Pigs when he was much younger.

With the first little pig who built a house of straw, Nick said, "That will never work." In response to pig two who used twigs as his building material, Nick said, "Better, but still not good." With the third pig and the brick house, Nick said, "Finally a contractor pig who knows what he's doing. He should help the other two."

"My goal with the alphabet is to familiarize as many people as possible about Asperger's syndrome," says Mele. She plans to update the ABCs of Asperger's as Nick moves into new developmental stages like middle school and high school. And Nick seems on board. "If you want to know about Asperger's," says Nick, "call my grandma."

You can read Mele's complete "A to Z Guide to Understanding the Symptoms of Asperger's" at www.parents.com/kids/health/autism/understanding-aspergers-syndrome.

Students Invited to Play a Part in History

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shapes, clean lines and often features abstract symbols, and to explore ways that the past and present styles come together.

To enter, students should go online (<http://www.caldecott-tunnel.org/index.php/stay-informed/medallion-design-competition>) to download the contest entry packet and other forms, to review the contest rules and guidelines, and to learn more about specific entry requirements. Entries must be mailed or dropped off by 4:30 p.m. Monday, May 7. For more information, e-mail medalliondesign@caldecott-tunnel.org. -J. Wake

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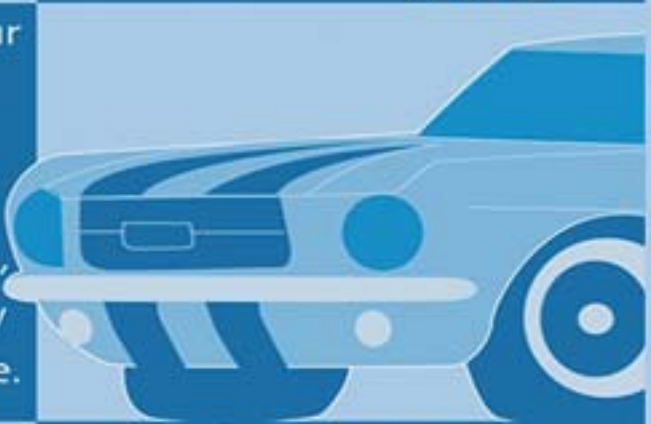
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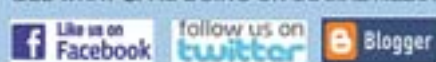
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