

Opinion | My autistic son can do more than you think

My son was diagnosed with autism a few years after he was born. Just after his fourth birthday, the age at which he should have started school, his mother and I separated in a silent, cruel implosion. We became co-parents of a child who needed our attention full-time.

Dutch special education is divided into four categories or clusters: cluster 1: blind, visually impaired students, cluster 2: deaf, hearing-impaired students or with a speech development disorder, cluster 3: physically and/or mentally disabled children and the long-term ill, cluster 4: children with mental disorders and behavioral problems.

Erik Raschke is a writer.

In fact, my son was in cluster 4, but he had no behavioral problems, in fact he was gentle, almost timid. I went to look at the cluster 4 schools and quickly saw that the children there had very different problems than he did and that he would never be able to maintain himself in that environment, let alone develop.

We looked for more creative solutions, places where they might make an exception for my son under the guise of 'appropriate education', such as the primary school around the corner from his mother. He was refused everywhere. When he was almost five years old, we managed to get him enrolled in a well-regarded school in cluster 2: speech and language problems. During his second year at this school, a new director came in who felt that there were too many children with autism at the school. My son's IQ was too low to learn to read, we were told. I showed her studies that proved that you cannot measure

an autistic brain with an IQ test. It did no good. They “could not offer him what he needs.”

We started looking again. We visited schools throughout Amsterdam and beyond with a heavy heart, we looked at Maurice de Hond's iPad school, the Vrije School, Dalton School, Montessori School, the Tobias School. We followed up on every tip from well-meaning family members, coworkers, and neighbors, even piloting it at a small Scientology school where they made numbers out of clay, but we kept getting variations of the same answer: “We can't place these kinds of kids” or “We do not provide what your child needs.” No one seemed to realize that we were being openly discriminated against.

My son could only go to schools in cluster 3: physically and/or mentally disabled children. Great, passionate people work there, but none of them had the right knowledge of autism or tools to help my son learn. He went to a school where he felt safe, but learned little to nothing. The list of therapists and organizations we tried outside of school during those years is pages long. I began to understand that the schools in the Netherlands that have high expectations of children did not want him, and the schools that did want him accepted him without the condition of a good education.

Recognize whole words

I am originally American, my son has dual American-Dutch nationality and speaks both languages. I have always kept up to date with the literature and developments surrounding autism in the US. During the summer holidays of 2019, I took my son to a school in New Jersey, Celebrate the Children, which specializes in autism. There a teacher tried different reading methods with him. The third, where he had to learn to recognize whole words instead of spelling them first, worked immediately.

The emotion involved was overwhelming for both him and me. The world of words and letters, which had always remained closed to him, opened up. Back in the Netherlands, we worked on this English-language reading program in the evenings and weekends. He learned a hundred words, and then two hundred. When he knew four hundred, he had mastered the building blocks of the English language. Now he could start working on more complicated compound words like ' *while* ' because he recognized ' *mean* ' and ' *while* '. Meanwhile, he did not read in Dutch at all.

When his last year of primary special education came, the same merry-go-round started again. We visited all corners of special education in the Netherlands, I tried to set up a school myself, we looked at a private international school for special education in The Hague, sought advice from independent education experts, asked the Autism Center for advice, asked other parents for advice, visited countless organizations and schools, and heard the same message everywhere: for your son there is only cluster 3. ZMLK, or Very Difficult Learning Children.

My son started reading signs on the street, menus and short books he got from school

Desperate, I decided to give school in the US a chance. If my son could learn to read after all these years with these American methods, what else could he learn? His mother didn't want him to go. He was Dutch, she was Dutch. The Netherlands was his home, she thought, not America.

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Finally we agreed on a trial year in the US. That was not an easy decision. My current wife would lose her husband for a year, my other two sons their father. We would have double rent and fixed costs and have to fly back and forth a lot to see each other. But we believed that if it would help my son learn, become confident, interpret and understand the world around him, and develop into an independent or at least partially independent adult, it would be worth it.

I got him registered with Celebrate the Children and in the 2020-2021 school year he filled his days with subjects such as language, social skills, biology, history, mindfulness, music, etc. in addition to practical subjects such as ' *life skills* ' where he learned how to folding laundry, paying bills, etc. In Amsterdam our schedule had been a military operation, with a patchwork of poorly coordinated extracurricular therapy spread throughout the city. At Celebrate the Children, school was combined with care in a hyper-personal curriculum: he received physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, extra language lessons, etc., and when that was all over, he got off the school bus in front of the door and we could both relax. . It felt so normal that it made me nervous.

Real friends

My son started reading signs on the street, menus and short books he got from school. He was a mentor to a younger student at Celebrate the Children. Perhaps most importantly, he made friends. Real friends, boys who were like him in everything, and when his social skills faltered, there were professionals at school who could help him navigate the complicated world of social interaction. His teachers praised him for his leadership skills, his generous and helpful nature, and his desire to learn.

He was asked to write the script for the annual school play. So much was constantly expected of him that I was afraid he would fail. The opposite happened. The school built up his self-confidence again. He went from 'I can't do it' to 'I can do it'. The school encouraged him, deeply convinced that he has just as much potential as a neurotypical child. He was happy and wanted to stay at this school in the US. His mother was not convinced and wanted him to return.

I asked a judge for alternative permission. Because Amsterdam was legally my son's place of residence, I had to go to a Dutch court for this. But after seeing in New Jersey what my nearly fifteen-year-old son was capable of, how happy he was in a community that embraced him and had high expectations for him, and how much he wanted to stay, doing nothing was no option.

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Fist-thick file

The file in our case was voluminous, full of reports from teachers in the US, evidence of my son's academic progress, explanations of the scientific methods used there, a comparison of the school he would attend in Amsterdam and the school in New Jersey, a long timeline with everything we had tried so far without success in the Netherlands, and many statements from American and Dutch experts in the field of autism indicating that there was nothing for our son in the Netherlands. A Dutch autism expert, who is also the mother of an

autistic son, wrote that they had moved to the US because of poor education in the Netherlands.

His mother indicated that there were exactly the same opportunities for him in the Netherlands. That he could develop fully here and that the methods from the US would be applied here in the Netherlands. Finally, she invoked her right as a mother to have our son with her in the Netherlands. This right would supersede all other interests.

Ultimately, three judges decided that it had not been proven that our son had learned something in the US that he could not learn in the Netherlands. They denied the request for substitute consent. On appeal, the judges ruled that our son had indeed received an education in America that he could not receive here, but that the mother's right to have him here with her outweighed his right to that education. The request was again rejected.

When the first day arrived at his Dutch ZMLK school, I cried harder than I had in years. I had failed, failed to protect him and failed to secure one of the most basic human rights for him: education.

Not a single Dutch word

We are now more than a school year further. He has not learned a single Dutch word. The methods from the US are not available in Dutch. During parent conversations, his teachers emphasize that he is such a sweet, cheerful boy, but that he does not seem capable of learning to read, write or do arithmetic. Sinterklaas has not been in class for a long time for average fifteen-year-olds, but he does. (He asked if he could stay home.) He regularly comes home with a sticker on his hand. "That's because I did well," he says. His outflow route is 'non-wage-generating daytime activities'. He is not allowed to take therapy or courses outside of school during school hours, and the number of organizations that are allowed to visit school for specialized

help or care is so limited that there is nothing for him. He does not receive speech therapy, occupational therapy or physiotherapy.

In the meantime, he is taking English language lessons at home, in the evenings, via computer with his language teacher from the US. His stamina and concentration are admirable and he is making rapid progress. Recently we watched a movie with English subtitles and I paused the movie with each new sentence. He read them all. The satisfaction and self-confidence that such a moment gives him is difficult to see, because the next day he is back at a school from half past eight to three where he cannot learn.

It's almost impossible not to think every minute of every day about where he could be if he had been able to spend all those hours developing at a school like Celebrate the Children. The months turn into years, and our son approaches adulthood. Without training.