

# Rugby works with Autism by Lisa Johnson

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**This blog has been passed from Heather to Trevor, and on to myself, and I think we're all in agreement that this is a truly great story about how rugby can be all inclusive and help people who need it the most. From all of us at #rugbyunited, we wish Lisa, Graham and Ellis all the best and hope to hear more of his rugby success in the future!**

It took 4 very long years for Ellis to get his formal diagnosis of Autism. We just struggled on as parents do, trying to do what we thought, and still think, is the best. In this his dad, Graham, and I have discovered that being a parent to an autistic child is one of the loneliest and isolating jobs we as have ever done, but also the most rewarding, especially when your son is involved with rugby!

To look at our 9 year old autistic son, you wouldn't think he had a neurological disorder, because he is what I would call an average 9 year old boy. He loves his Lego, playing on his tablet, playing out with his friends, and then he has his passion of rugby. On a daily basis we hear "He doesn't look autistic to me." "Really! He's autistic. He doesn't act like it." As a parent I cannot tell you how much this hurts, yet I can understand why they say these things from the way I have described him above. But you can't always believe everything you see.

Let's start at the beginning. From the age of 2 years old Ellis was like a constant whirlwind. He never walked...he ran! Nothing would hold his attention for more than a few minutes, he would struggle to give eye contact, yet his speaking and communication skills were way above average for his age. He just couldn't communicate his emotions in the right way; therefore his frustrations came out in meltdowns. By the time he was 4 Years old, Ellis's aggression and his meltdowns were fast becoming quite volatile to both his dad and I. He found how to deal and cope with everyday things very difficult and would lash out, and you could guarantee it would be while out in public. He couldn't sit still for more than a few minutes. He was constantly on the go, he never slept (and still doesn't), and he was constantly climbing on anything he possibly could. We needed an intervention to help gain some control back. This is when we decided that rugby might just be what we were looking for.

You may question why we thought rugby would be right for my son. All I can say is this; rugby is yet to be proven to us why rugby is wrong for him. At the tender age of 5, we took him to the local rugby league team at first. I thought he may shy away from the other children that where there. How wrong I was! He stood there among the other children and got stuck in! He was doing his most two favourite things, playing rugby and getting muddy! Unfortunately after two years, the children he played with weren't of his own age group anymore and things got a bit difficult for him. This is when I was pointed towards the another local rugby team, Littleborough RUFC, who had teams from under 7 upwards, and this is where the magic began! If you are involved in rugby union, you will all know the 5 core values: Teamwork, Respect, Enjoyment, Discipline and Sportsmanship. As a parent to

an autistic player, I've seen that these values don't only define the game; they are helping define my son for the person he is.

As adults we all know that for anything to work on a large scale, teamwork is essential. Nonetheless Ellis can find working as a team extremely difficult. Autistic children tend to not consider others in the heat of the moment and they can lack empathy for others. Yet, during the time that Ellis has been at Littleborough RUFC, rugby has become a positive focus in his life, witnessing him grow into becoming a team member who takes pride in what he does but in also what his team mates achieve. Secondly, he has come to rely on his team and understand that everyone has an important part to play. It's not always plain sailing, and he does have the odd meltdown pitch side, but when given time to gather himself, he is welcomed back onto the pitch.

As Ellis gets older, he's becoming more aware of his difficulties to mix with other children and adults. On the other hand since becoming a part of Littleborough RFUC's family, he does enjoy being part of a team and part of the rugby family we have there.

For some autistic children, learning to "show respect" appropriately may be simply impossible. In Ellis's case this is true. You see Ellis doesn't have the ability to "read" non-verbal communication. Because Sam (his coach) acknowledges Ellis's difficulties, and shows that all of his players deserve a basic level of respect based on their behaviour and qualities, he helps Ellis feel more at ease with his surroundings, hence being open to learn to respect back the match officials, the decisions made, players and supporters, right down to respecting his shirt he wears and the club he attends.

Being a parent to an autistic child is extremely challenging especially when it comes to discipline. What can work one time won't always work the next and this is where his lack of self-control can also become a problem. For example when incidents occur on the pitch, you have to be able to think clearly and make the right decision. This isn't easy for any child, never mind an autistic one. This is where I use rugby to help my son self-manage his anger by referring that, in the game players are honest and fair and that he needs obey the laws of the game for it to work, and it is the same at home. He doesn't always understand this and it is a continual work in progress, but as he grows older and hopefully learns that laws are there to help safeguard him and his team-mates, he will also take this discipline off the field into his own life.

From the very first time he stepped into the Under 7's team two years ago, his coach Sam Dickinson and manager Lisa Dickinson made him feel so welcome despite his disability and over time he has come to view them as his "rugby parents". This alone is a major step for him, as he finds trusting people difficult to do, simply because he finds reading people difficult. Consequently, by both of them encouraging that all the core values of rugby work not just on the field, is helping Ellis to reach his full potential both as a player, and also as an individual. We feel this is done by ensuring that his wellbeing and his development as a player is central to not just rugby, but in his own personal life and for that both Graham and I are thankful.

Sportsmanship is the foundation upon which rugby union is built, and as a rugby family worldwide we uphold the tradition of friendship with teammates and opposition. Rugby contributes to creating an environment where Ellis can focus on not just having fun, but learning the importance of being the best sportsman he can be. Additionally, it is through good teaching of the 5 core values of rugby that is offering Ellis an ideal opportunity for him

to develop his life skills, not just in rugby but in his everyday life. As a direct result, after only being with his team for just under 2 years, Ellis has been recognised for his dedication, his efforts and his achievements by becoming the 2015-2016 Mini Clubman for his team, and Overall Clubman in the whole of the mini section. This season up to now he has been recognised 4 games out of 6 for either Tackler of the Match or Man of the Match by the opposition's coaches or that of his own.