

EMPOWERED PARENTING AND AUTISM

By David Dadian

The drama in the supermarket began innocently enough. Andrey was in a shopping cart as we headed down the aisle that also contained cookies. When they came into sight, the very alert child zoomed in on his favorite brand and declared, “I want cookies, - “we buy cookies, please!” My automatic, immediate and premeditated response was “NO!”

What happened next all parents can relate to. The child, not satisfied with the response to his request, immediately sets out to ask over and over and over again, louder and louder with each plea. While the parent’s continued response was the same – firm and without explanation.

This only exacerbated the situation. Other shoppers observed the drama of a child out of control with a father standing his ground, not giving thought to the child but to what the onlookers were thinking.

Parenthood is filled with moments to remember and milestones to build upon. During the first moments of counting fingers and toes we checked to make sure he or she was “ok”. The first bottle, crawl, words, steps - all memorable and duly noted.

But there is another memory for us: the first time the doctor brought up the subject of Autism. It was a day that my wife and I will always remember. A new persecutor had been named in our lives.

Afflicting 1 out of every 100 children each year, Autism is a growing concern worldwide. As a complex developmental disorder, Autism is described as a “spectrum disorder.” The doctor explained “because it affects each individual in unique ways, ranging from mild to severe disabilities....”

The drama in our lives unfolded in front of us. Dr Steven Karpman was the first to describe the Drama Triangle and its roles of Victim, Persecutor and Rescuer. Each of these roles encourage the others in this cycle of problem-oriented thinking and actions as dramas unfold.

Of course we felt we were the Victim of the autism as the Persecutor (not victims of Andrey) – and hoped for some sort of Rescuer to emerge. We learned to cope and do our best with our wonderful – though challenged – child. Some people remain in the drama and victim orientation as these moments become their lives, focusing on each problem at hand.

And then a couple of years ago, I stumbled across this little book with a strange title: *The Power of TED** (**The Empowerment Dynamic*) by David Emerald.

Emerald's book was a revelation to me. It offers an escape from the drama roles (what he calls the Dreaded Drama Triangle, or DDT) through a set of antidote choices. The key to these principles is in making a shift from the thoughts and actions of victimhood to that of a creator. My wife and I read how Emerald suggested focusing on your current reality and then turning your attention toward the outcomes you desire. Opposite of a victim and the focus on a problem, a creator sets their sights and actions on working toward desired outcomes. We decided to adopt a Creator Orientation to our life with Andrey.

We, like most parents, want what is best for our child and have become strong advocates for our son. Our desired outcome is to help Andrey develop to his full potential despite his challenges.

Instead of reacting to his condition and behavior as a Persecutor, we chose to see them as what Emerald calls a Challenger. A challenger can be a person or a particular situation. In this case, autism challenges both the child and the parents in social integration and learning on a variety of levels.

Challengers call forth learning. Through doctors and educators we gained a greater understanding of how to address his challenges and work from strengths. My wife and I learned all that we could in order to support Andrey; advocated for him as we brought people and resources into his life; and challenged him on what he may be capable of.

We also transformed our tendency to be a rescuer – the third role in the DDT. As parents – especially with a child with special needs – the rescuer role is one of the easiest to step into. However, we came to see through Emerald's framework, doing so places our son in the role of victim. In order to help our son to create a life ahead of him, we are choosing the antidote role of Coach, rather than rescuer. As a coach, we treat Andrey as being creative and resourceful and seek to support him in becoming a creator in his own life.

Now these moments and our roles of choice are tested daily. As Emerald says, the changes are “simple, but not easy.” But, by making a conscious shift away from the drama triangle and toward the empowerment dynamic – by focusing on what we want to create, rather than the behavior we don't want - situations unfold differently for Andrey and me.

We have spent some time in the cookie isle since that first incident. Taking it slowly as I re-directed, coached, challenged and helped Andrey create some level of understanding and to make choices. Yes, the other shoppers stopped stared and wondered why father and son were sitting on the floor in the cookie isle. But, as co-creators of that moment, my son and I understood why we were there.

Each time I am able to make that shift from the victim orientation to that of a creator, I am more and more capable of working toward my desired outcomes. Making this shift in my personal perspective has also created new opportunities and outcomes in my business, my other relationships, and has made an already amazing marriage even better.

The roles that David Emerald outlines in his amazing book, *The Power of TED**, has helped me to deal with the times in the supermarket, become a better coach, creator and challenger with my son and so much more. In regards to parenthood, these are the moments that we will remember, that we continue to build upon, that help us to create a better life for our child. Now, more than ever, we are ready, willing and able to meet autism as a challenger.