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by **Mary Beth Palo**

Nowadays, it's not unusual to turn on the television and find someone talking about autism. This once overlooked and misunderstood disease is on a staggering rise in the US, now affecting 1.5 million American families and chances are you or someone you know has been affected. Given the statistics, the mainstream media is finally taking notice. But it wasn't always this way. It has been a long, challenging journey and no one knows this better than the Palo family.

This story began in 2000, when my son Brett (age 2) was diagnosed with a pervasive developmental disorder (PDD) and classified as autism a short while later. The news was devastating. But that is just the beginning. While the prognosis was hopeless, the Palo family searched to find Hope.



Following Brett's initial diagnosis, I took traditional steps recommended by doctors, early intervention professionals and therapists. Like most parents, my husband and I discovered quickly that recommended treatments were often ineffective and expensive. After months and months of one-on-one ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis) therapy we became disheartened by the absence of measureable progress. Two years after learning Brett had autism, he remained functionally non-verbal and suffered constant asthma, ear infections, gastrointestinal distress, seizures, hypoglycemia and sleeplessness. In desperation, we consulted with New York's most reputable physicians only to be told that Brett would require institutionalization. Phrases we often heard include: "poor parenting skills," "he won't get any better," and "institutionalize him."

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Searching for Hope



Hearing Justin

Frustrated by the ineffectiveness of the recommended treatments for our son, I cancelled all future appointments with Brett's therapists. In the days and weeks that followed, I observed my son in a desperate effort to discover a way to 'get through to him.' Brett, like many children with autism, was drawn to TV and videos. I observed his unique engagement with TV and decided to use this to enhance his learning. Initially, I created one 11-minute video. Brett watched the video off and on for about two weeks when suddenly one morning, he responded to one of my questions with a phrase from the video. This was a momentous beginning. From that time forward, video has been the mainstay of Brett's learning.



I have created over 70 hours of home videos meant to teach Brett the most basic life-skills. Through them, he has learned to speak and eventually to socialize. Brett's measurable progress with the help of my videos was so remarkable that other parents began to request copies for their children. I founded Watch Me Learn in response to this need.

In addition to video based teaching, Brett's physical condition required medical attention. Efforts were focused on reversing damage done to Brett's immune system. This effort entailed addressing his seizures which led to surgery to correct a Chiari I Malformation which was discovered when Brett underwent an MRI. As far as anyone involved knows, this was the first time that a Chiari Malformation was surgically corrected for an individual with Autism. Brett's progress after surgery was again another huge milestone.

If this wasn't inspiring enough, in July, 2007, Brett began competing in U.S. Diving Nationals. Now 11 years old, he is a nationally ranked diver in his category. He first learned to dive watching old footage of Greg Louganis competing at the Olympics.



Today, Brett continues to improve. While his autism is not "gone", it is certainly not noticeable. Brett plays little league, dives, plays and is in a mainstream classroom in 4th grade. While recovery is not possible for every child, no one should close the door on Hope. My family and I held on to hope despite the continued flow of hopeless direction and advice we received.

Mary Beth Palo is the founder of [Watch Me Learn](#), a company with a philanthropic mission to provide the most effective autism treatment videos to families, therapists and educators. The commercially produced videos are the only of their kind to receive the endorsement of the



National Autism Association.

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