

LIVED EXPERIENCE

HE'S AUTISTIC?

THE BEGINNING:

Chris was born through an emergency C section at 32 weeks (that's a whole traumatic story in of itself.) As a result, he had many eyes on him for the first year of his life.

A WORD THAT FELT ENORMOUS:

An astute nurse doing physical therapy for his torticollis told me I should look into services through the Regional Center* for possible autism. What? He's not even one. How could she possibly think he was autistic? At that stage, the word itself felt enormous and frightening, like someone was trying to place a label on my baby before I even knew who he was. Once you know the signs, it's surprisingly easy to spot things early, but when you're a mom hearing that word for the first time, your brain basically throws up a giant "NOPE" sign. Denial and anger are so much easier. They're warm, familiar, and require absolutely zero Googling.

THE PAPERWORK I THREW AWAY:

She handed me the paperwork, and I tossed it in the garbage with the confidence of someone who believed she had just dodged a wildly unnecessary detour. I practically dusted off my hands like, Well, that's taken care of. But apparently this was not her first rodeo. This woman had clearly seen many a parent gallop straight into the sunset of denial. Without me knowing, she filled out the paperwork and submitted it herself, not because she was pushy, but because she understood that sometimes moms need time before they can face what professionals already see.

SIX MONTHS LATER, EVERYTHING HAD CHANGED:

By the time the Regional Center contacted me six months later, everything had changed. I had lived half a year of noticing things I couldn't explain, wondering if I was imagining them, hoping they would magically resolve, and slowly realizing they weren't going anywhere. I was no longer the mother who threw the paperwork away. I was ready, or at least ready enough, to see what she had seen.

To this day, I think of that nurse and am forever grateful to her for doing what I was incapable of even considering.

WHAT IS A REGIONAL CENTER?

*In California, there are 21 Regional Centers that are nonprofit organizations dedicated to coordinating services for individuals with developmental disabilities. These centers are funded by the state and serve as a bridge to community resources, offering services such as early intervention for children, supported living, job coaching, and more.