

PREFERRED ACTIVITIES / OBSESSIONS

WHEN DEEP FOCUS LOOKS LIKE
DEFIANCE FROM THE OUTSIDE

TRANSITIONS EQUAL MELTDOWN

WHILE ADULTS SAW
BEHAVIOR, CHRIS SAW
THE UNDERLYING LOGIC



A MIND BUILT TO UNDERSTAND

Chris has been obsessed with understanding how things work from the very beginning. As a baby, he would stare at our ceiling fan for hours — literally hours. Fan was his first word, which tells you everything about where his attention naturally went.

When he was a toddler, I used to take him to the gym with me. I'd come out of my workout to find one of the childcare staff hovering over him, frazzled. Chris would be lying flat with his cheek pressed against the disgusting gym floor, staring underneath the aerobic machines. She'd tell me she couldn't get him to play with the toys or join the other kids — he simply wouldn't leave his spot. He wasn't stubborn or ignoring her. He was completely absorbed in trying to understand the mechanics of the machines. That deep, singular focus, that drive to figure out how things work, has been part of him since day one.

As he got older, Chris would choose a topic and become an expert in every facet of it. When his fascination with space began, around age three, he devoured anything he could get his hands on. And I don't mean "Clifford Goes to the Moon." I mean NASA-level material — rockets, fuel compositions, astronaut biographies, planetary science, orbital trajectories... everything. After space came jet engines, then World War II, and so on. As long as it was a topic he chose, he absorbed it like oxygen. Because he read so much his vocabulary and communication skills were beyond his years.

WHEN FOCUS BECAME FRICTION

It took me far too long to realize that this Mensa-level mastery of preferred topics did not translate to non-preferred ones — which, unfortunately, includes almost everything required to function in an educational setting for the first eighteen years of your life.

The thing is, if you tried to pull Chris away from a preferred activity and "transition" him into something non-preferred, all hell would break loose. I, his family, his teachers, everyone saw it as defiance, misbehavior. If he could do it one area of his life, he's choosing NOT to do it where we're asking. It wasn't defiance. It wasn't misbehavior. It was the sheer overwhelm of being yanked out of a hyper-focused, regulating state and pushed into something that felt confusing, unpredictable, or pointless to him.

SEEING THE LOGIC BENEATH BEHAVIOR

Years later, Chris told me something that changed how I understood autistic kids forever: he could identify with any autistic child in the throes of a meltdown. He understood their frustration, their panic, and — most importantly — he could instantly see where their "preferred" stimulus was. He could tell what they were trying to get back to.

There was one little boy, almost non-verbal and prone to frequent fits. Staff struggled with him constantly. But Chris knew right away: the kid was good with math. He recognized the pattern, the focus, the way the boy lit up around numbers. While adults saw "behavior," Chris saw the underlying logic — the same logic he had lived his entire life. Because he read so much his vocabulary and communication skills were beyond his years. A guy I knew asked if he was actually a midget instead of a kid...