



How a Pool Party Sparked a Wave of Gratitude

The simplest moments can often spark the most beautiful memories and the biggest waves of gratitude. My wave started with a splash in our pool.

One hot summer afternoon, I inconspicuously peeked out my kitchen window to catch a glimpse of the five teens splashing around in our pool with my 18-year-old son. I could barely contain myself as I watched the group bat around a beach ball, jump cannonball-style into the pool, and laugh as they horsed around with one another. I felt like my heart would simply explode with happiness, triggering a tsunami of gratitude that made me weak in the knees.

What's the big deal over a little pool party?

For years, I've ached to hear the sound of teens laughing on our back porch while they munched on snacks, cranked up some tunes, or played board games. I've craved to watch a bunch of kids swimming, playing pool volleyball, or floating on inner tubes. I looked forward to a crowd of teens raiding my fridge when they crashed at our house for an overnighter. I've yearned for even a handful of friends to just hang out at our house on a Friday night to watch a movie

or play video games with my son.

But in four years of high school, this never happened for my son. Not even once. Why? Because my son has Asperger's Syndrome, an autism-spectrum disorder that often delivers a deadly blow to a teen's social life. People with Asperger's struggle with communication and social skills, missing out on the nuances of facial expressions, body language, and social cues. In a nutshell, they are often socially awkward, and other kids pick up on this. The result? They struggle most of their lives to make and keep friends. While this always hurts (for both the kids and the parents), it's especially painful during the teen years, when the importance of a social life peaks.

Most parents don't think twice about their teen's friends hanging out at their house — it's a no-brainer because it happens so effortlessly. It's just a normal, take-it-for-granted part of adolescence. But for parents of teens with Asperger's, it's

anything *but* normal. And we think about it a lot — it's called wishful thinking.

Back in elementary school, things were different. My son's social life was more like a pre-arranged marriage, with playdates set up by moms on a weekly basis. Birthday parties included just about everyone in the class. Trips to the playground involved nothing more than a quick phone call to coordinate. I didn't know it at the time, but elementary school was the golden age of acceptance, where kids didn't seem to pay much attention to differences.

But around middle school, the social landscape changed dramatically. Birthday party invitations ceased. Texting and lunchroom conversations about the weekend replaced mom-coordinated playdates. Before he even realized it, my son was left out.

As a mother, it broke my heart to watch my son sit home by himself just about every weekend since middle school. I get a lump in my throat just thinking about it — not just the social exclusion and the loneliness, but how this has pummeled my son's self-esteem. He's such a great kid, but the other kids never bothered to dig beneath the social awkwardness. While other kids made plans with each other to go to school dances, movies, and parties, they never invited my son. Instead, he stayed home on Friday and Saturday nights hanging out with our family. I think his loneliness hit me harder than it did him.

But then, this little pool party happened.

Going *way* out his comfort zone, and ignoring his past social track record of



rejections, my son invited some teens in his art class to a pool party at our house. I'm not quite sure what even prompted the pool party idea after so many years of being blown off. But for the first time in about a decade, kids said YES!

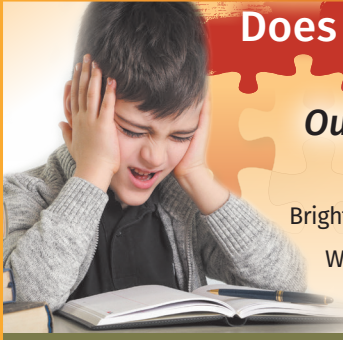
To these teens, accepting the invitation probably meant nothing more than making sure they didn't have a scheduling conflict that day. It was just something fun to do on a Saturday. But to my son, it meant the door of friendship opened up to him — a door that had been closed for far too long. When these teens accepted the party invitation, they did more than just give their RSVP. Although they probably didn't realize it, when they said yes to his party — *they said yes to my son*. Yes, we accept you. Yes, we like you. Yes, we have fun with you. Yes, we want to spend time with you. YES!

So, as I peek out the curtain watching it all play out, my knees buckle a little as I'm hit with sheer joy and a flood of gratitude. I watch my son's face light up, knowing he feels valued and accepted by his peers, and I'm grateful. I listen to the teens laughing, igniting a flicker of friendship, and I am grateful. I am in awe of my son and the courage it took for him to do this, and I am grateful.

As I silently thank these teens who said yes to my son, a powerful wave of gratitude washes over me, almost like the relief you feel when a doctor tells you that your biopsy is benign. Whew! *So grateful*. Although they probably don't even realize it, these teens opened their hearts and minds, affirmed my son, and created a little miracle they probably take for granted — friendship. *This* gives me hope for my son's future and a feeling of gratitude for the friendships that might lie ahead.

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Lisa Beach is a freelance journalist and copywriter. Her work has been published in The New York Times, Eating Well, Parents, Good Housekeeping, USA Today Go Escape, and dozens more. Check out her writer's website at www.LisaBeachWrites.com.



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