

# Social Stories

## The journey to understanding

### Sarah & Charlie

#### Noticing my child is different

My name is Sarah, and I have a six-year-old child called Charlie. From the moment Charlie was born, they were different from their older siblings. They didn't babble much or respond to their name. They were happiest playing with their spinning toys, watching the wheels go round and round for hours. As they grew, I noticed they weren't meeting milestones the way my other children had. They didn't point at things they wanted, and they didn't try to copy words like their siblings did at that age. While other children played together, Charlie preferred to line up their toys in rows. At first, I thought they were just taking their time, but deep down, I started to wonder if something more was going on.

#### Seeking help

My partner and I approached our health visitor, who listened to our concerns and suggested we see a paediatrician. The waiting process felt long, and I worried constantly – was Charlie struggling? Was there something we could do to help? The paediatrician asked about Charlie's development and observed how they interacted with us. They noticed Charlie's speech delay, love of patterns and how they didn't always respond to social cues. They suggested an autism assessment. It felt overwhelming, but we just wanted to understand Charlie better so we could support them in the best way possible.

#### Getting a diagnosis

The assessment process took time. Whilst waiting we received some help in from a local charity which supports early years children with emerging needs. Eventually Charlie met with specialists who watched how they played and communicated. They asked us about Charlie's behaviour at home, their routines, and what made them happy or upset. Finally, we received the diagnosis: Charlie is autistic. Hearing those words was emotional. I felt a mix of relief and worry. Relief, because now we had answers – our instincts had been right. Overwhelm, because I didn't know what this would mean for Charlie's future. But most of all, I knew Charlie was still the same sweet, curious and wonderful child they had always been. Now, we just had a clearer path forward.

#### Finding support and understanding myself

Even before Charlie's diagnosis we started learning everything we could. We found speech and language therapy to help with communication, and we connected with other parents of autistic children. We learned how to support their needs, like giving them choices using pictures and creating routines to help them feel safe.

As I read more about autism, something started to click. Many of Charlie's traits – the way they preferred routine, their deep focus on interests, and their difficulty with changes – felt strangely familiar. I had always struggled with social situations, felt overwhelmed by complex noise, and relied on routines to get through the day. I thought back to my own childhood and how I had masked my struggles, learning to mimic others to fit in. Curious, I joined an online group for autistic adults. To my surprise, many of them had only discovered their neurodiversity after their children were diagnosed. We shared experiences, and for the first time in my life, I felt truly understood.

#### Embracing my family's neurodiversity

Now that we understand Charlie better, it helps us to see the world through their eyes and anticipate situations which they may struggle with, so we can make adjustments. Their way of thinking is unique and beautiful. Their attention to detail, love of patterns and excitement for the things they love are all part of what makes them special.

And now, I understand myself better too. I no longer feel like I have to push myself to be someone I'm not. I recognise my own sensory needs and allow myself to take breaks when I need them. I know that my brain works differently, and that's not a bad thing – it's just who I am.

We know there will be challenges, but we also know that both Charlie and I have so much to offer the world. With the right support, we will thrive in our own ways. Being autistic is part of who we are, and we celebrate ourselves exactly as we are.

