



AUTISM ALLIANCE OF MICHIGAN PRESENTS

# MiNavigator

SPECIAL EDITION

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[www.AAOMI.org](http://www.AAOMI.org)

## OUR STORY...

**February 27, 2014. The day is seared into my mind. It is the day my husband and I learned that our autistic, seventh-grade son, Joe, had been sexually abused by an emotionally impaired student at Novi Middle School for the past six months. Our sweet, innocent boy. The one who still believed in Santa Claus.**

February 27, 2014. The night is seared into my mind too. The horrible images of what Joe told us that day flooded my mind. I sobbed out loud the entire night on the couch in our family room. I put the TV on for noise because the quiet was unbearable. More than three years later, the nightmarish images... thoughts of Joe's daily confusion and fear... how he suffered... how no one helped him. They are still with me. I hope they leave someday. For now, I still need the TV on every night to fall asleep.

I wish this were a happier story. A story about how the Novi school system took responsibility for its actions, showed compassion, and changed things so that nothing like this could ever happen to another child. I can't tell you that story because it didn't happen. I can only tell you what happened and hope that something good comes from it.

Our story began with the realization that Joe, our first child, had autism. Until then, our life had been pretty much going according to plan. My husband and I met after college and both had good jobs. We got engaged. We got married. We bought a house in Novi. We had Joe and his brother came along three years later.

Then, the plan changed. We realized it the same way many of you did: Joe's lining up of toys; his lack of interest in playing with other children; his repetitive behaviors and getting stuck on things; his anxiety and need for predictability; his problems with language. The people reading this know all too well the unbearable pain, doubt, and fear that filled our thoughts in those early days. What would our son's life be like?

Little by little, we learned to shift gears, appreciate what was unique and special about Joe, and focus on making his life better. We were committed to finding the best therapies, doctors, and support programs. We felt especially fortunate to live in the Novi School District, which everyone knew was one of the best. We thought we couldn't have made a better choice of where to raise a family.

It is difficult to describe the anxiety of sending an autistic child off to school for the first time. We know our kids are different. We know they can't read people. We are afraid they will be picked on, and teased, and ostracized. We don't know who will help them tie their shoes, or button their coats, or use the bathroom. We are afraid, especially when they are young, that they will not be able to tell us if something happens to them.

As a result, there is a sacred trust between special education staff and parents. We trust them to be our eyes and ears, to help our children when they can't help themselves, and to tell us when something is wrong. For so many years in the Novi School system, this is exactly the kind of relationship we had with Joe's teachers, aides, and therapists.

At Joe's elementary school, they were kind, caring and on top of things. They just seemed to get him. They kept us updated on his progress, celebrated every success, and watched out for him. I was thrilled to write a letter of recommendation for Joe's teacher when she was nominated for teacher of the year. She had gone out of her way to develop a relationship with our entire family.

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We were painfully aware that Joe wandered around alone on the playground and didn't have a "best pal" and never had anyone ask to sit with him at their table at lunch, but we always knew that the adults in the school were watching over him and protecting him. We could breathe. We could go through our day knowing that he was with people who cared about him. Looking back, I think how much we appreciated and counted on these people made what happened to Joe even worse.

February 27, 2014. That day, our trust was shattered.

We learned that every day, in a special education math class with only four students, our autistic son was placed in a small, secluded side office with an emotionally impaired student who was 6' 4" and 230 pounds. In that room, Joe was sexually abused on a daily basis. That is not the only place in the school that it happened. I cannot begin to convey our devastation over the suffering Joe endured.

As time went on, we learned the incredibly sad and tragic history of the student who abused Joe. We learned, from the school district's own records, about his serious and disturbing behavioral issues since pre-school. The school district knew. Yet, they put him alone with our son every day.

We learned that the Novi School District did not keep track of dangerous students, did not train staff on sexual abuse or autism, and had no process in place for sexual abuse complaints.

We learned that at least five times during the school year, teachers and staff had seen the other student holding Joe's hand and more. They never told us. They never gave us the chance to protect our son.

We learned that there was a four-minute video of Joe being sexually abused in an English class with only three students. The superintendent claimed the district never had a copy. We later found out the district had the video in the school safe but had it destroyed without showing us or the police "for Joe's safety." We wanted to ask the English teacher how this could have happened right in front of her, but incredibly, no teacher admits to being in the room that day.

We learned the other student admitted to repeated sexual touching. The police said it happened too. What was the school district's reaction? To our great horror and dismay, they told us there was "no evidence" of sexual abuse. They said that Joe, a twelve year old autistic child, had consented to any sexual contact. They *suspended Joe* from school. Then they told us Joe had to get back to classes with the *same student* who had abused him, with no changes to his schedule, no additional protections. *Nothing.*

My husband and I have endured for years the pain that many of us have in common – the pain of seeing our son without friends because of his autism. We have grieved each time he has been excluded from a birthday party or a game or a school activity. We have watched him time and again off to the side, alone, while other kids played around him.

I think all of those experiences have made it especially agonizing for us to hear the school district claim, over and over, that Joe "consented" to his sexual abuse. His IEP states that Joe has "no ability to make friends." That hasn't stopped the district from asserting that he and the other child were "involved in a consensual relationship." The people reading this newsletter will instantly understand the depth of ignorance and malice in this statement. Our school district was, and still is, oblivious to the fact that no twelve year old child can consent to sexual touching, much less a twelve year old autistic child.

Our faith in people and institutions has been shaken to the core. We looked for justice at every level of the school system and found nothing but cruelty. We have not found a single person with the basic decency to say, "I am sorry this happened." The interests of Joe, the other child, and all of the children in the district have been trampled to protect careers and reputations. Instead of taking care of Joe, the district has repeatedly blamed him and my family. The district has not taken any responsibility. It has not disciplined a single adult, and the superintendent said no policies have changed as a result of this tragedy.

There have been so many dark days. So many days where we have wanted to quit. Where we have wondered whether there is any point in fighting this powerful, unfeeling, institution that has done so much damage to our son. Where we feel like we just can't endure this pain anymore. Then we look at Joe and think about all that he has endured – in life and at Novi Middle School – and we know that we can't give up until we have done everything we can possibly do, for him and all of the kids like him.

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For his part, Joe remembers. He remembers everything. He can't forget. His mind doesn't work that way. But he is strong too. He asks me frequently when we will know it is safe at Novi Middle School. I do my best to be strong too and tell him, "Soon Joe, I hope soon."

People with autism have such good hearts, loyal spirits, and loving appreciation for those who love them. They don't always understand or properly interpret emotions or people's intentions, but I would take that any day over people who have that understanding and disregard it.

We don't know what the future holds for Joe, but we hope the time will come that he can share his own success story. The one about how he suffered unspeakable things and had the courage to fight so that kids like him can feel safe. Most of all, we hope that Joe will share that the reason he didn't give up was because he has autism, and people with autism never give up.

**February 27, 2014. I hope that someday, we can look at that as the day our son stood up, and we stood up with him, to make sure this never happens to any autistic child again.**

## How You Can Help!

### 1. Write and Call your state legislators, asking for:

- Mandated and funded Prevention Trainings for Autism
- Improved Supervision/Cross Categorical Placement and Seclusion and Restraint

### 2. Contact AAoM's MiNavigator 877-463-AAOM for sample legislative letters and speaking points.

## HOW A CONCERNED CLINICIAN CAN HELP

Tammy Morris, M.A., CCC-SLP Chief Program Officer AAoM

**Children with autism may be targeted by sexual predators because of their vulnerabilities. When children with autism are sexually abused they may show signs that are ignored or misunderstood.**

### Possible signs of sexual abuse:

- **A sex offender may present as an unlikely friend;**
- **Children with autism may turn more to behaviors that produce comfort or are self-soothing;**
- **They may become frustrated and exhibit self-injurious behaviors;**
- **Presence of sexualized behavior and physical signs.**

### What do we do?

- **Teach or provide materials to parents to teach sexual abuse prevention;**
- **Design protocols for speaking and non-speaking children with ASD;**
- **A one-time evaluation may not be successful and a familiar therapist can be used to evaluate the risk of sexual abuse;**
- **Clinicians can help educate police and others regarding the behavior of children with ASD.**



# APRIL AT A GLANCE

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THR	FRI	SAT
<p>Please visit our community calendar for full event listings at <a href="http://www.navigators.autismallianceofmichigan.org/events">www.navigators.autismallianceofmichigan.org/events</a>.</p>						<p><b>1</b> Autism Activity Day – Superheroes (Grand Rapids)</p>
<p><b>2</b> Caring Bunny Ann Arbor, Taylor Roseville, Lansing  Light It Up Blue (Rochester)</p>	<p><b>3</b></p>	<p><b>4</b> Perspective Parenting Seminars (West Bloomfield)</p>	<p><b>5</b> Getting My Own Address Presentation (Troy)</p>	<p><b>6</b> Public Input Into the Common Disability Agenda (Saginaw)</p>	<p><b>7</b> 10th Annual Living with Autism Workshop (Troy)  Friday Forms Festival (Marquette)</p>	<p><b>8</b> Easter Egg Hunts: Sterling Heights, Troy Sensory Friendly Bunny Novi, Auburn Hills</p>
<p><b>9</b> Liberty Riders Easter Egg Hunt (St. Clair) Sensory Friendly Sunday at Ann Arbor Hands-On Museum</p>	<p><b>10</b> Equal Opportunity Summit (Detroit) Skills for Effective Parent Advocacy (Middleville)</p>	<p><b>11</b> Positive Behavior Support (Hillsdale) Special Needs Easter Egg Hunt &amp; Bonnet Contest (Free Soil)</p>	<p><b>12</b> Student Needs and Assistive Technology in the IEP (Clare) EMU 2nd Annual Green March for Autism Acceptance</p>	<p><b>13</b> ConsumerLink Information and Resource Fair (Detroit) The Fowler Center All Camp Open House (Mayville)</p>	<p><b>14</b> Adult Art Class (Northville)</p>	<p><b>15</b> Easter Egg Hunts: Byron Center Rockford Positive Behavior Supports( Battle Creek)</p>
<p><b>16</b> Ice Cream Social at Play-Place for Autistic Children (S. Heights)</p>	<p><b>17</b> Integrated Dual Disorder Treatment 101 (Traverse City)</p>	<p><b>18</b> 33rd Annual Developmental Disabilities Conference (East Lansing)</p>	<p><b>19</b> Public Input Into the Common Disability Agenda (Marquette)</p>	<p><b>20</b> PCIT Initial Therapist Training (Ann Arbor)  CLS Open House (Wayne)</p>	<p><b>21</b> DWMHA 2017 Autism Conference (Livonia)  Evaluation and Eligibility (Cadillac)</p>	<p><b>22</b> 2nd Annual Interactive Learning Day for Families with Special Needs (Canton)</p>
<p><b>23</b> Rejoicing Spirits -no-shush worship service (Birmingham)</p>	<p><b>24</b> ESDM Advanced Training (Ann Arbor)  Skills for Effective Parent Advocacy (Hastings)</p>	<p><b>25</b> Intentional Communities of Washtenaw at Burger Transition Center (Garden City)</p>	<p><b>26</b> Bridge Walk for Autism and Free Sensory Friendly Night at the Museum (Grand Rapids)</p>	<p><b>27</b> Home and Community Based Services (Westland) Macomb Autism Society Resource Fair (S. Heights)</p>	<p><b>28</b> Transition: Planning for High School and Beyond(Houghton)  Celebrate Autism with AFN (Lamont)</p>	<p><b>29</b> Sensory Friendly Saturday in Greenfield Village (Dearborn)  Falconers at Potter Park Zoo (Lansing)</p>
<p><b>30</b> 4th Annual Walk For Autism (Somerset Mall-Troy)</p>	<div style="background-color: #76b82a; color: white; padding: 10px;"> <p><b>Navigating Autism Today--Regional Conference and Parent Networking Night</b>  <b>May 11th and 12th--Bavarian Inn Lodge Frankenmuth</b></p> <p>Join presenters, AAoM staff and caretakers for a night of networking before the all day conference.</p> <p><b>Information at <a href="http://aaomconference.org">aaomconference.org</a></b></p> </div>					