

CELEBRATING THE SPARK WITHIN EACH CHILD

by Gu Zhenzhen

*“Every parent and teacher should read this fabulous book!” was the praise for **The Spark**, a compelling memoir written by an American mother, Kristine Barnett. I couldn’t put it down. It’s a perfect book for me. I felt a strong connection to the mother’s story because Kristine’s journey with her autistic son, Jacob, reminded me of mine with my own children.*

Like Kristine, I am a mother of three boys. Two of them have special needs as well. My second son, Jiayin, was identified as a gifted student and my third son, Haiyang, was diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome, just like Jacob, Kristine’s eldest son.

There are other similarities: When Jiayin was young, he was also interested in light and shadows. Once he and his older brother, Weilan, used stones and twigs to build a “sundial” in the schoolyard at recess. Children’s curiosity makes them natural learners. Jacob taught himself Braille; Jiayin learned Morse Code on his own. He once wrote a letter to me in Morse Code that I had to use a dictionary to decipher.

Just like Jacob, Jiayin is a budding scientist. In 2012 he and his partner won a gold medal at the Toronto Science Fair for their project, “The Ultimate Fate of Our Universe” and moved on to the Canada Wide Science Fair in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. He, too, is a mathematical wizard. In 2010 he finished first place in both Canadian National Mathematics League Championship and the University of Waterloo’s Gauss Mathematics Contest with perfect scores.

Like Jacob, Jiayin’s younger brother, Haiyang, is obsessed with various things at different stages. Before he started kindergarten, he was fascinated by numbers. I fondly called him “the little boy who loves numbers” (now he is in a Grade 10 gifted math class). Then he was into analog clocks. His kindergarten teacher, Mr. Sparrow, gave him a nickname “Mr. Clock.” Later, he was crazy about weather, subway, comics, Super Mario, Club Penguin, Pokemon, Minecraft, chess, music, etc.

What do you do when your kids have a particular passion? According to Kristine, simply stoke their passions and never hold them back. She did just that. She made sure Jacob had as many of his beloved alphabet cards as he wanted. And she took her young son to the countryside to look up at the enormous night sky and to the advanced astronomy lectures at university when he was passionate about the stars.

In a similar way, I fed my boys’ passions, whatever they were. I took countless train rides with Haiyang when he was enthusiastic about the subway. We have been to all 69 subway stations in Toronto! My first born, Weilan, was captivated by aircraft. So we went to Pearson International Airport many times to watch planes from around the world taking off and landing (now at the age of 18, he is a second-year student in the Bachelor of Aviation Technology Program at Seneca College).

If teachers also follow children’s interests, they can have an impact, too. Haiyang’s Grade 3 teacher, Mrs. Doherty, allowed him to read his comic books to his class, which brought him out of his shell. That year, he truly thrived. His Grade 6 teacher, Mrs. Diack, let him share his passion for Super Mario with his classmates. It became another great year for him. He was voted “The Most Improved Student” and “The Most Optimistic Student” by his peers.

From *The Spark*, I got an important message: Believe in our children and nurture their spark. The result can be astonishing. Even though Jacob was diagnosed with severe autism at the tender age of two, and didn’t speak for a year and a half, his mother didn’t abandon hope. Instead, she embraced it and did everything in her power to help this unusual child reach his full potential. Now at the age of 16, Jacob has completed a master’s program at Waterloo’s Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics. His extraordinary mind may earn him the Nobel Prize in the future.

Every child is unique and has true potential. It is up to parents and teachers to nurture them, encourage them, challenge them and help them realize their full potential. That is what *The Spark* is all about. I totally agree that every parent and educator should read this inspiring book.

Gu Zhenzhen, a freelance writer and a mother of four teenagers, works for Toronto District School Board and York Region District School Board. 🍁



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