

# Sharing Elliot

by Stacey Herculane, March 2023

For the ninth time, students from my classroom will be standing in front of their peers speaking on behalf of my son, Elliot. This tradition started in March of 2015 with an amazing group of students. That first presentation will be one of my most memorable days as an educator.



It began with a new group of students and me returning to my first full year of school since becoming a mom to Elliot. Initially, I had decided not to share Elliot's diagnosis with my students. How would I explain it to third graders? I instead shared Elliot with my students as any other proud first-time mother would. I plastered my walls with his pictures. I shared his milestones and antics. And they adored him, despite never actually meeting him. They bought him presents for his first birthday as well as Christmas. They made pictures to hang in his room. They asked nearly every day what he was up to and how he had made me laugh recently.

They were truly an amazing, generous group of children. And an idea started to grow—maybe I could tell them about what made Elliot special. Maybe they could see past the diagnosis and just see the adorable, fun, amazing boy behind it. I

decided to share with them about what made Elliot unique.

I will never forget the day I sat down with them, picture book in hand, and explained that Elliot was just a little different. I read them the book, which included an explanation about Down syndrome. When I finished, they asked thoughtful, curious questions—did I know Elliot would have Down syndrome? Why is it called “Down” when there is something extra? What is it like to grow up with Down syndrome?

Their natural curiosity led to a whole research project, including scientific articles about Down syndrome, videos about amazing success stories, and ending with a writing project telling what they learned. They couldn't get enough—some students even researched on their own at home!

And it didn't stop there. They were eager to share their knowledge with their peers. We decided to create a presentation to be shared in the auditorium, complete with speeches, videos, and inspirational stories. We practiced until the students could practically perform in their sleep. They were excited, passionate, and eager to share with their classmates. We chose March 21st, World Down Syndrome Day, to host a 3rd grade crazy sock day and share our message. They were excited and nervous. As it turned out, mother nature had other plans for us. March 21, 2015 hit our area with several inches of snow, and school was canceled that day.

My students were not deterred, though. We rescheduled our big moment for the next school day. A day that I will never forget. Then 18-month-old Elliot surprised them by showing up to their show. He was treated like a rock star. The kids could hardly settle down in time for our big presentation.

My students spoke clearly and fluently. My tech team ran the show entirely themselves. They were so proud to share everything they learned. Our presentation ended with the song “Happy” by Pharrell, and my students danced up and down the aisles, high fiving their friends. It was an incredible celebration. We've repeated it every year since.

There is so much significance to that day for me. It opened doors and conversations with future students about Down syndrome, Elliot, and accepting differences. It's given me faith in children and their ability to do amazing, kind things. It set the tone for my role as Elliot's mom who happens to be a teacher. I cherish the open, honest conversations we have about life, disability, and accepting others, and I truly believe that the students appreciate it as well.

That day also showed me that Down syndrome is something that can be celebrated. Seeing the dancing, smiling, and joy on the students' faces – it may have been the first time in the eighteen months since Down syndrome came into my life that I knew everything would be okay. I knew Elliot would have a joyous life and that he would be loved. I owe that to a very special group of children, who are now juniors in high school. Year after year, a new group enters and steps up to give Elliot a voice, and though some things have changed (I've since moved on to teaching 4th grade, we've incorporated technology to create videos, and we do fundraisers), the message remains the same. For our school, World Down Syndrome Day is a day of acceptance, love, and celebration of differences—everything that I could ever hope for, for my son. ■