



# Christopher's STORY

EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY  
ENSURING ALL FAMILIES BUILD NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS





Parents Eric and Brianna now feel they have a closer relationship with Christopher, shown with younger brother Alec. (Photo Credit: Brandon Colbert)

By the time Christopher was 15 months old, Brianna could tell he was different from others. Sometimes he would smile and make eye contact, but at other times he would stare off into space as if he was in his own world.

Brianna and her husband Eric made an appointment with Christopher's pediatrician to share their concerns. During the appointment, the pediatrician referred them to the Autism Discovery Institute (ADI) at Rady Children's Hospital of San Diego for an assessment.

The evaluations confirmed that Christopher, who was now 18 months old, was showing signs of being on the autism spectrum. Their ADI doctor connected them with services including the HOPE Infant Family Support Program, which is a public special education program offered at no cost by the San Diego County Office of Education for children that qualify.

The HOPE program's speech, hearing and language specialist worked with the family on a weekly basis using the Floortime technique, an evidence-based practice in which a parent plays on the floor with his or her child by following their natural emotions and interests, and encouraging them to be creative and spontaneous.

During Floortime, the HOPE specialist coached Brianna on how to interact with her child. "I was uncomfortable at first," Brianna said. But the HOPE specialist taught her strategies on how to interact with her son more effectively and read his nonverbal cues. For example, Brianna learned how to follow Christopher's lead. If he became interested in a ball on the floor, then she would join in and play with the ball too.

The HOPE specialist also worked directly with Christopher to help him learn how to better pay attention, follow directions, communicate and play. Christopher was gaining valuable skills he would need to enjoy play with other children, participate in family activities and, one day, be ready to learn in school. The HOPE specialist gave the parents a guidebook with additional strategies on how to engage with their child.

Brianna said the best parts of the HOPE program were that they offered all of the needed services for her son under one roof, and provided additional services in their home. These services were invaluable, as was the HOPE specialist's continuing support.

"When we first started services," Brianna said, "Christopher seemed very far away. Now he makes eye contact, he smiles, and his eyes light up. This is a huge difference from what it was in the beginning, even if he still has a ways to go."





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*Brianna*

## EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH

Infant-early childhood mental health, sometimes referred to as social and emotional development, is the developing capacity of the child from birth to 5 years of age to form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, manage, and express a full range of emotions; and explore the environment and learn – all in the context of family, community, and culture.<sup>1</sup>

Parents of children on the autism spectrum need to learn strategies for how to support their child's communication, cognitive and social skills, while at the same time developing mutually enjoyable and loving relationships.

## STRENGTHS OF SAN DIEGO'S ECMH SYSTEM

Knowledgeable Pediatric Community

Coordinated Care

Quality Services based on Family Needs

Support Available for Caregivers and Parents

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In pediatric clinics, promote regular screening for developmental and behavioral concerns, and the prompt referral to community based assessment and treatment services.

Fund community based treatment services so that pediatricians can easily and confidently refer their families to qualified providers.

Provide resources for relationship-based education to parents and caregivers with an emphasis on quality parent-child interaction, attachment and child development.

Promote integrated care and one-stop shop services to improve the family's experience. Multiple services offered under one roof, or in the home, make it easier for families to obtain services and increases the likelihood they will continue with them.

<sup>1</sup>Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families, 2012  
ECMH (Early Childhood Mental Health)





American Academy of Pediatrics,  
California Chapter 3

For a list of resources and  
additional information, please visit:  
[aapca3.org/familystories](http://aapca3.org/familystories)

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