

When Milestones Fall Short

Category: Disability

written by Lauren Falcon | October 2, 2025

His chart read like a list of losses: no speech, no eye contact, hand flapping, no interest in others. By age five, milestones expected years earlier had not been achieved.

His dad told me a different story: “He’s shy. He’ll catch up. Some kids just take longer.” He smiled as he spoke, but his eyes gave him away. His denial wasn’t ignorance—it was love that refused to let go of hope and that braced against fear.

Meanwhile, the baby brother babbled and waved. He cried when I checked his ears, burying himself against his father’s chest. Across the room, the preschooler pressed his hands tightly over his ears, trying to muffle the outburst. The contrast was stark. While the father soothed the baby, I reached for the older child. He drew back from my touch, his gaze locked on the floor.

For the first time, I saw the father hesitate. The baby brother rambled, played, sought his embrace—all things his elder son had never done. He shifted in his chair and let out a long breath, his composure wavering.

Side by side, the children confronted him with what I could not soften—a distinction that spoke for itself.

The chart called it autism. The father framed it as patience. I felt the weight of both.

But what I saw wasn’t absence. The older brother made his presence known—covering his ears when the noise grew too loud, retreating when touch was too much. He was asking for space without words. He wasn’t broken. He wasn’t behind. He was expressing himself in ways milestones could never define.

I realized how often we reduce children to what is missing, instead of embracing the ways they are whole. What I saw that day was a boy communicating clearly, even if not by conventional means. The failure was never his—it was ours, for allowing benchmarks to cast a fog over the potential that had been there all along. He was exactly who he was meant to be, not who we expected him to become.

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