

# A Hard Lesson in Humility

Category: Parenting

written by Karen DeBonis | May 2, 2019

Matthew earned the nickname “Little Einstein” at eighteen months old, when he recognized the letter “T” and began announcing it at every opportunity. So when Matthew was selected for CLUES—his school’s gifted program—in third grade, it was no surprise. “Congratulations!” I said, pulling him into a hug. “I’m so proud of you!” Then I thought about the other students who weren’t chosen. Humility had been drilled into me as a young girl, and I wanted to pass that value on to my children. Quietly, I cautioned Matthew, “You know being in CLUES doesn’t make you better than anyone else, right?”

Two years later, my husband Mike and I pulled Matthew from the program, as he couldn’t handle the extra workload. He could barely keep up with his regular fifth grade work, even with timers, rulers, paper clips, and sticky notes to keep him on task. And he lost or forgot homework, books, and assignments daily, even when I stuck reminder notes everywhere, even when I wrote them on his wrist. He simply forgot to look at the notes, or he ignored them, thinking they were yesterday’s notes, or tomorrow’s.

Over the next year, I wished I could take back my lesson on humility. Be proud of being smart! I wanted to tell Matthew’s younger self. Crow about it all you want! I wanted Matthew to embrace being smart, knowing that one day, he wouldn’t be.

After a year of diagnostic dartboard, when Matthew was eleven, an MRI revealed the source of his decline: a brain tumor. The benign growth—a pilocytic astrocytoma—had trapped cerebrospinal fluid in the ventricles, causing severe hydrocephalus, squishing Matthew’s grey matter into a sliver against his skull. An endoscopic third ventriculostomy created a new exit pathway for the excess fluid, and Matthew slowly began to recover. Slowly, meaning over the next twenty years.

Matthew never regained his Einstein level of intelligence, but now, at 32, he’s independent, steadily employed, and about to buy a house. On his own. With money he saved from his full-time job, while paying rent on his own apartment. None of it came easily. But he never gave up.

Matthew learned humility the hard way. Now it’s time for him to crow. And if he won’t, I’ll do it for him.

*Karen DeBonis*  
*Troy, New York*