



Once a year, Nicholas school does an all school play. Several grades participate and all students in those grades are given separate parts of the overall play, music or presentation and then all the students congregate on stage to perform in sequential order the overall theme. Every year it was a different theme. The most memorable were the Musical Show and the American Theme.

When Nicholas was in kindergarten, the school used the musical theme. The background story was a traveling turtle around the world and the kids would sing different silly songs about the turtle's travels. The presentation was in the school auditorium that held about 200 parents and a similar number of children. The older kids were on stage, the younger kids (Nicholas) would stay on the floor in front of the stage. The older kids would sing from stage, while the younger kids would stand up, turnaround and sing to the parents.

As a sensory challenged individual, Nicholas did not like loud noises. He didn't like hammering, he didn't like loud airplanes, he didn't like barking dogs, and he didn't like loud music. This was going to be an interesting show. Nicholas was to be separated from his family, sitting with his class, sitting on a hard floor for over an hour listening to loud singing, then asked to stand up and sing loudly to the parents. I'm not sure who was more nervous, his teacher or us.

We had the great benefit of placing Nicholas in a communications disorder class within the school district. He was paired with 8 other kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade children with similar issues resulting from Autism, Asbergers, PD-NOS and other developmentally delayed children. The school system believed (and we heartily endorse) trying to continually expose the children to everything that the typical children classes were engaged with. This was sometimes painful since the children would occasionally react negatively to the stimulus, but all the literature continues to repeat that continual exposure of the children the "typical" world will indoctrinate them to the world.

Nicholas was not much of a talker. He was speech delayed. He didn't particularly like to talk about school when you asked him over dinner or after dinner. He preferred to discuss his favorite toys or what we would do next. We didn't know going into the show what songs they would be singing, and given the silly nature of the songs, I'm not sure that we would have understood it anyways.

As the parents assembled in the auditorium, the classes began to enter. Nicholas's class was one of the very last. We later found out that was intentional. The teacher tried to minimize the special needs class exposure to the stimulus as much as possible. They were pretty good at the school at thinking through what the kids could handle.

The show began with an assortment of songs and storytelling. My wife and I kept looking at Nicholas trying to anticipate how we was doing. We were discussing escape plans if he couldn't take it anymore. We discussed who would do it. How we would transfer the other 2 kids to the remaining parent. What door we would escape through. Should we carry Nicholas or try to just



lead him from the room. Where to meet after the show to them leave for home. After all contingency plans were made, we tried to relax and watch the show. But we kept watching Nicholas.

He was rocking. Left and right. Forward and Back. Looking around at what was going on, and then retreating to within himself. This was a sign of anxiety building. We had learned that the rocking was his method to demonstrate anxiety, no different than some folks tap their fingers and others bounce their knees up and down. We were over half way. Would he make it? Then it happened – the hands started going over the ears. This was the sign, that the music and singing was just too loud. This action usually preceded a declaration from Nicholas “you’re too loud!” and insistence that the volume decrease.

Nicholas’ class was up next. They actually sang with the other kindergarten classes, which was good, they weren’t up there alone. There stood Nicholas as commanded by his teacher. Standing, singing, with hands over ears. The voices of the children drowned out hearing anything Nicholas was saying. We believe he was singing along. When the song ended, the kids sat down and they went to the last few classrooms and finished the show. Nicholas had done it. He had participated in a group environment, with loud noises and had the composure to sit down and watch the rest.

When the show was over, he was excited to be able to leave the busy and loud room. We executed on the exit strategy flawlessly and met at the car after thanking the teacher. He had grown so much over the first year in school. He didn’t necessarily like the show. “It was too loud” we heard all the way home. But Nicholas was learning to cope with his challenges in acceptable manners.

Nicholas taught us several lessons that day. First, always have an escape plan; you never know when you might need it. Second, and more importantly, Nicholas was maturing emotionally to be able to calm himself enough to work through a situation in public. He didn’t have to like it, but he knew that it was important to behave and participate.