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By Linda White - [bio](#) | [email](#)

There's quite a bit of joy, typically, when a family learns it's having a baby. The McQuillan family felt that joy when they decided to expand their family from three to five.

Dad, Tom McQuillan said, "Everything about it was exciting from conception all the way through delivery."

Aidan and Andrew were born February 28th, 2007.

Then near their third birthday –

McQuillan said, "It's been a tough road, but there's been a lot of laughter, a lot tears, everything else."

-the twins were diagnosed with autism, a neuro-developmental disorder, which is an impairment of the growth and development of the brain or central nervous system.

First Andrew was diagnosed.

McQuillan said, "The night that Andrew was diagnosed for probably the first time in our 25 year marriage, I grabbed my wife by her hand and we knelt by the bed and prayed about decisions we would have to make about the boys."

Then a few months later Aidan was diagnosed.

The McQuillan boys are some of the 2 million people in the US, and an estimated 55,000 here in Alabama, who have autism, both diagnosed and undiagnosed.

While the CDC points to a 78% increase in autism over a 6 year period, ideadata.org uses different information over a ten year period to say that autism has increased 448% across the US, 517% here in Alabama.

Dr. Martha Wingate is part of the Alabama Autism Surveillance Project at UAB. It's one of 14 sites collecting autism data from across the country.

Martha Wingate, DrPH said, "Sometimes we think we're just recognizing more children and I think most folks would say that's some of what we're seeing, maybe not all, but that's probably a big piece."

According to the CDC, children born in 1992, had a 1 in 150 chance of an autism diagnosis. Those born in 1998, had a 1 in 110 chance. And the last birth year of data collected, 2000, those children have a 1 in 88 chance.

Parents, doctors, vaccines - at one point in history each has been blamed for autism.

UAB Clinical Psychologist, Sarah O'Kelley, PhD said, "I think anyone who's looking for a single or even a few causes is going to be very disappointed, because what we're learning, the more research that is done with autism spectrum disorders at the genetic level, at the neural developmental level is that there are many, many factors that converge to produce the outward symptoms of an autism spectrum disorder."

What specialists have found, the earlier the diagnosis the better. Children who get access to one-on-one speech, occupational, and/or behavioral therapy do better and are more likely to lead independent lives. That's why Aidan and Andrew are here at Mitchell's Place.

McQuillan said, "And after being here just a few months, he caught my eye as I was looking at him in the mirror and he said, daddy I want Micky Mouse on. He formed that full sentence, really this was a great investment for my children."

Parents and some specialists swear by the intense therapy that autistic children get here at Mitchell's Place and other facilities like it. They believe it makes a difference but it comes at a high price to families.

McQuillan said, "It is very expensive. With two boys on the spectrum we're paying a little over 3,000 dollars a month which is non-reimbursed by insurance."

And when the boys move to public school, taxpayers will be responsible for the cost of their care & special therapy. In 1999 the cost was \$18,000 a year to educate a student with autism in Alabama. That's three times the amount to educate a typical child not needing any special services. State officials were unable to tell us how many autistic students there are in Alabama, because students aren't divided into categories, they're all grouped special needs. All school districts use federal and state tax dollars for that care and those that are able, also use local tax dollars to pay for services.

McQuillan said, "I'm sorry if my boys are a burden tax wise to anybody but there may come a time in your family that you have the same issue. I'm not going to grumble or complain that my tax dollars are going to help yours."

As the former owner of a restaurant chain - McQuillan knows his family is fortunate to afford the early intense therapy for the twins. He doesn't place blame, neither does he know a cause of why they both have autism but he's hopeful that one day he'll have an answer. In the meantime the McQuillan's do the best they can and hope for the best for their children and others like them.

McQuillan said, "Never let yourself use your child's disability or whatever you want to call it as a reason not to expect achievements."

Several experts told me, no matter what the numbers are, autism is increasing. Early detection and services are needed to meet the increasing demand. That would allow individuals with autism to have independence and in turn reducing the taxpayer costs for people with autism.

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