

**T**he birth of any baby is special, but for me, the arrival of my third son, Hector, was a dream come true. Already a mum to twin boys, Thomas and Benjamin, then two, I'd endured four miscarriages and I thought I'd never be a mum again. So when Hector was placed in my arms, my husband Jonathan and I felt so lucky. Finally, we had the baby we'd longed for.

Only, just as my joy should have been complete, we received news that changed our lives in a way I could never have imagined...

I remember feeling so content with my new life as a mum-of-three as I took the twins for a hearing test in February 2002, eight weeks after Hector's birth. But as the doctor assessed them, he looked at us with a frown. 'You do know they have autism?' he said.

Even now, I can recall that moment so clearly. The utter shock as his words sunk in. I was sure he'd been mistaken.

Back home, we began researching into the condition. I was stunned when I read the symptoms - lack of eye contact, not wanting to play, delay in speech. The twins had every single one, but because they were my first babies, I'd assumed all these things were normal. How could I have missed the clues?

Their future looked bleak. Children with autism could have learning difficulties, and a lack of social and communication skills. Would they ever go to school? Make friends? Have jobs? Suddenly, the seriousness of it all dawned on me. Their lives had changed forever.

Still, determined to give our twins the best chance at life, we arranged for them to have an ABA (applied behavioural analysis) early-intervention programme at home to teach them how to play, speak and socialise. Slowly,



HECTOR, 14

THOMAS, 17

MARCUS, EIGHT

# 12 pregnancies... FOUR BOYS... ONE SHOCKING DIAGNOSIS

*After nine miscarriages, Sarah Ziegel is now a mum-of-four. But all four of her boys*

Sarah with her four children

they started to improve; they knew their own names, and even learnt a few words – asking for juice or saying ‘Mummy’.

But with these victories came terrible lows, too. The twins would throw tantrums at the slightest thing – and they had strange quirks. They’d only eat puréed food, and they hated wearing clothes with zips or buttons.

And, of course, Thomas and Benjamin’s diagnosis meant I watched Hector closely. Could he have autism, too? I was relieved when he started to develop normally. He’d babble in his high chair and laugh at cartoons on TV.

When I miscarried just a few months later, I wanted to hide away and mourn the loss of another child. But I couldn’t allow myself to think of the babies I’d lost. If I did, I’d never be able to keep going – to look after my boys, and keep trying for the baby I desperately wanted.

I forced myself to move on. And when I had another miscarriage – and then another – I refused to give up.

Then, in October 2003, I took Hector, then almost two, trick-or-treating. I thought he’d love all the costumes and sweets, but I noticed his eyes weren’t focusing, instead just staring blankly into the distance. In that moment, a wave of dread washed over me. Could he have autism, too?

### A genetic link?

I shared my concerns with Jonathan, who tried to reassure me. Still, we booked an appointment with a paediatrician, just in case.

In May 2004, when the doctor confirmed that Hector had autism, despite my fears, the shock hit me. Sobbing, I thought of my little boy, and the life he was going to lead. Just like his older brothers, he’d need constant care and attention. Could life really be this cruel?

In the days that followed, Jonathan and I were in a daze. We barely left the house, barely spoke. All we could do was sit in silence and sob. We had three boys, all with autism.

I couldn’t help but wonder if it was our fault. Were we passing autism on to our boys? So, in October 2004, we went for genetic testing – we knew we couldn’t risk bringing another child into the world who’d have autism.

When the results showed there was no genetic link, we were thrilled, and I became obsessed with the idea of having another baby. While I loved my boys dearly, I longed for a child free of any difficulties – one who would go on to university, fall in love and have children.

When I miscarried for an eighth – then a ninth – time, the grief was more overwhelming than before. What had I done to deserve this?

Despite our ordeal, each time I fell pregnant, I couldn’t help but feel hopeful. And, in 2007, when I realised I was expecting, somehow, I just knew – I was meant to have this baby.

I was right, and when Marcus was born in June 2008, I instantly fell in love. He had blue eyes – just like his brothers.

For the first 18 months of Marcus’ life, we lived in a state of ignorant bliss. He was too young to present signs of autism, so we got to enjoy him as the adorable, relaxed baby he was.

But ahead of his second birthday, I couldn’t help but feel anxious. I willed him to speak, to try to say ‘Mummy’ – but nothing happened.

### Unpredictable

The realisation was a slow one – I don’t think I wanted to believe it. Yet as Marcus turned two, I couldn’t ignore he wasn’t developing as normal – he didn’t speak or make eye contact. And in June 2010, a doctor confirmed he had autism.

This time, there was no sobbing, no knot in my stomach as I imagined my son’s future. Of course, I was disappointed, but by then, I knew how to look after a child with autism.

Of course, raising four boys with autism brought its difficulties. Going out as a family was almost impossible – the boys needed routine, so we’d have to lay out our plans before we left home. Any change would result in tantrums and racing back home.

And at school, I knew my boys were different to other children. It was heartbreaking to see them struggle to make friends. Even now, sometimes, I ask why this had to happen. What did we do to deserve this?

But there’s more to them than their autism. Through determination, and early intervention, the boys have exceeded all expectations and surprised us all with their development. The twins are 17 now – Thomas is a fantastic artist, while Benjamin is a really talented musician. Hector, now 14, loves computers, and even makes his own YouTube videos. And Marcus, now eight, is so joyful and chatty.

Life with my boys is unpredictable. But when I hear them laughing, or see them curled up on the sofa, watching TV, I feel lucky. I’ve always wanted a big family – and I adore mine. ☺

**\* Sarah’s book *A Parent’s Guide To Coping With Autism* (£14.99, The Crowood Press) is out now**

## WHAT HAD I DONE TO DESERVE THIS?



BENJAMIN, 17

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boys are autistic...



Sarah’s boys now have lots of creative hobbies