

Tony & Nicky Chironno's Personal Challenger Baseball Success Story

I am sometimes asked how my son, Nicky, and I got involved with Challenger Baseball. It started back in 2002, when we enrolled in the Challenger Division of the Lindenhurst American Little League. We heard about the program from a neighbor. We enrolled Nicky with little expectation of him being able to socialize or play in a game as Nicky was not interactive with others – a common trait of autistic children. As I indicated on the registration form that I was willing to help out any way I could, I found myself being a first-time Coach. At first, Nicky wasn't very attentive to the game, often self-stimming (indulging in repetitive motions, such as flapping a string in front of his eyes, and concentrating on that exclusively), as were many other autistic children.



The Challenger Directors, Carolyn and Joe Jankowski, had more success than I in getting Nicky to play and take a turn at bat. As with some of the other players, Nicky would play for half the game and then sit in the dugout watching the other players. Just by sitting in the dugout, benefits were being reaped. Nicky was watching, learning, and comprehending the basics of taking turns, encouraging others, cheering each other on, and especially the development of new friendships amongst peers.

As much of a benefit Challenger Baseball is for the children involved, the parents and guardians of the children benefit as well. Parents get together during each game and share their experiences with programs, treatments, and other topics related to the children's autism. New relationships have arisen between families of autistic children and mutual support is realized between these families.

Since 2002, Nicky has yearned for his independence while on the ball field, wanting to hit and field the ball by himself. Surprisingly, he has succeeded. His success on the ball field has crossed over into his daily lifestyle. The skills he learned on the ball field has allowed him to better interact socially at home, school, and while in public. I know of no other program that builds companionship and the social skills for autistic children, than Challenger Baseball.

~ Tony Chironno is the coauthor of "The Challenger Baseball Song"