



Autistic 11-year-old Luke Shambrook was lost in the bush for four days – and Amy (right) couldn't help but empathise with his parents.

LASHING OUT,  
ANTRUMS & LOVE

# My son's autism battle

NUM AMY SINCLAIR BEGS FOR MORE  
UNDERSTANDING AND AWARENESS

**W**hen 11-year-old autistic boy Luke Shambrook disappeared in dense Victorian bushland over the Easter long weekend, like many Australians I sat beside myself. It's wrenching when any child is missing, but as the mother of an autistic boy, I'm very close to home. I couldn't help but imagine my four-year-old son in the same circumstances. I spent four days reading the news coverage of Luke and his parents. Luke's mum has since said she's been unable to tell them exactly what happened during those four days in the bush, and that she understands much more than I'm able to express. Autism is heartbreaking like that. Our kids can't tell you about the bad things that happen to them, or even the good things.

I long for the day that my little boy Gus walks through the door and says: 'You won't believe what happened to me today!' It's a sentence I took for granted with my older two kids, but no more.

Before Gus was diagnosed, I knew nothing about autism, how widespread it is, how many children are affected – one in 68 at last count. I didn't know how heartbreaking it is not to be able to communicate with your child.

I didn't know what it felt like to have your child lash out at you, turn violent towards you. How depressing and isolating it can be for parents, how many marriages break up from the strain of autism. How financially draining treatment is, how families are cashing in superannuation and selling homes to pay for therapy. How little the government is doing for children with autism. But I know it all now.

Gus had just turned two when we were told he is autistic. ▶



Amy says Gus (below, with sister Queenie) can hit out over something as simple as his train carriages being in the wrong order.





Gus is now talking and loves reading, thanks to Little Souls – where he is seen playing with his dad Jimmy (below right).



## 'I've had split lips, bruises – but nothing hurts more than seeing your child so upset...'

Thanks to a lot of amazing therapy, he's a different child from when he was first diagnosed. While we're all much better people for having Gus in our lives, it's damn tough, and getting through a day without crying or feeling helpless is rare. You see, Gus is currently going through an aggressive stage. When things aren't going his way, he lashes out at my husband Jimmy and me. It could be something as simple as connecting his trains in the wrong order or wanting to leave the park before he's ready. Having lower results in a hell of a meltdown – and if he's not hitting me or Jimmy, he's going himself into mirrored wardrobe doors to get a reaction. 'I've had split lips, bruises everywhere – but nothing hurts more than seeing your child so upset about something as simple as taking a shower. Most of the time he's the happiest, sweetest, funniest boy in the world – but sometimes? Oh, boy!

Just recently, we took Gus to his favourite public pool, but on this particular day there was a private party set up, complete with a giant, inflatable waterslide. When Gus saw it, he started jumping up and down excitedly, screaming: 'Waterslide!' But while he was thrilled, I felt sick to my stomach knowing how the next hour would play out.

Sure enough, he wasn't allowed on the ride, and he went from spending 20 minutes patiently waiting his turn, to crying hysterically when we tried to coax him away. It eventually degenerated to us having to carry him 400m back to the car with him hitting us the entire way.

The exchange was witnessed by about 30 parents, and I heard one say Gus needed 'a good smack'. Only a week earlier, during another of his public meltdowns, I heard two loud women comment that they 'didn't come to the beach to hear some kid scream' and 'could someone shut that brat up?' Imagine if

they'd given me a hug instead, or asked if we were OK. A bit of kindness would've gone a long way, let me tell you.

Despite the fairly bleak picture I've described above, Gus is one of the lucky ones. He is receiving the best therapy he can from an amazing early intervention centre on the Gold Coast called Little Souls Taking Big Steps.

Jimmy and I moved from Sydney so he could attend the school. I quit my magazine editor job, and our two older children – Max, 15, and Queenie, nine – left their schools, starting all over again in a different state.

It was the best thing we've done. When he first started at Little Souls, Gus couldn't talk at all, rarely made eye contact and didn't know – or care – about what was happening around him.

Now he's talking lots, is engaged with everyone around him and can read, write, cracks jokes and more. He loves *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, plays with Max and Queenie – and as painful as this aggressive stage is, I know he will get through it.

To say the therapists at Little Souls have given us back our little boy is no understatement. We owe them everything. **NZ**



Diagnosed with autism at age two, Gus is generally 'the happiest, sweetest, funniest boy in the world', Amy says.