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### [Tabby Biddle](#)

Columnist, Goddess of the Week  
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## [L.A. Woman Brings Hope to Families With Autistic Children](#)

Autism diagnoses are on the rise, especially in [Los Angeles](#). In 2000, there were about 2,800 autistic students in the Los Angeles Unified School District; last year, there were more than 9,400. Recent studies show that a child born in Los Angeles is more likely to be diagnosed on the autism spectrum than anywhere else in California, with the rate at [two to four times the state average](#).

While teaching in an elementary school in Maryland, [Lauren Henry](#) noticed that the children on the autism spectrum being mainstreamed were completely overwhelmed in the classroom. "All the visual excess due to the ever-increasing demands of teachers were magnified and therefore exacerbating the already excessive stimulation within their surroundings," she explained to me in a recent interview. Additionally, she explained, she saw an increased amount of agitation and anxiety in these children when they were separated into classrooms that were gray in color and had only one desk and chair, devoid of any warmth or visual interest.



Lauren knew that these children could have a better experience. With a background in child psychology, education and art, she decided to do something about it.

Today Lauren is the Founder and President of [With a Brush of Love](#), an organization that transforms the lives of children diagnosed with autism and other special needs through their surroundings. Through the conscious use of color and various sensory elements, Lauren designs environments that improve both the emotional and physical well being of these children and their families. "In addition to helping directly, our methods also increase the effectiveness of other therapies and treatments," says Lauren.



Endorsed by the [Autism Society of America](#), Lauren is on a mission to help parents and teachers understand how imperative a child's surroundings is to optimize their progress and success. "You can spend thousands upon thousands of dollars on therapies which are integral and important to the progress of your child, but if your child is not in a space that supports what they need -- that money and effort is not going to work as optimally as it should," she says.



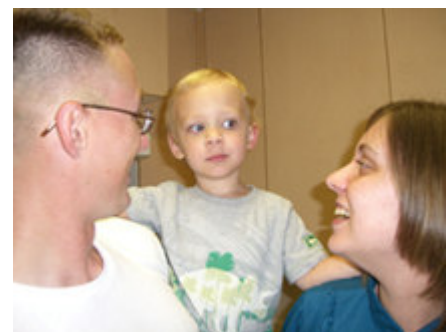
[Autism](#) is a pervasive developmental neurological disorder that impairs communication skills, learning abilities and social interactions. Avoidance of eye contact, delayed speech, social isolation, hand flapping, hitting, obsessive repetition, fear of loud noises and other sensitivities are some of the myriad behaviors of children on the autism spectrum. With a [1 in 110 chance](#) that a child born today will be diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (1 in 70 if that child is a boy), these behaviors are becoming more commonplace in our homes and classrooms around the country.

Many parents of children with autism spend copious time trying to educate themselves about the disorder, taking their child from one therapy to another to help them. Frustration, confusion, anger, and a sense of helplessness are not uncommon. After awhile, parents often wonder: Why are these recommended therapies not working? Why is my child acting out?

That's where [With a Brush of Love](#) steps in. With the support of a [Medical and Educational Advisory Board](#) that consists of licensed therapists, as well as educators and experts within the autism/special needs communities, Lauren works with families locally, nationally and internationally to help them design an environment that is optimal for their child.

Families who have worked with Lauren have reported noticing an immediate difference in their child's energy. Children who couldn't sleep through the night are now sleeping the whole way through; children who were anxious are now more relaxed; children who had low energy are now more vibrant; children with low self-esteem are now more confident.

*"Our son was diagnosed with autism almost a year ago. He has very little language and his surroundings tend to set him off for no reason. Lauren came in and gave him an environment that has opened him up in ways we could have never imagined. He fell asleep within 15 minutes of being put to bed the first night! It has been an ongoing blessing to watch him daily going to bed faster, staying asleep longer, and waking up calmer. Our little boy is relaxed for the first time. He is comfortable with his room, his bed, and himself. Lauren gave us peace as parents, but more importantly she gave our son peace."*



-Marine Sgt. Garey & Kristen Davis, Camp Foster, Okinawa, Japan

In designing their children's environment, Lauren says by far the most common mistake parents make is color choice. "Parents try so hard to please their kids and make them happy. They ask their kids what their 'favorite' color is and immediately assume that whatever the answer is will continue to make them happy." However, she says, that is rarely the case. "Frequently, the colors kids select as their favorite inadvertently create more harm than good when used on a grand scale," she adds. This in turn, she explains, can cause a lot of internal anxiety since that child cannot express it.



**Child's Room Before**



**Child's Room After**

In her new book, [\*Unique Kids, Unique Surroundings\*](#), Lauren provides practical guidelines for parents and caregivers through the use of color and design to create a supportive environment for their child. She emphasizes that no formal training or artistic expertise is required to make an immediate difference in a child's life through the use of the basic guidelines she provides in the book.

Furthering her mission, Lauren just finished producing a pilot called "[Room to be Different](#)." Each episode highlights a family, tells their unique story, and walks the viewers through an analysis and design process that addresses that family's needs. Later, Lauren and her team follow up with the family to see the actual changes in both the child and the family as a whole. "Typically there is a shift in the entire family's experience and relationship with one another," says Lauren. The program also introduces cutting edge services and experts who demonstrate various therapies and treatments that can help special needs children.



*"Our family was chosen to be the lucky recipient of a room transformation for Room to Be Different. My husband and I were very excited! We had wanted to do something for my daughter's room that was age appropriate (she just turned 9). She is autistic and we have about 20 hours a week of at-home therapies. Our hope was that the changes would not be so*

*overwhelming to her and would help her regulate when she has a meltdown and help her transitions be faster and less stressful on all of us.*

*We were blown away with the transformation of the den which was just a basic room for playing on the computer and video games. Now it is a family room, which has brought us closer, spending more time together talking and sharing ideas. Since our daughter is an artist, Lauren featured lots of Megan's art on her very own wall and Megan for the first time is taking pride in her work.*



*The best change is how much Megan loves being in her new room, which was the biggest transformation for all of us! She finds that it is very soothing, quiet and loves hanging out with her nanny to just talk (a very new behavior!) We find that she makes better transitions, is not so indecisive about choices, and has become very flexible. Because she has Anxiety Disorder and ADHD as well as Autism, we were a little scared of the changes. Everything has been so great! Lauren's passion and commitment to our family that weekend and even now has made a huge impact on our daughter, our family and our community."*

*-Pam & Adam Eisenberg, Chatsworth, CA*

While some might consider the work of *With a Brush of Love* only decorative in nature, Lauren says it's absolutely fundamental. "If you're going to spend money on various in-home therapies, but your child's surroundings are completely counter-productive to their ability to progress. You may as well watch your money go up in flames," she says.

**To learn more about With a Brush of Love or to contact Lauren Henry for a consultation, visit [www.brushoflove.com](http://www.brushoflove.com).**