

“My son was born with Down syndrome”

Lauren Schoeman shares how her son has brought joy to their lives.

Our family is private, but the birth of Nicholas did throw a spotlight on us to an extent. I've now decided to use that to my advantage – to create awareness and celebrate his life and those of other Down syndrome children.

Our third son, Nicholas Abbott Schoeman, was born on 28 June 2012. His Down syndrome was a birth diagnosis. There were no indications of abnormality during my pregnancy, so it came as a huge shock to us. Having a special needs child wasn't something we had never envisaged, but Nicholas is an amazing little boy and we feel privileged to be his parents.

The first six months of his life included a few hurdles. He spent his first three weeks in neonatal ICU due to feeding issues, came home for 10 days and went back to hospital for two weeks with a virus.

When Nicholas was four months old, he had open-heart surgery to repair a hole in his heart. This was one of the scariest events our

family has ever had to endure, but that's when we realised what a little fighter we had on our hands. We recently celebrated his one-year 'post-heart op' anniversary. His heart is now perfectly healthy, with only annual check-ups necessary.

Nicholas is besotted with his big brothers, Adam (six) and Ryan (four), and they in turn absolutely adore him. They spend hours playing together and it's just a joy to watch.

Adam has been obsessed with all things space-related since he was three. When I was pregnant and we found out we were expecting a boy, Adam nicknamed him 'Pluto'. As the smallest in the family, Nicholas earned the title of the smallest planet (in our family, Pluto's still a planet!). That name has stuck and it's definitely here to stay.

We've spoken to the boys about Down syndrome but to them it makes no difference. Nicholas is just their little brother whom they love more than anything.

Nicholas is a little ray of sunshine in our lives; he's always there to greet us with a smile in the morning. One of his favourite pastimes is flinging all the books from the bookshelf!

He loves to play in the sandpit and swing in his bucket swing. He can't wait for Mondays to get into the pool for his swimming lessons (bath time also involves a lot of splashing and excitement). Nicholas also loves music and attends a weekly music class, where he bangs the drums, shakes the maracas and admires himself in the mirror while doing so.

My hope for the future is to help other families and get my message across that 'happiness' and 'joy' can be used in the same sentence as 'Down syndrome'. We're a happy, normal family with three beautiful boys; one member just happens to have an extra chromosome.

Down syndrome's not a death sentence, nor a disease. These beautiful children can lead long, happy lives. And if given the chance, they can be a real asset to society. I know that Nicholas is going to make a positive difference in people's lives, and most importantly, he already has in ours.

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