I can think of numerous situations where I have argued with my husband and friends about important issues — politics, world events, religion — and trivial things like whether the *Breaking Bad* finale too neatly tied up the show’s plot threads. In most of those cases, though, the outcome of the argument had no real significance; I sometimes just like to argue for the sake of arguing.

However, when my son’s preschool did a diagnostic reevaluation to determine his kindergarten placement, I found myself in a situation where my disagreement had real-life implications. At the time, my son was not talking and had been diagnosed by a neurologist with PDD-NOS (pervasive developmental delay, not otherwise specified) — or more simply put, autism. The school, though, decided that his primary “diagnosis” should be “intellectual disability,” which is a nice name for “retarded.” I was furious; my son certainly had difficulties communicating and would need substantial assistance in a classroom, and he would definitely need special education services. However, I firmly believed that he was not “retarded” and that such a label on his school records would lead teachers to think he was unteachable.

Those who opposed me and my husband clearly didn’t have the emotional investment in my son that we did; some had only spent an hour evaluating him. Some of his teachers were fond of him, but they noted that he did not seem to learn new things and that he did not understand what others were saying to him. I wondered, since he could not speak, how they could really determine that using traditional IQ tests and other diagnostic tools. Should they not focus on teaching him some kind of alternative communication like sign language before they determined that he was “intellectually disabled”? Furthermore, they felt that his affectionate and fairly docile behavior meant that he was not autistic; as I have come more and more to realize, every autistic child is different. Some are affectionate, some are not, some have rages, some do not. Relying on stereotypes about what autistic children “should” be like as opposed to looking at his wide array of behaviors and communication deficiencies that clearly fit with diagnostic criteria just seemed irresponsible.
While I made the argument that he did have behaviors that fit on the spectrum, I was unable to change the diagnosis in his IEP (Individualized Education Plan). As a result of this meeting, I pushed for my son to receive more one-on-one assistance so they could better evaluate his ability to learn new tasks, which they agreed to, and I began getting him additional therapy outside of school. I also joined an organization that helped me gain access to workshops and resources that would help me to be better prepared for my son’s next evaluation and IEP meeting. When we later moved to another state, my son was reevaluated and his primary educational diagnosis was changed to autism. I think my earlier experience made me much better prepared for the reevaluation, and I am a better advocate for my son now.