



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** My Autistic Son – Part 1

**Guest(s):** Chuck Colson and Emily Colson

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Roger Marsh: Here's Dr. James Dobson with Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Have you noticed that laughter is the key to surviving the special stresses of the child-rearing years? It's true. Almost every day I hear from mothers who share the most wonderful stories with me about their kids. One of my favorites came from the mother of two small children, and this is what she wrote. Dear Dr. Dobson, A few months ago, I was making several phone calls in my family room where my three-year-old daughter, Adrienne and my five-month-old son, Nathan, were playing quietly. Now, Nathan loves Adrienne, who's been learning how to mother him gently since the time of his birth.

I suddenly realized that the children were no longer in view, down the hall and around the corner, I found the children playing cheerfully in Adrienne's bedroom. Relieved and upset, I shouted, "Adrienne, you know you're not allowed to carry Nathan. He's too little, and you could hurt him if he fell." Startled, she answered, "I didn't mommy." Well, knowing that he couldn't crawl, I suspiciously demanded. "Well then how'd he get all the way into your room?" Confident of my approval for her obedience, she said with a smile, "I rolled him." The kid's a little dizzy, but he's okay. Parents like this mother of Adrienne and Nathan who can see the delightful side of children also tend to cope better with the difficulties. I hope you'll never, never get too busy to smile.

Roger Marsh: Hear more at [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org).

Dr. James Dobson: Welcome everyone to Family Talk. It's a ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh, and on today's classic episode, we're going to hear a conversation featuring Dr. James Dobson with his dear friend, the late Chuck Colson and Chuck's daughter Emily Colson. The three discussed what Emily's journey has been so far with her son Max, who has autism. But before we begin, there's a very important issue which I must share with you. It has come to our attention that unscrupulous individuals have been using Dr. Dobson's image and likeness to falsely endorse online products. You have to know this advertising is absolutely untrue.

Also, Dr. Dobson is in good health. He has not left the church and most definitely not left the ministry here at Family Talk. I want to make it perfectly clear to you that Dr. James Dobson has nothing to do with these online scams, nor has he ever endorsed any outside products or services, let alone any product or service that is not in line with biblical principles and values. Dr. Dobson cherishes the trust and confidence that you have given him in the ministry over the years, and he will always seek to uphold it. And now let's join Dr. James Dobson, his guest, Chuck Colson and Chuck's daughter, Emily Colson, right now on Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: You and your dad did not have a real good relationship in the early days. Did you?

Emily Colson: We had a different relationship in the early days. My dad was very different before he became a Christian. I'm glad that I was old enough to be able to see that difference and be able to witness it firsthand the change that happened in my dad when he became a Christian.

Dr. James Dobson: And something has happened in your relationship, too. Hasn't it?

Emily Colson: And something has happened. Yes, it has.

Dr. James Dobson: Chuck, are you all doing a lot of interviews together or are you just getting started?

Chuck Colson: Yeah, we're just getting started, Jim. We haven't done very many of them. And you're right in what you said. It was a rough childhood because I was totally obsessed with what I was doing. I'd been day and night, gone most of the time when I was in the Marines and law school at night and high-powered job and government days, and then I ended up building a big law firm. I totally neglected my family and lost my first family. My fault. It's my goal in life to try to teach dads not to make that mistake.

Dr. James Dobson: And mine.

Chuck Colson: And to realize how important it has been. But Max has, coming onto the scene has completely changed my life. I've learned about love in a wholly different way. I've seen myself through Max's eyes, and you really have to come clean with who you are with Max because he'll expose you. And I've gotten down on my knees on the floor and played with this kid. I agonized with Emily as she's gone through horrendous things and we prayed together at length and it would be hard. I can't imagine any dad who's closer to his daughter or loves his daughter more than I do. So it's been a wonderful story of redemption with us. She's paid a big price. She's gone through a lot in her life. But God redeemed it.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, let's talk about that. Emily, you have a son named Max, that's who we're talking about here.

Emily Colson: And he's gorgeous.

Dr. James Dobson: He is gorgeous. He's 19 years old now.

Emily Colson: He's 19, yes he is.

Dr. James Dobson: And when he was born, you began to recognize that there were some things that concerned you.

Emily Colson: Absolutely. When he was born, everything in my life was really kind of going on target, just as you sort of imagined just this lovely normal life. There I was, was married, had a husband. I loved a baby on the way, a lovely home. I loved my job. Everything was just kind of working. And Max came on the scene and I was pretty ill-equipped as a mom and Max wasn't sleeping. He cried all the time. And at about four months old, I realized it's not that he just didn't make eye contact, but he refused eye contact. If you got right in his face, he'd look away and he'd only look at me when I looked away. So there were these strange things that were going on, but as a new mom and autism was not so prevalent. So you just keep going. But the-

Dr. James Dobson: What did the pediatrician tell you at that time?

Emily Colson: Well, at that time, at four months, they thought it was pretty interesting that he couldn't make eye contact and it was more of a wait and see. I think, we've got a great pediatrician, but I think at the time it just wasn't such a marker as it is now. It wasn't such a red flag.

Dr. James Dobson: Did he use the word autistic to you?

Emily Colson: Not till Max was closer to three and his language wasn't developing. All of the markers were late. All of those developmental milestones were delayed, so he didn't crawl until the very last second when it qualified as normal. He didn't walk until the very last day when it was okay to walk. But I think that the bigger marker was that when he'd be around other kids or around other people, he just screamed all the time and he'd bury his face in my shoulder and sob until I got him just to myself.

Dr. James Dobson: Get him away.

Emily Colson: Got him in a quiet environment and sing to him. So those were really the things that were more troubling than even the delayed walking and the crawling and he wasn't speaking. I think that that was a pretty big marker at that point, too.

Dr. James Dobson: And you lost your husband along the way.

Emily Colson: It was a very difficult adjustment. I'd been a designer and had a job that I loved, and I actually took a shower every day and then got thrown into motherhood at

a hundred miles an hour and life changed. It really changes for all of us when we bring that first child home and we think we're ready. And it's pretty tough. You don't sleep. Everything changes in your life.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, the baby always turns a family upside down.

Emily Colson: It does.

Chuck Colson: Jim, I'm sure you know this, but it happens tragically often that the husband simply can't handle it. I think it was that year he walked out a year after Max was born?

Emily Colson: Max was 18 months old.

Chuck Colson: 18 months.

Emily Colson: And I was very confused about it. I remember being in a playgroup when Max was very young, just a few months old. We joined a playgroup with other moms, with babies exactly the same age, and I would watch them and their kids would all be crawling and start to babble and talk, be interested in interacting. And I was just standing there holding Max while he was screaming. And I remember going home and thinking there's a secret that they're not talking about when I'm there. There's something they're doing. And I remember drilling Max one day thinking he's going to go back with a word and I'm going to be able to tell him he's got a word. They're doing something in the week when we're not together. And so there was this complete frustration, really, and I don't know if frustration is the right word.

Dr. James Dobson: Stress is though, isn't it?

Emily Colson: There was a complete stress and bewilderment, and I was so exhausted, and I loved him so much. It was so crazy about him. And I think looking back, all he did was scream, perform usually airborne bodily functions, and I couldn't get enough of him. And I think in some ways going through that divorce made me cling even more tightly to Max than I might have otherwise, and really made me push harder and know that this was the one thing left of this family that I thought I was creating and part of. And so I held really tightly to Max and I thought, I'm not letting you go.

Chuck Colson: Actually, Emily and I spent a lot of time together when she was going through the divorce and I dealt with the lawyers that we had to hire and it was very nasty and messy and difficult, and they had a beautiful home, which had to be sold. The anxiety of a dad when all this is going on, and I know she's out of her home and actually tells the story in the book of falling down the stairs on the way out, kind of hitting bottom.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you know what she was going through?

Chuck Colson: Oh yeah.

Dr. James Dobson: You understood that.

Chuck Colson: I watched Max develop and I thought there's serious problems here. I didn't dare mention to Emily what I was thinking, and I could just see the burden of this and then her life crashing in on her, and she was a baby Christian. It was agonizing. It was terrible on me. You just want to reach out and grab your child and protect her, and you can't. And you got to go through these high-powered lawyers and court hearings and you're in a band throughout it. It is a very, very horrifying experience.

Dr. James Dobson: Max is now about four, and for the first time you got a definitive diagnosis of what was wrong.

Emily Colson: Yes, yes. On the heels of going through the divorce, Max was diagnosed with autism, and it was really one of the most grace-filled moments. You wouldn't think it would happen that way.

Dr. James Dobson: Just to know what you were dealing with.

Emily Colson: To know what I was dealing with and to know that it wasn't going to change my love for this child. Nothing could touch that. And I really thought once we got the diagnosis, okay, we can deal with this. People are going to help us. We're going to find answers and solutions and places to go. But that was 15 years ago. And things are, even though they're still a tremendous struggle for families that are going through the diagnosis process, it was really tough. I mean, the internet was around but not really, and you just didn't know where to turn. So as much as I thought, terrific, we've got a name, it's autism, let's figure it out. There was no figuring it out. It was a brick wall.

Dr. James Dobson: I know from your book, Emily, that a lot of the people who should have known better did the wrong things or said the wrong things and were not helpful to you. And that had to be difficult because you're going to the experts and, well, explain it.

Emily Colson: Oh, well, we've had many experiences as have other parents who are dealing with disabilities or dealing with any kinds of challenges with their kids. You sort of depend on people to help you out and tell you what to do. And we did get some pretty bad advice along the way. We had some good people, but we brought in, I went to every conference that came anywhere within 200 miles. I was there. I was just soaking in information and reading everything I could read, and I really hounded down this one specialist when Max was seven years old. I heard him speak, and it was kind of exciting because he was telling people that through his methods, he could actually cure autism. So I really hounded this man's office.

Dr. James Dobson: Beware when somebody tells you that.

Emily Colson: Yes, yes. It's not such a simple thing. These kids can make tremendous progress and Max has made, it's just astounding what's happened in his life. But I sought this specialist, and when I first spoke with him, Max was seven, and I was really excited and I said, I really want to implement the program you're talking about. And he asked how old Max was. And when I told him seven, he said, it's too late. You missed your chance.

Dr. James Dobson: Oh, my goodness.

Emily Colson: And I was so heartbroken that I thought, oh no, you don't. You are going to come to my house. It took months of my pestering him to come to our home. And when he showed up, we spoke for about two hours sitting there in my living room. And then he walked around my house and he finally came to the front hall closet and he said, when Max is noncompliant, I want you to lock him in this closet.

Dr. James Dobson: Oh my goodness.

Emily Colson: And I looked up at this man who I had chased for a year. I had wasted time chasing him thinking that he had the answers. And there he was telling me to lock my son in a closet and he would send me a bill. And I just was so heartbroken. And now we'd lost another year. And there's such pressure on families with the young children because we know that the earlier we get in with these kids, the bigger the impact we can make in their lives. But it's not that simple because there are huge wait lists to get into programs. My son's school, where he is now, has 300 kids on the wait list to get into his autism program. It's just not that easy.

And so there's so much pressure for these families thinking that if they work hard enough and do everything they can, they will cure their kids. That when the kids turn 8, 9, 10 and they're still autistic, there's a whole second heartbreak that happens for a lot of families when they feel that they've failed, that they feel that they've missed the kind of therapy they should have had. And the heartbreak is enormous. But the truth of the matter is that these kids continue to make great progress. So if there's someone listening today who's been told your child can't find a new doctor because you want the people who say, we're going to find a way, it's really tough to watch your child be tested, realizing he's not, he's not hitting anything that they're asking him to do.

They brought us back into this little room after they'd all sat together and met and certainly had come up with the diagnosis, and they all sat with me. They didn't tell me that day, but as I was bantering them with questions and realizing they were no longer asking me questions, Max started to, he'd had a really long day. It was really tough for him to be tested, and he threw himself against me and kept trying to hug me, and I'm trying to ask questions and look past Max.

And all of a sudden I thought, there's really nothing I need to know that they're going to tell me that's more important than this moment with my son.

Sorry. And he just pushed his cheek up against mine, and I just melted into this. Boy. It was the most grace-filled moment. And I could hear these four evaluators who were watching us just oohing and eyeing as Max was in my arms, and they knew it was autism, but they didn't tell me that day. I didn't know till later.

Dr. James Dobson: And Max knew that you loved him, didn't he?

Emily Colson: Oh, yes, he did. Yes, he did.

Dr. James Dobson: What was Max like at seven years of age?

Emily Colson: Well, I think at seven we started to come into some of the hardest years, 7, 8, 9, even into 10. Those were some of the toughest years for us. The tantrums became enormous. We'd never be able to go anywhere because there were tantrums all the time. And this is almost, I guess I describe it as an anxiety attack. It's not the kind of tantrum other kids have where they want to buy something and the mom is saying no. And so the kid throws the himself on the floor until the mom says yes. What Max wants is for the world to make sense, and it doesn't, and he's looking to me to help him make sense of it. And it was really overwhelming. When he was younger, I could pick him up and move him, but by the time he got to nine, I was lost. There was really nothing I could do unless I thought of some really quick, clever bribe. And in the autism field, they call that a reinforcer, the rest of us call that a bribe, to move him out of the space, shift the situation for him.

Chuck Colson: He was also at that age, Jim, bigger than Emily. He's grown fast and he's a big guy and she's learned how to manage him. It's miraculous 110-pound girl, to me, handling this big kid. And I would live through some of those tantrums and they're really, really tough and you can't understand what's in that young man's mind. You have to learn to be in his place. This is what really, for me, has been a life changer. I usually think other people are tracking with me. Here's somebody who can't track with me. I got to figure out how to track with him. And Emily's done it brilliantly because she draws pictures and has that gift, and she can-

Dr. James Dobson: You're an artist, aren't you?

Emily Colson: Yes, I am. Yes, I am.

Dr. James Dobson: Our time is already gone, and we're really just getting into your story. Emily and I would like to do another program with you. Would you be back with us?

Emily Colson: Oh, I'd love that.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. The title of the book is *Dancing with Max*. And Chuck, I'm anxious to have you tell our listeners about what Max has meant to you and what your observations of him and his contribution to the human family.

Chuck Colson: Well, this is the amazing thing. We need kids like this. They expose us for who we are, and they teach us lessons I couldn't have learned otherwise, and they really have changed our family and change the lives of thousands of people. One day when Max was and Emily were with us in Florida, I wanted to go over and see some very dear friends. So Emily and I packed up Max and we went over it and we walked in and he was very good about it. It because he was getting a little easier to introduce to new situations as long as he kept control of the noise. We got into the living room and sat down and Max sat on the couch and I thought, oh, this is great. This is really going to work. And we're having this nice conversation. All of a sudden, Max bounces up, goes to the center of the floor and says, "Where are the vacuum cleaners?"

He loves vacuum cleaners, loves vacuum cleaners and car seats. He's these and bananas. He's got these obsessions with things. Well, all of a sudden, this rather stayed conservative family here, a little startled, and they went and got the vacuums and they turned out there were four or five vacuums in the house, and Max is saying, "Come on, turn them on, turn them off. Turn them on." He is now directing these people as they're dancing around in a circle, and I'm watching all of this and thinking, I've never gotten these people to laugh like this and enjoy themselves like this, and they were having such fun, but you could see the joy he brought into their lives. It's such a blessing.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, let's hear the rest of the story or at least more of this story next time. Chuck Colson and Emily Colson, thank you for being with us today, again.

Chuck Colson: Thank you.

Emily Colson: Thank you so much.

Dr. James Dobson: Chuck, my goodness, you've been on the air with me at least 40 times, and I would like to make it 41. So if you'll be back with us, we'll pick up the story next time.

Chuck Colson: We will indeed, Jim, and those have been wonderful experiences over the years.

Emily Colson: Thank you so much. We'd love that. Thank you very much.

Dr. James Dobson: And thank you, Emily for that smile.

Emily Colson: Thank you.

Dr. James Dobson: Because despite where you've been and what you've gone through, you have hope to share.

Emily Colson: We have joy to share.

Dr. James Dobson: Okay.

Roger Marsh: Well, what an open and honest conversation today here on Family Talk. That was our own Dr. James Dobson and his guests, the late Chuck Colson and his daughter Emily Colson. Now, if today's program touched your heart, be sure to join us again tomorrow and hear part two of this fascinating discussion. Emily will be sharing how her son's autism was creating stress in her family and how she once again found peace. If you missed any part of today's program, you can listen again, of course, at [drjamesdobson.org/familytalk](http://drjamesdobson.org/familytalk), and if you can relate to being overwhelmed as a mom or a caregiver, we have a special gift just for you. It's a two disc CD set called God's Plan for the Overwhelmed Mom. In this collection, Dr. Dobson talks with his special guest, Sarah Partial Perry, as she discusses her struggles as a mom of three with two of her children having Asperger's Syndrome.

It's quite an encouraging conversation that we think you'll enjoy. Now, this CD collection is our gift to you. As a thank you for your donation of any amount in support of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, we are a completely listener supported program and we greatly appreciate all of your prayers and financial support. So go online to [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org) and hit the resources tab. Once you're on that page, hit the store button and then look for the link for God's Plan for the Overwhelmed. Mom, we'll be happy to send it to you as our way of thanking you for your gift of any amount in support of JDFI today. I'm Roger Marsh, have a great day and may God continue to richly bless you and your family as you grow in your relationship with him.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

Dr. James Dobson: Several years ago, I attended a wedding ceremony in a beautiful garden setting and came away with some thoughts on child-rearing.

Roger Marsh: Here's Dr. James Dobson with Family Talk.

James Dobson: My thoughts drifted on that day after the minister had instructed the groom to kiss the bride and approximately 150 colorful helium filled balloons were released into the blue California sky. Within a few seconds, the balloons were scattered across the heavens, some rising hundreds of feet overhead and others cruising toward the horizon. A few balloons struggled to clear the upper branches of the trees while the showoffs became mere pinpoint of color on their journey to the sky. How interesting, I thought, and how symbolic of children. Let's face it, some boys and girls seem to be born with more helium than others. They catch all the right breezes and they soar effortlessly to the heights. Others wobble dangerously close to the trees. Their frantic folks run along underneath, huffing and puffing to keep them airborne. It is an exhausting experience. I want to offer a word of encouragement specifically to the parents

of those low flying kids. Sometimes the child who has the greatest trouble getting off the ground eventually soars to the highest heights. That's why I urge you as parents not to look too quickly for the person your child will become.

Roger Marsh:

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