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## Couple's Corner: Q&A

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In celebration of Valentine's Day, ECAC reached out to couples who are self-advocates with disabilities. From tried and true relationship tips to the meaning of love, these couples provided many nuggets of wisdom!

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**Matthew & Lucia**

**Alex & Jen**



*Matthew is 24 years old and lives in Wake County. Lucia is 25 years old and lives in Orange County. They both have Down syndrome.*

**How did the two of you meet?**

Matthew: We met in 1998 when we were just babies. Our mothers were board members of a local organization and brought us along to a 'Moms Night Out' gathering.

**How long have you been dating?**

Matthew: The movie "Frozen" was in theaters when we first started dating. We celebrated our 6 year anniversary on October 18 of last year.

Lucia: We celebrated our anniversary on Zoom, and did a countdown together.

**What makes your relationship unique?**

Matthew: We're able to relate to each other more because we have Down syndrome.

**What do you do to have fun?**

Matthew: We enjoy some of the same things. We're both very social. We do ballroom dancing to strengthen our core and muscles. I love ballroom dancing because it was my girlfriend's idea!

Lucia: Our moms are on the same boards of some local organizations and we see each other at those events. We also enjoy eating together. We take turns visiting each other at home.



*Alex is 25 years old and Jen is 23 years old. They both live in Iredell County and have Down syndrome.*

**How did the two of you meet?**

Alex: We met in high school. We were taking some of the same classes.

**How long have you been dating?**

Alex: We have just celebrated our 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Our first date was the Jingle Bell Jam at our high school. I liked the fact that she was very cute and the way she talked to me.

Jen: Yes, we had fun together.

**What makes your relationship unique?**

Jen: We respect each other and we listen to each other.

Alex: Also, we both have open heart surgery scars from when we were younger.

**What do you do to have fun?**

Alex: We love playing basketball, hanging out, and going to restaurants. We also visit each other at home. Sometimes she comes over here and sometimes I go over there.

Jen: We also like going to local events, bowling, and dancing.

Alex: My favorite dance is the Cupid Shuffle!

Matthew: We love cooking together, especially Beef Stroganoff and Chicken Marsala! We also like going to the movies. We've been doing Zoom dates.

**What kind of advice would you give other young self-advocates and couples?**

Matthew: To maintain or pursue a relationship, managing your time is important. There's always something to look forward to, whether it's going to events or having dinner at home. Always support your girl and make the effort to make her feel supported. It's also important to dress appropriately and to be attractive for each other.

Lucia: I would encourage others to do fun activities, attend social events, take things slow, and spend time with each other.

Matthew: Also, don't rush things. Focus on the now and prepare for the future. We are pre-planning our wedding so that when that time comes to actually plan it, we'll have things in mind so that it won't be so stressful.

**What is love?**

Lucia: For me, it's super romantic and the sweetest thing to have in your life.

Matthew: Love is important; love is life. You can't do anything without love. Whether it's your job, your relationships, or anything else...it's all love. Lucia came into my life and gave me a unique perspective of love. I know that I don't 'hope' to marry Lucia; I HAVE to marry Lucia!

Jen: We also like to model and do photo shoots. I have been a professional model for 5 years. One of our family friends puts on a show for families with disabilities. I really like wearing high heels!

Alex: My favorite thing about modeling is walking the runway!

**What kind of advice do you have for other young self-advocates and couples?**

Jen: Be nice to each other and be respectful.

Alex: Be smart about what you say to people. We also have a lot of love and respect for each other. I feel that we were just bound to be together. I wanted to pick her because I really love her. I will always want her to be in my life.

**What is love?**

Alex: Love is helping each other out when you're down. If that person feels sad you support them and make them feel loved. If I feel my girlfriend is down, I always help her and show her some love.

Jen: Love is caring, happiness, having fun together, and helping each other when you need it.

Alex: I just know that no matter what, she'll always be in my life until the day I die. She's very good at math and she helps me. She is the smartest girl I've ever met.



## Dallas & Abby

*Dallas is 17 years old and has autism, ADHD, and sensory processing disorder. Abby is 19 years old and has autism, ADHD, and epilepsy. They both live in Randolph County.*

**How did the two of you meet?**

Dallas: We met in Pleasant Garden at a center for people with disabilities.

Abby: When I first met him, I knew he was the one for me but I was concerned he already had a girlfriend. We started chatting and sitting with each other over time. We have been dating for about two months now.

### **What do you do to celebrate and have fun?**

Dallas: We went to the Cheesecake Factory for our first date and then we went to see a movie. For Christmas, I got her a Wonder Woman ornament and a necklace.

Abby: We also both enjoy playing Fortnite together.

### **What makes your relationship unique?**

Dallas: We both have autism. There have been times when I would be very quiet and not talk. We both understand that people can be mean sometimes. It can actually be a good thing to have autism.

Abby: I can anticipate how he's feeling at certain times when others may not understand.

### **What kind of advice would you give other young self-advocates and couples?**

Dallas: It's important to go places and take advantage of opportunities to be social.

Abby: Just be yourself. Don't listen to others if they are going to be rude. I also have ADHD and I haven't had a seizure in 5 years. I have learned how to believe in myself.

Dallas: People just need to be more compassionate and understanding.

### **What is love?**

Dallas: Love means you want to be in a good relationship with someone. You want to know their interests, favorite songs, favorite movies, and whether they like theme parks or the beach.

Abby: It's when two people love and care about each other.

# What is love?

ECAC asked parents across the state to ask their exceptional children to answer the question, "What is love?"

**Check out the responses below!**



### **Arie L.**

5 year old with ADHD  
Catawba County

*"It means hugs, kisses and help people."*

### **Shane F.**

6 year old with ADHD, ADD, developmental delay, anxiety, speech delay, and social pragmatic communication disorder  
Wilkes County

*"Love mean like I love you" (while giving himself a hug).*

### **Grayson J.**

10 year old with autism  
Jackson County

*"When someone thinks the other person is awesome."*

**Julietta C.**  
3 year old with autism and sensory processing disorder  
Pasquotank County

*"Love is what makes my friends happy."*

**Dean S.**  
6 year old with autism and ADHD  
Pitt County

*"Love is what you feel in your heart."*

**Emma R.**  
21 year old with bipolar level 3 and anxiety  
Mecklenburg County

*"Knowing you are always there for me!"*

**Zaiden D.**  
7 year old with ADHD and anxiety  
Gaston County

*"It's like when you like someone or something but more more."*

**Skyler W.**  
11 year old with autism, ADHD, and ODD  
Wayne County

*"When people accept my disability and love me for who I am."*

**E. P.**  
3 year old with autism  
Harnett County

*"Momma!"*

**Scarlett V.**  
11 year old with autism  
Craven County

*"Love is like eating pizza. It makes me happy to eat pizza. I love pizza."*

**Ella F.**  
8 year old with Down syndrome  
Carteret County

*"Mom, love is you! Your always in my heart."*

**Wednesday L.**  
13 year old with PASC (Long COVID), dysautonomia, POTS, and ADHD  
Gaston County

*"Something you need everyday."*

**Marik V.**  
13 year old with CHARGE syndrome  
Durham County

*(singing) "Love's gonna pick you up and never put you down from the movie Vivo. And have any of them seen this movie and what is their favorite character?"*

**Sam B.**  
10 year old with learning disabilities  
Wake County

*"Love means you love people (claps hands and smiles) your teacher, your friends, and your cousins who live far away."*

<b>Ella F.</b> 8 year old with Down's syndrome Carteret County	<i>"Mom, love is you! Your always in my heart."</i>
<b>Caden B.</b> 7 year old with autism and ADHD Wake County	<i>"Love is being kind and nice but love can also hurt."</i>
<b>James C.</b> 13 year old with ADHD Iredell County	<i>"When you (mom) help me with my homework."</i>
<b>Sawyer M.</b> 9 year old with ADHD, anxiety, dyslexia, and dysgraphia Johnston County	<i>"When you like someone, or like, like someone you love them. When you like someone they're a friend. When you like like someone you love them. Like a boyfriend or a girlfriend. Or your parents. Like I love you."</i>
<b>Orlando</b> 22 year old with cerebral palsy, blindness, and developmental delay Mecklenburg County	<i>"He said love you mom and dad."</i>
<b>Elijah A.</b> 9 year old with autism, medically complex Granville County	<i>"Unconditional care toward people you trust."</i>
<b>Layla B.</b> 8 year old with autism Vance County	<i>"Basically when you really care about someone, and that you don't necessarily have to have that "special someone", but that you can love your best friend, sibling, mother or father, and knowing that you will have a bond that you may not have with anyone else."</i>
<b>Lamont "L.J." B.</b> 12 year old with autism and ADHD Vance County	<i>"Love is like kissing, smooching, and hugging. It's like when someone REALLY REALLY LIKES YOU. That you are IN LOVEEEEE!!" (Then he made the smooching kissing sound.)</i>
<b>Talia K.</b> 19 year old with developmental delay and genetic disorder Wake County	<i>"Giving a huuuuuge hug to my sister, and then tugging on her hair. She's the one I love most!"</i>
<b>Greyson C.</b> 6 year old with autism Richmond County	<i>"A heart! Be nice! A kiss!"</i>

**Teddy B.**  
3 year old with motor speech disorder  
Union County

*"Love is Mommy."*

**Emmy Lou E.**  
16 year old with FAS, Autism, ADHD, Anxiety  
and PTSD  
Rowan County

*"Love is giving me a band-aid when I fall. Love is giving me hugs when I'm sad. Love is telling me that you love me. Love is giving me shelter and food on the table. Love doesn't have to be big things it could be little things like telling me to have a good day or like giving me things."*

**DeMari D.**  
10 year old with autism  
Mecklenburg County

*"When families get together and love each other and never fight."*

**Tristen O.**  
13 year old with autism  
Wake County

*"Tristen Olive Katrina Hayes Alexis Pruden  
Daddy Cousin Brenne Miss Emily"*

**Greyson H.**  
6 year old with autism  
Guilford County

*"(looking at his mother) "Love is you."*

**Braxton H.**  
12 year old with auditory processing disorder  
Guilford County

*"Love is when you care deeply about someone."*

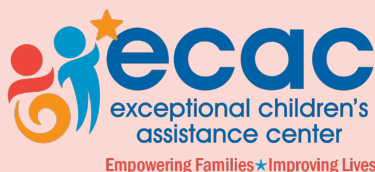
**Joey C.**  
24 year old with autism  
Iredell County

*"Love is like a double edged sword. It can be the greatest thing to ever happen to you and can cause the worst pain you'll ever feel."*

**We would like to thank everyone who participated!**

.HAPPY.  
**Valentine's Day**

FROM ALL OF US AT ECAC!



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