



by Jennifer Jennings

Living with Allison  
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light tread,  
flexibility and  
patience.

## A Stuck in the Mud

“Allison, what are you doing up there?” asked my mom.

“I’m moping!” she yelled angrily down the stairs.

The three of us—mom, dad and me—still sitting at the dinner table from which Allison had recently stormed away, burst out laughing. The comment was so typical of my sister: completely forthright yet hilarious. My sister is blustery, unpredictable and noisy. She is tropical weather; you never know when the clouds are gathering and when the thunder, lightening and rain are going to strike. In a matter of moments, laughter can turn to tears and smiles to screams.

I don’t remember life before my sister. She arrived in May 1984, when I was two and a half years old. Before that, life was quieter with all attention focused on me, the only child. Everything changed when Alison was born. From that point on, our house became a noisy place filled with constant movement.



Allison's noise began as a newborn. She didn't just cry (which I do not remember); she whistled. I remember watching her whistle in the bassinet by the window. My parents were amazed; my grandparents were flabbergasted. Allison was most certainly an unusual child. In addition to whistling, she also sang constantly. A highly musical child, she memorized songs immediately. And as soon as she learned to talk (loudly, I might add), she never stopped except to sleep.

She was a cheerful child, all smiles and giggles, except when she threw temper tantrums. My childhood memories are filled with visions of Allison's outbursts. Her rages seemed to erupt from nowhere and were so frequent that one outburst seemed to blend right into the next. She would lie on the floor, kicking, screaming and crying. I remember looking on, trying not to laugh, especially when my dad would lay on the floor with her and start kicking and screaming, too, in an attempt to distract her. As she grew older and her tantrums intensified, my dad would literally carry Allison upstairs to her room where she would continue hollering. Amazingly, when Allison finished a tantrum, she didn't hold a grudge. In fact, in her mind, we were not "allowed" to be angry with her. To this day, she becomes enraged if I remain upset about something she said or did 10 minutes prior, from which she has since recovered.

As a toddler, Allison used to literally climb the walls at the doctor's office. She felt constrained and wanted to get closer to the windows by climbing on the backs of the chairs. Impulsive then and impulsive now, Allison would get herself into precarious situations. One year in early spring when the snow began to melt and the mud started to thaw, Allison walked through a muddy part of the school playground into the middle of the spider web (a multi-colored, metal, climbing contraption), only to become stuck in the mud. A playground aide picked her up and brought her inside, leaving her pink and blue winter boots in the mud for a later rescue.

On another occasion, Allison—then a toddler—decided to visit our neighbors who lived around the corner. She found them having iced tea on the front lawn. At her own initiation, she went home, retrieved her little lawn chair and sippy cup and joined them. My worried parents looked everywhere, only to find her chatting with the ladies where she was "having tea."

Clearly impulsive, Allison has always taken risks without giving thought to the consequences. She has skied down slopes that are too difficult and taken jumps that she lacks the skill to handle, subsequently landing flat on her face. She has gone down an alpine slide too fast, especially around the corners, and slid down the slide without the sled, resulting in multiple scrapes and permanent scars on both her arms and legs.

## Clearly impulsive, my sister Allison has always taken risks without giving thought to the consequences.

Yet despite these and other challenges, my sister's birth was a gift. I was given a playmate and a best friend. Growing up, we operated in our own world—a world of devotion, a world of secrets and giggles, a world of mutual influence. When Allison was a baby and crying, I would tell her “don't cry, or I'll cry too.” Today, like many siblings, we still have our disagreements, screaming matches and bickering moments, but more often than not, we share a tight bond.

At the end of second grade, Allison's diagnosis of AD/HD was confirmed. She then began taking medication. The medication, coupled with support and behavioral interventions from our family and her teachers, helped Allison tremendously. From that point on, her life—and ours—vastly improved.

Allison has always had a poor memory, especially short-term. Each day after school, my mom would ask, “Allison, what did you have for lunch today?” Allison could not remember, even though she ate cheese, crackers and bologna for lunch nearly every day throughout elementary school. Her memory problems continue to plague her, especially in academic settings. Tests are a nearly insurmountable challenge for my sister. She thrives on research or hands-on projects where she pushes the limits and works for perfection and an exhaustive thoroughness.

For all of her life (and most of mine), my family's primary focus was Allison's academic achievement. I played the role of secondary tutor, editor and memory playmate. We spent much of her elementary school years singing songs to help her remember spelling words, did cartwheels across the lawn to remember times tables and played matching games with definitions.

During our childhood, there were no mistakes about our identities. Allison was dark-skinned with short, straight, blond—

nearly white—hair. I had pale skin and long, light brown/dark blond ringlets turned wavy. A tomboy, Allison's straight, skinny frame never held up pants or skirts very well. My mom dressed her in overalls and jumpsuits as often as possible; she wore shorts under her dresses. When I wore dresses to school, I wore them without shorts and changed into play clothes at home. Allison talked; I read. Allison sang; I played piano. Allison took acrobatics; I took ballet. We called her Ooper; they called me Fred.

Today, as young adults, people irritatingly mistake the two of us for twins. We share the same light blue eyes that change color with our clothing, the same dark and bushy eyebrows and light brown/dirty blond hair. Smaller than me, Allison stands one quarter of an inch shorter and a few clothing sizes smaller. I have short legs; hers are long. I have hips; she has none. We move in similar ways and tell people the same stories. In high school, we often would get ready for school in separate parts of the house, only to find that we were wearing nearly identical outfits. Equally infuriated, one of us would then have to rush back upstairs and change.

Allison's senses quickly overload. She becomes overwhelmed and then reacts violently. My Grandma tells a story of shopping with my sister, my mom and me. She took the three of us to an upscale department store for a clothes-buying expedition. Grandma and Mommy found dozens of outfits for Allison and me to try on. Grandma took Allison, then three and a half years old, into the dressing room and dressed her. The tags were too much. She hated *everything* and proceeded to yank the tags and labels off of all the garments. Dismayed, Grandma quickly dressed her and traded children. For Allison, a seam that sticks out slightly on the inside of clothing is cause for annoyance. Socks are the bane of her existence, she feels “stuffy” in them. My mom used to make “get-ready for school”

## Stuck in the Mud

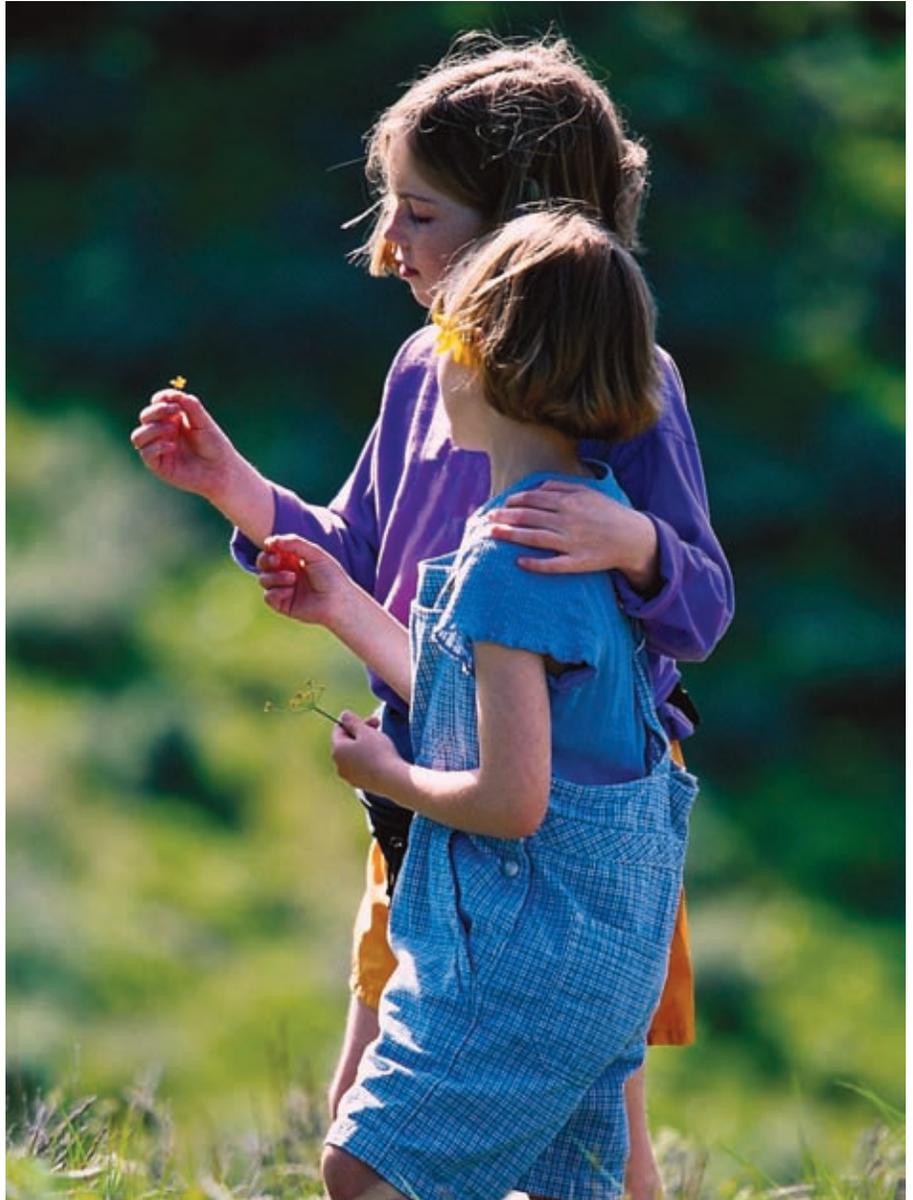


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charts for my sister; “putting on socks” had their own check box.

Scents also affect Allison dramatically, especially the smell of grease and fried food. Her sensitive nose can pick up smells that the rest of the family might not even notice. A family outing to a restaurant often ended with Allison running to the toilet. Vomiting was Allison's frequent reaction to feeling overwhelmed by noise, smell or emotion. While on a cruise with my grandparents, leaving my parents at home, Allison felt so homesick she threw up every day we were on the ship.

Living with Allison requires a light tread, flexibility and patience. I never know how she'll react to a situation or something I might say. I have to be especially careful when trying to have an intense conversation



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with her. Allison remains defensive, and many people find it difficult to get past the protective psychological barrier she watchfully maintains. I often want to know why Allison acts a certain way or makes a particular decision. Yet she is unable to tell me and feels that by even asking, I am criticizing her. We rarely have deep conversations on any particular topic be it politics, religion or personal matters, before she defensively tells me to stop asking questions or to stop “harassing” her.

A friendly and social being, Allison thrives on personal contact. She feels the need to talk to people constantly, whether in person, on the phone or on instant messenger. And she collects strangers, even though she is scared of them. Allison makes friends on every airplane flight, at every conference, at every social event, yet she also refuses to sit in the empty seat in a movie theater or anywhere else next to a stranger (although she might later tell them her life story).

## Stuck in the Mud

In her junior year of high school, Allison found a new love: graphic design. Graphic design provided hope for my family that Allison would find a fruitful and satisfying occupation after high school. For Allison, it provided a creative outlet that utilized her strengths and brought recognition for her talent through awards and appearances in art shows. Even now, Allison can sit for hours in front of her computer, perfecting her pieces, infusing them with bright, vibrant colors—as bright and contrasting as her personality.

Allison has never been my “mini-me.” She has her own friends, interests and lifestyle, yet our interests are also closely intertwined. Most of my passions—musical, political, religious, social—have also become hers. Without any prompting, her opinions often mirror mine. Allison simply incorporates them into her life framework. She listens to Snoop and Ani DiFranco, \*NSYNC and Dar Williams, Craig David and the Indigo Girls; she watches “Save the Last Dance” and “Boys on the Side” with equal enjoyment.

I may have influenced her values and choices of music, but it is she who has been my greatest teacher. Allison has taught me what it is like to live with learning difficulties. She has taught me to be tolerant of others’ differences. She has taught me patience. Allison has shown me the true meaning of perseverance. And since Allison develops unconventional ways of thinking about things, she has pushed me to be more creative.

Today she attends Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, where she is a sophomore double majoring in graphic design and advertising. She still struggles with academics and lacks the social skills that come easily to most college students, yet she has successfully completed three semesters of college. She aspires to be a *National Geographic* photographer or to work in advertising with the goal of creating intelligent ads that are not degrading towards women.

As we both have grown older and geographically distant (I go to school on the East Coast), our relationship has changed. We continue to develop appropriate boundaries and work on better ways to communicate with each other. Best of all, she still makes me smile. ■



Jennifer Jennings (shown at left with Allison), is a resident of Madison, Wis., and the daughter of a former CHADD coordinator and learning disabilities teacher. Jennifer is completing her senior year at Smith College in Northampton, Mass., where she is studying comparative government. She aspires to be a writer of magazine articles and biographies.