



Dear Friends,

Two recent events impacted our community so deeply that we wanted to highlight them and recommit to working towards greater systemic and social change. One was the police shooting of a 13-year-old boy with autism, Linden Cameron, in Salt Lake City. The other -- while incomparable to the shooting's gravity -- was a scene on national television that modeled extreme insensitivity and bullying.

**"He's just a kid...He doesn't know how to regulate."**

Every parent with a child on the spectrum has likely said these same words as Linden's mother. They can relate to the dread and panic that [she felt](#) when she heard shots ring out just five minutes after the police arrived. She, herself, had asked the police to help her son, as he had become violent. Instead, he was hospitalized with multiple gunshot wounds.

While the details of the incident are still being investigated, what we are certain of is this: our first responders need support. They need training in autism awareness and, more importantly, skills for deescalating volatile situations involving community members with developmental disabilities. This scenario has occurred too many times with children on the spectrum -- with [Stephon Watts](#), a 15-year-old shot by police in Calumet City; [Neli Latson](#), a teen detained for "looking suspicious" outside his neighborhood library in Virginia; [Elijah McClain](#), a 23-year-old in Colorado who told police before he died, "I'm just different." In each of these cases, greater awareness and training would have saved lives. Our parents need help, too. Linden's mother believed that he had been stressed by her absence, as she had returned to work after months in quarantine. What supervision or support could have protected him and the others? We have to do better.

**"I'm going to have nightmares for the rest of my life of him standing above me rocking back and forth."**

Those mocking words, accompanied by mimicked rocking, were spoken about Ian, a contestant with autism on "Big Brother," a CBS reality show in which contestants live together in one house. In the [2-minute scene](#), multiple contestants joined in, giggling at jokes about Ian's speech and behavior. This speaks volumes about the insensitivity that so many in our community experience daily. What's more, it underscores the need for greater responsibility among our public broadcasters to model positive behavior towards people with autism and other disabilities on the air. We understand that reality shows rely on manufactured drama, and that Ian Terry willingly participated in the show. We celebrate Ian's inclusion as a step forward, but with this bullying scene, CBS has taken us many steps backwards. "Scapegoating," whispered one of the contestants who didn't join in. We agree.

In order to thrive, individuals with autism need safety from physical as well as psychological harm. This week's incidents prove the miles we still have yet to go. In light of these and recent social upheaval, NEXT for AUTISM is redoubling our commitment to seek well-being and respect for all loved ones with autism in our community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Timothy J. Purnell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "T" and "P".

Timothy J. Purnell, CEO  
NEXT for AUTISM