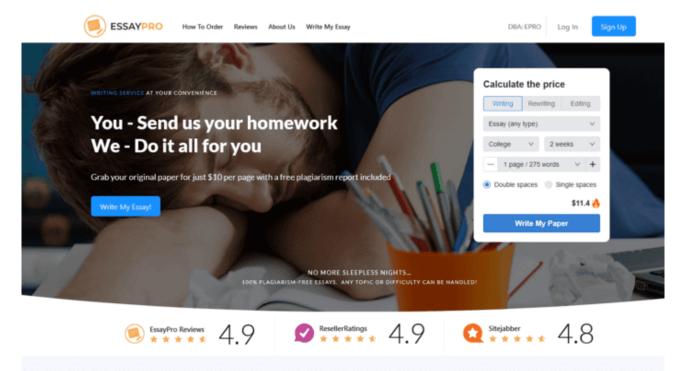
## Life is Beautiful



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## Life is Beautiful

I threw my hands into the air, fell back on Emily's bed, and covered my stressed eyes with the palms of my hands. Suddenly Emily turned out the lights and whispered "night-night" in a small voice as the door closed. She did it again. Just when I thought that I was the worst teacher in the world, torturing this sweet little girl with incomprehensible questions that she just wouldn't answer, she does something to show me that she does see me, she can hear me, and more importantly, she's responding to me. Sitting up, I think, "Oh Emily, I could just pick you up, hold you, and never make you work again. But you won't let me hold you. That is why we have to do this." Renewed, I was <u>ready</u> to start again.

Emily is a six-year-old with autism. I met her in 1996 through a baby-sitting job. This was the first time I had ever taken care of a person with a disability. Although I was a little afraid, I was excited that I would be able to do this. Emily's autism causes her to learn more slowly than other children. She doesn't communicate or respond to the outside world as most children do. It is a rare social and emotional developmental disorder. For Emily, simple tasks, such as focusing on an object or idea, become difficult, aggravating, and sometimes impossible. This makes it very hard for Emily to play a board game with her

sister because she doesn't understand about rolling dice or moving the pieces.

A year after meeting Emily, her mother offered me another job through an organization called Respite. I would work exclusively with Emily to reinforce her communication and self-motivation skills, and in turn, help to take down the communication <a href="mailto:barrier">barrier</a>. I would accomplish this by being both her friend and teacher: playing with her while prompting her to talk and respond.

I've been doing Respite work with Emily for three years and it has been an incredible experience. Of course there were times when I would talk to her and she would just not respond the way I wanted her to. These instances of frustration are always made up for by the times when she progresses so fast and I just have to hug her. Although I know that with her degree of autism she will never fully overcome her disabilities, it is exhilarating to see how she has improved.

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