

brings us so much joy'

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many of the classic symptoms of hydrocephalus, in terms of slightly slower thinking processes and difficulties with perception.

"But he has turned out to be a smashing boy and apart from having two shunt revisions, where the shunt had become blocked, and having to go into hospital, he is a normal, healthy, young man."

Robert is the sort of son any family would be proud of. He's a season ticket holder at Ipswich Town Football Club and a member of the Boys' Brigade, where he is going for his Queen's Badge. He is also a member of a youth club and doing his Duke of Edinburgh bronze award.

As the parents of two children, one of whom has no health complications, Mr and Mrs Watts quickly came to realise that parents never know what the future holds - whatever your situation.

"Both our children have brought challenges at times and both have brought great benefits to us as parents. Whilst one has a medical condition and one hasn't, both have brought the same degree of pleasure and joy but, at times, difficulties," said Mr Watts.

"Having a child with a medical condition hasn't been quite as difficult as people might think. At first we wondered 'why us?' but Robert has brought so much joy and happiness into our family just as much as his sister, and we are equally proud of both of them.

"Robert is a gentle giant. In company he is often quiet and shy but he understands everything and will often come out with quite a telling contribution."

Mr Watts says hydrocephalus is often known as the hidden handicap. Those affected can suffer a range of learning or living difficulties, which are not always apparent to others.

"That is why it is so important to have help for parents and the youngster concerned," he says. "As Robert began to grow, we turned to ASBAH and would go to their study days and we got more involved."

He hopes the charity's new book will be useful for professionals, parents and people with hydrocephalus, helping them to develop to their full potential.

He has nothing but praise for the education Robert has received, first at Chilton Primary School in Stowmarket, where the family lives, then at Beacon Hill Special School, Ipswich, and now at West Suffolk

Factfile

Hydrocephalus is caused by a build-up of fluid in the ventricles of the brain. It can occur in a variety of cases, including premature babies, after meningitis, a head injury or in association with spina bifida. Sometimes, hydrocephalus is present at birth and the exact cause cannot be determined. Hydrocephalus can lead to problems with concentration, reasoning and short-term memory. Some people will have difficulties with co-ordination, motivation and organisational skills.

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family, took the decision quite early on that for our own sakes and our daughter's sake we would live life as a normal family. We have taken Robert to America and have been all over Europe.

"Certainly, the first time we were worried and we have always been very careful, but Robert has thoroughly enjoyed that part of his life. At times you have to take a deep breath and carry on.

"I would say to anyone in the situation we were in 17 years ago, be positive. There are hiccups and challenges on the way, particularly medical, but all I can say is that we wouldn't now change Robert or anything. He has brought as much to our family as his sister.

"Read the book - the more you understand and know, the more you can help your child. See what you and they can achieve."

