



Journeys in Parenting, Autism and Neurodiversity

Edited by
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INTRODUCTION

In late 2014, something extraordinary happened. None of us knew it at the time, but the little idea that began as “Respectfully Connected blog project” ended up becoming of central importance to each one of its writers, as well as clearly resonating with a whole lot of readers.

When I think of the story of how we got started, I see a visual image of one of those network maps they use with lines moving between people’s names, showing the intersecting connections and relationships. That map is so tangled now, thick in spots where our words and worlds have collided, that I don’t think it’s even possible to say where it started or with whom.

I met her and she already knew her. And they knew each other from over there. And she introduced us to that group of friends and one of them already knew one of that other group. Can you see it? It’s a messed up, jumbled ball of thread and it’s chaotic and rich and beautiful.

The common denominator in our connections with each other is autism. We are autistic. Or we have autistic children. Or we are and have both. But it’s more than that. Alone and together, we are on a mission to parent our autistic children respectfully.

You’d think that would be the goal of any parent. But when it comes to children who are autistic, sadly it is not. We are way out there, on the fringes, parenting in ways our children’s paediatricians, teachers, grandparents, friends, and therapists don’t understand.

But our readers do. They have been hungry for voices that stand up for the rights of autistic children. That don't want to change them, mould them or mourn them and neither do we.

117 blog posts later, and I know that all of us who write for RC would say that it matters in our lives. We hope that our stories can support you in your own journey of respectfully parenting your autistic child.

Leia

When the Respectfully Connected blog project began, I identified as a non-autistic parent to autistic children, often feeling on the “edge” of community where autism is the common factor. In parent groups, I am the one who is doing things differently from the mainstream. In groups of autistic people, I was neurodivergent, but not autistic.

Respectfully Connected is a project that is different. One of the things I like about RC is that, even though the focus is largely on autism because that is a common ground for all the families represented by the contributors, the project over all is about neurodivergence. This was where I fit. With the people in this group, the contributors to this unique blog, I belonged. I suspect that is true for many of the blog’s readers.

Something I wasn’t expecting happened. As a result of friendships made within the RC team, I found the support and understanding I needed to begin to explore my neurodivergence further. I now identify as autistic. Respectfully Connected facilitated the safe space I needed to do that, and I know it is a safe space for many of its readers to learn and explore alongside the contributors.

The strength of the Respectfully Connected blog project is that it includes many voices telling many stories, all about moving gently through our life journeys, making connections and finding support as we go. We are learning together, and RC readers are learning with us. They relate to the stories of living on the edge of community and then the power of finding your place.

This book is a small selection of the articles on the blog, but it contains the essence of the blog. It is about finding our way together. I hope it helps you find your place.

Michelle

Hello. This is who we are.

Ally Grace

Ally is an autistic woman. She lives with her autistic partner, and their four autistic children, in Australia. They are an unschooling, no punishment family, with dreams to travel around the country. Ally strongly believes in challenging the pathology paradigm of autism. She blogs about rejecting conventional autism assumptions, her family, challenging social norms around raising children, unschooling, and being autistic at www.suburbanautistics.blogspot.com

Amy Bean

Amy is a mum to two children in a neurodiverse family, a youth worker, and devoted chocolate consumer. New to the autistic community, with her eldest identified autistic in July 2014, Amy has found that autistic voices have been her biggest ally in understanding her son and being able to provide him the support and understanding he needs. Amy feels strongly about neurodiversity, ableism, and challenging the myths around autism. Passionate about respectful and gentle parenting, social justice issues, and children's rights, Amy looks forward to discovering more about her neurodivergent self.

Briannon Lee

Briannon is a queer, autistic woman living in Australia with her wife and three children. All of her family are multiply neurodivergent. She is a social worker, scientist, advocate, and small business owner with a lifelong passion for social justice. Currently home educating her children, Briannon is a Director of Autistic Families International.

Cas Faulds

Cas is an autistic person, living in Australia. They are the sole parent of an autistic boy who is currently being eclectically homeschooled. As his parent, Cas believes that they are responsible for providing him with gentle guidance and love on his journey towards adulthood while also respecting his autonomy. Cas grew up in South Africa, and their experiences as a teenager during the fall of apartheid led to the development of a deep appreciation for and interest in the value of human diversity, which they are further exploring by studying towards a Bachelor of Social Science.

Cat Walker

Cat Walker is an autistic writer who lives in the United States with her neurodivergent family. She enjoys spending her days learning at home with her children. Cat is a voracious reader of fiction, who probably drinks too much coffee and kombucha. Cat is new to advocacy and is a firm believer that all children deserve

to be raised with respect and kindness, without the use of threats or manipulation. Cat can be found online at www.aisforautiste.blogspot.com

Court Alice Thatcher

Court is an autistic parent to three wonderful and spirited children, all of whom identify as autistic. Court is extremely passionate about intersectionality, body autonomy, and children's rights. Court's multiply neurodivergent family learns and thrives in the freedom of a radical unschooling life. Court is against punishment and behavior modification and feels strongly that children flourish when treated with unconditional love, respect, and compassion.

Jaime Franco

Jaime is a mama to 4 in southern Australia, who enjoys all things crafty. With some members of the family being neurotypical and others neurodivergent, she and her husband have chosen to take all in stride and joyfully respect every individual's needs without behaviour modification therapies.

Leia Solo

Leia and her neurodiverse family live in Australia, where they enjoy sharing special interests together and very occasionally venturing out to quiet places. Leia is an autistic parent, social work academic, and a Director of Autistic Families International. Leia blogs at www.leiasolo.com

Meg Murry

Meg is a writer and artist who lives in the Midwest United States with her husband Calvin and sons, Charles and Sandy. They are an unschooling family who are not currently participating in any therapy programs. Meg and Charles are both autistic, while Calvin and Sandy are not.

Michelle Sutton

Michelle is an Australian writer and neurodiversity rights advocate, with a background in education and psychology. Michelle lives in NSW, Australia, with her husband, 6 children, dog, two cats, and an undisclosed number of chickens. Michelle and her family choose an eclectic mix of strategies (none of which include behaviour modification therapies) to help them live well with their varying neurodivergences. You can find Michelle online at www.michellesuttonwrites.com

Morénike Giwa Onaiwu

American-born to immigrant parents, Morénike Giwa Onaiwu is an autistic woman in a multicultural, neurodiverse, serodifferent family of color. Morénike, a community advocate, writer, mom, and educator, is a firm believer in neurodiversity and responsive, relationship-based parenting. She has years of nonprofit experience and is involved in several social justice activism endeavors including HIV-related advocacy, disability rights, technology and learning, research, gender and racial justice, and promoting inclusion. In addition to Respectfully Connected and her blogs

"Just Being Me... Who Needs "Normalcy Anyway?" and "Advocacy Without Borders," Morénike has also been featured in numerous blogs, magazines, and other platforms.

Naomi Callaghan

Naomi is an advocate for inclusion and intersectionality. She is an autistic mother of three, one of whom is also autistic. Her passions are gardening, crochet, feminism, sustainability, and the apparently odd notion that all children deserve love and acceptance for who they are.

Sophie's Trains

Sophie's Trains is an introverted mom of four kids, on the constant journey toward living mindfully and with kindness to all, including (or especially) children. This leads her to often question conventional wisdom and mainstream approaches. Following her third daughter Sophie's autism diagnosis she found herself at odds with popular long-held beliefs regarding autism and what constitutes "normal" or desirable behaviours and interests. So her family forges their own path paved with love, compassion, mutual respect, and understanding. She reflects on their experiences in her blog www.onthetrainwithsophie.com

Zita Dube-Lockhart

A mom of two busy kiddos, Zita's family is full of diversity, uniqueness, and love. Zita strives to parent her children with the dignity and humanity that is their birthright. They practice a blend of radical unschooling at home while simultaneously integrating a part time specialized program during the days, the combination of which allow her autistic son, Sam, the opportunity to learn and grow with others in his peer group, while maintaining a very low stress, child-led, safe, and supportive environment in the home.

IDENTIFICATION

Welcome to Autism – Leia Solo

My son was diagnosed as autistic just one month ago. I've learnt so much in the last month and I want to pass some of that learning on to you – a parent with a newly diagnosed autistic child. Here are my top tips in the hope that it might be useful for you and your family, as you begin your lives “post diagnosis.”

1. Nothing is different

Your child hasn't changed since the day before their diagnosis. The day after their diagnosis is very likely to look a lot like the day before their diagnosis. You'll get up, have breakfast, and do all the same things you've done every day. A diagnosis will not change what happens from one hour to the next.

2. Everything is different

I just contradicted myself, right? Well not really. Because whilst the hours will pass much as they always have, you now have this word “autism” and all the tomes of information that come with it. The effect of having the label can be really helpful once you process and accept it because instead of seeing your child's behaviours as problems to be solved, you might be able to see them as just part and parcel of the little being you love.

3. Find your tribe

Hands down, the best thing I did was to reach out and connect with people who had walked before me and were flourishing, many of them autistic adults, as well as those who were just beginning along the path. A word of warning here, you want to be really selective when searching for supportive friends. The autism “world” is big

and filled with lots of different perspectives, so being particular about finding those who are on your same wavelength is key. You don't want to land in "spank them until they behave" land if you are more of the "let them eat cake for breakfast" kind of family.

4. Google "neurodiversity"

Just that. It will give you a road map. And it's really cool.

5. Don't rush it

A new diagnosis comes along with bucket loads of information and it's of the "one size fits all" category. It will be assumed that you are looking to get your kid school ready, line up visits from Occupational Therapists, Speech Pathologists, Child Psychologists, get them sleeping on their own all through the night, and any other number of "you'll want to do x, y and z." You may want to do all this. You may not. Refer back to point one and remember that today is pretty much the same as yesterday, so what you do is up to you.

6. Your child is the expert

Depending on their age and skills, asking your child what they want help with is always the best first option. If they can't tell you, then you are the next expert in line to try to interpret what their needs for support are. Most of us grew up with the "doctor knows best" concept so it can be hard to hold your own against lots of people with fancy offices and qualifications after their names. Remember that none of them knows your family or your child, but you do. Take the drivers seat and choose the

destination your family wants. Professionals can support you to get there, but that's it. They shouldn't be at the steering wheel.

7. Your extended family and friends will all react differently

Some will go straight to completely supportive. They are gold. Thank them. Others will nod and you'll have no idea what they're really thinking. Some will go into denial. All this is very hard if you are still processing your own thoughts about the diagnosis. Build some boundaries and buffers and know that time may be needed by everyone to feel acceptance. My more experienced mentors tell me that some people will just never reach acceptance. This is their problem and not yours. As much as possible, leave them to it. You have more important things to do like making sure your kid has pants on before they leave the house.

8. Check your assumptions

Another word you might want to Google is "ableism." If you've had very little connection with disabled people, you'll likely be carrying a closet full of prejudice about disability that you're not even aware of. I consider myself a fairly educated and sensitive person, but it was there, lurking all the same. It will come out in your thoughts and in your language. That's ok. You just have some learning to do. The best way to educate yourself is to listen to autistic adults and disability advocates. They are your child grown and I'm sure that you would want people to listen to what your child has to say about something that affects them first and foremost.

9. Resistance is futile

Begin to find ways to let go of all the social conventions around family life that really don't seem to fit well with neurodiverse (you're Googling that, remember?) families. Struggling with resistance to the family mealtime? Let everyone eat where and when they want. Battling to get your kid out of their pajamas for the day? Let them go out in pyjamas if it's their preference. And bedtime battles? Consider abandoning specific bedtimes like most parents in the world do. While some autistic kids do thrive on structure (so I'm told), many don't and letting go of all the rules (ok, except for health and safety ones) might just be the answer to a more trouble free day for your family.

10. And finally...

... know that the day will come when you won't think of the word autism when you first wake. When you'll go to bed at night and it won't be the last thing on your mind. You'll have gone through a whole day hanging out with your child without a head full of autism "stuff." It took about three weeks for me to get there but when I did, I realised that nothing has changed. And everything has changed. Happy travels.

I Need Space Today – Briannon Lee

Today was my sister's birthday party. She was there the day my eldest son was born. They adore each other. He was excited about going to her party and dressed up for the occasion.

As we arrived, he said quietly, "I need space today." While everyone was celebrating outside, he moved inside, and sat with his iPad, watching episodes of his favourite TV show, "Paw Patrol." I watched him through a glass door. He was looking at his iPad intently, and smiling. When he was ready, my son jumped enthusiastically in to the pool with our extended family. He's just taught himself to swim and was diving and splashing and enjoying his family's company. Later, when lunch was served and everyone got out of the pool, he whispered to me "the food smells." He couldn't bear to be near it and sat away from everyone again, watching another episode of "Paw Patrol" and eating a vegemite sandwich. He was so involved in his iPad he didn't notice us singing Happy Birthday. My family realised he missed out, and asked him to join us. He ran over excitedly, the candles were re-lit, we sang Happy Birthday again, and he helped his favourite Aunty blow out her candles. We ate cake and left straight away. It was, all in all, a great party!

I realised in the car on the way home, that this day would have been so different only a year ago. I would have felt the pressure of family and my own expectations, and not allowed my son to bring an iPad to a birthday party. My boy would have had no retreat from the social pressures of a family party with lots of

happy chitchat. The smell of the BBQ meat and the noise of my family sharing a meal around a table would have been unbearable. Inevitably, he would have started running around and squealing, perhaps singing loudly, bumping in to people, and knocking things over. He might cry or yell. He wouldn't eat. In the car on the way home, I would have complained about his behavior and felt frustrated and sad that we couldn't take him anywhere and that I hadn't been able to spend time catching up with my family.

The difference between last year and this year is not my son. He has developed new skills and grown taller, as little people do. But he is essentially the same bright, energetic, family-loving boy we adore.

The difference is absolutely the way the adults in his life, his mums, and his extended family, know him, and accept him. My son was diagnosed with "Autism Spectrum Disorder" last year. He says he has an "autistic mind", and we don't consider his incredible mind disordered.

But back then, in those early days, his diagnosis was a shock. It filled me with fear and grief. A grief that was strong and sat with me for many months, like an unwelcome guest that visited our house each evening, when our three kids were in bed; and I cried.

As I emerged from that place of deep grief, I started reading. I began with books by professionals, about helping my kid to "improve." Then thankfully, I kept reading. I learned about neurodiversity. I read the words of autistic adults written in blogs and books. Their words were powerful. They pushed through my fear and

settled gently in my mind and my heart. I realised my boy wasn't much different from me, with his struggles with social events and aversion to smells. How could I be so frustrated with parts of him that were simply childlike parts of me?

My boy was not a handful, hyperactive, or naughty. He was actually a child coping incredibly well under great pressure. A child that needed to be listened to, and encouraged. As all children should.

And so, this past year has been one of learning about and listening to my child. It's been a year of discoveries. Of finding and sharing the things that bring him joy and make him feel safe, and figuring out situations that are challenging.

With that comes a new and different, unsettling feeling. It visits me on days like today, when we have a big social event that is fun, when my children find their own ways to enjoy being in their extended family's presence. When I think of the mother of a year ago who was pushing her kid to fit in and pass as neurotypical; to sit still, to be quiet, to eat a meal with a group of people, to answer adults' questions and say hello and goodbye. I think of a little boy who was trying so hard for his parents and couldn't say "I need space today."

It's a bit of guilt, regret, and a big dose of sadness. It hits me in waves.

This too shall pass, I know; and there, still, shall remain my firstborn. A little taller. But essentially the same bright, energetic, family-loving boy we adore.

Autistic, Not Broken – Court Alice Thatcher

Autism “professionals” tell me you need a lot of help and intervention. NOW, before the window closes, they say. They meet you and talk of deficits. They check boxes and tally scores.

I disagree.

You are not a thing in need of fixing.

They are really missing out, these people who cannot see how perfectly amazing you truly are. You communicate with your eyes and with your whole body. You laugh mischievously from deep within your belly. You are so busy at play and in near constant motion.

You love to feel the ground with your bare feet, preferring to avoid shoes and experience the textures and sounds with your small toes tapping rhythmically on each surface.

You carry the iPad on your shoulder like a boom box, running and dancing to your favorite songs.

You love to inhale deeply and hold one of your beloved books close to your face, breathing in the scent and remembering it.

You love to run amongst the creeks and dirt near the playground, preferring the calmness of the perimeter to the crowded slides.

You look closely at your food and turn it, admiring it from every angle as you take a bite.

You nestle books under your arm as you fall asleep.

You have a preferred spot on the couch and not so subtly push me to the side with your feet if I sit there.

You enjoy having things your way and have no problem letting us know.

You run past me as you play, stopping sometimes to lean in for a kiss on the head.

You carry armfuls of books and your cherished toy laptop almost everywhere you go.

You wake a lot during the night and sleep often eludes you.

Every piece of furniture is a trampoline and a jungle gym. Outside, you are a blur in the sun racing towards whatever catches your eye, curls dancing in the wind.

You love deep pressure and tight bear hugs.

In the next room right now, I hear you running and stomping. You love the hardwood floor echoes of our new house. I love the way you play and the way you laugh.

I love the way you move throughout the world, unapologetically and with unbridled fervor.

Please know there is nothing wrong with you. Not even a little bit.

You are incredible, and strong, and bright.

You know your mind and aren't afraid to share it.

You are a stimmy and happy child who leaves me breathless with love.

Someone who, like your siblings, I can't help but feel undeserving of parenting.

You speak no words, yet you say so much.

You are so many things, but not one part of you is broken.

Embrace the Label - Leia Solo

I've read a few comments on various social networking sites from parents who are hesitant to pursue a diagnosis for their child because they worry about them being "labeled" as autistic. I remember feeling that way myself when considering what was best for my three-year-old son. I'm no fan of the medical model of disability, which has a tendency to reduce the complexities of a human being down to a set of symptoms requiring treatments. I too was concerned that being labeled "autistic" might feel overpowering for my son as he grows. That it might reduce him down to a medical diagnosis. I was also worried that it might make him a target for the judgment of others, who see only "autism" when they learn of his diagnosis, and ascribe all their own assumptions about what that must mean.

I figured that the best way to explore the idea of what labeling my son as autistic might mean was to seek out autistic adults and ask them. Overwhelmingly I found that autistic adults who had been diagnosed as children were pleased that they had been given the word autism. Overwhelmingly I found that autistic adults, who had *not* been diagnosed as children, wished that they had been given the word autism earlier. For me, autistic people are the experts on this issue and if they were telling me that labeling is important, I was going to listen.

Here's what they told me.

Your child will not be targeted more or bullied more because they have the label autistic.

With or without the label, it's likely that their differences will be noted by other kids and some of those kids will make life hard for them, because being different makes you an easy target. Having the label autistic might mean though that teachers and friends are on the look out for bullying and might take action to come to your child's aid should they find themselves a target. It might also give them the opportunity to speak with other kids about autism, and in doing so, potentially create more understanding about diversity.

Your child will not feel weighed down from knowing they are autistic.

In fact, the opposite is highly likely. They will have been given an important access point to self understanding that will enable them to view their choices, behaviours, and needs in a new context. In this context, they are not messed up, broken, or less than their peers. They are neurologically different. This will likely help them to move through their childhood, teenage years, and early adulthood learning how to play to their strengths and avoid some of the pitfalls that non-diagnosed people often fall into.

Your child will not be isolated and alienated from others because they wear the label autistic.

In contrast, they will gain entry to a community of autistic people. Making connections with other autistic kids and adults will help them to see that they can be just who they are, and be loved, accepted, and celebrated for it. They will see autistic adults who are doing just fine, who have found ways to live that work well with who they are. They will hear the voices of autistic activists who they might join with to

challenge the negative stereotypes around autism. They will know that they are not alone.

In a perfect world where everyone was treated with love and respect regardless of their race, colour, ability, neurology, and sexuality, maybe labels wouldn't matter so much. Maybe we could all just be who we are without a label. We don't yet live in that world. We live in one where being different from the majority causes challenges, conflict, and even pain. Autistic adults who have not been diagnosed until later life speak of the relief of a diagnosis.

Of finding a home.

Of finally understanding themselves better.

Of learning that there are others just like them.

They reflect on what it would have been like to find out they were autistic when they were younger and they share that it would most likely have been some kind of wonderful.

If you're worrying about the effects of your child being labeled autistic, please consider the voices of the experts on this issue. Autistic adults are your child grown and they are saying go ahead and embrace the label. Your child is likely to thank you for it.

I See You...I Invite You To See Me – Briannon Lee

I see you,
 Sitting in the car outside the paediatrician's office. In shock.
Your child has been diagnosed with autism, by a health professional using a list of deficits in a manual of Mental Disorders. You have a long report about your child's problems. All the ways they're different to other children. All the things you need to fix. All the therapy they need to do.

I see you,
 Reading late at night.
You'll read books by Autism experts. You'll google Autism. You might look for new treatments and read research papers. You will read blogs by "Autism parents."

I see you,
 Crying with your partner/mum/best friend.
You think your child will never be happy. You will never be happy. The news is full of parents talking about their struggles and all the hard things about "Children with ASD." You're part of the "Autism epidemic" now.

I see you,
 Watching your child play.
You're noticing now all the ways they're different from other children. You're thinking about all the things they'll never do. Their future. You're worried. You're working out how to fix them. You want only the best for them.

I see you because I have been you. Your story is my story.
But there is more than one autism story.

I invite you to see me,
 Reading late at night.
Books written by Autistic adults. Words from Autistic people on blogs, Facebook pages, Twitter. They say we are not broken. We are happy. We are neurodivergent & disabled. We have rights. We have identity, community and culture. Words by parents who see their child with the same eyes that looked upon them with wonder the day they were born – as a unique person with value and worth, uniquely unfolding and developing. Words by other parents who are happy. Families whose lives are good. As ours is.

I invite you to see me,
 Crying with my partner/mum/best friend.
Because I am fighting so hard for my children to be accepted, accommodated and

supported. Because I am tired of reading about my children as burdens and problems to be fixed. Because people want to change them. Make them fit in and comply in ways they can't, wont, don't. Crying for Autistic children who experience abuse, isolation, seclusion, restraint, coercion – by those who should protect them.

I invite you to see me,

Watching my children play.

They are happy. They have freedom to move, as they want. They play in their own unique way. They love being outdoors and being immersed in the elements. They watch endless episodes of their favourite TV shows. Collect precious things and line them up. They make mess and make noise. They approach everything with enthusiasm.

They invite me to join them in their own ways. And I do. We are happy.

Our happiness won't make the news.

Our autism story lacks tragedy, drama, or loss. We are not newsworthy.

But we are here, and many families like ours too.

Our children are loved and accepted. They do not have to change to fit the world; we are changing the world for them.

You can be part of that change. There is more than one autism story.

Create your own.

HUMANITY

I 100% Accept My Child, But... - Leia Solo

In my conversations with parents of autistic children, I'm noticing something interesting about the idea of acceptance. Some parents share that they completely accept that their child is autistic, but they go on to search with desperation for a solution to many of the behaviors that come with autism.

I know the feeling of being desperate for things to be other than they are. If we're honest, many of us could think back to the early days of our children being diagnosed and remember having the same feeling. It goes something like this.

"I simply can't stand that my son is oppositional about every single little thing. This can't go on. If I do (insert action), will this stop?"

"My daughter will not leave the house. I can't stay cooped up in here forever. If I do (insert action), will this change?"

"My kid is on their iPad all day long. It's not natural. If I do (insert action), will this stop?"

"My child has meltdowns over every little change in routine. If I do (insert action), will these stop?"

The search for the perfect intervention might flip from the authoritarian (time limits on screen time) to the permissive (permitting the child to do what they want), but the desire behind the intervention is the same. The behavior must change. And fast. Because life can't go on like this.

What I'm about to tell you might not be very comforting. If you are completely at the edge of your capacity, it might even sound defeatist. But here it is anyway, because it's the truth and accepting THIS is what accepting autism actually means.

Accepting that your child is autistic means accepting the behaviors that are related to their being autistic.

The sensory issues. The social communication challenges. The "rigidity." The need for routine. Oppositional defiance. Emotional swings. Selective eating. Intense interests. All of it or some of it. Accepting this is YOUR challenge.

You are not really accepting autism if you have a desperate need to change the behaviors that accompany it. What does "accepting autism" even mean if you are heavily invested in eliminating those behaviors that trouble you? Does it mean you accept the *idea* of autism? The *concept* of it?

If autism is characterised by sensory issues, challenges with social communication and "restrictive" patterns of behavior, then accepting autism means accepting how these play out in your child's life.

It might mean accepting that they don't want to go out and be around people, even if you do.

It might mean accepting that they need their iPad, favorite TV character, or other retreat to regulate, way more than you're comfortable with.

It might mean accepting that they need everything to be exactly the same because that feels safe even though you like change.

It might mean accepting that your life is not going to go the way you thought it would, because your child has needs different than your own. Different than what society sets as the norm.

Accepting autism is a nice idea in theory. In practice, it means understanding that no matter what you do, what intervention you try, what philosophy you employ, what action you take, your child's behavior may not change. They may not eat what you want them to eat. They may not play the childhood games that you expect them to play. They may not enjoy the company of others. They may not do many of the "typical" things that you associate with childhood. Ever.

Of course this isn't to suggest that you do nothing. Many sensory issues can be well managed with accommodations like noise cancelling headphones. Other challenges might be resolved by establishing a clear routine, or alternatively, scrapping all routine. Choosing to home school may reduce much of your child's anxiety. Buying clothes without seams may mean your child is happier in their clothes. If your aim is to better understand your autistic child's needs and explore ways to creatively meet these, then you might just hit on something that makes a difference.

But you also might not. Your child is autistic and always will be. That means that many of the behaviors that you find worrying may not go away.

Accepting autism means you accept that.

This is what many of us have learned over time. The single biggest intervention that has made a whole world of difference in our family lives is

accepting autism as it is and letting go of OUR needs for life to be different than it actually is.

It takes time. It's not a single moment where you suddenly let go of what you want and welcome what is. It's a slow movement towards understanding that there is no joy in wishing for a different set of circumstances, of holding out for change. Joy comes when you accept your child for who they are, as they are.

You can't accept your autistic child without accepting autism.

When Autism is Seen as Damage – Ally Grace

In 2015, Sesame Street introduced a new digital muppet character, and there was a lot of anger in circles in which parents discuss living more naturally.

This muppet character is named Julia and she is autistic. Presumably, she is supposed to help autistic children because there is representation of their neurology on a cool TV program. Admittedly, having an autistic character presented positively in the media is a nice change. It's much more common to hear reports of autistic children locked in cages, enrolled into compliance therapies, described as "not able to communicate," abused by their parents, portrayed in blogs and media segments as awful to live with, blamed for ruining their family because they exist, and killed because they'd be "better off dead."

The reason that many in these "natural parenting" circles are upset is that they don't think it is right, in any way, to celebrate or normalise being autistic. It is, according to them, "sad" and "tragic" that children are autistic in the first place.

Often, in communities like these when I meet parents who have autistic children, I see a lot of fear and sadness. I don't see a lot of real happiness, and I don't hear of thriving children- unless in the context of "healing." I don't hear parents sharing happy moments- unless it is linked to how their children seem not so autistic anymore. I don't hear of contentment- unless linked to the "hope" that one day life will be different. I do hear of struggling families, misery, despair, and lack of connection, all blamed upon the fact that their children are autistic. I hear of conditional kinds of happiness, whereby moments may be fleetingly joyful but only

in relation to specific constraints. Happiness seems to rely on something outside of the inner, depending upon whether children fit the mould that has been determined to be “normal” and “superior.”

Many times, I have interacted with people who believe that being autistic is caused by toxins, and who are on a kind of crusade to “educate” others about this. At these times, and also regarding the Julia character, I have been shocked at the level of disrespect this kind of attitude can cause toward autistic people. It wouldn't even necessarily be conscious, but when you believe a person to be a kind of half-person, or if you believe that someone is damaged, this is going to skew your interactions with them and detract from authenticity and respect. If you are pathologising someone, this is going to be a barrier to genuine connection.

Raising your autistic child with the belief that they are inherently faulty, poisoned, damaged, “shells” of who they “should” be, not really human, or similar, is not good and compassionate parenting. It isn't likely that we will be able to have an authentic relationship with someone if we are trying to fix them. If it is more important to a person to use their child as an example of a theory than it is to connect with them as they are - then this is going to detract from family happiness.

I am pleased with who I am as an autistic individual, and with the brain that I have. I am genuinely glad to be me. But people actually regularly delight in telling me that I shouldn't feel that way; that this happiness is wrong. I am “brain damaged” and “have a neurological disorder”, a “condition”, according to them. I should be angry that something made me this way, not happy to have the brain that I do. I

should be, apparently, living each day with the constant belief that something is wrong with me.

I am also living a truly happy life with my autistic children. I wake up each morning and feel blessed for all the love within my little home. I believe that my children are joyful too. I don't feel that my life sucks, or is negative or inherently problematic. And yet I am told, again and again, by these people who are supposedly more enlightened than I, that I am wrong or ill-informed, that I lack the ability to think deeply about my conditioning, or that my "head is in the sand." These comments come from different people, yet they are always the same. The "education" they provide is never anything new. Their "evidence" (which is usually the rise in autism diagnoses) is not compelling.

Loving our autistic children with wild abandon is so easy to do if we really tune in to our natures; surely nothing could be simpler than loving our children! However, in this world where autism is hated and spoken of with disdain and put in the same category as serious health conditions like cancer, it has become unusual to say that we love our autistic children in the fullest sense of the word.

How is it that loving our children wholly is seen as radical?!

Why is it that seeing our own beautiful children as "damaged" is supposedly more progressive than the alternative of seeing them as worthy and valid people, just as they are?

And so I would like to know, as I type these words while my children swing, giggling, on the clothesline, how can it be that I am the ignorant one?

My Child is Not a Prop in Your Political Campaign – Zita Dube-Lockhart

My child is not a random face on a poster, plastered on murals to proselytize a better way of living.

My son is not a research grant, a charitable organization, or a five-mile walk.

My child is not an illness.

He is not an ailment.

He is not a cure, nor is he a cause.

My child is not a question mark, a puzzle, or a light bulb.

He does not exist within the confines of a glass vial.

He is not a test tube, or a sample cup, or a dosage of chemicals designed to hurt, harm, heal, help, or hinder.

My child is not a cruciferous vegetable.

He is not a protein that exists in wheat, barley, rye, or other grains.

He does not inflame your bowels.

He does not cause constipation, nor does he cure it.

He is not a piece of fruit, grown free of pesticides, herbicides, or harmful toxins.

My child is not a laboratory, nor does he inhabit one.

He is not an animal to be trained, nor is he proof that the world needs to better love our four legged, furry friends.

My child is not an ominous warning of the downfall of civilization, nor is he a prophecy of a better world to come.

He is not a self-help book or an angel sent to heal the world.

My child is not a fundraising goal, a bottom line, or a government investment.

He does not exist on your budget lines, nor does he inhabit the spaces between the words within your speech.

My child is not a slogan plastered on picket signs, shouted from legislative steps, or written as some pre-emptive epitaph of a person who “might have been.”

Or “could be.”

Or “should be.”

My child is not a statistic. He is not a dollar figure. He is not an issue to be addressed.

My child is not a political campaign. He is not a mandate. He is not a platform.

My child is a child.

A child who will one day soon be an adult.

My child is a human being, despite any attempts to portray him as “other.”

My child’s right to a life of liberty and freedom and respect and dignity is written into his genetic code; his humanity inscribed into his DNA.

My child is not a weapon to be used to advance your cause.

My child is not a warning to be feared or a harbinger of a world without “words.”

My child is not a prop in your movement. He is not a lynch pin in your cause.

My child is not a burden. He is not a worry. He is not responsible for my mental health.

My child is not to blame for the ills in the world.

He is also not the result of them.

He is not yours to decipher, discover, or display.

He is not mine to do so, either.

He is his.

And he “is”, as you and I “are.”

Flesh and bone and blood, somehow combining to create life, laughter, heart, and soul.

Human.

He was born of love, into love, and giving love.

My child is not a crusade.

He is a person.

Just as he is - for all that he is.

Many Ways to Say, “I Love You” – Court Alice Thatcher

Recently, I had one of those Facebook memories pop up. It was from three years ago when I shared my excitement over my then three-year-old son giving me a kiss for the first time. I don't remember writing about it. At the time, it must have felt important and like some kind of milestone he had finally met. When it popped back up on my newsfeed, I cringed a bit. We knew my older son was autistic from when he was a baby and didn't think for one moment there was anything wrong with it. But I had begun to subtly absorb the prevailing narrative about perceived things I was “missing out on” and celebrated things he did like trying a new food or expressing affection.

Three years later, I can safely say we don't measure anything our three autistic children do by neurotypical standards. We haven't in a long time. Quite the opposite, honestly. I do not love affection and am not much of a hugger. This is not because I am autistic, but because I am me. I am affectionate only with my children and only if and when they are okay with it. Their bodies are their own and we do not force them to hug, kiss, or reciprocate any affection or forced expressions of love. Some of my children enjoy cuddling and some do not. I don't force any of it, just as I wouldn't want to be compelled to be affectionate towards someone if I was disinclined to do so at the moment (or ever).

Regularly I see parents lament how their autistic child doesn't tell them that they love them. I see them express presumptions that their child will “never say I love you.” There is so much deep-seated ableism and so many pervasive, damaging ideas

about autistic people and empathy. The affection aspect seems to get lumped into this. It mattered to me a few years ago, on some level. It mattered enough for me to share that my son had finally kissed me for the first time. I felt validated on some level, though I can't really say why now. Our love for each other is strong and known, and needs no formalities.

I realize now that our autistic family shows one another love in so many ways that don't include verbalizations of the words "I love you."

My partner calls and orders food for me because he knows I have intense anxiety about using the phone.

My daughter shares her interests with me and wants me to sit with her and watch her favorite videos, excitedly pointing out her favorite parts.

My older son reads to me from his tornado books and races up the stairs upon his return to find me when we have been apart.

My younger son holds my hands and inhales deeply the smell of my skin.

We show love by sharing what matters to us with one another. We show love by being thoughtful and kind. We show love through understanding grumpy moods, when we may not feel as loving or kind as usual. We show it by reminding each other to cover our ears or put on our headphones when the blender is about to be in use. We show love by respecting each other's bodies and needs for space. Some of us enjoy climbing and big movements, which can turn a parent or couch into a jungle gym. Some prefer to sit on the recliner or in the play tent and remain undisturbed.

My children don't have to do anything to show me that they love me. They are loved,

unconditionally and without any strings or requirements, exactly as they are. One of my sons is non-speaking and people have said to me “Don’t you feel sad that he’s never said I love you?” I can answer unequivocally that I do not. He shows love in so many ways. He loves to take my hands and put them on his head so I can give him a deep pressure head massage. He will bring me his beloved books to read with him. He looks for me every time he wakes up during the night and settles at the sight of me. Sometimes he will take my face in his hands and study it carefully. He brings me my lip balm when he finds it on the counters and end tables.

There are lots of ways to say, “I love you.” No one way is more valid than another. Love in our home is given freely. There is no obligation that it be expressed or displayed in a socially acceptable way.

Three years ago, instead of posting to Facebook I could have just enjoyed a moment between parent and child, rather than seeing it as some achievement. Last week, I woke up and saw my older son peering at me from his place in the bed next to me. He looked at me for a moment and then smiled. He said, “Mommy, when I watch you sleep, there are lots of red love hearts floating off of your body.” Then he jumped off the bed to start his day.

Being Human is Enough – Meg Murry

I've run into a curious phenomenon in my online life as I discuss autism and parenting, and parenting autistic children, in various groups and support circles and Facebook pages. If it happened once or twice, I might think it was just a miscommunication, but it happens over and over again and so I think it actually means something.

When I describe my autistic son Charles, his interests and his creativity, his close bond with his brother, his independence and strong sense of self; when I describe the way we are raising him, without punishments or gold stars or behaviorism, without screen limits or set bedtimes or mandatory chores, without coercion; when I describe how we are parenting our autistic child, without professional therapies, without strict schedules, without public school, without using physical restraints during meltdowns unless *absolutely necessary* and that's rarely necessary; when I refuse to expose his most difficult moments in public forums or offer support to parents who demean and ridicule and degrade their autistic children online; when I describe how he is thriving and happy and learning all the time; when I describe the way my husband and I accept and celebrate his unique self, people make this assumption:

Oh, well, you obviously have one of those “high functioning” kids. You obviously have one of those kids who go to mainstream classrooms and are “just quirky.” You obviously have never dealt with violent meltdowns. You obviously don't know how hard we have it. Obviously.

Or, some say it in a nicer way. Like, *oh yes, my gifted son who has Asperger's is just like that.*

In either case, the nasty way or the nice way, people are making the same assumption: only a child who is highly verbal and not too different from typical can be parented without punishments, can thrive without therapies, can be raised with acceptance and trust.

Only a “high functioning” autistic child could be accepted and celebrated in the way you, Meg, are describing this boy.

Every single time, I feel a sense of emotional whiplash. I never see it coming and so somehow, it feels like a fresh sting each time someone assumes they know what this boy that I love is like.

The fact is, they assume wrong. I categorically reject functioning labels, but I know what those people are picturing. I've met those kind of autistic kids who might (or might not!) pass as “just quirky” in a mainstream classroom, and they are great. I was one of them as a kid. But Charles is not. If he went to school, he would have an IEP and would need substantial support. I don't feel it's accurate to call him speech delayed because I see his speech as being more just on a spectrum of normal autistic child's language skills, but suffice it to say that he would be considered significantly delayed by mainstream medical and educational standards.

He would not be diagnosed with Asperger's if Asperger's were still in the DSM (he does have a formal autism diagnosis as of May 2015). He is five years old and can write a few letters on the rare occasions he's tried, but probably is dysgraphic

and certainly is not hyperlexic. He is, according to the child psychologist who diagnosed him, “right in the middle” of the autism spectrum; a description that to her credit she also said we shouldn’t ascribe much meaning. I don’t at all believe that trying to grade an autistic person’s “functioning” levels is either useful or respectful, BUT, to those people who assume I am talking about a child who might appear to be “just quirky,” I can assure them that is not at all the case.

None of that really matters, though I am always tempted to explain how wrong they are about what they assume. No, what really bothers me is what that assumption *means*.

I don’t think people are drawing this connection, and when I draw it for them, they get angry. But what I hear them saying is; only a child who is highly verbal and highly intelligent could be trusted with that kind of autonomy. Only a child who is very close to typical could thrive in this world without therapies to make him seem less autistic. Only a child who never has physical meltdowns could be parented with soft compassion rather than force and punishment.

Only a child who isn’t *that* disabled could be parented with that much acceptance and love. Because if my child were more autistic, I would celebrate him less. *Obviously*.

I am not exaggerating or being dramatic when I say that that kind of thinking is the path to abuse and even filicide for disabled children at the hands of their caregivers. I’m sorry if that sounds harsh, except - I’m not sorry. Because I think it’s important we realize it now, instead of lamenting down the road when another

autistic child is abused by a special education professional or killed by a parent, that we wish there was something we could have done to stop that.

We can pause now to call out this chain of thinking that goes: “high functioning” or less disabled = acceptance and celebration, but “low functioning” or more disabled = hardship and tragedy.

When I see that prejudice in action, and call it out, and warn people that that way lays child abuse, the reaction is not pretty. The worst things that have ever been said to me online have been said to me in response to me telling parents that it’s not okay to demean autistic children. And I’m not the only one who receives that kind of hateful backlash, far from it. It touches a nerve.

One of the common criticisms of people in the autism acceptance or autism rights movements is that we celebrate autism too much and never acknowledge the downsides or the hard stuff or the real disabilities involved.

For one thing, I find that notion a little absurd since the mainstream conversation about autism is saturated to the point of dripping with stories about how hard it is (*for the parents* of course). You can hardly throw a virtual stone without hitting a massive online forum dedicated to letting non-autistic parents air their grievances about their autistic children.

But the other point I want to make in response to that criticism is, yes we do acknowledge the hard stuff, *just not, ever, in a way that is disrespectful to autistic people*. The word Respect was included as part of the title of this book because we,

the group of authors, felt that respect is a vital part of our mission in parenting our autistic children and in writing about our journeys.

I have personally built up a wonderful support network online made up of non-autistic parents who are parenting autistic children with acceptance and respect, and autistic parents doing the same, as well as autistic people who don't happen to have children. And we do talk about the hard stuff sometimes when we need support, whether that's our own personal challenges with being autistic in the world, or with parenting our autistic kids.

You just might not *see* us doing it, if we don't know you that well, because we value our privacy and that of our children, so we seek out small, safe spaces in which to be frank, or we talk privately. It's not about being secretive; it's about being respectful and always deferring to the privacy of the autistic person who is struggling. And that goes for our non-autistic children too, for those of us who have them. Not to mention our spouses (autistic or not), for those who have them.

Everyone is entitled to privacy and basic respect - so no, you will never see me publicly venting about how difficult it is for me when my child has a meltdown. That doesn't mean he does not have them.

All people have a right to be accepted as they are, celebrated for who they are, offered compassion and understanding, entrusted with bodily autonomy, and to be free from external manipulation and control. Being verbal, intellectually gifted, and able-bodied are not the prerequisites to basic human dignity. Just being human is enough.

DIVERSITY

Attachment Parenting While Black and Autistic – Morénike Giwa Onaiwu

As much as I can, I avoid these types of offices when my younger children are with me. You know the type: quiet, sterile, not child friendly. Offices where food, drinks, and/or electronic devices are not allowed and where a security guard is standing watch, glaring at people. That type. I'm an adult, and even I don't like being there, much less my young autistic son and daughter.

But this time it was unavoidable - their presence was mandatory. I made an appointment for a time in the afternoon that I assumed would hopefully move pretty quickly. I packed along some toys, books, paper, and crayons, and hoped for the best.

The items I packed amused them for a while. But not long enough.

My babies tried hard. But it was a long wait, and it was boring. And they are children - and children aren't designed to sit silent and unmoving for long periods of time.

They weren't unruly. They were just trying to amuse themselves. Trying to pass the time.

They walked between the rows of empty seats. The seats were a soft faux leather material. They ran their hands along the seats.

The security guard said no.

The tables were made of particle wood with decorative metallic pieces at the edges. The shiny, smooth metal felt nice on their hands and made a soothing clinking sound when they tapped their nails on it.

The security guard said no.

The floor was cold to the touch and perfect for quietly sliding and for sitting and spinning in place.

The security guard said no.

The area near the entryway was made out of glass and had a mirrored appearance. They were drawn to it. They stood close to it and peered at their reflections as they made funny faces.

The security guard said no.

They sat back down in their seats next to me and amused themselves by reciting scripts of their favorite children's television shows and excerpts of their favorite Laurie Berkner Band songs. They swayed and flapped along to the melody of their voices.

The security guard said no.

And when I say she said no, I don't mean she politely said no. Each time the “no” was accompanied by an exasperated tone of voice, a contorted facial expression, loud sighing, and remarks muttered under her breath about “bad” children. Followed by a disparaging “side eye” glance.

Y'all know about the side eye, right? Well, this was no ordinary side eye. It was laden with judgment and hostility. It silently screamed, “You need to control your bratty kids.” And it also screamed, “You are an embarrassment to us.”

An embarrassment to “us.” “Us” being black people - for the security guard, like myself, was black.

We've all heard it. From black comedians, to blog posts, to casual conversation, there are various places where people remark on what they view is a marked difference between the way white parents and black parents rear their children, especially in the American South. Though a lot of things about child rearing transcend race, there is a sizeable group of people who perceive that black parents often place a stronger emphasis than white parents on the way children are expected to behave in public - and therefore if a black child was believed to be "acting out" publicly, then such a child didn't have the right "home training." The child's "misbehavior" was perceived as the parents' fault (for being too lax and/or ascribing to a "white" ideal instead of instilling "proper manners" in the child).

By this point, I was very frustrated with the security guard and I could see that my kids were growing weary. Every attempt they had made at self-regulation had been shut down. And not even shut down politely, but with a barely veiled attitude. I felt that I needed to say something, so I decided to confront her respectfully but assertively. My purpose was two-fold. I wanted to stand up for my kids, but I also wanted to make her understand. This wasn't about being a "bad" kid or being unruly for the sake of disrupting others. Maybe if she was informed she would have a different take on things. It was worth a try.

I approached her slowly, stopping at a neurotypically appropriate distance. "Excuse me," I said. "I heard what you said. About my kids being bad. I'm not mad or anything, but I needed to let you know you were wrong. My kids aren't bad;

they're autistic. They're trying their best to wait here like everyone else, but it's really hard.”

The security guard was somewhat light complexioned, and I saw her flush slightly at my words. “I'm sorry for using the word “bad.” I didn't really mean “bad” but it was the first thing that came to my mind. I didn't mean for anyone to hear,” she stammered.

“My kids aren't bad,” I insisted.

“No, they're not bad,” she conceded. “They're just...spoiled, right? You're just going to have to teach them how to act 'cause you know people like us can't get away with stuff like *they* can.”

Taken aback at her words, I struggled for a few seconds trying to form my words into a coherent response. Before I could speak again, she continued:

“They always trying to label us with something. Your babies sound smart. And they talk really well too. I bet they not really autistic at all. Don't let them label your kids. They tried to do that with my son too, and my husband and I told them they didn't know what they were talking about 'cause my son does NOT have no ADHD.”

At that moment, I heard someone attempting to pronounce my name over the intercom. I hurried away from her and returned to where my kids were seated. I gathered up our belongings and ushered the kids out of their seats so we could walk through the inner set of doors where a woman holding a clipboard was beckoning us with hand movements to come her way.

I didn't get a chance to tell the security guard all of the things that were in my mind. Such as her calling my kids “spoiled” was not any better than calling them “bad.” Neither was respectful, and neither was true. My choosing to utilize a responsive way of engaging with my children that promotes attachment and respects their wishes and their limits is NOT “spoiling” them. It's loving them.

I also wished that I could have told her that my kids DO know “how to act.” They just happen to act differently than neurotypicals do. That even for me (an adult), the office wasn't a comfortable place. It had bright fluorescent lights, really cold temperature, and hallways that echoed - on top of the electronics ban and the (unreasonable in my opinion) insistence on silence. As an autistic woman, it was clear to me that universal design was of little to no priority in this place, and neither was inclusion. I wished that I could have told her that being “smart” and having the ability to express oneself by speaking didn't mean that one couldn't be autistic. I wanted her to know that being autistic isn't a “label” that one should shy away from, but a way to understand and identify oneself. Perhaps it is a form of labeling, but it is a welcome and helpful “label.”

I wish I could have told her these things.

But I also wish I could have told her that I knew precisely what she meant by the fact that “we” (meaning people of color, especially black people and most especially black people and/or other people of color with disabilities) don't receive the same consideration, treatment, or services as our white counterparts. That her observation about how frequently youth of color, especially males, are identified

as special education students (and subsequently segregated in too many cases) was correct. And that while my kids' diagnoses were completely accurate, there is a societal tendency to perceive the behavior of black and brown boys as more problematic than their white peers, and that in some cases these biased and inaccurate assumptions may lead to misdiagnoses. And in other cases, it can lead to even more devastating consequences, as we have seen in too many instances when black autistic boys are harmed and killed for their noncompliance to social norms. I wish I could have told her that on one hand I was both offended and annoyed by her ableism and her stereotyping, but on the other hand I could relate to her being concerned about the lack of parity between how behavior is perceived from one race to another.

I wish I could have told her how much I disagreed with her, yet how much I also agreed with her.

I cannot tell her. But I can tell you. And hope that if more people begin to give a damn, and as more people call out these disparities, we can begin to see a noticeable difference in the way things are for ALL autistics, regardless of color.

Until then, I have to brace myself, and my kids, for more instances like this. Undoubtedly we will encounter many more people who will make similar assumptions. It's bound to happen again - and again - because we are black, because of our relationship-based parenting approach, and because the behaviors associated with autism are so greatly misunderstood by the general public.

She was not the first, and she will not be the last.

We will just have to be ready next time.

Meeting Conflicting Needs in Our Neurodiverse Family – Michelle Sutton

Two adults, six kids. Multiple neurodivergences. That's my family. Bipolar, Autistic, Anxious, Depressed, Sensory Sensitivities, Sleep Challenged.

We have variety. We have diversity. We have strengths and challenges. We have lots of different interests, lots of different preferences. We have many differing needs and a big range of coping strategies.

As with most families, we can work through our different preferences without too much trouble. We can balance our differing interests without much stress. But when our needs and coping strategies conflict with each other, that is a bit trickier.

So, how do we respectfully negotiate to make sure all 8 of us do get what we need? Simply put, we give and take, we compromise, and we have a variety of strategies available.

In practical terms, what we do probably looks somewhat unorganized and disjointed. But there are reasons behind the way our home is set up the way it is and why we do things the way we do. For my husband and I as parents, there was a fair amount of unlearning old habits and relinquishing of control. We had to make conscious decisions to do things differently than we had been modeled. We had to be prepared to look rather unconventional to some of our family and friends. There was a period of discomfort. But ultimately, it was simple, because it was what was needed, and when you decide to do what is needed, things do fall into place.

Here are some of the strategies we use.

In our family, we have sensory seekers and sensory avoiders. We try to provide spaces that meet the needs of both. Some rooms in our house are quite cluttered and others are quite simple. Some rooms we leave to be pretty messy most the time and others we aim to keep clear as much as we can. This allows a balance of spaces available to meet the needs of those who don't like clutter and those who find it comforting and stimulating, and for those who find both serve their needs at different times it is easy to move between. We have set up lamps and lights around the house so we can easily change the brightness in any room at any time. Curtains are often closed during the day for periods of time to suit someone's needs.

For our sensory seekers we try to provide a wide range of stimulus in our house. This means we have a lot of differently textured rugs on our floors. We have plenty of cushions about for piling into and under and on top of. We bounce on the lounge and bed. For our sensory avoiders we have small spaces around the place, curtained off beds, pop up tents and hidey-holes in wardrobes.

In our family, some need noise to relax and some need quiet. We are really fortunate to be able to offer the kids who need quiet a room of their own. Those who handle noise well share space with each other. In shared spaces, those who love loud music usually wear earphones to listen to their music. During times when music is playing in shared spaces for all to hear, there are ear defenders available for those who prefer less volume. The combination of earphones and ear defenders means there is usually someone in a shared space with something over their ears.

In our family meal times are not a family affair. There is no expectation that we all sit together at the table to eat. Some of us do, some of us eat in other parts of the house. Some of us eat at different times of the day. Some of us have quite particular preferences for foods and so choose not to eat the main meal that has been prepared. There is no requirement that we conform to any expectations around food other than being aware of the impact our choices make on our health. This has led to great discussions and varying choices. Our kids are all healthy and much happier for having control over their choices about food.

In our family, we encourage self-advocacy. It is always acceptable to say, “no I can’t do that right now,” “no, I will not share that at the moment,” “no, you can’t touch me,” or “I cannot be in this space while that is happening.” We acknowledge that shared space is just that- shared. If we do not have the capacity to cope with what is happening in a shared space, we remove ourselves from that space to somewhere we can be alone. When we need to be alone, it is always ok to say “I need to be alone in my space for now.” Those who share a room have a place in that room that is recognised as theirs in which they are not disturbed.

We find that when we implement these strategies, life is easier for all of us. The cross over and conflict in needs is balanced out and everyone has space to advocate for and have their needs met. Of course, sometimes we forget, or become overwhelmed and need to be reminded how to best look after each other and ourselves. Sometimes adults remind children, and sometimes children remind adults.

Over all, our large and neurodiverse family exists happily and peacefully together in this space we have worked together to create. It is a fluid space, a dynamic place, where we move with each other and around each other. It is a bit of a dance, in a way, and we are learning, improving, and becoming more coordinated as we go. We sometimes collide, we sometimes brush past a little awkwardly, and we sometimes slip by gracefully.

Mutual Weirdness - Jaime Franco

We're all a little weird. And life is a little weird. And when we find someone whose weirdness is compatible with ours, we join up with them and fall into mutually satisfying weirdness—and call it love—true love.

-Robert Fulghum

When some friends were helping my husband and I design our wedding invitations, this is the quote they came up with to describe our love; “mutually satisfying weirdness.” To be fair, it is accurate. See, my husband has been diagnosed with autism. When he was in his late teens, he saw a psychologist who brought up the possibility of autism with him, but who also said that the current diagnostic manual didn't allow for a diagnosis at his age because “if you've made it to nearly 20 without a diagnosis, you probably don't need one.” Much later, nearly 10 years later, the diagnostic manual has been changed and he has his diagnosis.

I had an eerily similar experience at the age of 18. My mother and stepfather had broached the topic with me and organised an appointment with a psychologist to consider a diagnosis. I was so against it. It felt like a rejection, as if they were trying to get me labeled so that they could explain away my weirdness and excuse themselves of the fact that they didn't understand me. I was told the same thing as my future husband; “I'd have diagnosed you as a child, but you've made it this far so you probably don't need a diagnosis.” There was also the additional difficulty of my being female.

7 years later and I'm much more open to the idea that I might be autistic. I probably am. We don't have the funds for me to get a diagnosis at the moment. I plan to be at home with our children for quite a while longer, so we don't have to consider the supports I might need in place in the workplace. I may never make it back to a conventional job and that's okay with me. I love spending time living and learning through life with our kids and having my own pursuits in the quiet moments. I also may never get a diagnosis and that's okay. Learning about autism has given me the prompts I need to learn more about myself and that's most of the help that I needed.

We have four children; two are my stepchildren and two are ours together. With our children being born of two autistic parents, they will likely be neurodivergent, and even the older ones may be. In our day to day life, it doesn't matter to us because all our children are individuals and their needs, whether they come from a typical or divergent neurology, are just as important as everyone else's.

Meeting my husband, we quickly fell into our mutually satisfying weirdness. After a few months as friends, I met his kids. Within a few weeks of that, we fell for each other and were engaged. By the time we'd been together 6 months we were married and pregnant too. The difference that our relationship made to my life is obvious when I lay out all the events, but one of the biggest changes was invisible; I began to not only accept myself in all my weirdness, just as I accept my husband in his, but also learn about this particular brand of weirdness and start to work with it.

I learned about myself that I need time to recover after being social, even though I love it. I also know that I like to listen to music because at least it's familiar

background noise; if I have to listen to outside noises from inside my house, my mind works on overdrive to pick out and understand every little vehicle noise, mechanical whir and the noises of the neighbor's playful child. I have anxiety that occasionally gets so bad that I feel physical symptoms and sometimes the cause might not seem “bad enough” for a reaction as strong as that. My husband doesn't have these challenges; his are entirely different. I've learned about those too.

In parenting our children, we also embrace their weirdness, whether it's autistic weirdness or not. One child likes to have his sandwich cut a certain way (is it a triangle day today?), one gets anxious in crowds so we wear her in a preschool carrier to ease her anxiety, another has such different needs in relation to her sleep that some nights she's awake past 1 a.m.

So this is where I'm at, not only parenting children who may or may not be neurodivergent, but also in a house with neurodivergent parents. By embracing our mutual weirdness, we choose to live in joy. Isn't that the dream?

Don't You Want to Know What Causes Autism? – Cas Faulds

Another week, another person with a public platform spouting uninformed opinions about the causes of autism. It would be getting boring except that it's incredibly hurtful and harmful.

I'm pretty sure that most parents of autistic children have heard this question at some point in time: “Don't you want to know what causes autism?”

My simple answer is “No, I don't want to know what causes autism.” I accept that autism is a naturally occurring variation of human neurology, and I value diversity. I accept my son for exactly who he is. I do not need to know what exactly caused him to be the awesome person that he is. People have said that I'm lucky that he's awesome because not every autistic child is, but I wonder whether that's because those children can sense the unresolved questions that their parents have about why they are the way they are. I know that I could sense that in my parents when I was a child. I could sense their unease about me; their unspoken (and sometimes spoken) questions about what was wrong with me, what could have caused me to be that way, and what they could do to fix me.

That's the problem: When you question the cause of autism, you show a lack of acceptance towards autistic people. That hurts! That tells us that you don't want us. It tells us that you want to know what caused us so that you can prevent us from being who we are. It tells our children that they are unwanted by the world.

When we speak out against this - when we try to tell everyone that we deserve to be here as much as anyone else deserves to be, we're accused of being angry. Our

children are accused of being angry when they try to assert their right to do what is most comfortable for them. We get told, “If only you could all act more like neurotypical people, then you would gain acceptance from everyone.”

Imagine if everyone started questioning what caused people to be neurotypical. Imagine if everyone started talking about how we could prevent people from being neurotypical. Imagine if everyone decided that neurotypical children should be subjected to 30-40 hours of therapy per week in order to ensure the “best outcome.” It's not really a great thing to imagine. It really is a bit nightmarish.

But, that imagined scenario is our reality. We live with that every day, and our children live with it when people whisper those questions to their parents. You don't need to know what caused us to be us in order to accept us - all you need to do is accept us for who we are. Maybe I'm being naive, but I really do believe that it is that simple.

Ten Things You Reject By Accepting Neurodiversity – Ally Grace

Neurodiversity is the notion, and fact, that human beings are neurologically diverse. The neurodiversity paradigm says that there is no “right” or “normal” way to neurologically be; and that all neurologies are therefore valid. It believes that variations in human neurology are a natural part of human diversity. Autism and being autistic, is addressed often in neurodiversity ideas. I feel that deep and real respect for autism and autistic people; springs from an understanding of neurodiversity.

Understanding this notion of neurodiversity may be something you are working toward. It can be hard to come to new places in a journey of challenging your own beliefs. If you aren't there yet, don't lose heart. Full acceptance of our autistic children, or of ourselves as autistic people, is the worthy end result; but for some can take time.

Here is a list of ten things you reject for your autistic children, when you embrace the neurodiversity paradigm.

1. That being autistic means there is something “wrong” with you

By embracing the notion that there are many valid ways to exist, and by embracing that *all* neurologies are valid; we can reject the notion that being autistic is “bad”, and instead simply see it as a valid way of being. When it is not believed that being allistic (non-Autistic) is the singular “right” way to be; alternatives are not seen as wrong or even as “not normal.” Without the assumption that there is a “right” way to be, there are no “wrong” ways.

2. That being positive means you have overcome the inherent badness of autism

Accepting being autistic as a valid way to be, means that life (as a carer to an autistic child or children, or as an autistic person) is not automatically thought of as inherently negative, or as something needed to be overcome with “positive thinking.” As a parent to an autistic child or children, you don't lament who your child/ren are just because they are autistic. It's not something you need to “grieve” or “come to terms with.” Your own life has not been hampered or ruined by having autistic children. It's not an obstacle. It is just your life. You don't need to “overcome the negativity” if your life isn't negative to begin with.

3. That saying “autistic” is wrong, or damaging, or medical, or “labeling”

The idea of being concerned with labels (in the sense that the word “autistic” invokes upset); isn't there when you are a true believer in the neurodiversity paradigm. When it is genuinely believed that all neurologies are valid, there isn't a fear in saying them. When it is rejected that being autistic means there is something wrong, “autistic” is a neutral and descriptive word. When people mention “labeling” with concern; this is often because they believe that autism is something wrong, shameful, or problematic. A “heavy burden” to bear. Otherwise, why would they be so afraid of naming it? If we imagined refusing to say “gay” or “Aboriginal”, I think this demonstrates the reason why refusing to say “autistic” is considered unhelpful and an opposite of inclusive. When autistic people say so often (and almost unanimously) that knowing about autism is important to autistic people, this also stinks of ableism and of not listening to a minority group about their own lives. The

neurodiversity paradigm means that being autistic needn't be stigmatised or referred to in hushed voices.

4. That “Person First” is necessary

When it is deeply believed that being autistic is a valid and valuable way to live; there is no longer a need to separate autism from personhood (by insisting on saying “person with autism” as opposed to “autistic person”). Autism is not considered a disease, a disorder, a condition, something you “have.” It is not thought of as a growth that attaches itself; it is thought of as a major part of someone and who they are. Therefore, there is no need to isolate the word “autism” and treat it differently (linguistically and socially), to other markers or parts of identity. Being autistic, in a neurodiversity sense, is comparable to sexuality, nationality, or even eye colour. By rejecting that Person First language is necessary, we accept being autistic as acceptable and valid, and that autistic people don't need to be constantly reminded that they are people first. Likewise, those around them don't need to constantly be reminded that they are people first. We can instead see being autistic as naturally and automatically linked to being a person and to having human rights, just like with all people.

5. That autistic people need fixing

If we don't see being autistic as being broken, damaged, or faulty - what is there to fix? Seeing neurodiversity as an inclusive and worthy paradigm, means we are all free to be, free to live, and free from the burden of people (and sometimes,

eventually, ourselves) trying to fix us. Being autistic doesn't mean being broken, and autistic people don't need fixing.

6. That people who aren't autistic, are experts on autism

We have this pervasive pattern in our society- the autism “experts” who have the best-selling books, whose seminars are recommended by paediatricians and autism centres, who become therapists implementing “treatment”, who organise conferences, who run training programs so that medical, law enforcement, and teaching staff can learn about autism, or who promote diets and food theories- are not themselves autistic. This is tied to the assumption that being autistic means there is something wrong with you and so you need the “undamaged” people to explain it all. If we truly, as a society, respected autistic people for who they are, we would not feel it was acceptable to allow important decisions influencing them, to be made without their input (and in many cases, with ignoring, rejection, or mocking of their input). When we value autistics, we allow them to speak about their own lives and ideas without feeling the need to exert our superior non-Autistic viewpoints onto them. It's a simple concept really; that when you respect someone you let them speak for themselves, about themselves. That when a minority group is given basic respect, they are allowed a voice and are included in organisations and other things that affect them. If we wouldn't go to a man instead of a woman to learn about women's issues, and if we wouldn't go to a white person instead of an Indigenous person to learn about Indigenous issues - then why are we allowing non-Autistic people to dominate mainstream discussion about autism and autistic issues? When we respect autistic

people because we believe in the neurodiversity paradigm and the validity of their lives, we can seek them out for valuable information, and “expert” advice is more easily questioned.

7. That “where you are on the spectrum” determines whether you can benefit from acceptance, and whether it “applies”

If you accept autistic people, and if you exist within the neurodiversity paradigm; you don't feel that some people deserve more respect or acceptance than others. Especially not based upon level of support needs. If it is believed that only some autistic people deserve the right to be accepted for who they are, and that others *do* need to be fixed or *are* damaged - this is certainly not consistent with the neurodiversity paradigm. This is ableism. Neurodiversity is a counter paradigm to ableism. *The neurodiversity paradigm involves the radical notion that autistics are people*, and that they deserve to be recognised and treated as such. When the neurodiversity paradigm is embraced, it isn't believed that some people deserve this, or need this, more than others.

8. That doing “some good” is an excuse for doing a lot of bad

When organisations or people spew hateful rhetoric and dehumanise autistic people; a common counter-cry is something like “*But they did something good, once.*” I think this stems, as usual, from a base and innate lack of respect for autistic people. From the belief that there is a right way to be, and that being autistic isn't it. It's an assumption that we should be grateful for anything we get (even if we don't want it or make clear that it's actually unhelpful or harmful) and that being

dehumanised (when you're automatically assumed to be less than fully human), isn't worthy of complaint. In the belief that autistic people are valuable and worthy, just as non-Autistic people are, we can reject the idea that autistics don't know what they need. We can reject that they need to be dehumanised or ignored, to be helped. We can seek alternatives; respectful ones. We can see that “help” that is rejected by the group it's aimed at, isn't help at all. Basic respect for autistic people helps us to see through such instances of thinly veiled ableism.

9. That autistic children deserve, or cause, mistreatment

This is again tied to the belief that there is something gone wrong in an autistic person, resulting in their dehumanisation at many levels. Mainstream ideas would tell us that having an autistic child to care for results in problems because of the child. It's hard to cope, we hear. Families “living with autism” elicit pity. When we start to think about things from the perspective of autistic people (as well as, as we so often hear “putting yourself into the shoes” of carers); we can start to think of them as real people (who knew?!). We can stop hearing only the tragic stories from carers, and can see also the opinions and needs of autistic people. We can stop seeing abuse and mistreatment as “inevitable” due to “lack of services”, “lack of support”, “aggression”, and “lack of autism awareness.” Just as external factors do not excuse child abuse of allistic children; nor does it excuse abuse of autistic children. We can see that they deserve to have their needs met as much as the next person, irrespective of social conditions surrounding autism. The neurodiversity paradigm tells us that autistic children are valuable and deserve to have their needs met, and that they

always have been. If you are an autistic adult, the neurodiversity paradigm can show you that you deserved it, too.

10. That our children need to be grieved for

Surely all children deserve to be loved for who they are, and cared for by people who appreciate them in their entirety. The idea that we would grieve for our living, breathing, and loving children - is often an erroneous one for those who believe in the neurodiversity paradigm. This is because we do not believe that there is a “right” or a “default” way to be (we may recognise social structure that supports these beliefs but we still reject their validity), and so we do not see being autistic as an opposite or alternative to these concepts. We see our children as hugely valuable people in their own right. We don't see a “right” neurology, and “others”; we see any neurology as valid. We believe in this natural diversity of neurologies that is the neurodiversity paradigm.

You may end up rejecting a lot, if you take this path, but you will surely gain a lot more. I am so glad that I found the neurodiversity paradigm, and that as a result my children are embraced every day for precisely who they are.

Found. Accepted. Valued – Michelle Sutton

It's easy to feel scared for your kids when you realise they are autistic. Pretty much everywhere you look in the mainstream media, on parent written blogs and in books by professionals calling themselves "Autism Experts" someone is referring to your child as disordered, a tragedy, a burden, difficult, part of an epidemic, or a problem that needs fixing. Yes, it is easy to feel scared.

I felt scared.

I felt angry.

I distinctly remember my anger at the fact the diagnosis my daughter was given included the word "Disorder." It lasted for days. An intense anger that someone had labeled her in such a way when to me she is perfect just as she is. The Paediatrician must have sensed my discomfort, as he acknowledged it seemed a bit cruel. "You have to be cruel to be kind sometimes." But I just think cruel is cruel. And I was angry that society looked at the differences in my daughter as inherently bad and wrong.

Fear and anger.

And searching.

I went through the motions of doing all the "right things" and appearing like I was getting the "good therapy" for her. But while I was doing that, I was searching. My first stop was parenting groups, to see if I could find others who were as uncomfortable as I was. I found many who were uncomfortable.... but it was their children they were uncomfortable with, rather than what society thought of them.

And again, I was scared. How was I going to find people who understood how I felt? All these parents wanted to do was feel sorry for themselves and the lot they had been cast, and they wanted to do that in the company of other parents.

More searching.

And then I was found.

I accidentally ended up in an online group with people who were advocates for acceptance of neurodiversity. Oh what a word! I loved it immediately.

Neurodiversity. Perfect just the way you are, but not necessarily what is expected.

Neurodiversity. Accepted. Valued. Worth while.

I met Autistic people who helped me understand so much about my children, and who supported me in my learning. The things they said and ideas they shared gave me confidence to parent my children in ways that seem unconventional to many, but that support their needs and that accepts, values and respects their individuality.

Found.

Accepted.

Valued.

These were the gifts my new friends gave me. And by giving them to me they also gave them to my children. I am forever grateful.

SUPPORT

Wait... You Want Me to Do What? – Naomi Callaghan

I don't know if you are aware of this, but after you go through the palaver of getting an official autism diagnosis for your child, you are pretty much left to your own devices.

There is no “treatment plan,” there is no manual that says ok, now you need to go and do All The Things. The paediatrician we saw basically said “chelation is dangerous, diet stuff is crap, everything you do about this now is up to you, see ya in six months or so.” And that was it.

Honestly, I was surprised, but relieved too. It meant we were free to make up our own minds on what we were going to “do” about “this.” It meant that we had some time to do some research. Learn some stuff. Think hard about the most important part in all of this - our gorgeously awesome NinjaGirl - and what it was she really needed.

Assuming of course, that she needed anything at all.

And this is where we (once again) started to diverge from the norm.

Now the usual approach to receiving an autism diagnosis for your child is to listen to the rather long (and presumptuous) lists out there in the community of all the things your child will never be able to do, and then sign up for an arseload of therapies and interventions to try and stop that from happening. And why wouldn't you? You want the best for your child, right? For them to be happy, to be successful, to fit in with their friends and family? So why wouldn't you make sure you were doing everything you possibly could to make sure your child can do all the things you

wish for them?

So, you start making appointments with psychologists, because everyone knows autistic kids have issues, and need help. And then you make appointments with an occupational therapist, because everyone knows autistic kids have problems, and need help. And you make appointments with a speech pathologist, because the worst thing would be a kid who doesn't talk, and so autistic kids need All The Help, All The Time.

You might add some ABA therapies (behaviour modification stuff, basically), recommended at 20 - 40 hours each week. Perhaps some social therapies, so your autistic child will learn how to be social. Any medical appointments that may be required for any co-occurring issues that often accompany autism come on top of that. And before you know it, you are racing around from appointment to appointment, dragging one or more child with you, trying to make sure that you are doing everything *right* so that your child will have to suffer from their autism as little as possible. Because that is what every parent wants for their child, and to make that happen, well, you must do it like this, right?

Except, maybe... maybe all that is wrong.

Maybe what an autistic child needs is not to be subjected to therapies that are founded on a presumption of deficit and delay; that assume that autistic people are automatically failing simply by existing; that spend precious childhood days reinforcing in your child's mind that how they think, communicate, relate to people, connect, how they ARE, is somehow wrong, incorrect, and needing to be fixed.

Perhaps therapies and interventions that suggest that your autistic child needs to be cured of who they are, needs to have conformity as an ultimate goal and measure of success, perhaps these kinds of therapies are doing more harm than good.

Imagine that you find a particular physical task extremely uncomfortable. Trying to do it makes it hard for you to focus on what is happening around you. Maybe it hurts. Maybe it creates enough anxiety that you start to cry or yell. But instead of being supported in that by the people around you, you are instead expected to do it anyway, because that is what other people- people you don't know and who don't know you- expect you to be able to do because if you don't they feel uncomfortable. So, you spend time each day “practicing” something that hurts you. Now imagine that task is making eye contact.

Or perhaps imagine that you DO something that makes you feel good. When you are sad or uncomfortable, you do this thing, or a variety of things, and they calm you down so you can function again. Or you do this thing when you are happy or excited, and this is how you show it. Or perhaps these things you do help your brain tick over, just like when people are concentrating and they stick their tongue out a bit, or jiggle their leg, or when they meditate to music. Now imagine that other people, people you don't know and who don't know you, find it uncomfortable that you do these things, and so you are expected to stop, even though it means having a harder time expressing your feelings, or a harder time focusing on your interests. So you spend time each day learning not to do these things, learning to suppress who you are. Now imagine that the things you do are stims.

And now imagine that you are three, like NinjaGirl, you don't talk, which people expect you to do. You make lots of gorgeous loud noises, you babble, you laugh, you click and hoot and growl. You just don't make words. And so people assume you have nothing to say. That you can't communicate. Because you don't do something in the way they expect, or in a way that makes them comfortable.

Imagine how horrible it would be to have to deal with any of that. With all of it. With everything that you are, everything that you could be, discounted because it just doesn't fit with how other people expect you to be.

And imagine that you are put into a system based on therapies and research that are built on that very concept.

So it was no surprise that, when we looked into what therapies were being recommended and what interventions and support services are available, and then we listened to what the autistic advocacy community was saying, my first reaction was “wait... you want me to do what?!”

Because first things first, NinjaGirl is a person. And then a child. And there is nothing wrong with who or how she is, and there is no way we are going to seek support from anyone who thinks otherwise.

Life is All a Magic Window – Sophie’s Trains

There is a pervasive ideology in the mainstream autism parenting and education community that when it comes to autistic children, you have to *act fast*. That if we are to teach our children anything, we must hammer it into them before a magical developmental window slams closed forever, leaving our children permanently shut out.

This concept of the magic window started innocently enough when scientists began to observe the massive amount of learning that toddlers do, the type of brain growth and development that is never again replicated in our life and concluded (as scientists do) that naturally we must interfere with this process, by providing “stimulation” usually in the form of too-advanced and too-rigid activities such as overpriced contrasting rattles, various “educational” toys and videos named after famous physicists.

While this type of interference is largely benign (if annoying and unnecessary) for typical toddlers, whose development is not under a microscope and who don't have to constantly try to catch up to their neurotypical peers, the philosophy of “maximum stimulation in minimum time” can do a great deal of damage to the autistic child.

We live in a stimulating world. Every waking second our brain must process and filter sounds, smells, sensations, emotions, our environment, words spoken, directions given among countless other inputs. The typical brain does so, seemingly without much effort. However, an autistic child often has problems processing all the

stimuli, which feel like an onslaught to them and they will attempt to self-regulate either by withdrawing, performing a calming ritual such as lining up or sorting objects or self-soothing with a repetitive movement or sound. These actions are not wrong, they are their methods for finding calm and grounding themselves. If their cues are respected and they are allowed to soothe in this manner, the child will often return to the activity they were doing, recharged and calm.

The problems begin when their natural mechanisms are deemed “unproductive” or “inappropriate” and the child is forced to abandon them. The thinking is - why waste valuable time on a useless activity such as flicking a piece of string, when the child can do a more “appropriate” task, such as a puzzle? And if the child is fighting the puzzle, we'll just corner them, snatch the string away, firmly say “first puzzle, then string,” force them to make the puzzle by placing our hand over theirs, squirming and squealing as they may be, complete the puzzle to our satisfaction despite their protests, mark in the book “completed puzzle with assistance,” lavishly praise “good puzzle!” and begrudgingly offer them their string back. Score one for education.

This type of therapy is sadly not uncommon. The child might be 3 or 4, or they could be 2. It could be happening in their own home, where they will no longer feel safe. The self-soothing mechanism that worked well before now might trigger anxiety. The child might look at the piece of string in their hand, remember the incident with the puzzle, and suddenly feel afraid. Or mad. They might lash out, or meltdown. And have no way to find their calm again because their source of calm has

been tainted.

Any time I mention that I didn't feel intensive behavioural intervention was appropriate for Sophie I am met with the assumption that instead we are doing nothing (because there's only those two options apparently). I wonder what people mean by “nothing,” really? Unless you are keeping your child in a sensory-deprivation tank (if you are, you should stop), you are likely not doing nothing.

I think of my “method” as planting seeds. Seeds are small and might seem insignificant, but yet they eventually produce incredible things. Each morsel of knowledge or a skill I show or model for Sophie is a seed. I share it with her with the assumption that she's listening even if she appears not to be. I don't expect her to show me what she learned - I trust she is either processing it, retaining for future use, or not yet ready for this information. I expect that I will repeat it many times, in the same neutral but engaging tone. It's my pleasure to share it with her; my interest is not hindered by her lack of enthusiasm. Many seeds, over many months, with an expected long-germination time, planted with love.

Since Sophie has a lot of time to do with as she will and her self-regulation methods have never been interfered with, she has a calm and centred demeanor. She trusts us and we respect her. This is the foundation (or the fertile soil, if we're maintaining the seed metaphor) for learning. I might sit with her and model on her communication app or read a book. I might bring a toy or puzzle and try to draw her attention to it. I talk to her as I dress her and name the articles of clothing and body parts. I point out things on our walks and day trips. I whisper stories and songs as I

tuck her in at night. Little seeds, planted throughout the day.

She's learning and developing. She's gone through so many phases conventional wisdom would advise us to “nip in the bud” and “act fast before it becomes an unbreakable habit.” Instead we guided, waited, kept teaching... And they all passed, one by one. We never acted fast; we never punished or used behaviourist approaches. This child, who according to autism “specialists” can only understand operant conditioning and cause-and-effect type of teachings, is a calm, clever, and adaptable girl, who is a pleasure to be around. She's so keenly aware of her surroundings, it's like she possesses a sense we don't know about for always knowing what's going on.

And she learns, she's always learning. This week she started pointing. Just like that, one day - oh there it is. She's pointing to what she wants with her index finger like she's been doing it all her life. Nobody spent any time teaching it to her directly, although she must've observed it through many indirect situations.

Children learn at the speed they are able. Whether neurotypical or autistic, their minds seek stimulation and growth. Using neurotypical milestone charts on autistic children is counterproductive and potentially damaging. Don't be afraid of this phantom window experts have warned you about. Current studies all suggest that our brains develop and change right until old age. Life itself is a stimulating environment. Challenge, enrich, and fill with exciting ideas by all means! Plant as many seeds as you are able. Then step back and admire the garden of your child's mind begin to bloom. It might surprise you what comes up.

Losing My Way and Finding It Again – Meg Murray

From birth, Charles has been a self-possessed, fiercely independent child with a lively sense of curiosity and a strong attachment to his family. I've always seen so much of myself in him and still do. He slept in bed with me and my husband Calvin for his first two years and beyond, and I enjoyed taking him everywhere I went, frequently in a sling at my hip or carried on my back. I always felt that I intuitively understood what Charles needed. In the early days, I trusted my instincts and felt tuned in to my child.

As he entered toddlerhood, though, I worried more about whether I was doing a proper job of parenting. I read a lot of the dreaded milestone charts and began to constantly check his progress against them. I had my second son Sandy when Charles was two years old. When Charles was two and a half I was concerned enough about his speech to take him to our pediatrician and ask if we should be doing more. Charles knew a lot of words and found it quite easy to memorize things like colors and shapes, but I sensed there was still something different about his communication. I couldn't have described it at the time but he didn't have a lot of social language yet, verbal or non-verbal.

The doctor gave us a phone number for Early Intervention and said we could have them evaluate his speech for free. He floated the word autism past us within a list of other possible causes for speech delays. Around that time, a family member also suggested to us that we get Charles evaluated for autism, but not in a helpful or gentle way - quite the opposite. I bristled and thought to myself that Charles probably

was shying away from that person because he sensed their disapproval. But now the concept of Charles being autistic had been planted, and off to Google I went.

The scare tactics and anti-autism rhetoric that bombarded me when I went online to research were horrific. I experienced a lot of cognitive dissonance between what I was reading and what I knew in my heart about my son. I did not believe that any of his so-called behaviors were meaningless. I knew he was very attached to me and my husband and that he loved us. For a long time, I flip-flopped between thinking that this meant either Charles was not autistic, or that he was not the child I thought he was - maybe I was blinded by love?

For a long time, I could not see the third, true possibility, which was that Charles was autistic AND he was the child I knew and loved. I had careened off course and was wading through misinformation and outright lies about autism, not knowing any better. The things I was reading not only drove a wedge between me and my son, they also drove a wedge between me and my natural parenting instincts. I questioned everything that I felt was right and thought maybe these experts knew better.

We had Early Intervention come out to our home when Charles was almost three. He was not fooled into thinking that the evaluators were there to play. He ran from them and hid in his room. They decided he was just shy, but I knew that he was clever and canny and did not want to be tested. Their verdict was that his language skills were emerging and he did not need “services” (in that case, speech therapy). I was relieved and never wanted to do anything like that again, but eventually the

worries crept back in. I was still terribly out of touch with my own inner voice and doubted myself every single day. So, six months later, when Early Intervention followed up with us, we agreed to more testing.

As we marched Charles into an elementary school for a new round of tests that spring, my husband Calvin and I still didn't trust ourselves enough to tune out the "expert" advice. We had gone back and forth a thousand times on whether to just leave Charles be or keep seeking these evaluations. I was trying to stuff down the part of me that was silently screaming THIS IS WRONG! So many people had tried to reassure me with tales of how their kids' therapists were so wonderful, their kids loved speech therapy, and it had helped them so much. All of those parents had done this, why couldn't I? Why was I so full of dread?

The tests were stressful for all of us. We quit partway through because we hated to see Charles suffering through something that was supposedly helping him. We turned our backs on the experts and I did some more reading. I pushed past the people who were telling me there was something wrong with my child, and finally I found those other voices. The voices of autistic people saying over and over again that they wanted to be accepted, not fixed; loved, not treated; supported, not cured. I found those other parents who were not trying to change their autistic children, just as I had never truly wanted to change Charles. I found my way back to my inner compass. I found my way back to my beloved child.

Charles has just turned five. In the past year, I have learned a lot. About autism - that it's a neurological difference and not a disorder, disease, or defect - and about

my son. He's autistic, and he's definitely perfect just as he is. We took a lot of time off evaluations of any kind and just let him be for a while. In some ways I am glad that we took that time to just let him be a kid, because I know that if we had had him diagnosed with autism earlier when we were still so full of self-doubt, we would have been more likely to get roped into harmful therapies and treatments. In other ways, I'm sorry it has taken so long for us to seek an autism diagnosis, because we spent too much time hoping that Charles could "pass" for typical and not realizing how that harmed him and stressed him too much. For too long we feared "the label" of autism and its stigma, not fully understanding that an autistic child still walks through the world being autistic whether you call him that or not. We're ready now to embrace and celebrate a diagnosis, and move forward.

A Language Without Words – Sophie’s Trains

Speech delay is often one of the first noticed signs of autism. Young toddlers are diligently watched to make sure their speech is developing “as it should.” If it doesn't, parents are usually advised to put them in speech therapy so that they might “catch up.” Some do, some do to a certain extent and some don't at all and they are usually referred to as “non-speaking” or “severe.”

It is true that an atypically developing speech often signals an atypical brain. Being parents of a four-and-a-half-year-old girl who used to speak and now doesn't, we have spent a lot of time pondering why she doesn't speak anymore, how we can help her communicate and even what she could be thinking. I always felt that my quest to help her communicate was a worthy and imperative goal. I haven't abandoned this philosophy but have recently realized that like most everything with Sophie, it's not quite so simple.

When Sophie was a young toddler, she had a lot of words, in fact more than all her siblings did between 12-18 months. Interestingly (and in retrospect) most of the words she had were nouns. She used words to request things – “apple sauce”, “mango” or to name them – “hat”, “mama”, “every Thomas engine name.” She never used words to demand actions such as “go” or “give.” She did say “help” and “hi” and “bye.” All together she had about 50 words.

After she suddenly stopped speaking, and was subsequently diagnosed with autism, we went through a brief period of shock and mourning. Then we made our rounds of the funded therapists. Quickly I realized that if a child is even minimally

verbal therapy can implement many strategies and techniques to coax more words out. However, a child like Sophie who lost all her words, had no interest at all in the therapist or her toys and actually *fell asleep* in all therapy settings? There was not much the therapist could do with that. When we suggested (after two sessions) that perhaps we would let her mature a bit I think I saw a flicker of relief on the therapist's face.

I decided to take matters into my own hands. I researched and it seemed PECS (picture exchange communication) was the way to go at that point. Anybody I mentioned it to looked at Sophie in disbelief. They didn't think she was "ready." Somehow I felt she would connect pictures of objects and actual objects without an issue. When I made my first batch of pictures and was still sticking Velcro to them, she came up, grabbed the picture for orange, and handed it to me with an expectant expression. "She's a genius!" I thought. I imagined a thick binder of PECS for every occasion. Having card-exchange conversations about all topics under the sun.

A year later not much had changed. While she effortlessly picked up cards to request snacks, she showed no interest in even the most basic conversations. At that time, she had her first (and only) block of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), four hours a week of PECS-themed trials. She skated through the program achieving a 98 percent accuracy and reaching phase 4 of PECS. And yet... It didn't really change anything in our life other than giving us the knowledge she can find a picture of Skittles in page of PECS and hand it to us flawlessly without bending or chewing the card (because that is a critical part of successful communication).

A lot of her success hinged on providing highly motivating items (such as candy) and putting them just out of her reach so she could ask for them. Giving her a piece of candy upon her proper request, recording data and repeating the trial. While admittedly it was somewhat satisfying to see her grasp this concept and “perform” it had no significance in the grand scheme of our life. It was like a party trick, which while cute we had no intent of implementing. We don't dangle treats in front of our other kids' faces and make them beg for them and we weren't planning on doing it with her. We took our glowing report of her success and filed it under “things we won't be doing again.”

It was then I thought perhaps the issue was the PECS. I've been reading a lot about Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) on the iPad and thought a more complex system might motivate her to communicate. After much research, we chose the app “Speak for Yourself.” I read many success stories and thought this will be *it*. I never doubted Sophie was smart. I assumed the right communication system was the last piece of the puzzle that would unlock her for us. At first, it seemed I was right. While the app is complex and the icons small Sophie seemed to instantly understand the concept, tapping out 5-screen phrases within days “no I watch Thomas” was her longest utterance. “She IS a genius!” I thought again. I imagined us sitting on our couches texting back and forth on our apps. Finally, we will know what she's thinking, she'll let us into her brilliant mind we feel we only see the edges of.

Except... A year later again and again not much has changed. While we are implementing all strategies and both schools are on board with modelling words for

her throughout the day, Sophie's most used phrase is still “drink juice” (which was the very first phrase she said with her app). She sometimes glances noncommittally at what is being modelled but shows zero interest in exploring the app and no glee at having words literally at her fingertips.

And then one day as I was sitting in the kitchen and she walked in dragging her iPad, past the pictures of foods stuck on the pantry and I saw her look at me then throw her head up towards the box of granola bars sitting up on top of the pantry something clicked in my mind.

Communication is more than words.

She communicates with us everyday. Her glances, touches, and sounds are loaded with meaning. She shows us what she wants by herding us towards the item and placing our hand on it. If it's beyond her reach, she looks towards it. If she doesn't want something, she pushes it away or gives the slightest shake of her head. When she's content or thoughtful, she hums softly. When she's happy she squeals and giggles. When she's mad or frustrated, she mutters angrily (she's rarely angry though).

I'm a very verbal person. I think in words predominately. I write, I read, I can't watch TV without closed captioning. I wanted to give her all the words because they're so important to me and I couldn't imagine someone not wanting them. But after that day in the kitchen I realized that words might not be Sophie's first language. She will learn them I don't doubt, like many of us learned a second language. We won't stop offering her many means of communication and will keep modelling on

her app. It is our hope that she will learn the words to use when *she* wants to use them.

I thought I needed words to really know Sophie. That to know her was to know her thoughts, expressed in full sentences. I worried I wasn't getting the full picture of Sophie without words. That she was harbouring hidden ideas and desires she couldn't express. I thought that she is suffering, locked in her mind.

But then I reflected - for a supposedly suffering person she looks pretty darn happy. Maybe happiness really is a box of juice, a granola bar and Thomas on the iPad. Maybe other, more abstract thoughts are expressed in patterns, shapes, and sensations. Maybe she thinks in a way my brain can't even comprehend. And hopefully, one day she will learn my language of words and will tell me about it. But until then- I know her. I know her well.

Taking Back Their Childhood – Court Alice Thatcher

When my son was 6 months old, I knew he was autistic. I was absolutely certain of it. I really enjoyed watching him play and explore the world. He used to spin the rainbow stacking rings on their side and figured out just the right amount of pressure to get them to spin for long periods of time. We knew he was autistic, is autistic, and we weren't sad about it at all. It was just how he is made and we loved him as much as, if not more than ever.

When our son was about 2, it was recommended by his doctors that we seek out a formal autism diagnosis from the children's hospital in case he needed therapy or other services. I brought him in and we met with various doctors, a speech therapist, and occupational therapist, over the course of several days. They played with him and chatted with me at length. We reconvened and they told me they agreed that he is autistic. It was recommended that we put him in 40 hours of weekly ABA therapy as well as preschool. I had no idea what ABA was but 40 hours a week of anything structured for a child seemed very excessive.

I called the ABA place just to get the doctors off my back and began to research what it was. Someone from an ABA clinic came out to meet with my children and I. When she arrived, my son was happily playing with a whisk he carried everywhere with him. He was flipping the light switches on and off quickly and laughing. It was one of his favorite games. The therapist frowned and took out her notebook then began to write. She said to me, “We can get rid of that.” I was floored and quite honestly offended. I told her I didn't want to “get rid of” something

my child found fun that was hurting absolutely no one.

The more she spoke, the more I realized ABA would not be a good fit for us at all. I told her we were not interested in changing him or making him appear less autistic. She disagreed and said if we did 40 hours of ABA for the next few years, he could “lose his diagnosis.” At the time, the gravity of the ridiculousness of that statement didn't hit me. It made no sense but now I realize how downright ignorant and ableist of a belief it is.

Autistic people don't become non-autistic. I knew she meant she would attempt to suppress the things he did that make him different or stand out. This was not something we were interested in or cared about on any level. Quite the opposite actually. We strongly felt and feel his needs are best met by allowing him the freedom to play how he wants with whatever interests him. He needs to stim and have freedom of movement, not 40 hours of intensive therapy (even if it is under the guise of “play”).

Our son did some speech and occupational therapy. He also did private OT. Between him and his (not yet identified as autistic) siblings, we were going to 4-6 total therapy appointments a week. This included OT/speech and PT. It became exhausting quickly and left us few free days to just play and hang out in pajamas like the kids wanted to. Once my son began to walk at around age 27 months, the PT gave us the option of stopping, which we gladly took.

I felt like the appointments for therapy and doctors were making us all stressed out and that we were rushing around too much. Even though the therapy was fun and

play based, many days the kids did not want to leave the house and forcing them to go felt wrong. We gradually began to stop doing therapy. Our stress levels went down as our number of appointments went down. I felt strongly that the kids needed to be able to be kids and have tons of time for free play.

We were losing 4-5 hours a week to these appointments and I didn't think the therapy was necessary. I understand that some kids need speech or PT and am not saying no one should do therapy. I am saying I did not feel it was a good fit. I was opposed to so much therapy, but allowed myself to be pressured into believing that they needed to be in speech or OT.

I can look back now at the three years my son spent in weekly speech therapy and the 18 months since we stopped taking him, and say that I feel most of the changes in his expressive/receptive language were a result of time and maturity. If I had it to do over, I would not have sent him. I think children talk if and when they are ready, if ever. We do utilize AAC at home with my younger son who is non-speaking. Some autistic children will communicate in other ways, and these are just as valid and should be respected.

So now, six years after realizing our son is autistic and after his two siblings have also been identified as autistic, we are nearly therapy free and much happier for it. We do an OT consult for our son and are beginning quarterly speech consults for my younger son.

I think the pressure to do so much with and to our autistic children is dangerous. They are losing out on being kids, playing, and having fun. I used to think

if the therapy was play based and my kids liked the therapist, that it was kind of like playing anyway. I hear a lot about therapies that “build upon kids interests.” I saw with my own eyes a therapist who continually asked what my son's latest favorite movie or character was, and then used that to try to get my son to play certain games or do things. Sadly, it really ruined his love of that thing and he no longer wants any part of it.

These types of methods are viewed as fun and harmless, but I really believe we need to rethink that. If a child were not autistic, would we use their hobby as a means to try to get them to do certain things? If not, we need to stop thinking it is okay to use an autistic person's hobby or interest as a subtle attempt to gain favor and manipulate/fix/distinguish “autistic behaviors.”

Children need to be allowed to be children. They should not have to spend all day, every day in therapy. Children were born to move and to play. We used to shuttle to multiple appointments every week. It felt wrong but at the time I didn't trust myself enough to stand up and say, “No, OT/PT/speech every week is too much. My kids are stressed.” I finally did but in hindsight I wish we had never done it and regret the two years we spent racing around to 4-5 appointments a week for my older two children.

My younger son is 4 and has never been in therapy. Since he is autistic, there is a lot of pressure from doctors and the school system to hurry up and get him in “early intervention” and intensive therapy. I do not even like the term early intervention. It is inherently pathologizing and ableist. It implies autistic children's natural paths are

wrong and must be stopped and changed by others “intervening” in them.

We need to stop believing the lies we are peddled; that there is some mythical “window of opportunity” in which children must be taught all the things before it is too late. Children are always learning, changing, and growing. We are unschoolers and my children are always learning new and interesting things just going about their day. The fear mongering towards parents is dangerous and is costing children their childhood, a time that is precious and fleeting.

Now we spend our days outside playing, at the library, at the playground, watching TV, playing in the mud, exploring the community on our daily walks and doing whatever we feel like doing. I was wrong to do so much therapy during those early years. I wish I had trusted my own instincts. Children develop on their own path and in their own time. We can't and should not, force it. There is so much joy and peace in freedom. This is how we live now. We have taken back their childhood, and our autonomy.

10 Autism Interventions for Families That Support the Neurodiversity Paradigm - Briannon Lee

In most places, as soon as a child is identified as autistic, they are funneled straight in to early intervention therapies. Based on a medical model of disability, these therapies see autistic children as disordered, and aim to change autistic children so that they will play, communicate and move more like their “typically developing” peers.

In contrast, the neurodiversity paradigm views autism and other neurodivergence as a natural and valuable part of human diversity. There is not an “ideal” brain or correct style of neurocognitive functioning; all are valued. *There is not an ideal or correct way for children to play, communicate, and move; all are valued.*

If families, caregivers, and health professionals accept the neurodiversity paradigm, “autism early intervention” looks very different. *The target of intervention is not autistic children, but their social and physical environments.* Autistic children are supported in families and communities to develop as unique and valued human beings, without conforming to the developmental trajectory of their neurotypical peers.

1. Learn from autistic people

Learn as a family about autistic ways of being and autistic culture, neurodiversity, and disability. *Autistic people are the only experts on autism;* find us and our work. Don’t ask us to educate you, but listen and learn.

2. Tell your child they are autistic

Tell them now, tell them early. Talk about autism matter-of-factly. *Explore what being autistic means for them.* Teach your child about disability and how they are disabled by society. Build pride and an understanding of human rights from a young age.

3. Say NO to all things stressful and harmful

Say no - to quackery, to intensive normalising therapy, to excessive socialising, and to inappropriate school environments. Say no to anything that causes stress or harms their bodies. Say no to anything that will interfere with their ability to say No themselves in the future. *Model self-advocacy early.*

4. Slow down your life

Autistic children need time and space to develop in their own way at their own pace. Ideas about happy “productive” childhoods are based on neurotypical norms. Cut out all of the extra activities and socialising, and busyness of life. *Discover the pace that works for your children.* You might find that lots of downtime at home is vital for their healthy development.

5. Support and accommodate sensory needs

Observe your child closely, talk with them, and tune in to their sensory needs. *Meet their sensory needs creatively* (you don’t need to spend lots of money). *Defend and protect your child from sensory assaults.* Frame this as an accommodation they require as a child with disability, in the same way other children require ramps or interpreters.

6. Value your child's interests

There is no right way to play. *Special interests are good for autistic brains, and a natural way that autistic children learn and develop.* Don't use them as a "way in" for other learning, therapy, or change. Don't attempt to broaden their interests, or restrict access to special interests. Join in, learn about and share their interests; but also respect your child's wishes for time alone with their favourite things.

7. Respect stimming

Stimming (self-stimulatory behaviour) is like breathing for autistic children and adults. It feels good, helps us feel connected and focused. *It is harmful to interfere with children developing and enjoying their own stims.* Unless children are hurting themselves or others, respect their need to stim; never shame them or stop them. Stimming is beautiful!

8. Honour and support all communication

Don't overly focus on the development of verbal speech. Human communication is much more than speech, and many autistic people are non-speaking. *Honour and respond respectfully to all communication from your children.* Support your child to access communication supports such as symbol-based AAC, sign language, typing, or RPM so that they have access to alternative ways to communicate with family, friends and others.

9. Minimise therapy, increase accommodations, and supports

Intervene with therapy only for issues impacting health and wellbeing. A good question to ask: "Would my non-autistic children access this therapy?"

Focus your energy and advocacy efforts on accessing accommodations and support for your child to participate in family and community as they choose. Autistic children may require 1:1 support more often or at different times than other children. They also have a right to accommodations to enable inclusion in school and community.

10. Explore your own neurocognitive differences

Explore similarities between you and your child's sensory, cognitive, and social needs. *Accepting and valuing your own unique brain, goes a long way towards respecting and accommodating your children's needs.* Many autistic children have neurodivergent parents; exploring your differences might help you identify something really important about yourself.

ADVOCACY

Normalised, No Thanks – Amy Bean

Recently I was kicked off a Facebook biomedical page when I spoke up in response to a mother of an autistic child saying that people are talking about autism like it's a gift, when children with autism actually need to be normalised.

She actually said normalised.

The whole thing made me so angry, it was exhausting.

I know that autistic people are hurt by these things being said. That many avoid these types of pages. Some may even wonder why I would expect anything different from such a page. I know many autistic advocates take up the keyboard to call bullshit on these types of opinions. But it's exhausting. Almost pointless to talk to these types of people.

I was kicked off because I was not there to heal my son. That's true. I just occasionally like to lurk to remind myself that some children are subjected to a myriad of protocols, diets, supplements, and therapies because they are autistic. That some children are constantly monitored, measured, poked, prodded, tested, compared, and treated like a guinea pig.

I lurked because I needed reminding that this stuff really happens. This is happening to people. To children. And I don't want to get too comfortable in my bubble and forget that there are people that need to be challenged.

The parents were angry that I dare point out what was said was offensive. They were more offended by me daring to suggest that what was said hurts autistic children and adults. That autistic advocates have written plenty about being “normalised” and

maybe they should listen.

Many times, I have heard that autistic people's voices are often dismissed by parents of autistic children. This has always seem so bizarre to me.

But no, it seems they don't want to listen.

Not on a page that talked about which shots were magic for your child, which special doctor and supplements at hundreds of dollars were making Tommy talk.

The thing that has also struck me from this experience is how much I need to thank the autistic advocates.

Thank you. Thank you for battling and continuing to speak up for autistic rights. For continually educating me and others on autism and helping to support my son. Thank you for going up against so many people, entire organizations, and doing it with such heart.

Because it must hurt, day in and day out to see, hear and read that stuff. And you keep at it with strong words, truth, love, and the message of acceptance.

Don't Say Rainbows – Sophie's Trains

I am a rather quiet advocate. I don't often get into debates and generally avoid conflict (in real and online life). I usually have a pacifist or diplomatic approach. However, this doesn't mean that I don't hold strong opinions and sometimes I do get sucked into an argument when I just can't ignore ableist or ignorant comments any longer.

There are few misconceptions about autism acceptance and neurodiversity that consistently get repeated by parents of autistic children, to the point that people take them as fact. What follows are some myths I've been trying to deconstruct in the recent past.

People that preach autism acceptance believe it's all rainbows and unicorns

I can't believe I just typed the above sentence. It seems like a comical idea, doesn't it? And yet it is THE MOST used argument I've come across against the neurodiversity paradigm. Repeat after me - we do not think *anything* is rainbows or unicorns. We never say it, we never think it, we feel ridiculous even repeating it. What does that even mean?!

Autism acceptance is for the “quirky autistics”

We believe *everyone* should be accepted for who they are. Everyone. The more support someone requires, the more he/she benefits from an inclusive and accepting society.

If you accept your child as they are that means you don't try to teach them anything or don't treat any of their medical conditions

We teach our children anything/everything they are able to learn. We feed them, take them to the doctor, get them glasses, give them medicine and buy them clothes. And we accept them as they are.

Autistic advocates believe autism is a special gift

Well, some might. But most just believe it is a big part of who they are. And they are sick of being told that it is a horrible tragedy to be how they are. And are tired of listening to parents bemoaning how the life they wanted was stolen by autism. And most of all, they can't understand why they have to keep justifying that they should be entitled to feel proud of themselves, in spite of society constantly bombarding them with messages that the way they are is inherently wrong, an "epidemic" and a burden.

Autistic advocates "pick on" parents

A lot of parents (myself included) have never heard of the neurodiversity paradigm prior to having an autistic child. We are indoctrinated with the medical/pathological view of autism, and so much of what the advocates say might seem radical and hard to accept. It's hard to be challenged in our beliefs. It is hard to be confronted with our deeply held biases and prejudices. It is hard to be told that the method of therapy we have carefully chosen for our child was traumatizing for autistic adults who had it as children. That does not mean we are "picked on." It might mean that we need to listen more and argue less.

Autistics who can write are not like my child, he/she will never write or communicate meaningfully. What they say doesn't apply to our life

First of all *everyone* communicates. My daughter doesn't speak, but she communicates very well. She is four. She might not ever speak but we are building on her communication attempts, we are teaching her AAC and we honour any way she's able to express her needs and wants. I find what other autistics say, especially the non speaking ones very valid and enlightening for our journey.

I have a right to say how I feel, my feelings are my own, and expressing them is healthy

While that is true, there is a time and a place for expressing our “own real and personal feelings.” A public forum where many people of various neurologies are is not one of them. Just as you shouldn't speak in front of your child of how much you hate autism, you shouldn't go into a public page or blog and say the same. And on that note...

I love my child but hate autism and I have a right to feel this way!

Love is unconditional. There are no caveats, no “I love this part of you but not that part”, no “if you do this I'll stop loving you” and no “I'd love you more if you were different.” There's just love.

The best gifts a parent can bestow upon their child are self-esteem and acceptance. Is driving them to hating a significant part of themselves the way to achieve that?

Face The Truth: What You REALLY Mean When You Say “Low-Functioning”

– Morénike Giwa Onaiwu

I’m so freaking tired of people throwing around functioning labels. “High” functioning autism. “Low” functioning autism. “Moderately,” “mildly,” or “severely” affected by autism. Aside from the fact that these labels are arbitrary, divisive, imprecise, and inaccurate, they just don’t make sense. As someone (not me) brilliantly stated, “Low functioning means that your strengths are ignored; high functioning means that your deficits are ignored.”

There are several GREAT written pieces about functioning levels written by adult Autistics and by parent allies that discuss functioning labels far more eloquently than I, and I encourage you to read them. This is merely my small contribution on the subject.

And it’s going to get real up in here. Let’s stop already with the deceptive semantics and just deal with the truth: there IS no “low,” “moderate,” or “high” functioning autism. There just isn’t. Just as there is no Tooth Fairy. Just as parents placing money under their children’s pillows doesn’t magically make those parents transform into the Tooth Fairy, millions of parents and professionals using functioning labels doesn’t make those labels legitimate nor accurate.

Technically, there is not and never has been an actual diagnosis called “low-functioning autism” or “high-functioning autism.” There is and has never been an ICD code for either of those or for anything like them. Previously, under the DSM-IV TR, there was an ICD-9 for five Pervasive Developmental Disorders: Autistic

Disorder, Asperger Syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and Rhetts's Disorder.

Three of these once separate diagnoses have been merged since 2013 under the DSM 5, so there is now an ICD-10 code for a singular diagnosis, Autism Spectrum Disorder. Again, there is not and has never been anything other than these autism categories. Period.

“But my doctor said Timmy had low-functioning autism!” you cry. Yes, your doctor very well might have said that. That term, and similar ones have been tossed around for many years, but they're not an actual diagnosis. They are colloquial terms that doctors, parents, and other professionals' use for descriptive purposes similar to how some people in the African American community might be described by their complexion.

Just as the use of functioning levels is just as variable and inaccurate as that is, what's considered “light” or “dark” to one person is not necessarily the same way another person would characterize it. And just as there's no actual race called “high yellow” or “dark-skinned,” there's no “low-functioning” or “high-functioning” autism.

In discussions about treatment, about services, and about “cure,” the false dichotomy between the “levels” of autism is ever-present. The “high-functioning” people are supposedly “draining resources” needed for others – that's IF they're even accepted as truly being autistic and not just “quirky.” (Because of course they're “too high-functioning” to understand “what it's REALLY like” to be on the spectrum.)

And the “low-functioning” people are “suffering” and their families are supposedly “desperate” for “any” treatment that will help – be it compliance training, questionable biomed, or even the ever-elusive “cure” of the month being peddled by autism’s many snake-oil salesmen.

NO, I don’t think everyone on the spectrum is the same. YES, people present differently. That’s why it’s considered a “spectrum.” There is a phrase that some people use pretty frequently that describes this well: “If you’ve met one person with autism...you’ve met one person with autism.” Although in recent years that phrase has unfortunately been used unkindly by some autism parents as a dismissive tactic to silence adult Autistics who are “not like my child,” I think the phrase’s original intent before it was twisted by others was to acknowledge the heterogeneity of the autism spectrum.

At any rate, if people are honest with themselves, all “low-functioning” really means is someone who is both autistic AND has a lower score on IQ and/or adaptive living skills assessments. (Additionally, to some it likely also means an autistic person who is primarily nonspeaking.) In other words, “low-functioning” is the presence of an autism diagnosis and intellectual disability (and again, to some, also the characteristic of being a nonspeaking individual). These are the ONLY differences between those who are “low-functioning” and those who are high-functioning.” Nothing else.

I’m writing this because I was prompted by something I read this morning. For the umpteenth time, someone said that we “shouldn’t judge” someone who

wants a cure for their “low-functioning” child who was “suffering.”

Don’t get me wrong. I KNOW that co-occurring conditions such as epilepsy, depression, etc can exist. I am an autistic adult and I have co-occurring conditions.

So do my autistic kids. I begrudge NO ONE the right to address problematic symptoms of any type with the appropriate treatment. I am not anti- treatment; like most neurodiversity proponents, I think ethical, helpful treatments are of tremendous importance. That’s not the issue.

The issue is that the parents need to be honest with themselves and with everyone else; it is not the “autism” part that they want a “cure” for. What they want a cure for is how autism presents when there is also low IQ/intellectual disability. And again, since the so-called “high-functioning” autistics are supposedly “just quirky” and “not really disabled,” then the problem must be with the intellectual disability. So...what they really want is NOT to have a child who has an intellectual disability.

But no one will EVER say that explicitly because it’s not “politically correct” to say that they want a “cure” for intellectual disability. It would be considered discriminatory and disrespectful (as it should). So, even though that is what is MEANT, that is not what is actually said.

Unfortunately, no such “political correctness” exists for autism. With regard to autism, expressing a desire for a cure IS socially acceptable as well as common. It is not at all unusual to hear autism parents, autism professionals, and even well-known “charitable” autism organizations frequently and openly lamenting about how

difficult “dealing with autism” is; how much autism “costs; “how much those on the spectrum are “suffering” and how their families are as well; and how finding the cause and a cure is needed.

Then to illustrate the point, EVERY single symptom, characteristic, and/or behavior a person has then gets lumped under the category of “autism” even when few of the challenges the parents are concerned most about fall under the diagnostic criteria at all.

According to the DSM 5, autism (Autism Spectrum Disorder) is characterized by:

“Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts...” and

“Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, currently or by history...”

That is IT. Period.

It’s not epilepsy. It’s not gastro-intestinal distress. It’s not allergies, or anything else. Though it can exist alongside those things.

And it can (but does not necessarily have to) exist along with intellectual disability. With regard to intellectual disability, there are many people with it who have careers, spouses, and families. They have hobbies, interests, goals, talents, and friendships. They add to the diversity of our shared humanity. They may also have challenges. Some of these might be as a result of everyday life, some might be due to societal discrimination and stigma, and some might be due to their condition.

Challenges are not unique to the autism spectrum.

Many of the areas of concern that people have about challenges their autistic loved ones face can also be found in other groups, such as those with intellectual disability. Some people with intellectual disability might “wander.” They might hit themselves and others. They might have communication difficulties and therefore be unable to express pain or discomfort with speech (though they are likely expressing it in other means that others around them may be missing). They might have co-occurring health ailments. They might stim and rock frequently, or hum. They might be non-speaking.

And you know what? They should still exist. They are still human. They still have value. Period.

One of my children (who is non-autistic) has intellectual disability.

He should exist.

He is human.

He has value. TONS of it, actually. He is amazing.

I know **exactly** what you are talking about when you begrudge the existence of individuals who are “low-functioning” and that you want to “learn the causes” so you can “prevent” people from being born who are going to be “like that.” “Like that.” “That” meaning intellectually disabled. Like millions of people around the world.

Like my son.

You SAY it’s “the autism.” But then you go on to describe something very

much unlike autism, but very much like my child and other people who share his diagnosis of intellectual disability. The people you describe almost as if they are less than human because they are different from you. And that? That I have a huge, huge freaking problem with.

Stop basing the value of people's lives on minuscule things such as whether or not they speak, how "social" you think they are, their perceived intellect, or other characteristics.

Start looking at what REALLY matters about a person. Their heart. Their character. Who they truly are in totality. Focus on their strengths. Offer support. Offer love. Build them up. For God's sake. For your own sakes. For the sake of the youth, who are our future.

Please.

I Am Not a Hero – Michelle Sutton

Surely it is not only me who, upon revealing that I have neurodivergent family members, is told by well meaning listeners how heroic I am?

Wow. I don't know how you do it.

Good for you for supporting them so much.

You are amazing to put up with all of that.

I couldn't do what you do.

Well, I'm not sure exactly what it is people think I do, but I'm pretty sure they don't understand my life at all.

You see, I am raising two autistic children. One Bipolar young adult lives at home with us. One teen experiences severe anxiety. One of our autistic kids has significant sensory challenges.

And there is nothing heroic about me being their mother.

Do you want to know what I do?

I do what it takes.

Just like pretty much every parent I know.

I listen to them. I laugh with them. I cry with them.

We learn together what supports they need. I do everything in my power to ensure they receive those supports.

I stay up late and get up early.

I help them with their medications.

I take them to appointments.

I help them with their education.

I make mistakes every single day.

I worry about them. I pretend I am not worrying about them.

I love them.

I accept them.

I encourage them.

I guide them.

I hold their hands if they ask me to. But only for a while, because I know they can reach their goals on their own.

All I do is what it takes.

There is nothing more heroic about what I do as a parent than what any other parent does. If people think I am heroic, it is because they don't understand that.

They don't understand that it is just as easy to love an autistic child, as it is to love a non-autistic one.

They don't understand that parenting is hard, no matter who your child is.

They don't understand that different challenges are not automatically worse or harder.

They don't understand that all I am doing is what my kids need me to do.

I am supporter, encourager, nagger, organiser, advocate, researcher, teacher, student, driver, cook, cleaner, mentor, and mother.

But I am certainly not a hero.

Spoilt - Briannon Lee

Have you ever been told that you are spoiling your children? Said yes to an extra ice cream? Been quick to forgive or overlook a child's accident or mistake?

Twice this week, complete strangers have told me that my children are spoilt. They've told me in my children's presence. In a week where we have been sick, just moved house, and are not sleeping so well. My children are autistic and anxious, spirited and joyful, serious and intense, loud. They were sick and tired. We were doing what we needed to get through the days and nights: new toys, chocolate biscuits, and clothes-free days in front of the TV.

I think *spoil* is a horrid word when applied to people.

From the Oxford Dictionary - **Spoil**, verb

: Diminish or destroy the value or quality of

: Harm the character of (a child) by being too lenient or indulgent

I felt a surge of anger and defensiveness at such a negative word being used to describe my family. At the time, I was completely out of spoons and couldn't find the words to respond.

This is what I say to these strangers now...

My children are not milk, or ham. They will not spoil.

They will not be diminished by my love.

My love means that I accept them completely, their differences, their gifts, and their challenges.

They will not be harmed by my acceptance.

My acceptance of their differences means I parent differently. I parent thoughtfully, and with kindness.

They will not be destroyed by my kindness,

For in my family, we need kindness, and patience, when our days together are long and our nights restless.

I know my children. More than you, so quick to judge.

Every moment, every thought, every resource I have, is concerned with my children; observing, and worrying, and planning, and caring for them. Because of this I know with certainty:

My children cannot be diminished by love, harmed by acceptance, or destroyed by kindness.

My children are not milk, or ham. They will not spoil.

We Need All Sorts of Voices – Meg Murray

Recently a friend of mine wondered aloud on Facebook about whether he might sometimes be too forceful in his arguments for equal rights for LGBTQ people in the US. My friend, who is gay and engaged to be married, had read an article claiming that some gay activists alienate potential straight allies by being too politically correct, too argumentative, too aggressive, and so on.

This, of course, is a topic that is much discussed in and around various groups that advocate for the rights of minority populations - whether it's to do with equal marriage rights for gay people, the Black Lives Matter movement for racial justice, disability rights in general or autistic rights in particular. I don't wish to speak for the entire group of authors at Respectfully Connected, as each of us can do that for ourselves, but I can say that we have discussed this topic too as we brainstorm together online and write for the blog.

In person, I'm pretty reserved. In certain situations, I do like to make my opinions known, but as I loathe direct confrontation, I tend to phrase things carefully, in a gently persuasive way. Sometimes I am so soft as to merely suggest. If my audience seems completely opposed to my point of view, I won't speak at all. I assume I won't convince them, and will only feel panicky if we argue.

When I write, I'm more confident and opinionated. Of course, that's fairly common in the online arena. I'm pseudonymous, but even with only the sheerest of technological veils, most people tend to be more straightforward on the Internet than they are in the room with you, for better or for worse.

I tend to think that for members of groups who are systemically oppressed and silenced in any given culture, it's an invaluable resource to be able to let your stronger online voice ring out. These are often people who are censored all the time by the dominant culture; finally given a microphone, why should you censor yourself?

The article that my friend read criticized gay activists for policing "micro aggressions." It seems to me this discounts the pressure that builds up in people who face those micro aggressions on an almost daily basis throughout their entire lives. It's easy for the privileged straight person to imagine that they are the ONLY person who's ever asked a gay acquaintance an offensive question. It's harder for the gay person to pretend they haven't been inflicted with this question a thousand times.

And why should they, I wonder. It's almost nonsensical for a human being who is fighting for equality and justice to pretend that the oppression they are fighting does not exist, for politeness's sake.

Of course, I do understand that you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. And ultimately the message we are all preaching is positive: it's one of love, acceptance, equality, and justice. I know that many will not listen to a sermon that sounds too angry and makes them feel defensive. But in my opinion, the most effective activists, the greatest champions of justice, have known that you can, and must, speak both with love and with force.

Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that." He also said, "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the

oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.” These two statements are not contradictory, but complementary - the light of which he speaks is the light that the outspoken oppressed pour out into the darkness when they demand their freedom.

There is room in the autistic rights movement, and any other equal rights movement, for all sorts of voices. Some are poetic, some gentle, some aggressive, some angry. We need them all. In fact there may be no other community in which it is more crucial for us to be heard on our terms than in the autistic community - a group of people on whom so much of the burden of communication with the dominant (neurotypical) group is already placed.

I believe that the only “correct” way of speaking out against injustice is to do it with authenticity, whatever that means to the individual activist. To speak your personal truth in your own voice.

FREEDOM

On the Wild Path – Sophie’s Trains

I never thought of myself as radical. If anything I spent most of my life trying to somehow fit in, even when it seemed impossible. By fitting in, I really meant not sticking out. In my mind, it seemed that if I could achieve the latter, perhaps the former would follow suit. As the years went on, I became less concerned with fitting in (I conceded it was too lofty a goal) but remained in the background, desperately trying to at least not stick out.

That doesn't mean I went against my values. My moral compass was always very strong and I felt compelled to always do what I felt was right, no matter how unpopular. I just didn't talk about it... much.

When I had my older children that meant I was known as an “alternative” parent- breast feeding on demand, co-sleeping, carrying my kids because they didn't like the stroller. I listened to my children and “indulged” them which some would consider spoiling. I knew I was not very mainstream but living in a trendy big city, I wasn't alone either. Ours was a popular rebellion and quite widely known and even accepted. I wasn't fitting in with the mainstream, but not sticking too far out either. Sophie was the third child and born at home (I finally felt, the third time around strong enough to break this social taboo). She was a glorious baby, there's no two ways about it. Calm, open, gentle, and perpetually happy. Everyone who met her was taken in by her spell (they still are). We were a happy, not-mainstream, but not-too-radical family. And then all of a sudden, we had to cross the line, although we didn't realize it at the time.

Just before age two Sophie became violently ill and profoundly regressed. Her speech that was developing at an advanced rate was suddenly gone. Her interest in toys, people- gone. She became almost catatonic staring at Thomas the Tank Engine videos with unseeing eyes. We took her to the doctor of course because we were worried she was very ill with a degenerative or metabolic disorder. The next six months were a blur of tests and appointments (and the birth of my youngest son too).

At the end, we were given a diagnosis - autism and global developmental delay. We were handed a bulging folder of places to call and sent on our merry way with commiserating remarks. That is all. And thus, we found ourselves at a crossroads.

On one side was the well-paved road of autism Intervention. The road where you set up ALL the therapies, try ALL the supplements and hope against hope that with a proper combination of the above her autism vanishes or reduces in potency. Of course, in her case it was doubtful but better do “something” than nothing right? No alternatives were presented on this road. You are to travel the weary path, vent, and complain if you need to but keep trudging ahead because her future depends on it.

On the other side- well there was nothing I could see. It was a dark and wild path. There were no guidelines, no directions, and only the knowledge that it was not the first path. We started hesitantly down the well- paved path first. Met with some therapists. Researched some supplements. Quickly grew disenchanted.

The therapists' really had no idea what to do with Sophie (or us), we could see that. She was aloof, she was hard to motivate or engage, but she wasn't doing

anything *wrong*. Their whole “plan” hinged on behavioural modification or intervention- we kept stressing her behaviour was great. They looked down at this obviously very autistic child, calmly doing her thing and her parents saying she's fine, really just you know...autistic.

My gut instincts started letting themselves be known. Often it felt like screaming in my head when some expert was “explaining” Sophie's behaviour to me. Stimming. Obsessive. Repetitive. Withdrawn. Eye contact. It was wrong, they were wrong. I tried to see it all from her perspective. I didn't understand all her behaviour that is true. But just because I didn't understand, it didn't make it inappropriate. Instead of trying to intervene, eradicating it without understanding, I chose to go back to the crossroads. We will take the dark, uncharted road- and we will tame it, map it, make like peaceful explorers of foreign lands.

I went in with the assumption that she does things for a reason; even if isn't clear to me what it is. I decided to observe and learn first and intervene only when and if necessary. I avoided fear-based articles and carefully chose who I connected with in the autism online community. I sought out autistic writers and advocates to learn from and challenge prejudices I didn't realize I had. Above all, I placed the emphasis on our connection and establishing her trust.

Two and a half years after diagnosis, our relationship is blooming. We are in such perfect harmony; sometimes I catch myself forgetting she doesn't speak. She trusts us and seeks our help when she needs something. We presume competence that when she's expressing she's not interested in something, she really isn't, and we let

her be. Since we've never limited the way she comforts herself through chewing, flapping, or finding quiet places of refuge, she's very comfortable in her body and in her home. I hope she feels she's respected exactly as she is and genuinely likes us.

Our wild path doesn't seem so dark and scary anymore. In fact, it feels soft, green, and peaceful. We walk it with Sophie who is happy and free. And me - when I stopped trying not to stick out, I found a place where I truly fit in.

Should – Cat Walker

He should sleep by himself.

He should be medicated.

He should be in school.

He should eat more.

He should be in a social skills group.

He should spend less time on his iPad.

He should know how to play alone.

He should answer when spoken to.

He should stop nursing.

He should cry himself to sleep.

Over the short life of my son, these are some of the pieces of “advice” I've heard from people with good intentions. At times, I've been inundated with this well meaning “advice”, most of it going against my instincts to parent him in a respectful, connected manner. At times, I've felt the weight of this “advice”, nearly crushing me with its weight and the guilt of not doing the perceived “right thing” for my son.

My son's arrival into this world was anything but the peaceful, natural hospital birth I had prepared myself for. Our first night home, I tried to put him in the bassinet next to our bed to sleep. He cried. I picked him up, made sure he was fed and dry, tried again. He cried. I halfheartedly tried a few more times with the same results. Exhausted, and recovering from a cesarean section, we decided it was okay to bring him to bed with us that night. Unbeknownst to myself at the time, that first

night home was my initiation into the world of gentle parenting.

As my son grew, it became easier to figure out his needs. He wanted to be held constantly, which worked for me as I would pop him into a carrier and go about my day. He wasn't interested in solids when “they” said he should be and it made no sense to me to try and force food on a thriving baby who was an excellent nurser. My son would only sleep next to me so that just meant I got to nap or rest with him every day. Why fight it?

He has gotten older and I'm much more confident in my decisions on how to best parent him, to figure out what he needs at any given time. Perhaps more importantly for me, though, has been the ability to decipher his behavior and meet his needs accordingly. Some of that ill fated “advice” I'd received had been about him being “bad” and needing more discipline. Children are not born into this world being “bad.” Behavior is communication from a child, even more so from a child with a language delay. It would certainly be much easier to write my son's behavior off as him being “bad”; however, for me, some of the richest connections I have made with him have been through digging deep and meeting him where he is at. That, perhaps, is at the heart of gentle parenting.

In a Bubble – Amy Bean

Recently I have discovered we have been living in a bit of a bubble. A cocoon type of bubble; safe and warm. The bubble is where I don't feel I have to translate anything for anyone else and we, my family of four, can just be.

My son who is 4.5 was diagnosed with autism last year. Initially there was some shock and I cried for two weeks because I had no idea how I was going to “do” all the therapy “he needed.”

Fast forward, and I'm reveling in the discovery of my complex boy. My boy who is so joyous and good-natured.

In recent months, we have grown confident in our understanding of his sensory needs. This is key to a vibrant happy boy. And that means we are in a beautiful bubble.

We say “no” more often to things that we know will cause discomfort or he isn't going to enjoy.

We are allowing him his space and trusting that if he wants to listen to toy story audio books over and over again then that is what he needs.

We plan around his need for downtime so we have plenty of time to “stay home”, a request we hear regularly, and listen to respectfully.

We allow more screen time, which I never thought I would. If he wants to watch something, I'm not being so rigid. Because I see how it relaxes and recharges him.

We are listening to him more, we are making connections with his sensory

needs, and what helps him be at his best.

We are all far happier, calmer, and enjoying life by slowing down to his pace.

We are learning more about our own needs through this. I'm learning about my needs for downtime and to just be.

So for me being in this bubble is allowing us to give our son what he needs but in the bubble, I have found what I need.

He has taught me to slow down and given me a simple appreciation for just being.

He has reminded me that the most important voice in the conversation is the one belonging to the person the conversation is about.

Being Free: Why We Chose to Home School – Briannon Lee

This April 2, UN World Autism Awareness Day (Autism Acceptance Day in our family), an inexcusable abuse of the human rights of an autistic child broke in the news in Australia. It has been reported that a primary school purpose built a cage made of pool fencing for an autistic boy.

Frighteningly, parents and disability advocates have responded by saying this is not an isolated incident, that seclusion and restraint of students with disabilities is ubiquitous across Australian schools.

Since the news broke, I cannot stop imagining my son in that cage, in place of the other boy like him whose rights have been abused. My beautiful son is autistic, full of spirit and energy. Free.

My son is a child who would be at high risk of abuse from caregivers. He isn't interested in authority or following the crowd. His intrinsic motivation is high. He's overwhelmed by too many people, and their noises and smells. He's at ease when using his body to create movement and noise. This combination is ill suited for mainstream schooling with extended sitting times, teacher-directed learning and lesson plans set for a group rather than an individual. Where there are 25 noisy children in a classroom and a playground of 500 or more. Where he would be lucky to get 1:1 support for more than a few hours a week because he's able to communicate verbally and has a high IQ.

Sometimes when he's overloaded, my son reacts in ways that might be considered challenging. Although as his mum, I know it's usually because we've

missed his early attempts at communicating that he's overwhelmed and needs a break. In a busy classroom with no support, how could a teacher notice these subtle signs that even I fail to spot some days? And how then could a teacher with a classroom full of children, possibly support him gently through a stressful situation?

In a school setting, my son might just be that boy with a purpose built cage.

Or he might be the boy we met in a special education unit within a reputable local public school we visited. When we asked how they catered for twice exceptional children (gifted with a disability) they took us to see the boy who was gifted but couldn't cope in the classroom so spent all day reading advanced engineering textbooks on his own. My son would be that boy too, segregated from his peers.

He was that boy, actually. Twice he attended small, high quality early childhood programs with experienced educators and an inclusive philosophy. The first time, he spent all day following his Group Leader around, hysterical if she took a lunch break. After two months of “emotional days” (as the daycare described them), we removed him.

With pressure building to “socialise him” as he approached school age, we tried again, at a smaller centre, with only a single small class, three educators, and this time with a 1:1 funded support worker. Despite good intentions, therapist visits; endless meetings and support from us, the accommodations he needed to thrive were not provided. We didn't ask for much – to be excused from stressful “circle time”, to have frequent movement breaks, to access an iPad, and visual supports. He spent

much of his day with his aide in a small red tent, outside the classroom and away from the other children. So much for socialisation.

We pulled him from kindergarten after his psychologist asked if he had experienced a significant trauma there. He hadn't, in terms of typical traumatic events. But all of the signs in his body and his behaviour suggested he had.

The irony is that at the time, I had been researching for work the topic of toxic stress in young children. A concept formalised by the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, who say:

“The future of any society depends on its ability to foster the healthy development of the next generation. Extensive research on the biology of stress now shows that healthy development can be derailed by excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems in the body (especially the brain), with damaging effects on learning, behaviour, and health across the lifespan.”

I have no doubt my son was demonstrating symptoms of toxic stress.

The very environments that are stimulating and positive for many of his peers, activate and elevate my son's stress response systems in unhealthy ways. All the good intentions and inclusion support in the world, could not protect his body from the sensory assaults, confusion and stress of a kindergarten setting not able (or willing) to accommodate his needs. Once we recognised the signs, he stopped attending right away, and we spent the months following decompressing together.

I will not give my son PTSD for the sake of socialisation.

He will not go back to a formal educational institution unless he asks to.

When people ask me about his socialisation, I inform them about children in cages, “time out rooms”, “Special Ed” classrooms, and my little boy isolated in his little red tent.

When people ask me about his education, I tell them about a bright little boy who learns best through following his own interests, technology, and who does not learn sitting still in rooms full of children. I tell them of schools who could not see my son's potential, who could only see disability through a limiting, behaviour-focused lens.

When people ask me how I feel about the years ahead and homeschooling, or say they don't know how I do it, I describe the anxious feeling I used to have going to work knowing how stressed my child was in a small supportive kindergarten. I ask them to imagine how sick I would feel leaving him at school now, knowing he is in the care of a system that constantly abuses and fails our children; especially spirited and easily overwhelmed children like mine who are at high risk of restrictive practices.

Having him home with me free to move, vocalise, and learn in a way that suits him, is no sacrifice, or challenge on my part compared with the worry I would feel and the stress he would experience in our local public school.

When people ask if I believe in inclusion and mainstreaming in education, I say “Yes. Yes. Yes. Of course.” But my child does not have time to wait for a system to be resourced, for teachers to have more training, for schools to focus more on children's wellbeing and development than on the results of standardised testing, and

for society to stop turning a blind eye to the abuse of our most vulnerable children.

My son cannot wait because he is busy being free, not caged. Exploring, not escaping. Learning, not being taught. Discovering his gifts, not being limited by people's perception of disability. Being loved in his circle of family and friends, not isolated in the name of socialisation.

He is free. As all children have a right to be.

Culture Shock – Amy Bean

Not long ago I was battling anger, frustration, and sadness at being on the outer. I was exasperated that people can't just accept my family, our choices, and our life as being different. I have been insulted by other people's need to question our lives, when I don't question theirs.

The reason why, is that I was hurt, angry and tired of having the same conversations over and over again. Explaining the same things and justifying our choices.

I just want people to accept us.

Our choices.

Us.

I want them to understand that all decisions made in our house are made to help us be the best, happiest family we can be. I want them to just say, "That's great, I'm glad you have found something that works for you."

Have you ever felt like you just don't fit in? Because your family is different to most; not the norm, the majority and the mainstream?

I feel like my entire parenting experience I have always been on the outer. The co-sleeping, breastfeeding, respectful parenting meant it wasn't always easy to find like-minded people.

Believing in neurodiversity and acceptance for our autistic child, so that we can support him to develop his best self, has been met with a lot of surprise.

Choosing to unschool, after two attempts at kinder failed our autistic child, has

been the thing that has been met with the most shock. And questioning. And emailing. And concern. And interference. Suggestions of other schooling ideas. Encouraging us to look at special schools. It hurt, the lack of support.

We made the decision to homeschool and we are happy with it. We feel it is right. But people still try pushing us to do something other than what we were doing.

Nothing has made the decision harder than having people not see that we have made a decision based on our experiences, knowledge of our child, looking at the options, and collating all that to make our choice.

For us;

Our family.

We want our child to be comfortable, to flourish, to learn in an environment that nurtures him. No one ever asks about why we choose to do that. The focus is on socialising, is it legal, will they ever go to school, how will I cope without kids at school, why don't we look at a special school? It goes on and on.

No one cares about all the research we have done. They don't ask about why we don't believe mainstream school is for our child, what our experiences have been, or why we don't believe special schools are an option.

I have realised to stop being angry I have to look at what triggers my anger. Its core was the lack of acceptance from my family. People questioning and not supporting our choices angered me because I wanted the support and acceptance. I couldn't continue being so hurt and having my confidence shattered. I was scared of taking this big leap and people's questions were rocking my belief in what we are

doing, even though I know the alternatives aren't right.

Once I started to see my reasons for my anger, address my fears and soothe myself I rebuilt my confidence.

Then I needed to start looking at how people react or respond to things I do that aren't the norm and develop an understanding that allowed me not to be constantly defensive. I had to look at people's reactions from a different perspective. Why are people so? Because it's not their reality. And I realised it's a type of culture shock.

We all live our own lives and it can be so surprising looking at how others do things.

The culture at home can be vastly different, and when we see that, it can be a culture shock. We can be surprised and think, "How do they do that?" It's this type of culture shock I feel like I experience with other people. And at the moment framing people's reactions this way helps me with feeling so misunderstood. It helps me react in a kinder, more self-assured way.

"Yeah, we do things differently at my place, but I wouldn't have it any other way."

Possibilities – Ally Grace

I am a mama in an unschooling family. If you haven't heard of unschooling or don't really know what it is, I will briefly describe the philosophy and base beliefs behind it.

Unschooling believes that with an opportune and rich environment, and with involved and loving parents (or other caregivers), children will thrive and learn what they need to. It proposes that children learn best, and most happily and readily, from real life, and from play and enjoyment. Not from imposed curriculum or lessons put upon them. It is, in essence, the radical trusting of children.

None of my four children have ever been to school. I don't give them lessons. I don't force them to learn things. I don't make them read/write/count/anything else, by any certain age. I don't impose common education beliefs upon them. If this is sounding unusual, I suppose that's because it is. It is not the norm by any means. But it isn't new either, and there are many adults who were unschooled as children, living in their communities and going about their lives as we speak.

The ideas behind unschooling also flow into all areas of living. In an unschooling home, living and learning are intertwined, and they intermingle, and blur into one another.

My children, as well as being free from forced and coerced learning, are also free from punishments, rostered chores, rewards and praise, and other things used to “train” children.

Because, as I wrote earlier, unschooling is essentially the radical trusting of

children.

I don't wish to alienate anyone in explaining unschooling. The ideas behind it can apply to anyone who wishes to challenge the way we routinely and habitually think about, and treat, children. I feel that many of us can benefit from challenging personal assumptions, whether we unschool our children (or whether we even have children), or not.

I would like to now explain that my children are autistic. Through our unschooling journey, and with the full acceptance of our children as valid and worthy just as they are (we have never attempted to “cure” our children, nor do we think in terms of “healing” or “getting better” - our children are autistic and this is not a problem), we have seen some amazing things from them. We have enjoyed a lot of happiness as a family too.

I am not a researcher by trade. I don't have any university qualifications in a scientific field. No one has come and “studied” my family. But what we have going on is something notable and unusual.

While autism researchers and experts continue to claim things like;

“Autistic children NEED strict routine.”

“Autistic children don't know how to learn. We must teach them, through therapy, how to learn”

“Autistic children need to be pushed out of their comfort zones.”

“Autistic children will fixate on a “special interest” to an unhealthy level.”

“Autistic children are not capable of self-regulating.”

“Autistic children are scared of the world.”

“Early Intervention is essential.”

“Autistic children don't connect cause and effect.”

“Autistic children need to be punished to understand things. Consequences are vital.”

We are living an entirely different reality. And in it, those statements are wrong.

I would like to invite the consideration that what we know (or think we know) about autism - can be challenged. I would like to invite the idea that *all* of what we know about autism could be challenged. We are not the only family living this way, and there will be many more after mine.

I propose the possibility that, while we continue to force autistic people to jump through our hoops; while we continue to induce high anxiety in autistic people by trying to push them into certain scenarios; while we continue placing them into schools and therapy centres that are, by their very nature and structure, inappropriate for autistic people; while we continue using a non-autistic yardstick as a measure of success; while we continue to draw big conclusions based on outer markers over inner being; while we continue to allow non-autistic people to make important judgments and start research projects and write diagnostic criteria and design treatment models based upon neurotypical neurology; while we continue to allow non-autistic people to stigmatise and stereotype being autistic; while we continue to believe that being autistic means that there is something “wrong” with you - we have

no real idea what autistic people are capable of. And not just that, we cannot even know what it would be like if autistic people were just allowed to be happy and to have their basic emotional and comfort needs met. If they were free from marginalisation in all areas of the community. We just cannot know. How could we? How can we claim to know what the world could be like for autistic people, when we have done such a poor job up to present? It is both far-fetched and misleading, to base so much upon the conditions and paradigms that exist as they do, and for as long as they have. And yet, this is the current state of autism “expertise”, autism research, and collective autism knowledge.

I believe strongly in re-thinking what we assume about being autistic. Because we just don't have a good basis of knowledge, and we don't often ask the truly challenging questions. I imagine a world of radical trust of our autistic children, and I know we are capable of moving closer to that. I don't know what would happen if we did so, but I do know that things would be different.

FAMILY

Walking the Path – Naomi Callaghan

We share so much, you and I.
Genes, hair colour, the need to touch.
We both love to snuggle –
Sometimes alone, sometimes whomever is closest.

We share a love of the water.
Your inquisitiveness and curious mind matches mine.
We have the same skin,
Although yours is browned by the sun.

We share a desire to flap.
A need to let our bodies talk with us, sometimes for us.
We love to sing and dance –
Me in private, you not caring who sees.

We share so much.
And we walk the same path.
But your footprints are yours alone,
And mine are the only ones I can claim.

The Eye of the Cyclone – Briannon Lee

What is it like being a family of neurodivergent people? This is my experience...

It's not all sunshine and rainbows.

No.

Some days we crash and clash
bang and bash
Together
A cacophony of sound and movement. Soothing,
for some
overwhelming.

Restless nights and
tired too-busy days.
Without naps.

Things that bring joy
constantly encroached on
by another's needs.
Equally important.

Everything's half done. Underdone,
Overdone.

We don't go gently. Although,
at least one of us does, sometimes.

We're cyclonic.

But we're moving in the same direction.
And usually we find our way to the eye of the cyclone,
often together.
And then,

It is sunshine and rainbows
Unapologetically.

Actual beautiful Sunshine,
and mud, on skin.

Cacophony-cancelling earmuffs

AAC

and iPads with Disney movies,
on Repeat.

Dark

quiet rooms

Patterns and categories,
and boxes.

With labels.

Impromptu toy shop visits to collect
another toy we must
collect.

Knowing what makes each of us happy
Their favourite this or that.
Bringing it to them.

So many hugs and kisses.

Squishes.

Wrestles on the bed in piles of clothes

Laughing

Staying home all day

To play

To rest

Family Moments

stretching out across sunrises and sunsets.

Until one day, when my Final Sunset comes, And the cyclonic days will be
remembered.

Yet,

I suspect,

*The glorious, divine moments of
Together*

in the eye of the cyclone, will be

Our story.

Child of Mine - Morénike Giwa Onaiwu

Child of mine, I see you.

I see you.

How much you love and accept your neurodivergent family members - without conditions.

How you flap along with your younger siblings even though flapping doesn't come naturally to you, because you want to share in their joy.

How you willingly partake in scripts because you know it brings comfort to him when you do so.

How you avoid entering and exiting a certain door of the vehicle because it causes him stress.

How you count out seven squares when giving her toilet tissue because you know that's how many she needs.

How you've memorized nearly every song by the Laurie Berkner band and on the "Just Dance" games because they get such heavy rotation.

How you only pour the water to a certain line in the cup because that's what they like.

How you try to make things more comfortable for them when meltdowns occur, and how much it pains you to see him hurting.

How much you love and accept them.

How much your sweet, wonderful friends love and accept them too (awesome kids they are).

How you say with pride, “My mom, brother, and sister are autistic. They don't “have autism.” They are autistic.”

How you jokingly say, “I'm half autistic too, because of being raised around it. It's all I know.” And then you smile - that beautiful, pure, knowing smile.

Child of mine, people like you will change our world.

And I couldn't love you more.

Not just for that, but for being who you are.

Our Little Neurodivergent Family – Meg Murry

I think of ours as a mixed family - two members probably neurotypical, two autistic. Within our family of four is a mixed marriage - my husband Calvin being the neurotypical one and me being the autistic - and a mixed set of siblings - my older son Charles autistic and my younger son Sandy very likely not. These configurations have their challenges, as you might expect, but also a lot of benefits for all of us.

I've always been drawn to friends and romantic partners who possess the social skills and confidence that I lack - it's comfortable for me to take a supporting role in relationships and in social situations. I didn't fully appreciate it until I realized I was autistic, but my gregarious friends have also probably always been role models that I could keep close and learn from - watching what they do so I know what to do, following their leads, listening to the things they say and when they say them so that I can file away some useful social scripts. I wasn't consciously picking out such people as social mentors, but I think that I subconsciously sought them out to teach and sometimes shield me in situations that were difficult for me to navigate alone.

My husband Calvin has been this sort of mentor to me, except that not only can I follow his lead, I can also rehash social situations with him after the fact, venting about the things that were difficult for me, and getting his point of view and sometimes advice on what I should do when I have conflicts with other people. We're different in a lot of ways, but in many others, we are similar, and we agree on most things in life.

In a lot of the ordinary responsibilities of having a family together, we are able to divide chores and duties in ways that suit each of us and help me to not get terribly overwhelmed. I'm a homebody, so I don't mind doing most of the cleaning and cooking and boring organizational stuff like filing our taxes. He likes to drive and is better at handling what I think of as things-in-motion, so he runs most of the errands, does most of the shopping, takes care of the daily financial situation.

The main challenge that our differing neurologies present is that he can't relate to my sensory processing difficulties. He doesn't know what it's like to deal with overload, and so when I am overloaded he tends to perceive me as just being cranky. He doesn't quite understand that sensory input physically fatigues me, so sometimes tells me I just need to get more sleep, when all I really need is an hour or two alone to recover. It's hard to explain to him that although I love staying home with the kids and enjoy his company too, being with them takes something out of me that only alone time can restore.

When Sandy was born, Charles was only two years old. For the first two years, I wasn't sure they would ever be friends, but I hoped at least they would learn to peacefully coexist. But after Sandy turned two and began to talk quite a lot and run and jump and play, Charles saw him with new affection. In the last several months, they've become the best of friends - still fighting sometimes, as brothers do, but they play together a lot and clearly love each other. Charles understands his little brother's funny toddler accent even better than I do sometimes, and I think that Sandy has

taught him a lot more social language and gestures than I ever could. They're learning to settle their own disagreements and solve problems together.

Sandy looks up to Charles and wants to imitate everything he does - and for the most part, Charles enjoys that. He thinks it's hilarious when Sandy repeats after him and copies his movements. They are physically affectionate toward each other, roughhousing and cuddling in equal measure. They are different in a lot of ways - Sandy is super social and talks to other people almost constantly, while Charles is pretty introverted and retreats into his own head a lot - but for the most part they complement each other more than they clash.

Where they do run into trouble, tends to be that Charles needs to control his environment a lot, and that sometimes leaves Sandy without a lot of say in the matter. Meanwhile, Sandy is very talkative, and Charles sometimes just needs to get away from him. Calvin and I do our best to help both of them work things out without "taking sides" or creating a winner and a loser in their conflicts. Usually there is a way for everyone to be heard and satisfied.

Sometimes when parents of autistic children read about the chances for those children to grow up and have healthy relationships - get married, have their own children - they run into discouraging statistics or narratives that emphasize the problems their children might face. But I would tell those parents that, to the extent that your children someday grow up and want partners or families - not everyone does, and that's totally fine - their potential for happiness is great. Our children are autistic pioneers - they won't suffer the shame and the pressure to deny their true

selves that previous generations of autistic people have endured. They can be aware of the ways they are different, sensitive to the areas where they need support, and know that they are worthy of love. Our little mixed family makes it work by respecting everyone's differing needs, and that's something our children can take with them into adulthood.

More Than One Way to Eat Salad - Michelle Sutton

I made salad for dinner. When I say this, I use the phrase loosely, and fully expect that many of you will conjure up a mental image that is completely different than what I actually prepared.

At our house, salad refers to a selection of vegetables, sometimes raw sometimes cooked, sometimes cut up sometimes not, put on a cutting board and left on the bench for people to select what they would like to eat.

The reason we do salad this way is that we all like different things in our salad, and some of us really don't want any trace of the things we don't want to eat to be on the things we do want to eat. Some of us like salad dressing, some of us don't. Some of us like onion; some of us are allergic to it. Some of us love avocado, others of us gag if anything we put in our mouth has ever even slightly touched an avocado.

It's not just a food preference thing, either. Your idea of eating salad for dinner is likely different than what happens at our house too. When I was a kid, dinner was always eaten sitting around the dining table, together as a family. In my house now, dinner is provided in the kitchen, every one is told there is food, and then each person comes when they are ready, serves their own meal, and takes it to eat where they want to eat it. Often there are a few of us around the dining table, sometimes people wander outside to eat, sometimes people choose to take their meal to their bedroom and eat alone.

There was a time when this would have upset me. I used to have ideas about family time, and the necessity of routine and memory making and strategies for

communication. It doesn't now though. I have learned there is more than one way to get things done. No one way is inherently better than another. Here, we just do what works for us, and for our kids, and we learn as we go how to support each other.

Looking at the way we prepare and eat salad here is just the start of identifying the things we do to manage the challenges we live with and the ways we support each other.

There is more than one way to play.

There is more than one way to do bedtime.

There is more than one way to get chores done.

There is more than one way to financially support a family.

There is more than one way to do education.

There is more than one way to eat salad.

Outside the Lines – Naomi Callaghan

We're a neurodiverse family. The neurotypicals outnumber the neurodivergents, but we make up for it with sheer awesomeness and savage wit. I have to admit though, even the neurotypicals in this household are oddballs, so our quirk level runs high.

Our life looks a bit different from the outside too. I often don't realise how different it is until I look at other families. We've made choices that reflect our own personal ethics and beliefs, but also had to make compromises that are based more on the functionality both of individuals and the family as a whole.

Some of it is alternative but not that unusual. We co-sleep, with both our son (The Lad) and our youngest (NinjaGirl). Eldest has her own room when she comes to visit, but on stormy nights, she's been known to snuggle in with us too. The bed gets crowded and wriggly at times, but it suits us for a variety of reasons - warmer in winter, The Lad has nightmares at times and gets a bit anxious in the dark, and NinjaGirl has a very high snuggle requirement, often resulting in her sleeping with an arm around my neck and a leg chucked over my hip. We've thought about starting to shift the kids to their own beds, but frankly, my partner and I would miss the snuggles, and they aren't inclined to go. So we maintain the status quo.

We babywear, even now. Not a huge amount, certainly not as much as when the kids were actually babies. But NinjaGirl is a houdini bolter, which means she is either in a carrier on my back if I'm flying solo with more than one child, or we have one adult for her and one adult for everyone else. The kid is seriously fast, and loves

to explore. Wearing her lets her see what is going on and provides the intense body contact she loves. As bouncy as she might be running free, when she is up in the carrier, she snuggles right in and calms down fast. If I'm honest, it soothes me too, having her so close. NinjaGirl will be 5 in a few weeks, so really I should say we kidwear.

We don't have set bedtimes, and have found that everyone tends to put themselves to bed whenever they are ready. Sometimes that is 7.30pm, sometimes it is 9.30pm. Usually The Lad or NinjaGirl will simply come grab a parent and request some snuggles while they go to sleep. Of course, there are times when one of them is still roaming the house at 10pm and we are seriously wanting to go to bed ourselves, but that happens in every family.

We homebirth. For lots of reasons - safety, privacy, my sensory/stranger stuff. Both the small kidlets were born about 1 meter from where I'm typing this right now. We did a lot of research into it, hired a midwife, and went with the flow. Boringly normal. Once we had checked out all the birthy side of things, the deciding factor for me was the control of space and the privacy. I have strong anxiety stuff, and very strong personal space stuff, which means I need to know who is going to be around me, especially when I'm feeling vulnerable. And birth is a prime time for a woman to be feeling vulnerable. I was in control of who touched me, who could see me, what was done. I was in a familiar place where I knew where everything was, where I felt safe and comfortable. I had people with me I trusted, who knew my quirks and respected them, who respected my bodily autonomy.

And we have both parents at home. This is the biggie, really. This is the bit I get nervous about talking about, because we also don't work outside the home. People get pretty judgmental about that stuff. Yep, we're a welfare family. And it is sort-of-not-really by choice.

A combination of sleep issues for NinjaGirl, and anxiety/sensory processing stuff for me means that for our family to function, we need one operational parent here every day. That makes holding down a job with regular hours pretty much impossible for either adult. Bosses don't look kindly on someone who needs to take multiple days off work each fortnight because the other parent is so sleep deprived they can't function. So, we receive government assistance as our income. We're hoping this won't always be the case, but we are grateful that we have help while we need it. It also means we need to budget carefully, and we go without some things that many people see as normal or necessary.

We homeschool. Mainly for educational reasons, but also for the flexibility both day to day and over the year.

We live a fairly quiet, slow life. Sometimes balancing the social needs of everyone else with my hermit needs is tricky, and we've all had to compromise, but as long as we don't overload the social calendar, it tends to work out.

We cook mainly from scratch (which helps with the budgeting as well as The Lad's sugary carb addiction).

We garden, keep chooks, I sew. I crochet a lot, which I love in its own right but also works as a stim for me. The whole sustainable living thing is something that fits well with what we need and reflects our personal ethics.

We split the household work between both adults. I'm one of those angry feminists (lol) and my partner is a grown human, so this would happen anyway, but it becomes even more important when one of us is out of action due either to sleep deprivation or sensory stuff.

It seems really normal to me. It's taken quite a while for me to be ok with accepting that this kind of life, while not really stacking up on the measure of "success" we're told we should be aiming for, is actually good for us. We've made sacrifices that are in line with our ethics, and we try hard to be responsible with what we have and what we have been given. Not everyone would want this. Not everyone would be happy with this, nor would it suit their family's needs. But it is good to know that making choices that are outside the usual lines is ok. It is good to hear from families that are finding ways to make respectful accommodations, who are ok with accepting their differences instead of hiding them. And I hope that we will hear from more and more of them.

ACCEPTANCE

The Antidote to Grief – Court Alice Thatcher

What if the antidote to grief was acceptance? I believe it is. My three children are all autistic. My husband and I are not sad about it. I did not grieve at any of their diagnoses. We already knew and autism was so intertwined with our daily life that there was no devastation whatsoever upon hearing the diagnosis.

For years I kept quiet about my lack of grief because everywhere I looked I saw advice to parents of newly diagnosed children that always included “Allow yourself time to grieve.” This didn't make any sense to me, it still doesn't. I didn't lose anything. My children's lives and dreams were always their own. I never sat around thinking what college they would go to or what things they would do to impress me or make them worthy of my love. They don't owe me anything. I wanted to become a parent. They didn't ask to be born and are not under any obligation to perform for me on any level. I am honored just being their parent.

Autism is not something that “happens” to anyone's family. Even if you love your child more than your own life, saying you love them but you would take away their autism in a heartbeat, means there are strings to that love. When someone is autistic, it is completely woven into one's personality. Autism means our brains function differently and it is just a different neurology, not a disease, or a disorder. No one wants to see someone they care about struggling but demonizing autism doesn't help your children or autistic people.

So yes, support and help autistic children and adults. First and foremost, this means total acceptance and listening to autistic advocates. It may look like helping

your child communicate via AAC and to ensure their sensory needs are met. Treat neurodivergent loved ones with the same compassion and respect you would give to anyone you cared for.

When you grieve and feel like they are broken, even if it isn't said out loud to them, they will know. Growing up I felt defective and like I didn't belong anywhere. I didn't know I was autistic until I was an adult. Had I been given unconditional acceptance as a child, I would not have struggled nearly as much.

If my older son A. wasn't autistic, I would miss out on seeing the indescribable bliss he gets from spinning the kitchen whisk in a circle. I wouldn't be able to see him flap and absolutely quiver with joy watching the same 30 second Curious George scene for the thousandth time. I would miss so much in life if he had not taught me to slow down and notice everything. Like how he swirls his hands in water and makes waves, then watches slowly, mesmerized. The quiet stillness of him lying on his back in the bath smiling at whatever fun memory he has in his head at that moment.

If S, wasn't autistic, she wouldn't greet me every day with lines from her favorite movie or ask me the same question over and over because there is such comfort in repetition. Were she not autistic, she may not touch and smell everything and experience the world with all of her senses heightened in such an incredible way. We wouldn't script and laugh in unison. Our lives would be unrecognizable to me. I would miss this.

If O. wasn't autistic, we wouldn't be able to hear his happy stims all day. He wouldn't flap wildly, constantly, with the freedom of a child who has never been

pressured to be anyone but who he is. Maybe O. would join his peers in play instead of exploring the playground dirt and trees and running carefree in dizzying circles. This wouldn't make him "better off" or more worthy. Fitting in isn't what he was meant to do. He has made that clear from day one. He goes his own way and I will never prevent him from doing so. He doesn't need to act a certain way or "fit in" to be loved unconditionally.

The irony is, in expecting nothing from my children except that they be exactly who they are and who they were born to be, I have been given immeasurable gifts. Every day I am lucky enough to be able to see how incredible they are and how they see the world and know that it is right and not to be fixed.

They are autistic. We are autistic. We do not need pity or sadness. I should not be called a "super parent" for being fortunate enough to have three autistic children. Taking care of them makes me grateful. I am honored to be able to share my life with three amazing children with such distinctive and interesting personalities. I like us and I like how our brains work.

This does not mean our lives are free from challenges. What life is free from challenges? What guarantee is there that a child of any neurology will live on their own at a certain age or have a certain type of relationship or life? There isn't. Your child isn't born with an IOU for a college diploma or grandchildren.

When you sign on to be a parent, your job is to love your child fiercely and protect them. I am not my children's voice. I advocate for them when they need it. I am not the voice for my non-speaking son. He communicates constantly and just

because it is not spoken language doesn't make it any less valuable of a means of communication. I am a guide, providing resources to help him communicate in the way that best suits him. It is not my right or place to assume to know what he is thinking or what he wants.

So, no, I do not grieve the non-existent children that I was somehow supposed to expect and feel entitled to. I feel grateful and love my children so much that it hurts. I do not want to cure them or change who they are. I am here to give whatever support they need.

I will continue to say no to harmful therapy that demands compliance or that they behave a certain way to fit in with someone else's idea of socially acceptable.

I will not allow them to be disrespected or othered.

I will continue to empower them to advocate for themselves.

I will follow their lead.

I will never again be silent when people's rights are being threatened.

I will never stop trying to help people see that autism is not a dirty word or a disease. I am not jealous of parents who don't have autistic children. Each of our families has its own joys and challenges. It's real and it's life. My family doesn't look like yours but it is not a reason to grieve.

I will not limit my children with arbitrary and useless functioning labels nor allow the numbers and scores on an assessment to define them.

I will continue to encourage them to question everything and make up their own minds.

I love my “non-compliant” and unapologetically autistic children.

What if instead of “giving parents permission to grieve”, we give them permission to accept their children, even in the face of the fear mongering and ableism that permeates our society? What if we say no to 40 hour work weeks of therapy and yes to childhood? What if we said no to grieving about autism?

This is the path we took and I will never regret it.

I will never grieve about my children's neurology.

I will watch them flap, spin, stim freely with no stigma or shame. I will continue to find myself breathless and amazed that a person who has messed up so much could be given the chance to live with such amazing human beings. I will remain thankful and humbled that I have been given the honor of watching them grow and being their friend.

I cannot grieve what was never lost.

Is He a Good Baby? – Jaime Franco

So often, stranger's strike up a conversation about my newborn baby; the youngest of our 4. When out in public he's comfortably nestled into a wrap or carrier, often sleeping and almost always looking angelic. Through the course of the conversation, the question inevitably comes up, "Is he a good baby?" This question has always confused me. At his age, he's still running on instinct, so I'd hardly call his behaviour either good or bad, regardless of what it was. What constitutes good or bad? I think that if he communicates with me then he's doing pretty well; I may not always understand or respond appropriately, but that's on me.

It is not uncommon for this question to come up about our older children too. When asked to describe them, instead of asking about their personalities or interests, people ask, "Are they good children?" I think that what people are asking is, "Do they obey your instructions?", "Do they disrupt your sleep, activities or conversations?", and "Do they meet arbitrary expectations in behavior, appearance and academic performance?" I think if I measured things by those benchmarks, my answer would be no and the thought of answering that way saddens me. Luckily, my journey to respectfully connected parenting has lead me far away from this way of thinking.

There is a term often used in Buddhist proverbs, Mu, which sometimes translates to "the question itself must be "unasked", or "no answer can exist in the terms provided." In essence, it describes a situation where the answers of both "yes"

and “no” are incorrect. So why talk about “good” or “bad” children? The question itself is wrong.

If “good” or “bad” children is a Mu kind of concept, then what is the right question? I think that first we need to consider that our children are people. For some this concept is radical. “Child” is seen as almost a label and a class; often one that is seen as lesser in intelligence, rights and abilities. There's a whole other piece of writing or series or website in that idea and why I reject it, but suffice to say that it is core to respectfully connected parenting. Just as a question like, “Does your partner obey your instructions?” is inappropriate, once children are framed as people, that question becomes inappropriate in that context also. A more appropriate way to ask that question would be in the context of the relationship; “Does your partner work with you to complete the task?” It speaks to the fact that both people are involved and equal and that is the responsibility of both to maintain the relationship.

So, are my children “good”? My children communicate their needs. My children know that they can ask for help. My children sleep when they are tired, eat when they are hungry, learn when they are curious and stim when they are overwhelmed.

Yes, my children are excellent.

Master of Himself – Leia Solo

My son is assertive.

He knows exactly what he wants to wear and what he doesn't.

He knows what food he wants now, how it should be served, and where he will eat it.

He knows which park he will go to today, tomorrow and the day after and what he will do when he gets there.

He knows that he wants a square birthday cake, with pink icing, sprinkles, and four candles of different colours.

He knows which Lego set he will be getting next and where he'll get it from.

My son knows how to tell other children in the park who are bothering him that they are bothering him and what they need to do about it.

He knows he won't say hello or goodbye because he doesn't want to.

He knows where everyone in the family must sit in the living room and he's very good at telling you if you forget and get it wrong.

My son will not recite the alphabet if you request it, nor will he repeat something cute because you asked him to.

He will tell you when it's time you left and give you an idea of when he would like you to return, if at all.

He will not have his photo taken unless he consents.

He is Master of his days and Master of his body and will tell anyone who infringes on his rights that they had better stop now.

My son knows what he wants and he knows how to assert himself to get it.

And that's perfect.

I Want You to Know That We Are Happy – Meg Murry

What I want you to know about my autistic child is that I love him dearly, completely, unconditionally, not in spite of autism (or because of it for that matter), but because he's my child and there's no part of him that I don't love. I want you to know that he is sweet and clever and has a delightful sense of humor. I want you to know that although he does get upset sometimes and does get overwhelmed sometimes, he is not violent or "aggressive." I want you to know that he is curious and always learning new things. I want you to know that he loves our family and his little brother is his best friend. I want you to know that he listens and understands a lot, even if he doesn't always respond when spoken to. I want you to know that if he screams at you to stop, it's not because he's being bratty or rude, it's because he's very overwhelmed and really needs to regain control of the situation.

I want you to know that all autistic children are unique, just as all people in general are unique. Don't assume you know what my son is like just because you've heard your coworker's nephew is autistic or you've seen a character on TV who has Asperger's. My son has trouble with verbal language, but that doesn't mean he doesn't talk at all, and it certainly doesn't mean he doesn't understand what you're saying. He has a knack for music and he loves machinery, but that doesn't mean he's a prodigy or a genius - and he doesn't have to be. He's just a kid. You might wonder how to talk to him if you meet my son, how to interact. You really can't go wrong if you just treat him like a human being - that is, with respect and kindness.

I want you to know that I would rather you ask questions than make assumptions. I'm not ashamed of my autistic child - it's not an embarrassing or sensitive topic for me to discuss with you. But, fair warning, I might get offended if you say something prejudiced or disparaging about autism. I will bristle and feel annoyed if you recommend any so-called treatments or cures or special diets that you think will "help." Even so, I promise to politely grin and bear my irritation if you promise to stay open minded and learn something new.

I want you to know that - guess what! - I am autistic too. And I like myself just fine. I don't want to be fixed, though I do wish that I had known earlier that I was autistic. I wish I knew because for most of my life I thought there was something wrong with me that made me feel so different from everyone else. And it's a huge relief to know that being different is not wrong, it's just different. I wish I had known there was a name for people like me - some might brush it off as an unnecessary label, but what it really is, is a word for what kind of different I am. And in that word, I finally found acceptance and a feeling of normalcy.

So, if you ever wonder why I'm keen to slap a label on my child, it's because I intimately know how it feels to *know*. Knowing that I am a normal *autistic* person feels like exhaling after 36 years of holding my breath. I want my son to start out where it's taken me so long to end up - at self-knowledge, and self-acceptance.

What I want you to know is that life is good. There is no tragedy in this house, thank goodness - we are so lucky. We have our ups and downs like any family, and

our particular ups and particular downs might be different from yours, but in the end, what I want you to know is that we are a happy neurodiverse family.

This is What Acceptance Feels Like – Leia Solo

I want to look at the concept of awareness and propose that although it's important, it's only half the story.

When our son was first diagnosed as autistic, we went on a rapid journey of raising our awareness of autism. We were pretty clueless. Our knowledge wasn't really knowledge at all, but turned out to be a very narrow understanding of what autism looked like. We'd had no reason to look beyond our stereotyped understanding and to explore the myths that we'd adopted through exposure to mainstream media. We sought to educate ourselves so we could better understand what this whole autism thing was about. Increasing your awareness about anything is a pretty good idea. Learning more is never a bad a thing in my opinion. We learnt that autism is a term that can be applied to a whole variety of behaviours. We learnt that some autistic people speak and some don't. We learnt about sensory overload. This was undeniably helpful, but we started to notice a trend. Most of what we were learning was coming from non-autistic people. We read books, research reports, and blog posts. We visited "experts" from the various professions that work with autistic kids. And although we learnt a lot, we also felt the weight of the perspective that they offered. Awareness acquainted us with the "limitations" and "symptoms" that our son had. We now had a name to match some of his behaviours, but somehow this awareness left us feeling pretty heavy. For example, we could now name his repetitive noises and movements as "stims," but we listened and watched with unease. In short, being *aware* of autism didn't really help us beyond having words to match with behaviours.

When we became aware that we were also autistic, something shifted. We reached out and connected with the larger autistic adult community. We stopped searching the “experts” and started looking for the perspectives of autistic adults. We found that autistic adults don’t celebrate “Autism Awareness” day or month. Instead, they started their own month of celebrations under the banner of “Autism Acceptance”, in recognition that awareness will only take us so far and may also take us in a direction that is unhelpful. Awareness provides us with information. Acceptance is a whole other destination.

Let me tell you about what it feels like to be accepted as autistic in the hope that it might give you some insights into why acceptance is the higher goal. My mother has listened to me many times over the years since my son’s birth as I’ve shared with her the joys and challenges of parenting him. When my son was diagnosed as autistic, my mother came with me on our awareness journey. She hungrily read every article I sent her, she researched for herself, she asked questions and supported us emotionally along the way. When I told her my husband was autistic, she made space in her heart for this news, expressing how wonderful it was for our son that he had such an excellent role model in his father. Since my own diagnosis, I’ve struggled with whether or not to tell my mother that I am also autistic. Although she reacted so supportively to the news about my husband and son, I just wasn't sure that she could do the same for me. After all, autism in women looks very different to autism in men, and I feared that she would either not believe the diagnosis or somehow reject this part of me. I worried that this would be a burden for

a woman in her 70's who might prefer to hold on to the ideas she had already formed about me over the last 43 years. I couldn't have been more wrong.

In a busy eatery at lunch time, I was unable to contain the news that I'd sat with for some time and I blurted out that I was also autistic. My mum paused briefly, looked directly at me, and said she wasn't surprised. Her words were a comfort but her look and the feeling that washed over me will last a lifetime. When I think about that moment, I'm very aware that what I felt was the clear stillness of acceptance. Everything slowed. Our eyes connected. I felt safe in the bubble of her unconditional love. I felt heard. Seen. Content. Accepted.

I also know that I'm very lucky to have the acceptance my mother has offered our family, as many people are not greeted so positively when they share the news that they or their children are autistic. Some are ignored, as if their moment of disclosure never happened. Some are not believed. Some are shunned or abused. Ultimately, this leads to a distancing and for some, the gulf becomes too wide to ever again breach.

My hope is that my son can feel accepted as he makes his way through life. It's a much deeper experience than simple awareness affords and the effect is powerful. With my mother's acceptance for my son, for my husband, for myself, I feel as though there's an invisible safety net underneath our family that truly supports us and deeply knows who we are. When I think of this, I feel like I can do anything. I feel like there are no limitations, only the occasional barriers. With my mother's love and

acceptance of me as an autistic person, I feel like I can leap the hurdles I need to, or take comfort in her love when I can't.

My family celebrates autism acceptance, in the wish that all autistic people and those that love them can truly accept who they are.

A year or so later, after the paper – Amy Bean

It's been well over a year since we were given the official paper with the diagnosis of autism for my son.

It feels like such a world away. I can't believe how truly different our life is.

The paediatrician told us on leaving his office, “If you invest heavily in early intervention, I believe you will be able to have your son attend mainstream school in two years.” We nodded solemnly and thought, I really hope we can do all that work and get him to school. This is all on us, his “best outcome.” We have to do ALL the right things or we will be failing him.

I was overwhelmed by all the therapy we were told we needed to do to give him “optimum results.” How could I do this? With his baby sister 15 months old and ALL the hours I needed to do, all this therapy. Occupational therapy, speech pathology, psychology.

Just writing all that makes me feel pretty awful. All the yuck medical language. The ableism. There is so much fear heaped on you at diagnosis by heavily pathologising experts. People who all need to help “treat” your child.

I reject it now.

The suggestions of all the therapy hours, social skills training, the constant pushing and pulling of a child to conform and to “pass” as “normal.”

I wish I could go back to the moment in the paediatrician's office. I wish I could say, “Investing in our son means loving him, supporting him in his needs, advocating for his rights, and ensuring accommodations in his life to be safe,

supported and included. Whether he goes to school or not is not a measure of his ability as a person. Nor is it a measure of anyone's ability.”

I can't go back.

I don't really want to, because currently we are really “invested” in happiness at home, with no school. Because in the end, school wasn't for our son and we found ourselves considering unschooling after two unpleasant attempts at kinder. It's been a shock; because not so long ago I too was convinced that school was a measure of my son's growth.

I was so wrong.

And I'm so glad I found our “right.”

There are many people who helped my family to find our right path. The people who shone lights on autistic voices, hidden by loud, noisy fear driven parents, so I could hear.

All my autistic friends who forever changed the way I think about disability, acceptance and supporting the ones we love with respect.

Thank you.