



## Autism Information Library

# Autistics Need Acceptance, Not Cure

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Morton Ann Gernsbacher

This month, which is Autism Awareness Month, I'm hiding my eyes and those of my autistic 8-year old son from the media.

National headlines that describe autism as an epidemic, or pandemic. Public service announcements liken autism to being kidnapped.

A government Web site defines autism as a "devastating scourge." An autism "expert" decrees that autism is worse "than Sept. 11 and AIDS combined." An Autism Society Canada board member proclaims that autism is worse than cancer — because people with autism have normal lifespans.

Have you — like my son and me — ever heard parents say how learning that their child was autistic was like experiencing a death in their family? Have you ever been at the playground when a mother classifies her children, standing right there beside her, as this one who is autistic but these other two who are — thank goodness — perfectly normal?

They say that autism entails difficulty taking another person's perspective, appreciating how another person might feel. But when I read or hear such hate speech I wonder: Exactly who has a problem taking another person's perspective? Who can't appreciate the feelings of others?

My son surely can. He understands quite well that there are so-called autism "advocates" who despise autism, who march thousand-fold against it with placards calling for its defeat, its demise. His demise.

Oh, you say, those people don't want to get rid of my son, they just want to get rid of that part of him that's autistic. But research demonstrates that autistic traits are distributed into the non-autistic population; some people have more of them, some have fewer. History suggests that many individuals whom we would today diagnose as autistic — some severely so — contributed profoundly to our art, our math, our science, and our literature.

Most poignantly, many autistics affirm that it would be impossible to segregate the part of them that is autistic. To take away their autism is to take away their personhood. Despite our politically correct labeling, they are autistic; they don't "have" autism any more than homosexuals have gayness or

lesbianism. Like their predecessors in human rights, many autistics don't want to be cured; they want to be accepted. And like other predecessors in civil rights, many autistics don't want to be required to imitate the majority just to earn their rightful place in society.

I'm a middle-aged psychology professor who holds an endowed chair at a major research university. But my son has taught me far more than I ever learned in my lab. Every time he walks by a poster avowing that autism must be eradicated, he teaches me grace. Every time he ignores one of the countless scholarly articles that tower above my desk, asserting he is disordered, he teaches me tolerance. Every time he embraces a world that so frequently rebuffs him, he teaches me unconditional love.

What if next year we celebrate the diversity of social interaction observed within and across all cultures? What if this "awareness" month marked a time to appreciate the variation that all humans demonstrate in their style and competence in communication? What if it heralded an era during which we marveled at the determined focus that in my occupation often wins indefinite tenure but in a precocious child gets labeled as diseased?

Then, neither my son nor I would feel compelled to hide.

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