

A Good Thing About Autism

By Kyle Pontius, PhD

I work a lot with adults on the autistic spectrum. Doing this, I usually find there to be a stark contrast between the perception of young parents of autistic children and young adults with autism. Parents of young children frequently see autism as horrible and a severe disability - which it is. Adolescents and adults become protective of their identity, which includes their autism. Some deny that there's anything different about them. Others embrace their uniqueness.

I'm reminded of when my son, who has high-functioning autism, was in the eighth grade. I was asked to participate in "Career Day" at his school. Brian was my host and led me to the room where I was to do a presentation to two different groups of eighth graders on what it was like to be a psychologist. I talked about the preparation needed to be a psychologist, the day-to-day activities of my job, and about autism, my area of specialty. The kids were attentive and asked a lot of questions.

Toward the end of the first session, Brian raised his hand. "Tell us some good things about autism," he said. I was taken back a little. Of course there were good things about him, he's a great kid. I'd not thought much about the good in autism. As a psychologist, my focus is on disorders and dysfunction-things that have gone wrong and what it will take to fix them. Mental health, more often than not, is relegated to simply the absence of mental illness. It's the medical model. I can't recall how I answered his question. However I did, it was apparently acceptable to him and to the rest of the class. Brian's question has stayed with me. As I've been working with adults on the autistic spectrum, "What are the good things about autism?" has consistently been an important question to each individual.

Adults affected by autism tend to be very sensitive about their identity and view attempts to "cure" autism as an assault to their sense of self. It's okay to build skills and to empower affected individuals in any and every way. Autism is diagnosed by analyzing the presenting symptoms; however, it sinks into the personality structure and becomes part of one's sense of who they are. Most of the time, it's a good thing to fit in, particularly with autism. That is, to be functioning in a manner that is as consistent with one's typically developing peers as possible. There are times; however, that standing out is a good thing. What is particularly good is standing out because of a positive aspect of autism.

In May 2007, Brian was getting ready to graduate and was chosen as a "Student of the Month" for "Moral Courage" at Trabuco Hills High School. He was one of only a few in a student body of over 3,100 to receive this distinction. Adolescents with autism can be much less susceptible to peer pressure than their typically developing counterparts. They tend to miss many of the social cues that other kids are keenly aware of, those that are seen as vitally important to social acceptance.

Persons with autism look for "rules" to follow and may rigidly adhere to them despite the social consequences. Brian has adopted many values consistent with his Christian faith, and he is not shy about standing up for what he believes in. Many teens, even committed Christians, can be tempted to compromise their values if their social standing is challenged. This isn't as much of an issue with many affected by autism, including Brian. Demonstrating moral courage may actually be easier for him than it is for others his age because of his autism. However, being easier doesn't diminish the value of the award. In fact, it highlights a very positive aspect of autism.

Getting the award may have affected me more than it did him. He tends to take a lot in stride, particularly praise. At a time when we were celebrating his coming of age-graduating from high school-this award meant that, as parents, my wife and I did something right here. We instilled in our son values that he lived out on a daily basis at school, enough so that he stood out among his peers in a really good way. This is huge.

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