

A father sheds light on autism awareness

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With our current all-consuming concern with overcoming the coronavirus threat, some other things have understandably taken a back seat. One of those things, unfortunately, is the observance of April as Autism Awareness Month. This is a topic which has become important to me because I have an adult son who lives at level 2 on the Autism spectrum. Now, I am not a behavioral health professional, so I don't pretend to know exactly what that diagnosis means in medical terms, but I can speak with experience regarding what it means in real-life terms.

One of the things it means is that I am a very lucky dad. My son is one of the most pure-hearted people that I know. Because he doesn't understand the dynamics of the polite dishonesty which characterizes most people's social interactions, he doesn't play those games.

Having him in my life is a continual reminder of something I am supposed to be myself, but often am not. He is also an amazingly grateful person. No one in my Family utters the words "thank you" as often as Dave. Simple gestures the rest of us take for granted – he doesn't. Again, every day, by his example he reminds me to be a better person than I otherwise probably would be.

Another thing that autism means, however, is that my son has faced struggles that I will probably never fully understand. The form of autism that Dave deals with does not make him immediately identifiable as someone with a disability. This is good in the sense that there are many things he can do that those more severely affected cannot. But, it has been tough for him in the fact that his disability has often been misinterpreted as a deficiency in his character. One of the people guiltiest of that misinterpretation was his own dad. I will live the rest of my life with the memories of treating my son as if he simply was not putting forth the effort to accomplish certain tasks. Unaware of his struggles, I made them significantly worse.

While I have learned and repented of my errors, other misinterpretations continue to bring heartbreaking challenges to Dave. People with autism at any level just don't catch the same non-verbal cues that the rest of us take for granted. How often, for example, do we exchange pleasant greetings while simultaneously sending signals that we have no interest in a longer conversation? Dave does not receive those signals. Because of this, my pure-hearted son has been sometimes misinterpreted as weird, creepy, or worse. I watch him deal with these situations, and I want to scream at folks, "If you encountered someone who was blind or in a wheel chair, you would treat them with kindness and patience. What makes you think it is okay to treat someone with autism so harshly?" But, then I remember – maybe those folks are just like I once was. They simply don't know. Well, I am telling you now. Like a deaf person needs sign language, people on the autism spectrum need us to speak literally and clearly. Sarcasm and body language are to them like a foreign language to the rest of us. If you don't wish to have a long conversation with an autistic adult, that is fine. Just say so. Misinterpretation only leads to mistreatment. Please don't take as long to get a clue as I did.