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Autism: Normal? Not Her Izzy

People on the spectrum can be unusual, sure. But sometimes that's precisely what's so wonderful about them

By Sarah Maizes
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Your daughter's autistic?? Wow! She seems so normal!"

This "compliment" is absurd to me. I realize it's intended to make me feel better. After all, people assume I'll be thrilled to know that my daughter passes for "normal." But every time I hear this statement I can't help thinking "Normal? Oh, God, I hope not!"

My ten-year-old daughter, Isabel, was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome when she was three. For years she's had occupational therapy, speech therapy, and social skills classes. I've done everything in my power to give her the tools she needs to be confident and succeed. And she's thriving. But my goal has never been for her to be "normal."

I've seen "normal." And I'm not interested.

Normal doesn't suddenly decide to go by the name Bob. Normal can't tell you the individual designs on every state quarter. Normal doesn't answer the phone in the British accent they've been practicing all week. Normal is overrated, and I won't have it. Not in my house.

In fact, my seven-year-old twins are "normal," and I pay Izzy \$2 a week to teach them everything she knows. It's part of how she earns her allowance: Make your bed, take out the trash, teach your brother and sister to be abnormal. When they start organizing their plastic dinosaurs according to dietary restrictions, I'll know I've succeeded.

I'm "normal," and it took me 40 years to get up the nerve to do what comes naturally to my daughter: find a passion, speak my mind, and have the balls to go for what I want. Izzy knows she loves ducks. She loves everything about them (and can do a perfect imitation of a Scottish widgeon). When she ducks up, she wants to work with ducks. Don't even think about telling her that's silly or that she should perhaps consider dentistry. Izzy isn't paralyzed by what everyone else thinks, and I know enough "normal" people to know that that is definitely not normal. Because of it, the world is her oyster. Frankly I'm jealous.

You can't suck up to Isabel. She likes you or she doesn't. You're worthy of her attention or you're not. Yes, she knows how to be polite, but if you really want to be Isabel's friend, flattery won't get you far.

"You like my sneakers? They wouldn't fit you. They're for kids." "I'm pretty? Thanks. Got any snacks?" She couldn't care less. I think she's got a future as a Hollywood agent.

I wouldn't change a thing about Isabel. Of course, I want her to be happy. For Isabel, happiness will come, I hope, from feeling loved for who she is, having skills to navigate the "normal" world, and being confident she can reach her full potential—which I believe is limitless.

Isabel is an extraordinary girl. She is beautiful, loving, and unique. But call her normal to my face, and you're asking for it.

Sarah Maizes is an L.A. author, blogger (Mommy Lite), and stand-up comedian. Her second book, Got Milf? The Modern Mom's Guide to Feeling Fabulous, Looking Great, and Rocking a Minivan, is due out next year from Berkley Books.

Photograph by Sarah Maizes