



Let's Not Become a Divided Special Needs Community

By **Jeanetta Bryant**

OFTEN, OUR SOCIETY IS GUILTY OF SEEING AN ISSUE OR CAUSE FROM ONLY ONE VANTAGE POINT. WE ARE TOLD TO GROW, GAIN PERSPECTIVE, AND SEE THINGS FROM SOMEONE ELSE'S POINT OF VIEW. THIS IS REMARKABLY DIFFICULT WHEN THE ISSUE OR CONCERN IS SOMETHING CLOSE TO THE HEART, LIKE THE CARE OF OUR CHILDREN. BUT THIS VERY WELL MIGHT BE WHEN IT IS MOST NEEDED.



My daughter is 12 years old. We have been on this journey through autism for nearly 10 years and as a mother, advocate, and professional in this community, I have witnessed a community divided. The adage, “If you know one child with autism, you know one child with autism,” is not only a popular saying; it is accurate. Each of our kids is significantly different, with different strengths and deficits. Adults with autism or an adult diagnosis have yet another set of circumstances that define their experience. We must challenge ourselves to stop speaking on behalf of everyone in this community when, really, we can only speak for ourselves and our experiences.

It is when we speak as “the expert” for the community that we instantaneously polarize those with different experiences. No two parents raise neurotypical children the same way, so why would we suddenly believe our parenting would be the same for all neurodiverse children? All too often, parents feel isolated and alone, reaching out to groups on social media for validation and a sense of belonging, only to be thrashed by judgement

and meanness. Stop finding reasons to make someone feel bad and start finding ways to support a family that needs encouragement.

At times, it has been hard to see our daughter make progress through a new treatment or therapy and see friends choose not to do the same. If I am being completely transparent, it took years for me to understand why they wouldn’t follow suit. Their choices frustrated me and I was somewhat judgmental of them. Ultimately, I recognized they were doing their best and that the path we took does not determine what is best for another family. After all, my family motto is “Perfectly Imperfect.” I know many families that are far more disciplined and investigative than I am. Who I am to think others don’t deserve the same grace?

Unfortunately, parents turning on parents is only one element of the division in this community. We also have adults with autism speaking their truth, and that may fly in direct opposition to a child with autism and their medical concerns. Or the more common issue where we as parents beg for communities and society in general to support us, accept us, and embrace us, only to complain they are not doing it right or that the solution they suggest won’t help.

I’m sure as many of you read this, you can reflect on a moment or two in which you’ve heard these words ring true. Maybe you were the one who was isolated, or you were the one too quick to condemn—either way, we must stop our infighting and unite to support one another to help our children and loved ones be their best selves.

Some tips to help overcome this quicksand we find ourselves in are:

- **Listen.** Try to hear what another parent is trying to convey, even if they are choosing to say it with words you wouldn’t use. By hearing the heart of what they are saying, you have gained the opportunity to understand a situation or scenario, and we can make a potential bond. At the very least, you can validate someone who simply needs to be heard.
- **Speak.** Tell your story to the community, and help others gain insight into the world of a family navigating an autism diagnosis, but be careful to only say your story. Try not to speak on behalf of others. It is OK to propose ideas as long as you include the statement: “Things like this helped our family.” Being an advocate for your child is tough work, but being an advocate for the community is very tricky, and a great deal of thought should go into the words you use and the concept you are advocating for or against.
- **Assume the best.** If all else fails, try to assume the best in others. Parents may be at their wits’ end or sleep-deprived. Advocates often want to bring forth good, and our society tries to find new ways to support us. These actions may not always go as planned or executed as we



would hope, but if we assume the best and know they are trying, we will find an extraordinary amount of growth.

We are human to be offended or to think we know best. When it comes to my daughter, I assure you—I know her and her story better than anyone else. But I don't know your story, and I won't ever get to know it if I walk away assuming the worst. The strongest parents I know are exceptional needs parents, and there are very few obstacles we cannot get through. This is a challenge I know we can conquer.



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