

Dealing With Staring

by Judy Winter

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No doubt about it, when people stare at our children (or us), they make us squirm. Let's face it, people rarely stare at us because they're mesmerized by our great beauty. More likely, they are sizing up our glaring imperfections. For kids with special needs, those imperfections may be hard to hide.

During an especially intense episode of staring, most of us (if we are really honest) have found ourselves thinking, "If only our looks back could kill ... !"

It helps to learn how to deal with staring in a more productive and less stressful way, whether it occurs in the school hallways, at church or the zoo, at the movies, on vacation, or while you're buying ice cream and cereal and milk at the supermarket. You can't avoid staring in public.

For some families, this issue is so upsetting that it interferes with their freedom to move about in society like everybody else. That's why I'm challenging you to look at staring in a whole new way. Ask yourself this one question:

What if staring is actually a good thing? (Please don't throw things at me!) After more than a decade of returning not-so-friendly fire to people who stared at my son and me, here's my take on the subject: You never know *why* someone is staring. It may provide you with a rare, priceless opportunity to educate society about the value of your child and others with special needs. That's time well spent.

Here are some valuable thoughts to help defuse all those uncomfortable feelings you may get when people stare at you and your child in public. When people stare, keep these possibilities in mind.

- *People think your child is cute.* That's not so bad. If I had a buck for every person who stopped us to say how cute and how adorable our son was, I would be one rich mama. Eric *was* cute.
- *They have a family member with special needs and feel a kinship with you.* Or they work with children with special needs and have a heartfelt story to share. That's not so painful either.
- *They are having difficulty dealing with special needs in their own lives.* Or they are new parents of a child with similar challenges and have questions, like what kind of wheelchair or stroller to buy. Share your expertise.

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- *They have lost a child with special needs and seeing your child causes them to remember special outings with their own child.* That's how it is now for me. Try not to shut these families out. Offer them hugs, a shoulder, or tissues instead.
- *Children stare because they are curious.* Adults are a different story. My advice is to smile or wave at kids or ask if they have a question. Most will respond by smiling or waving back or asking a question -- which gives you a great opportunity to tell them about special needs, before sending them off as little ambassadors to educate the adults in their lives (a much bigger task).

Staring is part of the deal that comes with giving your child every opportunity to be fully included in society. The good news is that it often gets easier to handle once you come to love and accept your child unconditionally. The next time someone stares at you or your child, give the benefit of the doubt -- and think of it as an opportunity to enlighten this person.

Unless you prefer to stay home for the rest of your life.