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## Adolescence, Without a Roadmap

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At least he's good-looking," I say to my husband whenever the subject of our oldest son's dating future comes up. And he is good-looking, our son, with his blue eyes, wavy hair, broad shoulders and warm smile. He's also got a deep voice (he works at it) and a gentle manner. It's hard to believe girls won't fall in love with him. And maybe they will.

But he also has autism. When he's tired or sick, he forgets words or uses them incorrectly; often it requires enormous effort just for him to maintain a conversation. It's as if he has no native tongue and essentially has had to memorize our language word by word.

Now he's working on our customs. You see him eagerly watching other kids, looking for clues and lessons, signs he can follow into the world of the average teenager. It's a world he's desperate to be part of. He dresses like them, adopts their gestures, mimics their rudeness and even douses himself, as they do, with Axe deodorant body spray. ("Look at the other kids," we're always telling him. "Watch them, play like them.")

He'll be in the middle of a group of kids and they'll laugh. Then he'll laugh, a second too late and too loud. He knows he needs to laugh to fit in; that much he's learned from observation. What he can't seem to learn is what made the joke funny and why everyone gets it but he.

For a long time our son was a little boy with autism, which was a certain kind of challenge. Now that he's a teenager with autism - and a teenager who notices girls - we're faced with something else altogether.

"Hey, Mom?" he says as we're walking out of a store. "That girl was hot." He thinks he's talking in a whisper but he isn't, really, because he has voice modulation problems and has trouble hearing what his own voice sounds like. The lifeguard in the bikini at the beach is also "hot." So is Jessica Alba, whose picture he printed and carefully glued onto his binder, next to a photo of Keira Knightley.

The term "hot" may be an affectation he picked up from his friends, but his appreciation of skinny girls with big breasts seems to be genuine, as we realized when we discovered he'd started using the Internet the way other teenage boys are likely to only when they think no one is watching.

We put content filters on our browser software, and his father sat down with him to go over some basic rules: Wait until you're in love to have sex. Always wear a condom. Hide your pornography where your mother won't find it. He'll remember all this because they're rules, and he's very good at remembering rules.

It's the other stuff - the emotional, heart-stopping stuff - that's going to be hard.

I know he wants to find a girl and fall in love. Sometimes people say that kids with autism aren't capable of love. That's ridiculous. My son loves deeply. He just doesn't communicate well. The instincts we rely on when we're first falling in love (being able to sense what someone else is thinking, becoming aware of a sudden connection, anticipating another person's desire) don't come naturally to him.

I want the girls he meets to know that just because he speaks a little oddly and sometimes struggles to understand what they're saying doesn't mean he wouldn't make a great boyfriend. I want them to see what a good heart he has, how he would never manipulate or hurt them, how he would be grateful, obliging and loyal. But how many girls will be able to get past the frustrations of his disabilities to appreciate that part of him?

Would I have been able to?

And these things can't be forced anyway, no matter how good-hearted someone may be.

Last year he got friendly with a girl he met in a social skills class. She was what those of us in the world of special needs describe as "lower-functioning." She attended a special needs school, but even there she felt she was the object of ridicule and abuse. I never knew if her account of insults and cruelties was accurate, but I'd hear my son talking to her on the phone, offering his unwavering support. "That's terrible!" he'd cry out after listening for a while. "They shouldn't do that."

I'd listen to him and think, "What woman wouldn't want a man who comforted her like that, who was willing to listen and believe and always be on her side?" It gave me hope.

In the end, though, he broke up with her, if "breaking up" is even the right term for ending what they had. Her litany of complaints bored him. And in all honesty she wasn't the slightest bit "hot." Although he never mentioned it, I suspect this also may have been a factor in his decision.

Since then, the only girls he's asked out have been at the other end of the spectrum, and they've all rejected him - for the most part (and as far as I know) - quite kindly.

Still, he aims high. Recently he asked out a girl who was already dating the star athlete of the entire middle school, an eighth grader who was captain of the baseball and basketball teams. When I suggested that maybe a girl like her was out of his reach, my son just looked confused. The social intricacies of popularity that separate students into cliques and loners mean nothing to him because they're unstated, unquantified. Most of us just sense them instinctively. He can't.

Obviously I could let myself be crushed by these rejections, especially if he was. But so far he doesn't seem to mind; there's an advantage to his emotional obliviousness. He's still young, though, and none of his friends are really dating, so he probably doesn't feel so left out yet. Still, I worry about whether girls will keep rejecting him throughout high school and into college, while the other kids start successfully pairing off. What if he starts to wonder if anyone will ever love him?

You can, I've discovered, teach your child to make polite conversation (ask questions, listen attentively, then ask more questions), to be a good host (offer refreshments, suggest activities and choose the one your guest says he'll enjoy), to please his teachers (show up on time, behave well in class). But how do you teach him to fall in love with someone who will love him back? What rules can you lay down for making someone's heart leap when she sees you?

When our son's autism was diagnosed at the age of 2½, there was no clear prognosis. We didn't even know if he'd ever learn to talk. But we found talented people to work with him and he improved, slowly at first and then more rapidly. By the time he graduated from elementary school, he had no discernible behavioral or academic problems.

People congratulated us. Our son had emerged. Someone met our kids at a party and a friend mentioned that one of them had autism. "Which one?" the person said, genuinely bewildered, and then guessed the wrong child.

BUT that was from a distance. Up close it's clearer that our son is marked and challenged, fundamentally and permanently. And up close is where relationships live. Up close is what love is all about. And sex? Well, that goes without saying.

This leads to what is perhaps the scarier question: What happens when a girl finally says yes? A year or two ago, going out meant nothing more than a kind of glorified play date. But I overhear the kids in his class flirting, and there's a strong edge of sexuality to it. My son's body has matured, and physically, if not developmentally, he's not a little boy anymore.

Just as he's learned our language and our customs with a lot of hard work and memorization, he'll soon have to learn how to navigate the world of sex. But how? Through imitation and observation? Through rules we

teach him? No. The same kids he has studied and imitated to gain other social skills are going to be fumbling in the dark themselves, behind closed doors. And in this particular game I don't foresee his father and me doing much coaching from the sidelines. He'll truly have to find his own way.

Then again, I've seen him rise to similar challenges in ways I never anticipated. I was told, for example, that kids with autism can't be empathetic because they're incapable of being able to perceive and relate to someone else's suffering. He can learn that he's supposed to say, "That's terrible!" when someone complains to him about an injustice. But the ability to notice and respond to nuances of another person's emotions and moods isn't supposed to be in his repertory. And it's true that when he was younger I could sob in front of him (something I did all too often back then, I'm afraid), and he would simply continue his play, oblivious to my emotions.

Not long ago, however, when I was fixing a snack in the kitchen for all my kids while they sat around the table doing their homework, something about the situation reminded me of my mother, who'd died recently, and I began to quietly cry.

My three younger children didn't notice. But my son looked up and said: "What's wrong, Mom? Are you O.K.?" and came over to give me a hug. I literally smiled through my tears.

Somehow he had learned something they said couldn't be taught. I'll take that as a good sign.