

Facts & Arguments

EDITOR JANE CAD

THE ESSAY» BY CARMEN G. FARRELL

Compassion on the playground

My son can't speak intelligibly or hold eye contact, but his fourth-grade friends line up to help him

He is a beautiful child. In our modern society that values symmetry in physical appearance, the first impression my son Ges leaves is "normal."

Even more than normal – his physical attractiveness makes strangers' eyes linger.

But only for a few seconds. And then most adults' eyes dart away as their brains try to process, "what's going on?" And to try to answer that question, their eyes return to him to take in the involuntary movements, the wandering eyes. Most of them try not to be seen doing this, and if my eye happens to catch theirs they quickly look away.

Children don't do that. No apology rests in their gaze.

Most stories about children with special needs are about that child. They follow a pattern – a parent's realization that something is "different." The agony, a period of grieving, then acceptance of the need to get on with the job and find a meaningful path for their child and themselves. These uplifting stories resolve into some description of an improvement for the family.

Or often it's a story of how the child could do so much better if only ... and the viewer or reader is left with a belief that some disease or condition requires greater awareness and public-policy support.

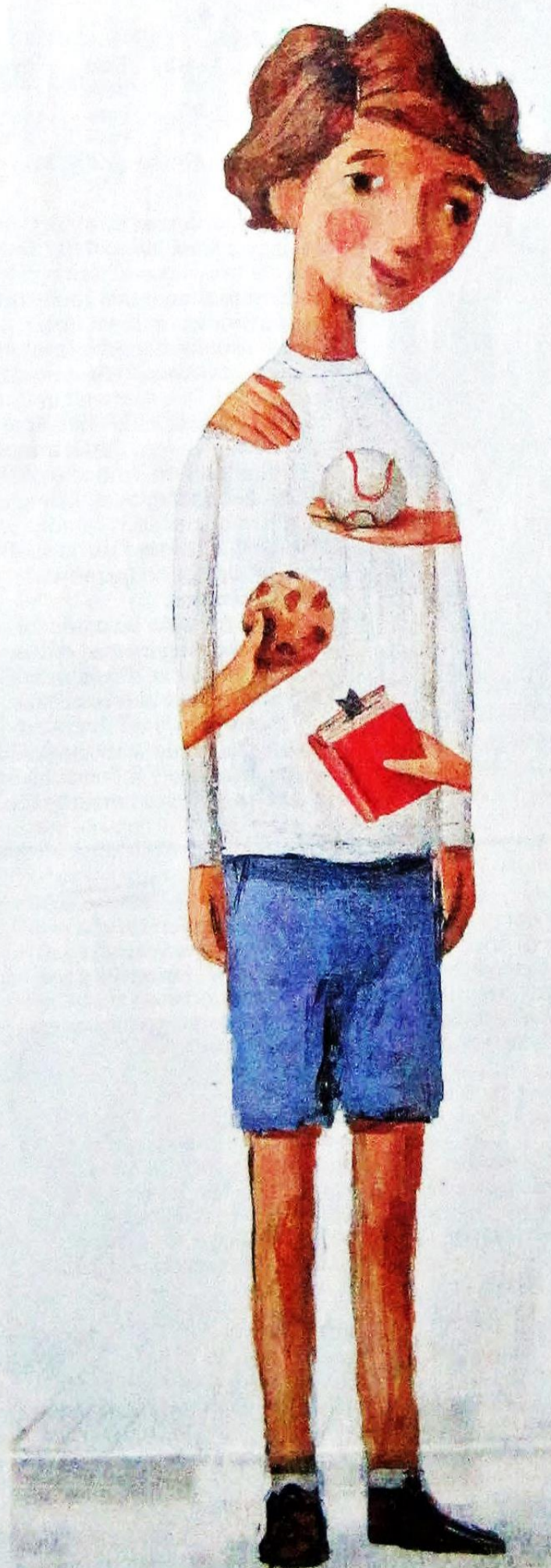
But this story is not about my 11-year-old son. It's about his friends.

It's about how his presence in our neighbourhood school, Highlands Elementary in North Vancouver, is helping to raise a more compassionate generation of Canadians in one corner of the country.

Up to Grade 2, there was a cadre of kids who regularly sought Ges out.

Some were encouraged by their mothers; others just found a safe place to be with him. He's uncomplicated. He doesn't shame them, call them names or negotiate to have things his way.

He is still the same, but when soccer games, shared secrets and more complicated friend-



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ships started taking the place of tag, chase and hide-and-seek, the kids didn't need him like they used to.

A year and a bit ago, I happened by the school playground at lunch.

Ges was standing alone, his face pressed against the perimeter chain-link fence facing the street, staring out.

His fingers were laced through the wire mesh on either side of his face.

So at my request, last fall the school asked families of Grade 4 kids if their children would like to volunteer for a recess and lunchtime playgroup to help Ges.

They were hoping for six to eight kids. But out of 61 in the grade, 43 said they wanted to help. About two-thirds of them!

"Why?" I wondered. "What does my son offer these children that makes them want to volunteer in droves to be with him?"

Ges's speech is unintelligible; he says "no" to invitations to play because he can't imagine what something as wide-ranging as "play" could be; and his affect can say "I'm not interested" because it's hard for him to maintain eye contact.

But all these kids took charge of this friendship group. They named it Club G.

They decided what playground games they could adapt so that Ges could play, too. Varieties of tag were modified to reduce the size of the playing field, and the child who's "it" wears a pinny to be very visible.

"California kickball" is played with simplified rules and a smaller playing area, and telling knock-knock jokes on my son's iPad shows everyone how difficult it can be to communicate when you have to type most of the time.

It is a unique club that offers social, physical and age-appropriate stimulation and therapy for my son – and it was invented by nine- and 10-year-olds. At the end of the school year, the kids published a book of Club G jokes.

Children from other grades wanted to join, and this year there are plans to write the

club's story, create a video and include kids from higher and lower grades.

What do these kids get out of their relationship with my son?

Perhaps it's the opportunity to care, to give and to make a difference.

The members of Club G unconditionally accept Ges. They have the courage to act on that acceptance, and the endurance to keep trying even in the face of his apathy.

You might think that after years of him saying "no" or ignoring them they would be fed up. Oh, no. They volunteer *en masse* to "try again" with him!

It's not about pity: It's about having the courage and persistence to say "hello" without expecting the same in return; to extend an invitation to play that might go unacknowledged; to keep on talking without knowing if you are being listened to.

And it takes extra courage when you're in Grade 4.

I grew up at a time when kids like my son were never seen by children like me. I grew up scared of these differences. But my son's classmates see his gifts.

He gives them the opportunity to connect with people who seem different from them, to experience the satisfaction that comes from acts of kindness, and to pay attention to the ways life can be tougher for friends like Ges.

And by being the creative directors of Club G, they learn to be leaders with their ideas at a young age.

"They're such compassionate kids," I said to his learning-support teacher.

"Yes they are," she said. "But it's him who makes them great." My son truly is a beautiful child – and not just on the outside.

Carmen G. Farrell lives in North Vancouver.

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