

My son is different than most, sometimes strangers won't let me forget it

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Someone called the police on me today. I am accustomed to apologies in the gazes of strangers. I'm used to the startled reactions of strangers. In public spaces, I've become inured to the annoyed reactions to my son's lack of social graces. I've got two decades of experience with both the overly solicitous comments or wide berth that people steer around my 21-year-old neurodivergent son and myself. I have a strong Teflon coating over the bubble of us.

But involving the police was new.

To be confronted with a cellphone-wielding cyclist on the forest trails behind my house, and talk with the local RCMP detachment about my parenting choices at that moment? Well, that presented a challenge to the Teflon.

In the cyclist's defence, she was acting out of concern. I see that. I don't judge her for calling the police. But I do wonder what it was about a differently abled, sweaty runner on a trail frequented by walkers, runners and cyclists, that made her think he was lost? Should people with disabilities not be exercising strenuously?

In some ways, though, her response eases my mind – makes me believe I live in a community where there's support around my son.

This is important, because now that he's an adult and not in school any more, there's a marked difference in institutional support – ironically, at the time in his life when he yearns

for independence and needs that support. For families of kids with special needs, leaving Grade 12 may hold little or no eager anticipation of their future. Graduation is less a marker of achievement than a marker of dread for the unknown. My son has always relied on the kindness of strangers, family love and the care of friends. But people live busy lives and increasingly, his world keeps shrinking. At 21, his world has fewer people in it than when he was 10 or 16, and I suspect it's that way for many families like ours.

My partner and I differ about what's best for our adult son. In the midst of our parental debate is Jess, who in some ways, wants the same things

as other young adults. But his mind lives in a Grade 1 world. He can learn a routine well and proudly holds a part-time produce clerk job at our neighbourhood grocery store. He volunteers with the parks and recreation commission and at his former elementary school. He takes pride in being helpful, in doing a job properly on his own. But he cannot problem solve.

These North Vancouver forest trails and the quaint village where his job and some of his volunteering takes place is a 10-minute walk from home. It's Jess's world. He knows it. Considerable resources have been expended teaching Jess how to cross at crosswalks. The route to and from the village has been planned and practised for months.

Jess checks for traffic after he pushes the crosswalk button. I know this. I've seen him do it. But is he checking because that's on his mental list? Or is he checking to see if there are cars? I don't know. Because my son's attention, while trainable, is not reliable. I wonder about the driver who's distracted, or in a rush and not seeing the tall young man stepping into the crosswalk because the light told him it was okay.

All of this scrolls through my mind as I gaze at this helmeted woman in cycling spandex. "Are you the mom of the young man in the turquoise shirt?" I nod, and she says into her phone: "Thank you so much. I'm sorry, I found the parent, he's fine." She starts apologizing to me. "I could see he was ..." her voice trails off, not knowing how to describe my son's disabilities and risk offending me. "Well," she ventures, "He wasn't responding to me and he seemed ..."

"It's okay," I reassure her. She's veering into the "overly solicitous" category of stranger. "Thank you," I say. "You did that because you were concerned and you care. Thank you for acting on your concern."

She apologizes several times, breathing hard from her workout and anxiety over my son. Now we're both feeling anxious, but I know from experience I must set aside my needs to deal with hers first. Jess comes zooming up to me and I disengage from her, for him.

"Great job Jess, now run around Mom and back up the hill to the bridge and then come back! Way to go! You've got this!" I call to his retreating back. I had devised a system of him running back and forth from a landmark near our house to where the dog and I were on the trail, creating laps of varying distances as the dog and I walked. He'd be out of my sight for a few minutes at most. He's wearing one of his running shirts, this one from a 10-kilometre race three years ago. The team was organized by my friend and she named it after him. "Jess Do It" is written on a turquoise background.

While Jess runs up the trail, there's a moment to reflect. Today marked the first time I tried a little independence for him. Jess had a remarkable running career in high school, and I've been motivated to keep his interest in running fired up. Usually, if I can't find someone to run with him, I sit nearby while he runs on a local track. But he prefers the trails and I thought, I could juggle exercise for Jess with walking the dog and experiment with giving Jess an independence challenge. The multitasking part of my mothering was super happy.

He did great. But this woman's reaction has me worrying. Jess just started walking home from work on his own two weeks ago. Now I'm afraid I'm going to get calls from my local police detachment or worried neighbours. Was I wrong to give him some independence? What's the right balance between managing my anxiety and giving him some normal sovereignty over his life?

I have no fingernails left over our uncertain future. His autonomy, or lack of it, is very much my future. Today has reminded me – again – that because my child has special needs, everything's complicated. But I'm also reminded, in our community, people do care.

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