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Keep public places open to the autistic

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Keep public places open to the autistic

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What does it mean to be "well-behaved"?

A recent Associated Press article (Aug. 17 World-Herald) discussed the "disruptive behavior" of individuals with autism. As mothers and activists on behalf of children with autism, we have a different perspective.

We are concerned with the article's "us versus them" tenor, and we are writing because we wish to share a more inclusive view of autism and public space. We hope to broaden discussion of autism's issues, as well as invite participation in solutions.

As the article mentioned, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that one out of every 150 American children has autism or a related disorder (termed autism spectrum disorders, or ASDs).

The vast majority of people with known ASDs are children. While most are still relatively young, the leading edge of a huge wave of affected people is quickly "aging out" of the public school systems.

What will our society do to engage and care for these hundreds of thousands of people with autism when they reach adulthood? We are deeply concerned about this, as well as the day-to-day needs of these precious children.

And they are precious, as is every child. The AP article placed public space, civility and even the parents of autistic children in opposition to them. What sort of civilization would institutionalize those who do not easily conform to a narrow ideal of public behavior, as one person quoted in the article suggested?

This idea is contradicted by federal laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Each of us has seen families' and classmates' lives uniquely enriched by children with ASDs. Further, we believe that a welcoming and diverse public sphere benefits us all.

ASD parents are keenly aware of the risks of exposing their children to the public in shopping malls, parks, streets and schools. Guiding a child in a place where she or he may "melt down" can be terribly hard. The parent must struggle to help the child and manage others' disapproval.

Most parents would probably agree that they avoid places that are likely to overstimulate their child and bring on a meltdown. We might remember that most children, including those unaffected by autism, at times can be annoying and disruptive : and even melt down : in public.

Like them, our children must be out in public. That is where they learn crucial life skills and appropriate behavior. Like everyone else, they have a right to occupy public spaces.

Through contact with our children, people who lack a friend or family member with autism can gain awareness of their abilities as well as their challenges. Just as the tiny inconvenience to the able-bodied of stepping around a shopper's assistive device in the grocery aisle is more than justified by that person's freedom to shop, compassion for those with autism helps them and their caregivers to navigate public spaces more easily.

We must also acknowledge that there is a difference between "disruption" and "danger." Swift intervention is needed for people who pose a clear danger to themselves and/or others.

However, there are many more documented cases of people with autism being harmed by others than the reverse. People with ASDs frequently misunderstand instructions (say, from police) or process information so slowly that they fail to respond in a timely way and are forcibly restrained.

Children with ASDs are easy targets for bullies. It is crucial for all involved to work together to help people with ASDs navigate the social world while maintaining safety for everyone. In our view, a "well-behaved" society welcomes everyone to its public spaces, regardless of ability or health status.

Last April, the Autism Society of Nebraska sponsored the society's first Autism Puzzle Walk. Despite the snow, more than 400 people gathered to walk in support of Nebraskans with autism and their families. For one morning, the Chalco Hills Recreation Area became autism-friendly public space. We invite you to join us next year and to learn more about autism.

For information, visit <http://www.autismnebraska.org>.

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