

Teaching Your Child to Love Like Jesus Does

If your child is on the autism spectrum, news reports of Elliot Rodger's shooting spree likely make your blood run cold – especially on top of Adam Lanza's massacre last year. Let me remind you of what every mother who loves a kid on the spectrum needs to hear. The percentage of shootings carried out by young men on the spectrum as opposed to those who are not is consistent. Being on the spectrum does not raise the probability that your child will do such a thing!

Once I put that fear to rest, then I can listen to the stories of Rodger's shooting spree and think without condemnation on the struggles my son is likely to have out of proportion with his peers because he is on the spectrum. The one I am thinking about today is empathy.

Empathy: the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner;

When our son was first tested and diagnosed at age 3, I remember well a particular test they gave him. The tester showed him a package of M and M's and asked him what he thought would be in them. He said M and M's. She dumped them in his lap, and it was actually filled with pink puff balls. They had a good laugh. She brought in another clinician from outside and asked my son what SHE would think was in the M and M bag. He said, "Pink puff balls."

Such a simple test, yet it was revealing and consistent with my experience of him. I talked with the psychiatrist afterwards, and he pointed out that most kids at age 3 would

recognize that the new person would not know what they knew about what was inside the bag. But my son was behind developmentally that way. Something about empathy did not come naturally to him. My second son is quite empathetic, and it's been interesting to watch it develop naturally in one child while not in the other.

This has caused me to focus on empathy in my home. Probably every parent should try to teach their kids empathy, but I'm not sure I would have recognized that need if I hadn't witnessed so clearly that it wasn't coming naturally to my oldest. Kids (and adults) on the spectrum struggle to accurately assess the emotions of another person. They often attribute wrong motives to someone, something particularly evident in the writings of Elliot Rodgers.

A girl walks by him and doesn't make eye contact, and he assumes that she is deliberately cutting him down with her rejection. She may be late for class, sad about breaking up with her boyfriend, or simply scared talking to a stranger alone on campus. But he assumes a motive that is centered around himself and takes it deeply personally.

As a believer, Scripture gives me several concrete ways to disciple my son through this, and it all centers around the greatest command.

1) Love gives the benefit of the doubt according to I Cor. 13. Love is ever ready to believe the best of someone. So I have to work with my son on attributing to others the best motives rather than the worst.

2) Love treats others the way you WANT to be treated (Mt. 7:12) not the way you believe they just treated you.

My son has come a long way, but reading Rodgers writings in news reports has reminded me what does not come naturally for my son. I want daily to help him exercise his ability to respond to people with Biblical love and not the narcissistic,

self absorbed way that comes easier to him than his brother.

I find it interesting (and supernaturally inexplicable) the relationship between a parents' discipleship of their child and the Spirit's work within that child's heart. I can get my son to conform externally, for a time. But I can't change his heart. Yet the Spirit allows me to work with Him in my son's life.

I cast my bread on the waters because that's what God says to do, and the Spirit returns it after many days as only He can. It blesses me to walk with the Spirit with my son. I attempt to teach my sons empathy, yet I find I learn and grow as much as them by God's grace. In Christ, the journey with my son on the spectrum can be beautiful, not fearful.

*Adapted from **Wendy Alsup's** blog, **Practical Theology for Women**. Wendy has authored three books including **By His Wounds You are Healed: How the Message of Ephesians Transforms a Woman's Identity**. She is also a wife, mom and college math teacher who loves ministering to women.*