

Adam's Year of Cruelty

Filmmaker documents bullying of son with Asperger Syndrome

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Asperger Syndrome is a cruel condition.

The communication disorder distinguished by a failure to pick up social cues, body language or even make eye contact spells social isolation for the 15,000 Canadians who suffer from it.

Filmmaker Marianne Kaplan captured a year of cruelty inflicted on her 12-year-old son, Adam, as well as all the challenges his entire family faced, in her documentary *The Boy Inside*.

The film unflinchingly looks at the schoolyard bullying that has always been a part of Adam's life and a short clip of the movie at theboyinside.com shows him facing the first day of the school year in Grade 7 worrying about getting bullied. He expresses the hope that this year will be better than the last.

Kaplan said the goal of her film was to educate the public about Asperger Syndrome and to provide a glimpse into the pain and struggle an entire family faces when one of its members is challenged by this condition, which is a form of autism. Her daughter, for instance, who is two years older than Adam, doesn't want him coming to her school – it makes her life so complicated.

"In so many important ways they look like typical kids and, in some cases, behave like typical kids, so that people expect them to be typical kids — but they're not," says Kaplan in a telephone interview from her B.C. home. "They don't read social cues."

Things they do, like standing too close, talking too loudly, harping on a special topic, being obsessive about hobbies, not looking people in the eye, being oblivious to the needs of others in a social setting make people think they are "bratty," says Kaplan. Knowing about the condition can help people be kind, she says, adding, "Kids need more information and to be more empathetic."

Children with Asperger Syndrome are four times more likely to be bullied than other students, she says, and their parents also face social isolation when others judge or blame them for their children's behaviour.

When B.C. minister of state for child care, Linda Reid, saw the film, she was moved to incorporate it in every elementary school program in the province with back-up materials for teachers. When the prime bully of the movie saw himself on film, he wrote a heartfelt email to Adam, apologizing for his behaviour and saying he had no idea how hurtful he had been.

Kaplan counts these as victories, proof that her movie is changing hearts and minds.

It has been shown in many public forums and film festivals in the past year, including on the CBC last fall. The Aspergers Society of Ontario hosts a screening tomorrow at 2 p.m. at 333 Bloor St. E. followed by a question and answer session with Kaplan and Adam in attendance. An avid hockey player, Adam will also take in a Leafs game and tour the Hockey Hall of Fame. Now 14 and in Grade 9, Adam is finding high school much more pleasant than elementary school. He is proud he hasn't got into a fight "since grade school" and backed away from one only this week.

"He offended me in some way and there was going to be a fight. But, at the last minute, I called it off. Everyone around was yelling fight, fight, fight – they were disappointed. I just walked away."

Although his mother reports he spends most weekends alone with the family and doesn't have many friends, Adam says he has got a "nerdy group" he hangs out with in school adding, "but I'm kind of nerdy too."

It's a funny thing, his mother points out, that Adam has difficulty talking to individuals but has been able to hold an audience of hundreds in his thrall.

Adam agrees that talking to groups who see the movie "is kind of fun. I'm nervous with one person but I talk to a group."

Kaplan explains the difficulty looking people in the eye, stems from the amount and intensity of information being received.

"There's so much information coming to them; they don't have filters to shut out the noise, the light, the smell. To look people in the eye is too intense. They look away and listen."

Another trait is arguing or having "melt downs" when the noise and confusion gets too be much. Social skills training is one of the main ways to treat this disorder, says Kaplan, with instructions "repeated over and over. They don't get it on one try."