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Deep into the life of a family

Marianne Kaplan's festival film focuses on son's struggles.

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As you make your way up the stairs to the entrance of the charming east-side character house, you can't help but notice that the yard and the front porch are littered with sporting goods: a basketball, a skateboard, a pair of soccer cleats. Anyone walking by might assume the father, mother, sister and brother who live inside are a typical Vancouver family. But the family inside is not typical at all. In fact, this is a very courageous family, who allowed their filmmaker matriarch, director Marianne Kaplan, to make an intimate documentary about a particularly difficult year in their lives.

The Boy Inside: A Journey Into Autism tells the story of Kaplan's family and her 12-year-old son, Adam, who suffers from Asperger's syndrome. Asperger's is a form of high-functioning autism, characterized by socially and emotionally inappropriate behavior. One of the things this means for Adam is that it's seemingly impossible for him to find the one thing he wants most in the world – a friend.

Children with Asperger's look like typical kids, and Adam is no different, but his actions and his inability to read social cues separate him out almost at once, especially now that he's an adolescent.

As Kaplan said, "Adam desperately wants to be accepted." Unfortunately, his mind isn't wired like that of typical kids. The gap in his cognitive abilities means that he is able to verbalize that desire and even talk very articulately about what it means to be a friend and how to be accepted in a group, but, as Kaplan said, "he just can't do it.... He says the wrong thing and he does the wrong thing and he just doesn't get the subtleties of [non-verbal] social interaction like we do." Everyone can relate to feeling rejected. That feeling is magnified when it's our children who are ostracized. As Kaplan said in an interview with the *Independent*, "It's something we've all been through in varying degrees and it's the thing that just kills us about our kids.... They can reject me, they can reject my husband, but when they reject my kids, that's something else ... you want to make it all right for them, but you can't."

It's not for lack of trying. Since Adam was diagnosed with autism at two years of age (his diagnosis later changed when, through intensive therapies, he learned to talk and communicate), Kaplan has made it her mission to ensure that he was integrated into school and social situations. But it hasn't been easy. From the doctor who made Adam's first diagnosis to various teachers, parents and peers, Kaplan and her son have found it

very difficult to find acceptance in the world. Fortunately for Kaplan, one of the first people she met after Adam was diagnosed set her on a positive path.

Kaplan described her meeting with Robin Gelfer, another Vancouver mom of an autistic child, like this: "[Gelfer] could see that I was devastated and she looked at me and she said, 'I want you to know, this is not a death sentence. You have to understand that.' This was someone I did not know, I had never met her before and she was so generous and warm and so supportive and welcoming. And after that experience with her, I made a commitment that when I was ever approached by a parent for information that I would always be generous and helpful and I have done that and I think that's a Jewish trait."

While it is true that Kaplan wanted to give people a glimpse into life with an Asperger's child, it is also an extension of her mission to educate people about the effects of autism and Asperger's, and about techniques on how to interact with these kids.

With more and more children, and adults, being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders, Kaplan said this kind of education is imperative.

This intimate film makes it crystal clear that living with a child with Asperger's takes a toll on a family – something Kaplan's family was willing to expose in the film. While Kaplan acknowledges that it's been her who has "been in the trenches" with Adam, her husband, Peter, and daughter, Sara, have had their own struggles. Living with Adam hasn't been hard on her marriage, but Kaplan said she and her husband are committed to one another. She added, "Luckily, we've never reached rock bottom together."

As for Sara, Kaplan said, "It's hard for her, she has felt neglected. In her mind, Adam gets all the attention and to a certain extent, that's true." The silver lining is, "Sara is this incredibly empathetic person and has learned skills that will serve her well later in life. A lot of good qualities have come to her through this experience."

Kaplan's willingness to expose her own family's struggle with living with an autistic child has had an unexpected result for her. Even before the film has screened, publicity about it has precipitated an onslaught of e-mails to Kaplan from numerous families with autistic children, thanking her for making this cautiously optimistic film and showing others what their lives are like. Kaplan said, "When I see this response, it validates my decision to put our lives out there to look at."

The Boy Inside premieres at the Vancouver International Film Festival with screenings on Saturday, Sept. 30, and Tuesday, Oct. 10. Advance tickets are recommended. For more information, go to www.theboyinside.com.

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