As a rule, we don’t give much thought to the social delineation of parents of children on the autism spectrum. We see all parents of children with disabilities as parents who work diligently to keep their family units together, fight to educate their children to the best of their ability, and struggle to lead fulfilling lives. What we might not know is that parents of children with moderate to severe disabilities may be one of the loneliest groups of parents in terms of social and emotional stability. Because young moderate to severe children on the spectrum oftentimes have severe behavioral issues, subsequently they are seen in the community far less. Imagine how challenging it is for a mother to grocery shop for a family of five while she attempts to keep her 5-year-old autistic son from jumping out of the cart in the dairy aisle.

Because these mothers and fathers have less opportunity to be in the community with their children than their counterparts, this makes for less opportunity to develop and nurture new friendships with other parents in the public eye.

Parents of mild/moderate children many times overlook inviting children with severe behavioral issues to their child’s birthday party and outings, which is where most of our parents make lifelong friends. This consequently lessens even more the chances of developing a strong support system with other likeminded parents. Potentially, these would be the very friends who can offer expert advice about service providers, where to locate the best resources in town, changes in the state and federal laws, and how that neighborhood school is doing in standardized test score ratings. These friends could also be that much-needed ear when someone is just needed to listen.

I have even had parents confide in me that they are no longer invited to close relative’s homes—like sisters and brothers—for Thanksgivings and Fourth of July celebrations because of their child with autism. I believe this to be the saddest exclusion of all, being shunned by your own family members on holidays and festive gatherings because your child is too destructive or the family members feel “uncomfortable” in their presence and don’t know what to say to you.
The question is how can we? And will we be able to change this? We may be successful in altering the isolation that many of these parents experience as more media awareness about autism becomes available to the lay person. We also need to work case by case.

Imagine if you were a mother of an elementary school child, how terribly isolated and rejected you would feel if you heard about a party that your son or daughter had not been invited to. I think the best way to help these parents feel like they are members of the community is to remember the next time you are planning a get-together, party, or celebration, think about one mother or father who you may have overlooked—for whatever reason—and pick up the phone and call them. Let them know how much it would mean to you if they came to your child’s party, your home for Thanksgiving, or if they just dropped by for a cup of coffee or tea. We can make a world of difference in someone’s life with just the smallest amount of good intentions.

Joanne Lara, MA founded Autism Movement Therapy®. She is a professor at National University in Los Angeles. She was the Technical Advisor/Autism Consultant for Kiefer Sutherland’s show Touch. Joanne also produced the documentary Generation A: Portraits of Autism and the ARTS. Her new book Autism Movement Therapy® Method: Waking up the Brain! was published in October 2015. Contact her at www.autismmovementtherapy.org or by email at jolara@roadrunner.com.

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