

Justin and I were sitting in the lobby of Jeremy's speech therapist's office today, waiting for him to finish his session. Another mom also sat with her teenage daughter. The daughter obviously had significant, physical and behavioral challenges. Non-verbal, she would often howl or make guttural noises. She was the type of person to get stared at in public, or at least have people take a furtive second look after she'd passed by.

As the four of us waited, the girl continued to writhe in her chair or make inappropriate noises. Mom would hastily shush her, embarrassed, then glance at me as if to apologize and plead for understanding: She was trying her utmost to control her child.

My heart went out to her, as I'm often in the identical position with Jeremy. Every time the mom would try to hush her daughter, I smiled back as desperately as I could, earnestly trying to convey just how much I understood.

Justin had been playing with some toys. He'd fashioned a pretend ice cream sundae with nesting cups and checkers pieces.

"Here mommy! Eat your ice cream cone!" Justin chimed. I silently obliged. For some reason, I felt guilty having a "normal" child who talked and played so charmingly, in front of this woman I'd never met or even spoken to, yet for whom I felt such compassion and sympathy. This, even though I too, had a non-verbal son who made guttural noises, moaned and displayed virtually the same inappropriate social behaviors.

To my horror, Justin walked over to the teenage girl with his sundae. Paralyzed, I could only watch and wait helplessly to see what mortifying thing he might do or say to her.

"Here! You can have an ice cream, too!" he piped, and proudly thrust it at her with dimpled fists. The girl howled with delight and flapped her arms in excitement. The mother's eyes watered. It appeared neither of them was accustomed to having another child approach the girl to play.

But the girl didn't accept my son's ice cream, nor did she reply. Justin offered it again, repeating, "Here! I made an ice cream cone for you, too!" Still, she just

howled and flapped. The mother's delight quickly reverted back to embarrassment, her eyes pleading with me again. I, too, instantly reverted to the dread and mortification I was stricken with when Justin first approached her.

Sure enough, the question came tumbling out of Justin's mouth before I could stop it, "Mommy, what's wrong with her?" Before I could scramble for an

## *A Lesson on* "What is Normal?"



from Justin

By Diane Dokko Kim

answer, Justin answered his own question, "Maybe she don't like ice cream..."

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