GROWING IS FOR PARENTS TOO

Joan started the session by talking about our relationship, which we have worked very hard together to build. “I just want to say that I understand better now why we do the group with both parents and kids,” she began. “As you know, I always felt that when you lead the group with only the children it's better. But maybe what I really thought was that it’s better for me to have time away from my daughter — a break — an hour without having to deal with all of it. That it’s better for both us to have some time away.”

Joan continued. “I didn't in the beginning, but I trust you more now. You're honest with us and the kids. That was hard for me — I really hated the time you said my daughter was spoiled. I mean she is, but she couldn't handle hearing it.” She paused. “Maybe I couldn't handle it.”

Other parents then spoke about wanting the kids to have their own group. We’ve been talking about this for months, and I’ve held my ground — I think it’s very important for the parents and children to be in the group together more often then not. The parents have to take collective responsibility for raising the children in the group, and I encourage them to do what parents are told never to do — to speak to other parents about how they’re talking and what they’re saying to their children.

All of the relationships in the room — especially those that are outside of the family — are critical to the success of the therapy. The children — and their parents — are no longer alone.

Mary said, “He’s going to be really mad at me when I tell him I’m coming with him next week. He wants to be with the kids — to play and not have to deal with all this stuff. He wants a break from me. I mean sometimes it's fun, but other times it's really hard.”

Joan spoke again: “Sometimes it’s so painful to see how limited my daughter is. I mean, she's growing, she's developing, and that's why I've stayed. But this is not an easy therapy to be in. It’s in your face the whole time — the kind of mother you are, who your child is, how wonderful they are, and how you love them. I see my own failure, and it’s unbearably hard.”

Anne was crying. She said, “I get frightened that no matter how much he’s growing — and he is — that people will hurt him.”

“How will they hurt him?” I asked.

“They’ll take advantage of him,” she said. “He's a pushover for that because he won't see it coming.”

“He will get hurt,” I replied. “Of course he will.”

Joan agreed. “This is a reality of life for human beings,” she said. “For other children, even kids who don't have Asperger’s. It's probably true in some ways for us as adults. Maybe he'll learn from it like everybody else. You can't protect him from life.”

The parents were very upset as they struggled to create this conversation. I saw that they were working hard to be honest about what they think or feel, and tried to express what it’s really like to live their lives.

Joan brought up a group session a few weeks ago — one of the children had said he didn't think he wanted to be alive. She talked about how hard it was to be in the room then. Another parent said that the group had seemed chaotic — the children had been having lots of reactions and she had felt crazy because it was raising a lot for her about her own life.

Larry says he thought that I had been upset that day. I said it was true, that emotional chaos — with the children in so much pain — can be hard and sometimes upsetting.

I was glad we were having this conversation, and told that to the group. I said it was helping me see that I need more from them — I need more support; I need them to be giving to me so that I can do what I have to do.

“What do you mean, you need more from us?” Joan asked. “Why would you need anything?”

The other parents sat silently.

Joan answered her own question. “No, of course you need stuff. I think we relate to you as the one who’s going to make all the difficulty go away. I can see that's not fair, and it doesn't make any sense.”

“This is challenging for me, too,” I said. “I need you to be working collectively with me, showing your support, being thoughtful in how you respond. That’s what will create the kind of environment in which I can give what I have to give — which is often a response that’s very challenging. That’s what I need to do to help the group to grow — and I mean the kids and the adults. Sometimes you act out because you’re frustrated or upset, and I need you to work harder.”

Joan was nodding. “I get that,” she said. “We act like we’re the victims and drop it in your lap — ‘Here, YOU fix it!.’’ She paused. “I don't want to do that with you any more. I realize that I've been mad at you, but it was because I've learned something I never thought was true. That you can get so focused on the diagnosis that it’s what your child becomes — a diagnosis. In the last few sessions, I've learned that my daughter is like me. She's difficult like me. She's impulsive like me. She’s a brat like me.”

Others around the room laughed, and Joan went on. “I've never wanted to see that before. I wanted it to be all about her diagnosis or something. But I’m able to be more honest now and I can see that it’s not. As hard as that is, I do have to thank you for it. I’m growing, too.”

Being a parent in today's world is challenging. Parents often bring their children to therapy to get "fixed." But the parents in this group are growing — they’re collectively creating new ways to parent, to grow themselves and to embrace the conflict of what it means to be a parent.