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## Children whose parents have disabilities

Excuse my attention-getting metaphor, because I don't really believe "bad" is a good descriptor for parents who, through no fault of their own, lack the "wiring" to meet their children's most primal needs. But just as there are children who don't fit their parents' expectations — about whom Solomon writes in *Far From The Tree* (Random House) — how much worse is the fate of the defenceless infant born in the expectation of responsive, empathetic parenting, when they are born to parents who lack the genetic encoding to give it?

In 1996, when Asperger's syndrome or "high-functioning" autism was just starting to be recognised, I founded the world's first support group for people who were raised by autistic parents. At that time, the world was only waking up to the notion of Asperger's in children, but nobody seemed to have twigged that autistic children do grow up and sometimes have children of their own.

Since early childhood, I had sought the world over for the words to describe my mother's strange behaviours. By the time I was 15 I was an expert in 1960s psychiatry gleaned from my local library, but nothing in the psychiatry textbooks described my mother's "case". Not manic-depressive, not schizophrenic, not catatonic, so what else was there? Not "mentally retarded" either, as, rarely for 1950s women, my mother had a university education.

So since my mother was not "mad" as far as psychiatry was concerned, I came to the only remaining conclusion — that she was "bad". I figured she must have gone out on one moral limb too far, one of selfishness, laziness, and wilful stupidity. And had got permanently stuck out there. I was desperate for understanding and validation. Then along came the internet. I sought in vain for the support group I needed, and realised I would have to start my own.

Even as a five-year-old, I thought there was something terribly "wrong" with my mother and saw her as a "baby peering out from behind a grown-up's eyes". In public, she was excruciatingly embarrassing. I watched in shame as she failed to notice that people were desperate to find a polite exit from her interminable monologues. To me, it was as if she had walked through a mirror from another dimension, where the social rules were much simpler than ours. But what was worse was that infantile geocentricism, the hair-trigger public meltdowns, the constant need for attention, the perseverative clutching at me, the same baby questions over and over, day after day. And worst of all, my heart bled for my father, who bore the brunt of the daily outbursts.

This is no "desperate housewives" tale of pre-feminist sexism. Both my parents worked, but my father had a triple day. He had to be mother and father to me, while I had to be mother to her. Meanwhile, she would delay dinner till 8 or 9pm, while she toyed with, say, cutting up one cucumber with mathematical precision, while we did all the rest. My mother was impervious to the feelings of others and had no capacity for self-reflection at all.

I've offered this keyhole view of our lives, just to establish my commentator's credentials. It is by no means the most heartbreaking story I heard from the roughly 200 people who joined the online group before I burnt out from supporting them.

As the first members began to share their stories, a pattern of neglect and "abuse" emerged consistent with a clinical description of Asperger's. I put the word "abuse" in quotes, because the word has too many cultural associations of intentionality, incest and physical violence. In our families, there was little or none of that. It was simply that mum or dad, (or worse, both), were not "there" for us, could not mirror us, could not anticipate or respond to our needs, were not aware of us as separate beings. If we existed for them at all. We had to parent

ourselves and them as well, be their social translators, while struggling from a position of inequality not to be drawn into their bizarre fixations, their all-consuming anxieties, their hair-trigger meltdowns, their isolating tendencies, and more.

In its early days our support group did not get much traction. The idea that there might be a genetic component of inadequate parenting was taboo and threatening to the “blank slate” view of the world that we grew up in. Perhaps now, as the nature/nurture pendulum has swung back to a realisation of the reality and power of “nature”, it’s time at last to have a mature conversation about this last taboo.

In the case of my mother and myself, the outcome of facing the reality of neurodiversity, for better or worse, has been wonderful. I have a realistic understanding of the struggles she has had in a world that doesn’t understand her, and my anger has turned to respect and protectiveness.

It is good to know, now she has declined to dementia that the constant uproar between us has turned to a glowing warmth till the end of her days.