

## Good Morning Officer

About three months ago, my son began dressing like a police officer. His already small wardrobe further whittled down to a favoured pair of navy Nike track pants with a white reflective stripe down the legs. Couple that with one navy Superman t-shirt (\$7 Wal-Mart jobbie) and you've got yourself an officer. Little sister's size 5 gold lame' faux fur-lined winter vest adds glam and authenticity, while a dollar store police badge, officer costume hat, and dad's pilot sunglasses top of the look. Ta dah... officer on the scene. The costume itself can be seen as simple dress up, child's play. But the issues it brings to surface and what it tells me about fellow man are anything but.

There's no harm in dress up, I've been told; imaginative play is a heartwarming throw back to the days before our children disappeared behind their various screens and hand held devices. But it's more than that for me. My little guy is nearing nine years of age, and also on the autism spectrum. I am torn between letting him fully express himself, and protecting him from what he doesn't quite understand. That others may laugh at his choice of clothes, or worse yet, laugh at him. If a spunky, self-assured neurotypical kid of the same age opts to wear something a little risqué, they do so understanding the social risk they have taken.

They are able to weigh the consequences, and make an informed decision. My little guy is not. He follows the beat of his own drummer, uncaring, but also unaware of the inherent risk involved. As mama, I have to protect him. But, I face the struggle of stifling his self-assurance, a self-assurance I would kill for, or offsetting the potential judgement of others. Do I protect him, or preserve him?

And judge they will. Sidelong glances as we prance through the grocery store, quizzical glares, or worse yet, robust laughter. At my baby. There are few things in life that can sting as much as your child being dismissed or ridiculed by others. As he is blissfully unaware of these reactions, I must temper my own feelings of the desire to grab a supersized roll of bubble wrap to shield him from this.

Because he remains nonplussed, delightfully skipping through the world, Billy stick in hand. Instead, when I see those looks, I reach out, pat him lovingly, speak sweetly to him...lots of 'handsome boy', 'sweetheart' and 'angel' words from me...to let onlookers know that this is a child who is loved. Not a joke or a funny thing they saw today. Like a mother lion on the savannah, I scan the crowd, meeting eyes, deciphering who is laughing with, and who is laughing at. But people standing in line, waiting to be served, often find themselves with little else to do, but to keep a close eye on the little boy, all dressed up, jumping up and down, meandering about, unable to mimic their stillness. People. Regular, run of

the mill, smartly dressed adults, who know no better than to give way to their curiosity, and disregard all manner of manners or tact. People I am sure, who would donate money to an autism campaign if asked sweetly, but do not have the understanding to recognize it for what it is when it is their temporary neighbour in the world.

Nine years doesn't sound like a ripe old age, but it would appear to be the age where my son loses the shield of youth. Where odd behaviours, and boisterous loads of energy are no longer tangled up into the disguise of early childhood. Where more rigid expectations are placed on him for how he should be behaving, ...by now. But autism doesn't necessarily recognize these rules and regulations; in fact it could kind of care less. It steps out from behind this shield of youth and continues to be itself. My child continues to be himself, and true to himself without young age, we are left feeling naked in the world. Young behaviours, but not in a young child. Enter judgement, questions...reality. Few can recognize autism just by looking, unless they know what to look for. There are no distinct facial features, no paraphernalia of disability like a wheelchair or a cane that scream accommodation, or instant understanding. Sometimes you get the flap of the hands that are the universal symbol for those of us in the know. Us moms go

around with the puzzle pieces dotting us like spots on a Dalmatian, hoping people will see the symbol and cue understanding.

Time and time again, I've found myself alarmed by those who do not dismiss him.

Always, it is the scruffier amongst us, the less well dressed, perhaps those who are doting a cigarette outside a store entrance. Perhaps those who haven't always had it so easy, who may have found themselves from time to time being hastily judged, whose appearances may also give way to preconceived notions.

These are the people who will look at him, dead pan, no plastic smiles upon their faces, and simply state, "Good morning officer."

He doesn't miss a beat, without looking into their eyes, he continues walking, but quietly utters in return, "good morning". Because, as he's told me many times before: it's not a costume, it's a uniform.