



MY SON THE TEACHER

By Dennis Gordon

As human beings, we tend to reject, fear, or avoid what we don't understand. Such were my own feelings concerning mentally handicapped people. Looking back, it was partly the result of a one-time childhood exposure to a group of handicapped children who were visiting the same sports event as our school class. I found myself reacting negatively to their behaviour and appearance, which were outside my normal experience. This was the 1950s — a time when people not as 'normal' as the rest of us lived in institutions and didn't interact much with society.

Early-established prejudices are not readily overturned unless they have to be. In my forties I was blessed with a third son, Adrian, who turned out to have a genetic abnormality that results in, among other things, retarded intellectual development. The circumstances of his birth and first 18 months were a trial — a premature delivery with complications, slow weight gain and inability to breast-feed, hypercalcaemia, three hernia operations, and the discovery that he had Williams Syndrome. This condition is marked by the loss of some genes from one of the chromosomes of every chromosome 7 pair in his body. Only some of the roles of these genes are known. One is to make elastin, a protein that is found in connective tissues, arterial walls, and the dermis of the skin, and its lack contributes to the facial characteristics that make every Williams kid look as if they belong to the same family.

Our experiences in the neonatal unit, and subsequently, have allowed my wife and me to share in the distresses of other parents, giving us more understanding and compassion for sufferers of disabilities. We were also to learn that life with Adrian would bring self-discovery, acceptance, and the overturning of some prejudices.

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First, let me tell you what Adrian *is*. He is all boy. He is social, outgoing, fun-loving, empathetic, and compassionate. Curiously, these attributes are said to be characteristic of Williams kids generally. Perhaps because of them, and to our great relief, Adrian was readily accepted, even loved, by the teachers and children at kindergarten and primary school. Now 13 and attending high school, Adrian has only the abilities of a 6-year-old in most tasks: vocabulary, reading, counting, drawing, and bodily coordination.

I like the descriptor 'special needs'. That exactly describes Adrian and all children like him. He *is* a 'normal' human being. He just operates at a level that is according to his personal abilities. He laughs, he cries, he plays, he interacts. He thinks, learns, reasons, schemes, and solves problems. Above all, he loves and thrives on love.

Because his needs are obvious it is easy to respond to them. I have been gentler, more merciful, understanding, and forgiving with Adrian than with my two older boys. Perhaps this comes with age and experience, but there's no doubt that his very needfulness evokes my compassionate response. One begins to look at all 'special-needs' people in a different way.

Actually, my relationship with Adrian has helped me to understand a lot about God. Although we human beings are remarkable creatures with extraordinary quality of mind, behaviourally we can be a pretty pathetic lot. We are so error-prone, so susceptible to character weaknesses like pride, lust, greed, and just plain orneriness that I often wonder why God bothers to deal with us. *No* human is immune to messing up, and that includes the most upright members of society — the Bible makes a startling assertion about this: "There is none righteous, not one", wrote Paul the Apostle to Christians in first-century Rome. None? That's something to think about.





Dennis and Brenda Gordon with Adrian.

When I observe the blatant

Williams Syndrome

Williams Syndrome (WS) was recognised only relatively recently. In 1961, J.C.P. Williams, a Dunedin heart specialist, noted that some of his pediatric patients shared many characteristics. In addition to some cardiovascular problems, they had elfin facial features and seemed to be mentally retarded. Since that time physicians have noted other traits, all apparently linked to a variable number of genes lacking from a region of chromosome 7. WS is not a new condition, however. It exists in all ethnic groups, at a nominal level of occurrence of about one in every 20,000 births worldwide. It has been suggested that Williams people were the inspiration for folk tales about elves, pixies, and other 'wee people'.

WS is just one of many genetic conditions that affect neural development. Researchers are finding that integrated studies of Williams and other syndromes are helpful in exploring how genes affect brain development and behaviour. In short, our special-needs brothers and sisters are helping us to learn more about ourselves as human beings.

There are active WS associations in many countries, including New Zealand. Enquiries can be made to: NZ Williams Syndrome Association, 19 Skibo St, Dunedin. A NZ website is being developed.

crassness and casual immorality on prime-time television and in popular magazines these days, and see people poisoning their minds and bodies with drugs and drunkenness, I think God must consider human beings as quite spiritually retarded. That would seem to be a more serious condition than mere mental retardation. Actually, one of ancient Israel's prophets quoted God as declaring human nature to be a kind of sickness — "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure". Perhaps this explains another observation made by Paul to the church in Rome — "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so." From God's perspective, the human condition is pretty serious, terminal in fact.

Fortunately, God fully understands our condition, how it came about, and how to effect a cure. Christians believe that, in the person of Jesus, God himself experienced the human condition. He did not sin, but he knew temptation. He grieved about human suffering to the point of anguish. He cared so much he even bore our sinfulness personally, suffering torture and death to rescue us. Accepting his sacrifice personally, and admitting our need for God then to dwell *in us* through the Holy Spirit, is the cure to our otherwise incurable 'heart' condition. It does require, however, that each of us admits that we are indeed spiritually

retarded and need help.

Actually, God loves all human beings. But the ones he finds particularly irresistible are those who admit they have 'special needs' and want to become his children. At one level, this world is an incubator for the children of God, a kind of spiritual neonatal unit in which God sees little ones who are fighting to survive. This includes the worst of us — God knows what makes us the way we are. And his heart is captured by our vulnerability.

As the father of a special-needs child, I can identify with the words of the psalmist in the Bible: "As a

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father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those that fear him; for he knows how we are formed." Adrian is only now beginning to understand his condition and explain it to people, but he has always recognised his need for help, and my wife and I can't help but respond. And neither can God to anyone who recognises a need for *his* help in conquering character weaknesses that arise from our human nature.

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