

THE CRAFT OF CONVERSATION

Did you manage to see the "Pokemon 3" movie last spring? Neither did I, thank heaven. It made so little money that it might be (keep your fingers crossed) the last in that film series of cute cuddly monsters fighting to the death. In fact, we parents may have entered into a short, happy period in which no grand juggernaut is commandeering our children's attention and allowance money, at least until the "Harry Potter" movie opens. For the first time in years, we seem to be free of those big phenomena that cause our children to buy, buy, buy, watch, watch, watch, and thrash around the house like annoying little ninjas.

I am personally thankful for this lull, because experts have been telling my wife and me that, rather than sheltering my son Liam from this heavily merchandised dreck, we need not only to expose him to it but to encourage an interest in it.

Liam has a condition called Asperger's Syndrome, a type of high-functioning autism that makes it hard for him to make friends. Social interaction is as confusing for him as reading is for dyslexics. While most children learn the mechanics and rules of sociability by imitation, for kids with Asperger's, it just doesn't sink in. This includes the ability to have real conversations.

To give my son something to talk about with his first-grade classmates, some therapists have recommended that we push him to follow the latest childhood fads. This, of course, is the last thing my wife and I ever intended to do. Our plan when he was born was to expose him to classics like "Oz" and "Curious George," then hope for the best, knowing that crass commercial junk was going to seep in despite our best efforts. Now the experts want us to sit him down and intentionally watch "The Super Megaton Samurai Hour," then buy the toys, backpacks, videos, jumper cable sets and every other tie-in with the show, whether he wanted them or not? It sounded like a form of child abuse to me, not to mention a Faustian bargain.

These days, Liam has his own interests, mainly drawing. His favorite subjects right now are genies, castles, and the fall of Jericho, which he will draw dozens of times. Some people with Asperger's or autism care passionately about arcane topics, which become obsessions they return to again and again to get a calming sense of order in a loud, chaotic world. My instincts tell me Liam's interests haven't become obsessions yet, though most six-year-olds wouldn't begin a casual chat by reciting lists of Australian marsupials or African countries that start with the letter "Z".

Ever since he was diagnosed as neurologically different, my wife and I have had to wrestle with the idea of how "normal" we want him to be. We would like him to be himself, but he has to get along in the world, too. Should he cloak his disability just to be accepted? And haven't we already been tampering with his "normality" by means of speech therapy, social practice groups and other special attention? "It's for his own good," we say, as we sign him up for sports leagues he's not interested in, "otherwise he'll never learn to interact."

But let's be honest. What percentage of adult sociability is meaningful, and how much is empty, second-hand twaddle? Is blabbing about Pokemon any better than celebrity gossip or sports scores? I'm sorry to sound like Holden Caulfield here, but how much is Liam really missing, by being naturally immune to drinking fountain chatter?

Liam knows all about Harry Potter, the Powerpuff Girls, and other currently hot characters. But they don't excite him just because they excite his classmates. Maybe this peer-pressure immunity is a neurological disability, but when his teenage years roll around, it's going to look like a godsend. Still, when shopping for this holiday season's life-or-death toy, would any parent want to trade places with us for a while?

All these issues run through my mind when I sit down to watch old Bugs Bunny cartoons with Liam. Memorizing these episodes, as he is certain to do, won't explicitly help him interact with his peers. But I think it will give him something more beneficial than an entire stack of "Super Megaton Samurai" cards, something that will help him deal with a noisy, chaotic, frightening world: it will give him a healthy sense of humor, which isn't a bad thing to have when you have trouble making friends.



Copyright © by James Finn Garner. All rights reserved.