

# The Problem with Sheldon Cooper and the "Cute Autism"

Lydia Netzer

Sheldon Cooper doesn't have autism, or that's what *The Big Bang Theory* writers have always claimed. Speaking on behalf of the show, Mayim Bialik (who plays Sheldon's girlfriend) told Neil deGrasse Tyson that the show's writers refuse to pathologize their characters, because everyone should be loved and accepted without labels. Sheldon himself denies being autistic, stating "My mother had me tested." And yet: Obsessive behaviors. Social dysfunction. Regressive tendencies. Inability to grasp subtext and sarcasm. Avoidance of physical contact. Anxiety. Scientific savantism.

Failure to call a duck a duck doesn't change the fact that it swims and quacks, and viewers have decided that Sheldon is on the spectrum based on his many "spectrumy" behaviors. Of course, they love him for it. He's been called a poster boy for Asperger's Syndrome. Sporting a shirt with his catchphrase, "Bazinga!" is like hoisting an autism flag. He's such an icon that now we have a new show, *Young Sheldon*, in which a nine-year-old Sheldon Cooper goes to high school, undiagnosed autism and all.

Jim Parsons, who has won an Emmy and a Golden Globe for his portrayal of Sheldon, admitted that avoiding the label takes away a certain "social responsibility" to play the character true to that diagnosis. Without the label, the writers can have their autism jokes and avoid being accused of stereotyping. They can be on trend while skipping the "very special episode" a diagnosis might have necessitated. Put a word to it, and it gets awkward. People might get mad.

As the mother of a child who has gotten through his teen years watching and idolizing Sheldon Cooper, I am actually already mad.

Because I agree with the show: Sheldon Cooper is in fact *not* an autistic person. He suffers from a different condition, one that appears mostly on TV and movie screens, but also on Facebook posts, in Christmas letters to family, and in glossily remembered versions of real events: the cute autism.

People who have cute autism do funny things like always need to sit in the same spot and memorize obscure facts. They misunderstand sexual innuendo and they carry around white boards and they speak in funny, hyper-formal constructs. They amaze strangers with mental math, and they're gosh darn persnickety about food and laundry. Cute autism is sometimes paired with cute OCD, which brings on symptoms like doing amusing rituals and being selectively germophobic, needing things to be lined up on shelves, and putting soup cans in alphabetical order.

A person with cute autism might commit a faux pas, but he will not be shamed and kicked out of school for it. He might utter a gaffe, but he will not permanently alienate a friend group because of it. He won't destroy relationships. He won't have an ugly emotional meltdown in public, or freak out and hit someone. While Sheldon Cooper's friends on *The Big Bang Theory* are often exasperated and annoyed, they never shun him, because Sheldon never crosses the line into causing true offense and hurt. The writers carefully keep Sheldon just on this side of being awful. That is a high bar to set for autistic people in the real world.

I confess that I write this with imperfect conviction, because I have been watching *The Big Bang Theory* for a long time, and I have loved laughing at Sheldon. Sheldon has a Ph.D., a grown-up apartment, and a constellation of nerdy friends; he is going to be okay. What drives me to raise my

hand right now and call foul is the appearance of *Young Sheldon*. Now we're looking at a cute little child with cute autism, and it's not really okay.

Characters who make viewers go "aww" over autism spectrum behaviors create an unrealistic expectation that autistic people be consistently endearing and quirky, and ultimately socially successful. The pilot of *Young Sheldon* promises little Sheldon will learn to take off his germophobe mittens to hold his father's hand. That will not happen in real life. The pilot promises that while teachers will yell and students will scoff, Sheldon will prevail. That will not happen in real life. There will never be a very special episode of *Young Sheldon* where Sheldon beats his own face black and bloody, or cries himself to sleep because his last friend has decided he's too weird and turned his back on him. The writers won't allow that.

Consider the autism muppet, Julia, on *Sesame Street*. She is the epitome of adorable, and she teaches children to tolerate kids who don't want to be touched, or don't give eye contact, or make flappy hands. Julia will never push a joke too far or unwittingly say something unforgivably racist. Julia will never do something disgusting, or scary, or inexplicable, because Julia's job is to teach kids that autism is safe and fine. But autism is not safe and fine. Autism is beautiful, and magical, and brilliant, but autism is also screaming, and hurting people, and agony, and clashing with the world.

Yes, we already know how to leave that part out.

"Cute autism" is an identity that families of autistic children already feel compelled to perpetuate by only showing the funny or positive sides of autism in scrapbooks or Facebook, and in conversations with parents of neurotypical children. We rinse the events of our kids' lives until the scary parts are gone. This is why we need writers who create fictional characters from unfiltered truth.

Cute autism, cute OCD, cute depression -- they trick us into thinking that tolerance is easy, because these conditions can be sanitized into character quirks to enhance a thirty-minute comedy plot. The producers may shrug it off and say, "He's not autistic!" but he is, to everyone watching, and to my son who identifies with him so much. I know I should give you a pithy personal anecdote to really bring this home in a powerful way, but I won't, because I am filtering out the ugly things about growing up autistic that might embarrass him or shock you. I don't apologize for that, because my son is real, and his future is important. I maintain the cute autism, so my child is only as autistic as he is allowed to be. And it looks like young Sheldon will be too.

### **Lydia's son says:**

*".....Dr Cooper has never once solved a problem by himself, which is why it works. Most autistic children work the same way, with their mothers at their sides, mending every awry social interaction by stepping in and helping the child make the right decisions. Often, the mother might interject with the statement that the child is autistic. I've had situations where my judgement was poor, and my own mother had to help me figure out what the proper action was (she did not have any influence on this paper). Without her and my friends to help me, I wouldn't have as strong a relationship to all of them, and I would've most certainly hurt their feelings.*

*My mother was an important parental figure in my life, helping me through my quirky childhood, but when I [read her essay](#) I've decided that it's time for me to stand up for what I really believe in. It's time for me to make my own decisions and outgrow my condition."*

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The conflicted behaviours of AS; the so-called “cuteness” and then extreme bullying which is noted by Lydia Netzer; are present throughout that person’s life. These behaviours carry into all close relationships.

Autism is not cute in the privacy of their own home. It is tyrannical and controlling; all “cuteness”, charm they display outside the home completely disappears. This is the Jekyll and Hyde described by Prof Tony Attwood. Their prompt dependence is never acknowledged by them, like Lydia’s son has, and when they are helped by a spouse/partner they become angry and they bully and berate that person. Conflict and chaos are what happens when AS is involved.

It would be very helpful if AS adults admit that his/her spouse helps them cope with life.

*Lydia Netzer is the author of Shine Shine Shine and How to Tell Toledo From the Night Sky*

Read more: <http://www.autismsupportnetwork.com/news/problem-sheldon-cooper-and-cute-autism-387783#ixzz4x1XnJFIN>  
<http://www.autismsupportnetwork.com/news/i-am-not-sheldon-cooper-autism-332921#ixzz4wrJ7Huqo>  
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