

My kids, Savanna, Charlie, and Ethan, aren't camera shy!



# It's Okay to Stare

My sons and I look different from other people, but we'd rather you ask questions than ignore us. BY MEG R. ZUCKER

One clear and sunny day last November, my husband, John, and I decided to take our three kids, Ethan, 8, Charlie, 5, and Savanna, 4, to the top of the Empire State Building. When we descended the tall building and the fact that they'd be more than a thousand feet off the ground, they were ecstatic.

As we arrived at the 86th-floor Observatory deck, their excitement became contagious. John and my aunt, who'd joined us for the adventure, took Charlie and Savanna in one direction, and I showed Ethan the breathtaking vista over lower Manhattan and the Hudson River. As we were gazing at

the Statue of Liberty, I noticed that another mom and her son, who was probably about 6, were looking at us.

Suddenly, the boy pointed at us. "Hey, Mom!" he called out. Ethan turned around, no longer oblivious to the scene that was about to unfold. The boy opened his mouth to say something to us, but then his panic-stricken mother quickly pulled him away into the crowd of tourists.

We have been in plenty of situations like this before. Born with a rare condition called ectrodactyly, I have only one finger on each hand, shortened forearms, and one toe on each foot. Ethan and Charlie were also

born with ectrodactyly. Given our unusual appearance, we're not surprised when people stare at us. Ethan, in particular, approaches the subject matter-of-factly—almost like, "I have two fingers, and most other kids don't, so what?" After all, the boys' lives are just like those of other kids—they have school, afternoon play with their friends, sports, and family time. It's just a few moments a day or a week when someone, out of ignorance or just insensitivity, reminds them that they were born different.

Although my Mother Bear instincts often kick in at these times, my mission is not to overprotect them. But I

certainly understand how they might feel sometimes. I remember years ago when I visited some friends and their three children for a birthday party. It had been ages since I'd seen them. When I arrived, one of their kids looked at me with terror in his eyes and then ran out of the room. Usually children are interested and ask about my hands, but in that instant I felt like a monster.

Once I found my friend in the kitchen, I told her that I thought her son was afraid of me. "Oh, Meg, don't be ridiculous, he's only 5!" she said. "We decided to prepare the kids about the way you look so they'd be on their best behavior and wouldn't make you uncomfortable in front of other guests. Don't worry, they'll just love you!" Aha! Now I knew why I felt like a creature from some faraway lagoon—my friends' so-called preparation had simply freaked out their son.

All young kids are curious when they see a person who looks different,

whether it's a child with a disability or a grown-up who's obese. I've observed (even while being observed) that children blurt out what's on their mind not only to quench their thirst for knowledge but also because they're worried that the same strange condition could happen to them. Their poor parents usually don't know how to react, and so they stifle their kid's questions in order to spare themselves embarrassment. That mom at the Empire State Building may have had the best of intentions when she prevented her son from saying something that could have offended us, but she sent him the message that Ethan and I were strangers to be feared, rather than individuals who were worth getting to know.

What is the best thing for a parent to do? Having been on both sides of these situations, I think you should let your kid embarrass you. That's right. Rather than engineering a plan to avoid

an awkward encounter, give her the chance to explore life's anomalies naturally. The key is to trust your child and have the guts to allow the scene to unfold, regardless of the outcome.

If your child sees a man in a wheelchair and proclaims, "Mommy, what's the matter with that man's legs?" you may feel mortified. But that man knows he can't walk. It isn't a secret. Instead of silently mouthing an apology to him and slipping away, I'd suggest that you walk over to him and introduce yourselves. While your child may be shy and prefer to hide behind you, she'll see you engaging the man as a neighbor and a potential friend. I can't promise that this approach will be well received in every instance, but it's worth a try. By making this effort, you will be showing your child that the man is a "someone," not a "something."

One day when Charlie was around 4, I took him to the mall and we saw a woman who appeared to have been

burned. In a clear and booming voice, Charlie asked me (pointing with his two fingers), "What's wrong with her face?" The woman looked down at Charlie and smiled uncomfortably.

Bracing myself for anything, I grabbed Charlie's hand and approached the woman.

"Hi, I am Meg, and this is my son Charlie. I love your outfit. Where did you get it?"

"Bloomingdale's," she responded with a grin.

Then Charlie, who was holding my hand, also turned to her and asked, "Are you a mommy?"

She looked at him directly. "I'm not a mommy, but I am an aunt and I have two nieces and a nephew. In fact, my nephew looks a lot like you!" Charlie smiled at her and then went over to the fountain in the mall so he could throw in his penny for a wish.

As we were getting ready to drive home, I leaned over to Charlie in his



**Since we were born this way, Ethan (above, age 2), Charlie (right, age 1), and I never assume there's something we can't do.**



car seat and said, "Charlie, everyone is different. Each person's uniqueness is what makes that person special. If we all looked the same, this world would be an extremely boring place, don't you think?" He smiled and nodded.

After buckling him in, I asked, "What did you wish for when you threw your penny into the fountain?"

"I wished that I could meet that lady's nephew who looks like me."

It suddenly occurred to me that he may have believed her nephew had only two fingers on each hand, just like he does. Striking up a conversation with her not only made her feel more comfortable and accepted, it made Charlie feel more connected too. □