FROM THE LAND OF SPOILED BOYS

I want to introduce you to “Josh,” a ten-year-old boy I’ve been working with in my multi–family group. The group currently has five families — five mothers and five kids aged 9-13. Josh has been diagnosed on the autism spectrum, and goes to a special education school in New York City.

Josh and his mom (I’ll call her “Elena”) started therapy last spring, and I met with her first to learn about him, their family and what they want help with. Elena was attracted to the idea that Josh would be working in a multi-family therapy group. Like many parents, she can feel overwhelmed by raising a special needs child.

Next, Josh and Elena came in for an intake session. They took seats in the therapy room, and I asked how I could help.

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Elena spoke first. “Josh likes to show off,” she began. "He’s always trying to get a lot of attention and he is socially a zero. He doesn’t really have friends. He’s weird. I love him. His social relationships are few and far between. He has a hard time listening, focusing. He’s autistic and I want him to grow. Can you help him do that? How does this group thing work anyway?”

I turned to Josh and asked, “What do you think about what your mom is saying, Josh?” He didn’t reply. He seemed spaced out, and turned to look out the window. I spoke to Elena.

“Let me give you an idea of what we do here, so you and Josh can decide if this is a good fit,” I said. “We run multi-family groups, where moms, dads and children join with other families to learn how to grow together. Parents’ being part of the group is important — they grow emotionally and get the support they need to help parent their child. One of the real values in being in the group is that you’re no longer alone with your child and he’s no longer alone with you. Your family now has more resources — not only the therapist, but other adults and children as well, their creativity, their frustration, their pain and the joy of being a parent. I lead the group to constantly create new ways of playing and performing together. Children love to do this and they lead the way in developing themselves and everyone involved. I help the group develop as givers — givers of their pain, their disability, their humor. They perform, meaning they participate in the developmental (and joyful) experience of going way beyond what they’ve been able to do before.”

Elena looked at Josh. “What do you think?” she asked. Josh was silent as he looked out the window.

“I’d like to meet with Josh alone now,” I said to them. “Josh, will you do that?” Continuing to look out the window, he nodded. Elena left the therapy room.

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“Hi,” I said to Josh.

He said, “Get me a clipboard with paper.”

I thought to myself, “Oh boy, here we go.” I brought him the requested items and sat down.

“Get me crayons,” Josh said.

I went out, got some crayons, and returned. I gave the crayons to him and sat again.

“Now I need a glass of water,” he said.

Although I was conflicted about continuing to respond to Josh’s every demand, I decided to continue to play this game as a way of building my relationship with him. I walked out to get the water.

When I returned, Josh was drawing a very elaborate map on the paper. He took the water and sipped.

“What are you drawing?” I asked.

“I am drawing a map of where I live and how to get there from here.”

He showed me the drawing, which was very detailed and interesting. “Wow,” I said. “That’s pretty cool.” I said nothing more. Josh continued to draw. Josh drew for another ten minutes.

“Where do you live?” I asked. Josh showed me the street on the map he had drawn — Smith Street. “Really?” I said. “I could have sworn I’ve seen you somewhere else.”

Josh looked at me for the first time. “You saw me on Smith Street?”

“No I didn’t see you there. I’m pretty sure I’ve seen you somewhere else.”

“Where?” Josh asked.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve seen you in the Land of Spoiled Boys!” I said.

“What??? NO. It wasn’t me.”

“Oh, yes. I’m sure it was you.”

Josh insisted. “NO — it was probably someone who looked like me.”

“I think it was most definitely you,” I said, and brought Elena back into the room.

Josh rushed over to her. “Mom, do you know what she said to me? She said I live in the Land of Spoiled Boys. Can you believe she said that?”

Elena looked at me curiously. “What’s he talking about?” she asked. “You didn’t really say that, did you?”

I told her it was indeed what I said.

Elena seemed annoyed. “You said that to him? You think he’s spoiled?”

Josh interrupted before I could reply. “Mom! Mom, wait,” he said. We both turned to him. “I think she’s right. I think she might be right. Maybe we should listen.”

That was the end of the first session.