

Middle School, Asperger's,

Oh, no. That towering, drippy mass of blue streaked ice cream, sitting perilously atop a gigantic waffle cone is a *small*? So much for a simple after school snack.

So much for dinner.

But the ear-to-ear grin - replete with ice cream moustache - on my newly coiffed daughter sets aside any misgivings. Only a few hours earlier, wearing a personally designed shirt she asked friends to sign, my seventh grader took a seat on a simple wooden stool in front of dozens of other middle schoolers. Her Rapunzel length hair held in a low ponytail, she directed the hairdresser to cut off twelve inches, instead of the customary ten. Fellow seventh graders clustered near my daughter, straining for the best vantage point, supporting her. Gazing at the gaggle of girls, it looked like my daughter has a "posse."

(At least I think that's what kids call it these days.)

Not only did she decide to finally have her hair cut to a manageable length, she decided to join several other young ladies from her school and donate her locks for charity. So, I suppose sharing in an overdose of processed sugar, cream, and blue dye #-who-knows-what with a good friend is absolutely acceptable - for one day.

Wow. Sharing with a good friend. Meeting up with another. Friends.

Echoing other moms in my position, I don't take the phrase "my daughter has friends" for granted. If anything, I find myself silently repeating the phrase over and over, happily ruminating over each and every word as my mind replays earlier events of the day. So many girls shouting her name in encouragement. Beaming in her presence. Clamoring

for my daughter's attention. All this happening in middle school...and happening to my daughter.

My daughter, who just happens to have Asperger's Syndrome.

I am not going to pinch myself to see if I am dreaming. A quick, mindless retort to a peer affirmed that, yes, this is indeed reality. No, she didn't notice the young lady tear up at her curt remark. And, yes, I took her quietly aside for yet another of a zillion social stories and coaching moments. She is adapting well to the neurotypical world she finds herself in, but she does, indeed, have, and always will have, Asperger's Syndrome.

Today's successes didn't come effortlessly. Elementary school was a grand mix of emotion, an unwanted perpetual roller coaster ride of feelings and experiences, doctor visits and therapies. How on earth could middle school possibly be an improvement? Middle school: the bane of many an adolescent's existence. Middle school: one of only a handful of experiences no money in the world - or even an endless supply of chocolates - would entice me to repeat. And for the parent of a daughter with Asperger's Syndrome, an apparently insurmountable mountain range, fraught with peril at every turn, leaving all sorts of scars and bruises along the way.

I know. I have them.

But how could it be that my hunches missed the mark? That so many articles and blogosphere chatter, even my own negative personal experiences, could - in my daughter's case - be incredibly contrary to her reality? Not only is my daughter surviving middle school, she is thriving - and blooming. In so many encouraging ways, she does not

resemble the young girl who entered those doors almost two years ago.

As I write this, I fully realize other young ladies and gents are in the middle of a veritable hell. In no way do I wish to minimize those experiences. What I do wish to accomplish is to offer a different perspective to those not yet on the doorstep of middle school: these years may not necessarily become an unwanted adventure. And if middle school is indeed difficult, high school need not follow suit. These years may become a welcome, memorable time of life.

Really. Truly. Honestly.

So, why? Why her, why now at a period of life that makes most parents cringe? I can only speculate. My daughter was diagnosed at age six, had several supports, and we did a whole lot of hard work which helped her grow. Her small elementary school was traded for a larger middle school, one where many students are transplants and one with greater clarity and follow through regarding discipline and classroom expectations.

In my mind, smaller was better, and bigger a nightmare. The deep seated fear of my child attending a monstrosity of a place initially blinded me to many of its benefits, such as a larger pool of peers making it easier to find friendship. True, frequent changes of classes are an organizational challenge, but one she has managed to handle, even if only on a barely passing level. New routines in a new school building in a new state initially wreaked havoc with my daughter's expectations and sense of direction. She's working through it.

There have been several other bumps along the way. Although most peers and adults at school have been supportive

and Hope

and kind, there were a few who made for some difficult moments. Not to mention the “beauty shop bullies” who continue to taunt her to this very day. All things considered, we’ve had to adjust old strategies to fit new situations. And my daughter, to her credit, devises new tactics to help herself maneuver through various situations. For example, remembering which class to go to next was a genuine worry, solved by my daughter, who thought to note a fellow student who always switched classes with her, making sure to follow him with each and every class change. Consistently forgetting to go to the car rider loop, as opposed to her bus, on days I needed to pick her up early was solved by having her called to the office right before the last bell rang.

Yes, there have been the difficult moments, but there are countless encouraging ones. The word “friends” is now a daily part of her vocabulary. Smiles outweigh tears. Her grades remain high. We choose to focus on and celebrate this reality. And that is making a difference.

Although middle school has been a breath of fresh air in a surprising place, we have no illusions that high school will be similar. We have no expectations that it will proceed flawlessly, for elementary school showed us that school can be a challenge on so many levels. But middle school has taught us to withhold expectations, to keep our minds open, to have hope.

Contemplating all this as my daughter gears up for the ride home from the food court, I notice a slim, white paper bag in her hand, which she

proudly announces holds...a cookie? A so-called “small” cookie, which she fully intends to eat before reaching the car.

On top of the ice cream.

In addition to the excitement of the day.

So much for dinner.

So thankful for the smile crossing her beautiful, flawless face. Middle school isn’t what so many warned me it would be. What I swore it would be. But it is our pleasant, present reality, even if it lasts only for a moment. 🍪

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By Julie Clark

