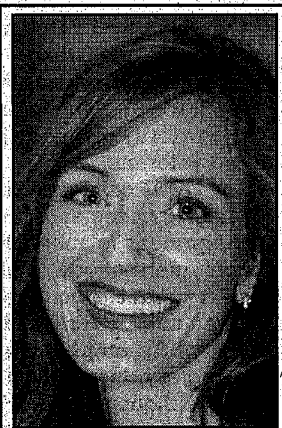


# Slidell Lifestyle

Smart or not so smart, what's the difference?



By BETSY SWENSON

have a kid diagnosed with autism and a rare chromosome disorder, and he's not smart. Not

valuable, intellectual disability or no. My child can move mountains. And your child, the one with autism who happens to be intellectually gifted? His life is valuable, too, and it would be, even without the gifts.

"The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outside of a person. But the Lord looks at what is in the heart." - 1Samuel 16:7

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smart." "He's extremely intelligent."

I bite my tongue and refrain from saying, "So?"

I wonder, what if he weren't smart? Would all be lost?

A lovely and kind friend described her autistic son as a "brilliant child." She said, "his gifts make up for the disability."

I wondered what that meant. I wondered if she was trying to communicate her son's value in spite of his autism, that—no, really—his life has worth.

It makes me bristle, every time. Because I

world where we preach about inclusion and the inherent value of all people, we're still making value judgments based on intelligence.

The sentiment is out there, that the disability is OK if he's smart. And if he's not? I don't know. The world tells me it's not OK. When the majority of pregnancies diagnosed with Down Syndrome are terminated, what is the world saying? Here's what I hear: Better to never have been born than to have a low IQ.

But I will tell you this—the world is WRONG. My son's life is

There's this thing I see parents do when they have a child with a disability, especially if that disability can be linked to intellectual impairment. They talk about how "smart" their kid is.

I see this especially among moms of kids with autism. (I'm allowed to say this because I'm a mom to a kid with autism.) They acknowledge parenting a child with autism can be difficult and emotionally exhausting. They'll share how their child struggles. But then there's the P.S. at the end—"but he's such a bright child." "He's so

by our culture's standards, anyway.

"Don't ever let anyone tell you your child isn't smart," a disability advocate once said in a training seminar I attended. Her words were met with applause, but I wanted to ask...what if he's not? Why can't we be OK with that?

Is it because smart people are more valuable? And if you're not smart, does that make you worth less? Or even worse, worthless?

I've talked about this in my column before, and it's because it strikes a chord in me. Even in the disability