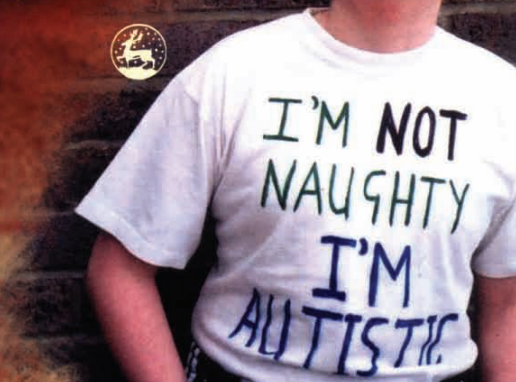


## I'm Not Naughty – I'm Autistic

Jodi's Journey

Jean Shaw



BY JEAN SHAW

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# Autism

## Why My Son Is More Intelligent Than I Am

One of the biggest problems for people with disabilities, particularly those with a learning disability like autism is the limited opportunity for social inclusion.

I decided that at the age of eighteen my son ought to be "Out there", doing things his peers might, so last night I took him along to the local badminton club.

Despite having autism I've always known my son was very clever, and last night he proved it.

I was a bit apprehensive because there are clubs and there are "clubs" – you know, those cliquey places where the members are seriously competitive and never seem to enjoy themselves unless they are winning.

My son doesn't understand competition. Neither does he understand the rules of badminton, i.e. how to score, which side of the court to stand or when

All he knows is that when playing badminton he stands one side of the net, usually more towards the right hand side; his opponent stands opposite and they take turns to hit the shuttlecock to each other. This doesn't usually require a lot of movement – at least on his behalf because he has very good eye/hand co-ordination and long arms, so last night's experience was totally new to him.

It started off well enough. The club was more of a social enterprise and everyone seemed very friendly and accepting. I explained to anyone who would listen about his autism, and that he didn't really speak. I didn't want them to think he was being rude if he ignored their attempts at conversation.

There were five courts, four players on each and several others waiting in the wings

ready to play when the opportunity arose. We got on court almost immediately and our first partners, a male and a female just knocked up with us. This was fine, as apart from there being four players instead of two; it was what Jodi was used to.

The second "match" was a bit more eventful. Again a male and female partnered us, but these were obviously a bit more serious and wanted to play a proper game. I explained to Jodi's partner that whilst he could hit the shuttlecock, he didn't understand the rules or that the idea was to win.

Since I didn't feel she had any chance of being on the winning side I asked if she would like me to play with my son. She assured me it was okay though and we'd just play and see how things turned out.

It started off well but then Jodi got really confused because you have to keep swapping sides when you serve. This means of course your partner also has to swap.

The first few serves were okay although he did get hit in the face with a speeding shuttlecock ... but shortly afterwards he lost it. No sooner had he walked across to where his partner had told him to stand than he had to move back again. When she gently tried to guide him to where he needed to stand, he lashed out and hit her on the arm.

He's a big lad and very strong. I felt mortified. I rushed around the net to him apologising profusely to his partner as I went just in time to stop him from tipping the whole net over.

He was not impressed and I had visions of us being banished before we'd ever really

got started. However, he soon calmed down and stroked his partner's arm saying "Sorry".

She was just wonderful and despite the huge red handprint on her arm kept reassuring me it was alright. It appears she worked in the "Community", whatever that means. I just know I was extremely grateful for her understanding.

After that we played three more matches but no-one asked or expected Jodi to swap sides so I guess word must have got round. I did suggest to him at one stage that he should "move his feet" and he responded immediately with a shoe shuffle the like of which the penguin in Happy Feet would have been proud!

It wasn't quite what I'd had in mind though. Still, everyone was very impressed

with Jodi and whilst he didn't physically move around the court very much, he rarely ever missed a shot. He didn't even appear to be watching the game either. He'd just raise his racquet and swing.

Often he casually had one hand on his hip as if to say "Why am I waiting?", or his finger in his right ear to shut out the noise echoing around the high ceiling sports hall, which did make things a bit awkward since he is right handed. Still it didn't appear to affect his ability to connect to the flying plastic missile.

One player suggested I get some earplugs for him to wear to shut out the

noise and I may just do that when we go next week. Yes, we have been invited to go again!

So now I suppose you want to know why I think my son was very clever last night, don't you? Well, this morning I can hardly move. All that running around and swapping sides has taken its toll and my body aches in places I didn't even know I had muscles!

Jodi, however, is as fresh as a daisy. Guess who's the intelligent one?

***Despite having autism I've always known my son was very clever, and last night he proved it.***

