

How About Not 'Curing' Us, Some Autistics Are Pleading

"... at an [experimental] school for autistic teenagers ... 'We don't have a disease,' ..."

From the New York Times, 20 Dec 2004 ([full article \(http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/20/health/20autism.html \)](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/20/health/20autism.html)) By **Amy Harmon**

Boiceville, N.Y. --- Jack Thomas, a 10th grader at a school for autistic teenagers and an expert on the nation's roadways, tore himself away from his satellite map one recent recess period to critique a television program about the search for a cure for autism.

"We don't have a disease," said Jack, echoing the opinion of the other 15 boys at the experimental Aspie school here in the Catskills. "So we can't be *cured*. This is just the way we are."

From behind his GameBoy, Justin Mulvaney, another 10th grader, objected to the program's description of people "suffering" from Asperger's syndrome, the form of autism he has.

"People don't suffer from Asperger's," Justin said. "They suffer because they're depressed from being left out and beat up all the time."

That, at least, was what happened to these students at mainstream schools before they found refuge here.

But unlike many programs for autistics, this school's program does not try to expunge the odd social behaviors that often make life so difficult for them. Its unconventional aim is to teach students that it is O.K. to "act autistic" and also how to get by in a world where it is not.

Trained in self-advocacy, students proudly recite the positive traits autism can confer, like the ability to develop uncanny expertise in an area of interest. This year's class includes specialists on supervolcanoes and medieval weaponry.

"Look at Jack," Justin pointed out. "He doesn't even need a map. He's like a living map."

The new program, whose name stands for Autistic Strength, Purpose and Independence in Education - and whose acronym is a short form of Asperger's - is rooted in a view of autism as an alternative form of brain wiring, with its own benefits and drawbacks, rather than a devastating disorder in need of curing.

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