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Struggling to be a Perfect Parent to an Imperfect Kid

By **Lauren Daley**

BookLovers

December 25, 2010 12:00 AM

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When you are the parent of a child with autism, depression, OCD, a learning disability or an eating disorder, you feel like you are the only parent in the world who has ever been dealt such a hand.

But in their book, "Shut Up About Your Perfect Kid," sisters Gina Gallagher and Patricia Konjoian want parents of imperfect kids to know: You are not alone.

Gina's daughter Katie was diagnosed with Asperger's, a form of autism, at age 10. Gina's low point came when she got a call from the school saying Katie had written a disturbing essay about snowflakes:

"If I were a snowflake falling, I would be sneaky and clever ... When I fall, I would strike. I am going to my school, it is time for revenge ... Here I go. Fear me, ha ha ha. I charge right into the school and damage everything before my school blows up. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Bye, school..."

Gina's heart sank into her stomach, she broke down into tears as images of Columbine danced in her head: She knew then there was something seriously neurologically wrong with Katie – the Asperger's would never go away.

Patty's daughter Jennifer was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, or manic depression, at age 11.

Patty and her husband Michael had to drop Jennifer off at "a mental hospital," crying as their daughter screamed "Don't leave me!"

They were heartbroken, but terrified that Jennifer, who had been threatening to kill herself by jumping out a window, would do it.

In an impressively light-hearted and humorous tone for such a tough topic, these two sisters from Massachusetts have written a book that is touching the lives of parents all over the nation.

I recently talked to Gina, a freelance writer from Marlborough, and Patty, a freelance videographer from Andover.

Lauren: First off, why write this book?

Gina: For therapy, really. We each had kids with issues. We felt isolated; we felt that people didn't understand what we were going through.

Patty: Even though our daughters had different diagnoses, we were both feeling the same isolation. People were insensitive, or they gave you pity. Gina used to write a humor column for a local newspaper, and she stopped doing it. I said to her jokingly, 'I'm going to write a humor book about bipolar disorder, because it's just that funny.' She laughed, and later she told me she was going to resurrect her column and we should write together... that's how it started.

Lauren: Although your title addresses parents of perfect kids, I'm assuming it's the parents of imperfect kids who get the most out of your book.

Gina: Yeah, when you put a title like "Shut up" on it, you're going to turn the "perfect" parents off. So it's really had more of an impact with other parents in situations similar to ours.

For example, one woman last night said before she read our book, she thought she'd had it. She thought she had just about all she could take. Her daughter had several mental health issues – OCD, cutting, eating disorder. She said we had saved her.

When we first started the book, we were expecting a lot of criticism. But so far those who have criticized it have done so solely based on the title. When they read it, they love it.

Lauren: Were there any dark moments where you felt you were going to break? Gina, that must've been the snowflake essay for you?

Gina: The snowflake, definitely. Because you always hold out some kind of hope that Asperger's would all go away. But I realized in that snowflake letter that there was a neurological problem going on. Because she wouldn't hurt a fly. She was just being bullied at school and (was trying to fit in by making the boys in her class laugh.)

Patty: One mom told us at a reading the other night that she wanted to get in the car and drive, and not come home. And I was nodding my head, "Been there, done that."

Lauren: Gina, during the course of writing the book, your youngest daughter Emily was diagnosed with non-verbal learning disabilities and anxiety. What was it like learning that in the midst of writing this book?

Gina: People have asked me, "Why didn't you write about that?" But at the time, I wasn't ready to write it. We always thought, "At least we don't have to worry about Emily; she's OK." When you're in survival mode, you focus on the one kid that doesn't have (issues.) So it was hard.

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Lauren: What did your kids think of this book? Were they offended?

Patty: We never would've gone ahead had we not had their blessings. Jen was in middle school when we started this ... She said, "Mom, I think you should do this." She still comes to a number of our talks.

Gina: Katie's issues are somewhat more obvious – she claps her hands, or waves her hands. So when we wrote it, she thought, "Oh good, there are others like me. There's nothing wrong with me; I just see the world differently."

Lauren: How are the kids now?

Patty: Jen is 17 now. She's applying to colleges. And in her college essay, she's going to write about her bipolar disorder ... She doesn't have the mood swings that she used to...she's doing the best she's ever done. She gets sad now and then, but doing as well as can be expected.

Gina: Katie's 15 and Emily's 11 ... So much of what we do as parents is project ourselves on our kids. But by life standards, despite everything they've been through, they're doing well.

Lauren: Anything you guys want to add?

Gina: If you are the parent of a child who is not perfect, you are not alone. There is a great community online – we have 4,000 fans on our Facebook page who vent, share laughs, stories.

In January, we have a TV show coming out on an online network called Family Network TV. It's a nationwide Special Needs network, and the show is called "The Imperfection Connection."

"Shut Up About" is available at major book retailers and some independent book stores. For more information, visit www.shutabout.com, or friend them on Facebook "Shut About Your Perfect Kid."

Lauren Daley recommends this book to all parents. Contact Lauren Daley at ldaley33@gmail.com.

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