

fact, Alissa is one of the few people, besides his siblings, that Joseph feels comfortable teasing.

Our chiropractor, Rob, also happens to be a personal family friend. Because of Joseph's custodial job, which includes vacuuming, cleaning windows, and other repetitive jobs, his shoulder and arm bother him periodically, so he goes to Rob's office on a regular basis to be adjusted. Rob always talks to Joseph just like he talks to the rest of our family. As a result, over the many chiropractor visits and occasional social times that Joseph has interacted with Rob, he feels less nervous and much more comfortable interacting with Rob than he does with most people. Though to someone listening in, it would appear that Joseph and Rob's conversations are small talk, Joseph is actually very open with him compared to most other people in his life. Rob usually gets several sentence answers rather than the one- or two-word answers that most people receive. And, even more telling, Joseph is so comfortable with Rob that he can usually respond immediately instead of having to think about how to respond. Joseph has noticed that Rob treats him as a "normal" person. One time, after we left Rob's office, Joseph had a rare moment of expressing his feelings, showing that he does, indeed, know he is "different" when he said, "He talks to me just like if I am anyone else." It was obvious that this meant the world to Joseph.

These are not the only four people who have reached out to Joseph. Most of my mom's friends greet him and chat with him on a regular basis, and other people do as well. Some, however, feel awkward around him and say nothing, not realizing that even a simple, "Hi, Joe" would make him feel welcome and included.

It can be hard to reach out to those who do not respond as we would like them to react. Personally, I would much rather spend my time and effort on friendships that feel more two-sided. A good heart-to-heart talk with a good friend is one of my favorite things in the world. It is hard to reach out to those who are different. This is true, not only with those who experience special needs, but also true of those who have personality quirks, are extremely reserved, have a prickly personality, talk too much or talk too little. Yet, Jesus reached out to the socially awkward. And, in our desire to be Christ-like, we should do the same. I am so thankful for those who take the time to invest in "difficult" people. At one level or another, we are all "different" and "difficult," and we all have moments of being socially awkward. Yet, God still accepts and loves us.

My husband is such a godly example to me of reaching out to the hard-to-love. You will often see him chatting with people who others tend to avoid. Yet, having a son like Joseph has taught me so much. One of the important lessons I have learned from having him as my son is to not give up on a relationship just because the person is hard to reach. I love Joseph as only a mother can, but God loves him even more than I do. Joseph, and others like him, are valuable people created in the image of Christ, and we, ourselves, are blessed when we treat them as such.



Kim and Jeff Stilwell have lived in Des Moines, Iowa, since 1987. They are high school sweethearts who met at a missionary kid school in Lima, Peru. Jeff and Kim have five precious children and a daughter-in-law: Joshua & Alissa, Joseph, Josiah, Jessica, and Jennifer. They are also the happy grandparents of the sweetest granddaughter in the world, Kate.

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