

## FOREWORD

Welcome to *Shut Up About Your Perfect Kid*.

First, the good news: I really like this book. Now, the bad news: I really don't like the title, and only partially because I don't love the words *shut up*. The main reason I don't like the title is that this book really isn't about other people's kids being perfect. This book is about the journey of two moms—one whose child is diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, the other whose child is diagnosed with bipolar disorder—as they struggle to understand their kids' differences and keep their heads above water in a world that still doesn't understand individual differences very well at all. It's not easy out there for kids with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges, and it's not easy for their parents, either. These two moms (and their kids) somehow find their way, though, and this book is about their journey.

The other good news is that the wisdom they gather along the way is packed into this book as well. Though they are more favorably inclined toward psychiatric diagnoses than I am, they've made no attempt to transform themselves into mental health professionals in telling their stories. One of the best parts of the book is that these two moms sound like . . . well, two *mom*s. And two very funny moms at that. So you're going to laugh (a lot), and cry (a little), and you're going to hope for the best, and you're going to pray that someone can help their kids, and best of all you're going to know that you're not alone.

So if you were hoping for a dry, predictable reading experience, I'm quite certain you've selected the wrong book. Kids with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges aren't dry and predictable, so hang on to your hat and bring along some tissues.

Finally, if you were hoping for a long foreword, wrong book again. You need to start reading!

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## INTRODUCTION

# The Movement of Imperfection

They are here. There. And everywhere. You can hear them buzzing at spelling bees. Running at the mouth at track meets. Even trumpeting at concerts. They are the parents of those “perfect” kids. You know them—those people you meet in life who love to tell you how smart, athletic, gifted, and talented (blah, blah, blah) their kids are without your ever even asking.

“Nice to meet you, Gina. What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a freelance writer.”

“Speaking of writing, my four-year-old son is already writing in cursive.”

So how exactly are you supposed to respond to these child-worshipping chatterboxes? Especially when you have kids who (How can we say this delicately?) aren’t exactly poster children for perfection.

Kids, well, like ours.

We probably should explain up front that though we refer to them as our kids, we’re not married or life partners (not that there’s anything wrong with that). We’re actually sisters. Not the kind you find in habits, though we certainly have our share of bad ones. We’re the other kind—the DNA- and childhood-bedroom-sharing kind. (For visualization purposes, you might think of us as Mary Kate and Ashley minus the twinness and the thinness.)

And in addition to sharing the same parents and a lot of the same imperfect traits—sloppiness, disorganization, lack of discipline, immaturity (in the spirit of saving paper and the forests, we won’t list

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them all)—we have something else in common. Something that a lot of sisters don't share.

We're both raising daughters with disabilities.

And that's not so easy to admit these days. Because whether we like it or not (and we don't), we live in a perfection-preoccupied society. A society that admires people who live in perfect houses, are married to perfect spouses, have perfect bodies, and of course, above all, have perfect children. (For those of you keeping score at home, we're both batting .000.)

For many of us parents, this perfection-palooza starts early on in our parenting careers. Usually from the moment our kids are born—when we look for creative ways to make our children stand out and be admired by others.

"That's a nice-lookin' baby, Patty. So tell us, how did she score on the **Apgar**?"

"Well, Michael and I were pleased with the results, though they did take some points off for her conehead and **jaundice**."

"Oh, that's too bad. Our little Mandy aced hers. The doctor said he's never seen such a perfect baby."

We should point out that this pattern doesn't occur only with parents of young children. No sir. We've met parents who brag about their children at every stage of life.

"Did I tell you my son, Malcolm, just got a fellowship for his work with garlic?"

"Would you believe my son, Albert, still has all his teeth at age seventy-eight?"

Nor does it happen with "perfect" strangers. Even our own loving, but nonetheless perfection-crazed mother has been known to brag about us, which is particularly amusing, since she knows better than anyone how vastly imperfect we are.

"I told all the seniors at the flu shot clinic that you guys signed a publishing deal with Random House!"

"Ma! Stop doing that! It's embarrassing!"

"Yeah, Ma, have you forgotten the name of our book?"

"Oh, stop it. I'm a mother; I'm supposed to brag about my smart

girls. Now both of you do me a favor and grow your nails. You don't want to be signing books with them looking like that."

### Ask Us About Our Kids

For the record, we're not saying we don't want to hear parents talk about their high-achieving kids anymore (though we certainly see how some could make that leap from the name of our book). We just want them to ask about *ours*. Because even though our kids may not be gifted athletes, students, or musicians (or room cleaners), they've given us plenty of reasons to be proud. Reasons most people don't even think about.

Patty, for example, the older sister, is proud of Jennifer, her seventeen-year-old **bipolar** daughter, for her courage and maturity.

"Jenn, are you sure you want to get up and speak in front of all those people at that suicide prevention fund-raiser?"

"Well, Mom, I am nervous, but I want to do this. Sometimes I feel like no one can relate to me. This is my chance to be heard."

And Gina, an avid athlete, is proud of Katie, her fifteen-year-old daughter with **Asperger's syndrome**, not for the way she bounces a ball, but for the ways she bounces back from adversity time and again.

"Mom, it's okay that I didn't get invited to that party with my friends. I'm just lucky to have friends."

Because we've struggled so much trying to find a place for our kids in this perfection-obsessed society, we become frustrated when other parents don't share the same struggles, and often resent the fact that they don't understand ours.

"Jenn's been so depressed and anxious. We were so relieved when we learned the hospital had a bed available for her."

"Oh, Patty, I know just how you feel. I was a nervous wreck waiting for Rumer to get into that elite soccer camp. Thank God we got the last spot!"

Sometimes, we even feel like we're on a completely different planet from these parents.

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"Gina, you're so lucky your kids don't play sports. The fees are outrageous."

"And you're lucky your kids don't have issues. Therapy is no bargain, either."

But even though our children have different strengths, challenges, and ways of thinking, don't we all want the same things for our kids? Like for them to be happy, successful, and accepted?

Our daughters with disabilities have helped us see that. And through their beautiful blue eyes (if we may be so bold as to brag), we've been able to view the humor, irony, and absurdity in the ways so many parents judge and live through their children.

"Sorry, ladies, I can't go out for drinks tonight. I have to work on my chocolate volcano for the science fair."

And to openly admit how far we all are from perfection.

"Gina, your house is so clean. How do you manage to keep it that way?"

"Oh, I just throw everything in the closets and under the beds."

For us, it's all very ironic. As parents, our job description calls for us to teach our kids and help them become better people, yet our daughters are the ones who have taught us and made us better. Their courage and resilience have given us the strength to do what we've been so reluctant to do our entire lives: to be real and to accept and embrace imperfections in ourselves, in our kids—and in others.

And so with tribute to these blissfully imperfect young ladies, we created this imperfect book and started speaking around the country to introduce *The Movement of Imperfection*. This long-overdue movement invites parents to come out of their messy closets and celebrate the joys, gifts, milestones, and even quirks of their imperfect children. And, of course, to finally do some bragging. Here. There. And everywhere.

"May I take your order?"

"Yes, I'd like a Whopper. And speaking of whoppers, my autistic child just told his first lie!"

We invite you to join *The Movement of Imperfection* by talking openly about your imperfect child and helping this wacky world see what our daughters have now made so clear to us—that the true

beauty of our children lies not in how many goals they score or As they earn, but in who they are inside.

Sounds like an imperfectly good idea to us. (We would know.)

### **The Truth About Lying and Children with Autism**

As our disability specialist, LeeAnn Karg, MEd, explains, lying is a milestone for many children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs):

Developmentally, most children with autism view the world from a single, concrete perspective: everyone shares exactly the same thoughts and feelings. Lying requires several perspectives: the true details of the event, the created lie, the realization that thoughts are private, the understanding that every choice has a consequence, and the discovery that one can still choose a negative behavior. Therefore, lying can be viewed as reaching new developmental milestones . . . and as a real reason to celebrate!

Not to brag, but all our children seem to have mastered this skill. Yeah, yeah, we know you want us to shut up about our lying kids!

For more information on this and other disability topics, visit LeeAnn's website, [kargacademy.com](http://kargacademy.com).

The Movement of Imperfection encourages people to be honest and real and, above all, to face their imperfections. We were excited to learn that people have really embraced it, particularly when they visited our website ([www.shutupabout.com](http://www.shutupabout.com)) and completed the following sentence:

### **You Know You've Got Issues When . . .**

- ✓ Your Asperger's son tells you he "missed having lunch with the principal today."
- ✓ Telemarketers call your house and hang up *on you*.
- ✓ Your idea of a family vacation is to gather around the kitchen island.
- ✓ Without remembering requesting them, you begin receiving e-mail newsletters from *Psychiatric Times*.
- ✓ The entire pharmacy staff knows your name, your address, and the name of your first pet.
- ✓ You've diagnosed Amelia Bedelia with a nonverbal learning disability.
- ✓ Your son gets a sticker at Wal-Mart and then proceeds to eat it.
- ✓ Your child's occupational therapist tells you your voice is "probably annoying to your child."
- ✓ You come home from a quiet, getaway weekend with your spouse and discover that your house is wrapped in crime scene tape.

And finally . . .

- ✓ Each one of your children has his or her own attorney.