

## Setting It Straight

# Autism Advocates: Linking Conn. Shooter to Asperger's Misleading

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LAKELAND | Emily Arnold was watching TV with her mother the day after the Dec. 14 massacre at a Connecticut elementary school and heard a reporter say the shooter allegedly had been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome.

Emily, 15, has Asperger's, a form of autism. The Lakeland girl reacted to the report with such dismay her mother, Amy Arnold, wrote down her words.

"Great — now we will be treated like animals and feared," Emily told her mother. "I have so much to give to society, and I don't want be shut out just because I have Asperger's. I think we should interview individuals with the condition and let us speak up."

The Arnolds and other advocates for people with autism worry media reports identifying mass killer Adam Lanza with Asperger's syndrome may create an unwarranted stigma, causing some to connect the trait with an inclination toward violence.

"I think people are looking for a reason, looking for something they can pin it (the attack) on," said Lakeland resident Lauren Magnusson, whose 18-year-old daughter has Asperger's syndrome. "But I think they're looking at the wrong thing to pin it on."

Asperger's syndrome, first identified in the mid-20th century, is often described as a high-functioning form of autism spectrum disorders. Autism, estimated to affect one in 88 American children, is a range of neurodevelopment disorders typified by social and communication difficulties and repetitive behaviors.

Asperger's syndrome is often distinguished by an obsessive interest in one subject or activity, along with peculiarities of speech and struggles to engage with peers. Advocates for people with Asperger's speculate that such historical figures as Mozart, Beethoven, Thomas Jefferson, Mark Twain and Emily Dickinson may have had the disorder.

### BACKLASH WORRIES

The National Autism Association issued a statement after the Connecticut attack: "As advocates, we now face the additional fear that children and adults with Autism may become collateral damage of irresponsible media coverage. Regardless, there is no link between planned violence and Autism Spectrum Disorders. Those with ASD are victims of crimes like this, not the perpetrators."

Magnusson, a teacher at George Jenkins High School, said she was shocked when one of her students, knowing that her daughter has Asperger's, asked whether she might be capable of such an attack.

Her response: "Are you kidding?"

Magnusson said her daughter, who asked not to be identified, attends the Honors College at the University of South Florida. Magnusson said she warned her that she might hear questions about her diagnosis.

"I think she was concerned that people might think ill of her," Magnusson said.

Lakeland resident Nicole Torres, whose 11-year-old son has autism, said media coverage of Lanza's apparent diagnosis has been a subject of much recent discussion in the autism community.

"I am deeply concerned at the inaccurate and irresponsible coverage provided by the media," said Torres, the founder of a local autism support group.



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"There is no evidence showing that individuals with autism are prone to calculate or plan mass killings like this. ... I think it's important that the media not inadvertently victimize individuals with ASD by allowing false perceptions of the disorder to reach the public."

It's important to recognize that all forms of autism, including Asperger's, are developmental disorders rather than mental illnesses, said Karen Berkman, an assistant professor at the University of South Florida in Tampa and director of the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities.

What's the difference?

Berkman said developmental disorders occur before age 22 and generally last throughout a person's lifetime. Such disorders can cause delays in all aspects of daily living or meeting developmental milestones.

By contrast, she said, mental illness can be either temporary or chronic and generally interferes with a person's thinking, feeling, mood and ability to relate to others.

Berkman said a 2006 article in an academic journal suggested people with Asperger's are involved in the justice system at a rate higher than their percentage of the population, but she said that probably reflects misunderstandings that result when those people fail to recognize the emotions or intentions of others.

"The person in Connecticut would appear to have planned this event with some forethought, and not (as) a random, impulsive act," Berkman said by email. "This would not be in line with what we would expect from a person with Asperger's. ... Having Asperger's in and of itself is not likely to produce the tragedy we saw in Connecticut."

Torres said it's possible for someone to have a diagnosis of autism and a mental illness. She said that might turn out to be the case with Lanza.

#### INCREASING PREVALENCE

Emily Arnold is a 10th- grader at Lakeland's Monarch School, a private school devoted to children with autism. Her mother is the school's executive director.

Amy Arnold said her daughter was diagnosed with Asperger's at age 10. After a delayed start in reading, she now reads at a post-high school level and plans to attend college.

The main elements of Emily's condition are an extreme sensitivity to noise and a tendency to obsess over one area of enthusiasm. For about 10 years, that fixation has been Pokemon, a Japanese franchise of animated characters.

Emily said she hasn't had anyone try to associate her with the Connecticut killer, but she discussed the issue with one of her teachers, whose son has Asperger's.

"My computer teacher worries about the same thing I do," she said. "She kind of worries we're going to get labeled as a group of crazy, psycho people."

Emily said people unfamiliar with Asperger's might assume everyone with the diagnosis is a potential mass killer.

"With the way everybody sort of thinks today, they kind of put everyone in a collective group and put a label on that group," she said. "If they will take everyone with Asperger's and label them serial killers, that wouldn't be very good. It's like if you take a dog breed and label that dog breed bad, then all of a sudden people want to start putting down that dog."

She said she can't imagine anyone with Asperger's carrying out a murderous attack.

"Asperger's doesn't usually cause violence; it usually causes more breakdowns where you want to curl up in a ball and not do anything and cry because of whatever reason," Emily said.

Amy Arnold said her daughter and others she knows with Asperger's tend to be extremely respectful of authority and careful to follow rules.

Arnold said the Monarch School has an entire class of students with Asperger's. She said two who graduated last year are now in college, and three who will graduate in the spring plan to attend college.

Magnusson said the increasing prevalence of autism means most Americans are likely to know someone with the disorder. She said she hopes familiarity will dispel any false impressions that

people with Asperger's syndrome are prone to killing sprees.

Magnusson said some news reports have described Lanza as having no empathy for others. If that's accurate, she said, it doesn't fit the profile of a person with Asperger's syndrome.

"I've never seen a more empathetic person in my life than my daughter," Magnusson said. "She may not be able to read the social cues and know you're distressed, but once she knew you were distressed, she would do anything to comfort you."

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