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INVISIBLE DIFFERENCES

Ellie Balfe explores navigating the non-typical neurological spaces.

The Māori word for autism is *takiwatanga*, meaning “in their own time and space” which, to me, as a mother of an autistic daughter, is beautiful in its tenderness. My daughter was diagnosed as autistic in 2019 when she was ten. I had always known something was different about her, but as she is my eldest, I had no benchmark of typical or non-typical.

However, as she grew I could see traits I knew to be of neurodivergence. Often called “quirky” in school with very strong, precise interests – always one passion at a time: first the *Cars* movies, then *Minecraft*, then *Pokémon* – these would be fully immersive for her and all she would talk about. She would speak to strangers about them, often interrupting the conversation with cashiers at tills

– anyone who would listen – to tell them about her topic, but she wouldn’t make eye contact with them.

The word autism comes from the Greek word *autós*, meaning “self”, and was first used in 1908 by psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler when describing a patient who had “withdrawn into his own world”. For me, it was my daughter’s discomfort with eye contact and her beginning to spin – whirling around the kitchen to calm and regulate herself – that solidified it for me. And so, she was assessed.

Post-diagnosis, it felt better for us. Together we learned about autism and now, at almost 14, she identifies with it completely. We read books by autistic illustrators – Abigail Balfe’s *A Different Sort of Normal* (Penguin, €8.99) is her favourite. “Look Mum, that’s so like me!” she often says. And so, we found her space. We worked with her school on plans for learning support. We found a way to make it easier. In truth, we found her.

I am forever grateful for her diagnosis, as we now understand how her beautiful brain works and

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