

VIEWPOINT

Do the eyes have it? Some adults with autism say 'no'

BY LEIRONICA HAWKINS

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As a woman, I'm expected to drop what I'm doing and be attentive to someone else's needs, which means staring at them. If I don't do this, I'm perceived as a selfish bitch.

Before my diagnosis, I worked at a snobby restaurant, taking reservations (left). One night, two men were bantering in front of me. I didn't care about their conversation — I was just trying to appear 'normal' by watching them. That plan blew up in my face when one of them yelled at me for being nosy.

I never feel safe in public places, so the last thing I need is a stranger with a predatory look in his eye trying to make eye contact with me on the subway (right).

I caught a toddler smiling at me at Whole Foods. It was easy for me to grin back — he was so charming! Sometimes when adults smile, it's phony, like they're merely tolerating my presence. But small children are genuinely curious about people, regardless of race or class.

Eye contact with a cute, furry dog always makes me laugh. Dogs run over to me so I can pet them, or drop at my feet for a belly rub. Some owners have told me, "My dog's not usually friendly." I think dogs can tell what kind of person you are on the inside.

Nothing says “back off” like a pair of shades. When I wear them, strangers are less likely to approach me. They also make it easier for me to look at people when I’m talking to them.

It took me years to be able to meet the gaze of the most beautiful person I know: my mom. I can finally look into her eyes without feeling uncomfortable. She doesn’t judge me, and that helps a lot.

Leironica Hawkins is an artist on the spectrum. She is working on a graphic novel about living with autism in New York City.