



Boaz Behaving Badly

MALINA SAVAL



Temper tantrums, emotional meltdowns and screaming fits in public venues are everyday events in the life of Boaz, a feisty and affectionate five year-old boy with behavioral issues and developmental delays. The wondrous yet sometimes thorny world of boyhood is presented from the perspective of a mother who feels the incessant need to leap to her young son's defense.



Boaz woke up the day he turned five a changed man. It was like something out of Kafka, only better, because Bo didn't scream, "I NEED to watch TV!" or fling his soaked Pampers pull-up diaper across the room like he was a major league baseball pitcher hurling a 90 mile-per-hour curveball across home plate. On cue, as if he were embracing the beginning of a new year in his young verdant life, Boaz climbed into the bed I shared with my husband, Paul, our two-year-old daughter, Ayla (she has a toddler bed; never uses it), and our two grossly entitled cloud-white Bichon Frise-poodle mutts that have come to believe they are human. He buried his head in my chest as we all wished him a happy birthday, and politely asked for his sippy cup.

At breakfast at Central Park, a local Pasadena eatery, Boaz ate voraciously—four scrambled eggs, apple juice, ice water, several packets of strawberry jam—a rarity for a kid who normally subsists on chocolate milk and cereal bars from Trader Joe's. He used his cutlery and sipped his beverages through a straw. He didn't bang Ayla over the head with a butter knife or throw a tantrum when the waiter took away his menu before he was finished pretending to read it. Bo's food remained on the table. It was as though over the stretch of one good night's sleep he had been completely transformed, this kid who was prone to pitching fits all day, every day, for whatever reason, often for no reason at all.

This morning things were different. Boaz didn't clench his fists in heated frustration, his face turning an apoplectic shade of red like he was about to explode because his toast had broken apart. He didn't throw himself onto the ground like a bad actor playing dead in a Shakespeare play and punch the floor with tight-fisted blows because the restaurant didn't carry strawberry-banana smoothies. He didn't push the salt and pepper shakers slowly over the table's edge, watching with mischievous wide-eyed wonder as they plummeted to their deaths, shattering to pieces as a pool of salt-and-pepper coagulated on the wooden floor below.

Suddenly, as if he had imbibed a bottle of Alice in Wonderland-like potion and emotionally matured overnight, Boaz was smiling, sanguine, laughing—a perfect gentleman in size 4-T clothes.

After we'd gotten the check, Boaz wiped his face clean with a napkin. With remnants of strawberry jam on his upper lip and in his soft puppy dog voice that rises gently at the end of each sentence, he asked when we were going to ride the ponies, as I had promised, because this was his birthday and he was turning five.

Boaz must have ridden his little almond brown Shetland a total of sixteen times around the white-fenced corral, grinning sheepishly as I tried to snap pictures when he trotted past the viewing area, the pony gently snorting and shaking its shiny golden-sugary-brown mane as if he were performing in an equine beauty pageant. Boaz is happiest on a horse—calm, serene, focused, and quietly submissive. Boaz showed that pony respect. He looked like a movie still from the documentary "The Horse Boy," about a British couple that takes its autistic son on a horseback journey across the vast uninhabited landscape of Mongolia in search of a cure. He belonged on that horse.

Boaz wasn't autistic—not unless you counted the 45 minutes he was observed by a clinical psychologist who diagnosed Boaz with being on the "spectrum" because he stared at the wheels of a toy truck; later there'd be other psychologists, other diagnoses—but on that horse he was lost in his own little world, carefree and swept up on the romance of it all, communing with nature and the surrounding greenery of Los Angeles' Griffith Park.

And as I watched him I thought, maybe this whole time Boaz was just being four.



When Boaz was two I took him to the pediatrician for his scheduled routine physical.



“How many words does he have in his vocabulary?” asked the pediatrician.

“Two,” I shrugged. “Three.”

“Three?”

“I think. Mama and Dada and—”

“That’s not good.”

I looked over at Boaz sitting on the floor digging through a basket of books, most of them Spanish translations of Dr. Seuss and P.D. Eastman titles. It hadn’t really occurred to me that he should have a more extensive vocabulary. I only knew that while other kids his age could point to their nose or ears or head and say their corresponding names, Boaz showed an active interest in grunting and pointing to objects he wanted/demanded, be it orange juice, a ball, or a butterfly fluttering past. Looking back it’s all a bit of a blur, but I remember simply thinking: He’s just being Boaz.

“He should have more words?” I asked the pediatrician.

The pediatrician nodded as she surveyed Bo’s chart. “Yes,” she said. “He should have at least twenty-five.”

Several rounds of language disorder assessments and hearing tests later, Boaz was diagnosed with both a receptive and expressive speech delay. At this same time he started preschool, whining his way through finger painting, snack and morning recess. Because he was ridiculously cute and infectiously affectionate—and it probably helped that I dressed him like a miniature skate rat with Vans, cool designer tees and Appaman shorts—he was an instant pet among his teachers.

Bo’s new speech-language pathologist was smitten. Emily was young and blond, with azure blue eyes and a sweet, patient disposition. And she was paid by the state, which made this whole thing possible since neither my husband nor I could afford a private speech therapist. Boaz sobbed whenever she’d lead him into the room in her office with its stacks of learning toys and blocks; then he’d sob when it was time to leave. I believe Boaz had a bit of a crush.

By the time his sister Ayla was born in November 2008, Boaz learned his fourth word: “Baby.”



But as his expressive language skills steadily improved, Boaz wasn’t making much progress in the way of his receptive ones. If you asked Boaz a question, he might only understand one or two words - or understand them, but out of order. If you said, “Boaz, what did you do in school today?” he’d answer: “Yes.” If you asked him, “Boaz, did you have a fun day?” he’d respond: “Why?” If you asked him, “Boaz, what do you want to eat for lunch?” he’d stare at you blank-faced, his brown, glazed-over doe eyes darting back and forth.

Fussy was an understatement. Bo’s tantrums grew in rapid fire frequency and he was prone to throwing whatever was in front of him across the room—or straight at you (on more than one occasion, this resulted in me getting a black eye, looking like I’d stepped out of a casting call for *The Fighter*). If we visited relatives out of town, he’d spend the entire time whining, from the moment he woke up to the moment he went

to bed. Boaz found it impossible to sit still and was wildly disruptive during pre-school group time. If you sang him a lullaby in an attempt to calm him down—I tried humming the Hebrew tune we sang during his circumcision; clearly the wrong song choice—he'd block his ears and scream for you to stop. Bo wasn't interested in books and refused to eat except at odd late hours. By the time Boaz turned three, he still wasn't sleeping through the night.

Soon, I became The Mom who was constantly defending her kid. Anytime Boaz was invited anywhere, he'd destroy said venue within minutes, upending IKEA storage bins and wicker baskets filled with color coordinated stuffed animals and miniature play kitchen items. If the host offered Boaz a piece of fruit he didn't want, he'd completely freak out; if he wanted something they didn't have, he'd all but implode. If anybody asked him to *please not drop foreign objects like forks and car keys in the fish tank*, Boaz would devolve into a loud blast of biblical-like tears. If anybody he didn't know or trust tried to touch him, he'd kick them where it counts, likely compromising their chances of reproduction. If someone asked Boaz to share a toy or return a toy or "Please, do *not* break that toy," Boaz would emit a protestation louder than a stadium filled with tween-age girls at a Justin Bieber concert.

Once, at a Chanukah party held at the home of one of Bo's classmates, Bo started banging on a huge Yamaha drum set that was positioned in the middle of the modest-sized living room. The drum pretty much took up the entire space; people were standing and sitting up against it. The sticks were resting atop the cymbals just waiting for a four-year-old to grab.

Boaz grabbed the sticks and proceeded to bang on the snare drum like he was Ringo Starr. And, yea, he drowned out everybody that was talking but, really, was anybody even saying anything all that interesting? The moms were exchanging tips on where to get the best Vietnamese manicure in the San Gabriel Valley and the dads were saying things like, "Yea, my stocks *really* took a beating last month."

Boaz was the most interesting person at that party.

But after numerous requests to stop, the Dad of the house yanks the sticks from Bo's soft little hands (his hands were so smooth, his nickname was "soft paw"). This, obviously, did not go over well. Boaz started wailing like a drunken nun at an Irish wake—bereft, inconsolable.

And now everybody's staring at him because he's making an even bigger commotion than when he was playing the drums.

I'm tempted to scream: "You've got a *drum set* the size of a mini-van in the middle of your living room and twenty preschoolers racing around. What did you *think* was going to happen?!"

Next, the Dad turns to me, and without the faintest trace of an apology, he says: "He wouldn't listen to me. I *had* to take the sticks away." His wife, the Mom, peels Boaz off the drum stool, swiftly ejecting him from the living room area. She crosses over to where I'm standing by the front door, depositing Boaz in my arms like a bag of donated clothes at Goodwill. "We all follow the same rules in our house," she tells me, as Boaz sobs into my shoulder. (In history, this will go down as The Moment that I officially started hating Parents.)



That January, one of his preschool teachers wrote down on his mid-year report card: “Boaz has zero regard for authority.”



About a year ago, a close friend of mine invited Boaz, Ayla and me over for a swim. A little background: Boaz and Ayla are both excellent swimmers. I’ve made sure of that. From the time both of them were six months old they were taking swim lessons, even if it meant that I had to drive an hour-and-a-half back and forth on the 110 freeway in the height of LA traffic to get them there. I’m grooming them for the Olympics, or at least the high school swim team, or at the very least attempting to save them from drowning. (The *Talmud* says that you should teach your child to swim, and it’s probably one of the scant few pieces of rabbinical advice to which I strictly adhere.)

So there we are swimming, my friend growing increasingly irritated because Boaz is in the deep end and it’s making her nervous. I assure her that he’s fine and, anyway, I’m in the water right next to him. She demands that Boaz swim back to the shallow end. Of course, he doesn’t. Why should he? He’s splashing, kicking, showing off. Boaz is having the time of his life. It’s Los Angeles in June and it’s 90 degrees and Boaz has no interest in going to the shallow end to wade in 2-foot-deep water. She asks him again. Again, Boaz swims across the pool away from her. He’s laughing, his light brown eyes are sparkling in the late afternoon sun. Boaz is happy. And here’s this unreasonable adult trying to screw up a little boy’s good time. And mine.

Who invites a three year-old boy over to swim during a sweltering summer day expecting him to stay in a designated section of the pool?

But, my friend—who was on every other occasion excellent with children—saw things from an entirely different perspective: I was rude, disrespectful, and overstepping a boundary. This was her house and she felt responsible. She was being protective; I was being reckless. Nobody wants a kid drowning in her pool.

But when you’re a parent, the force of love is so powerful—so *feral*—that there is no other perspective.

Nobody was going to destroy Boaz’s moment of chlorinated-pool bliss.

Minutes later, after dragging Boaz kicking and screaming out of the pool, he stalked furiously through the house, his bathing suit dripping all over the kitchen floor and carpeted living area in deliciously devilish revenge. He followed a trail of puzzle pieces and Legos and Transformer figurines and climbed the stairs leading to a children’s playroom where he promptly began wreaking havoc on a Thomas the Tank Engine train set and a deck of Uno cards that he scattered around the room like confetti on New Year’s Eve.

When it was time to go, my friend peered sternly down at Boaz:

“Boaz, can you pick everything up?” She firmly requested.

Boaz looked at her askance. He kept on playing.

“Boaz, I need you to listen to me—”

“He probably doesn’t understand,” I told her. “I’ll clean up.” I knelt down and began to pick up cards.

“I don’t want you to have to clean up,” she said. “I want him to do it.”
“He’s three. You can’t expect a three year old to clean up a room on his own.”
“I’ve known plenty of three year-olds who have cleaned up rooms.”
“Well, every kid is *different*.”



At his four-year check-up in August 2010, Bo’s pediatrician noticed something slightly off about the way he reacted when she went to administer his flu vaccine, specifically the way he went to kick her in the face when she leaned forward to adhere the Bandaid to his skinny white thigh.

“Looks like he might have a bit of sensory integration dysfunction,” she said in such an off-the-cuff, nonchalant manner it was as though she’d been diagnosing kids with this all day. “I’ll input a referral for an appointment with an occupational therapist.”

“Huh,” I said, only partially understanding what all that entailed. “Interesting. You know, that makes sense.”

“Yea,” she said, punching information into the computer. “It’s the new diagnosis.”

Which made me feel kind of good, because when you’ve got a so-called problem child, diagnoses can come as a relief.

Seven or eight hearing, eyesight, language, and behavioral assessments later—and I am not overstating here—Boaz was diagnosed with an auditory processing disorder and sensory integration dysfunction. To fully comprehend what this means you’ll need to study the 200 pages of literature that I received (and to be honest, have not yet completely read). But the basic gist is that there is name for Bo’s behavior—several of them actually, and many overlapping each other—and they mainly have to do with his vestibular system, the sensory system that controls his sense of balance and spatial orientation. When a kid’s vestibular system isn’t properly regulated, it can create a delay in certain developmental areas, like speech and the ability to process the meaning of certain words. It also accounts for Boaz’s “sensory-seeking” behavior, and why he has a difficult time sitting still, focusing on anything for more than a minute or two at a time, and why certain sounds send him reeling. It also explains his insatiable desire for roughhousing and the need to slam certain books against the wall and dump boxes of wooden blocks out on the floor, furiously chucking them across the room.

It also explains why Boaz is one of the most fascinating, funniest, most intelligent, kindest, most compassionate and most lovable individuals that I have ever known.



Boaz just started his fourth year of preschool. At the time we made the decision to hold him back, all parties involved believed that Boaz could benefit from an additional year of crayons and macaroni art before heading off to kindergarten. What this means is that he will have spent as much time in preschool as most people do college, a fact my father, who was reading at age three, skipped kindergarten and went straight to



first grade when he was five, finds darkly amusing.

In addition to his ongoing speech therapy, Boaz has also been working with an occupational therapist for the past year and has made significant strides in the way of building mental focus and improving his level of language comprehension. (Boaz's special education teachers are worth their weight in gold; they should be getting paid far more than they are.) He speaks eloquently and has an active imagination, and can often be found pouncing on the couch, wielding a pretend sword and pretending he's a swashbuckler manning a pirate ship on the high seas. Either that, or he's a character in the Japanese animated cartoon Pokémon, aiming an imagination weapon at his pretend predatory enemy.

There might come a time where Boaz meets the criteria for a medical diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), typical of boys with auditory processing and sensory integration disorders we are told. But doctors typically like to wait until a child is at least six before reaching that conclusion and determining the most effective course of action. I come from a family where the diagnosis of ADHD is prevalent (but who doesn't these days, and what does *that* mean?), and Boaz certainly may possess aspects of the disorder even now. But am I rushing to put Boaz on a pill so that he'll sit still through *Caps for Sale* during afternoon story time? Definitely not. Not yet anyway.

See the problem is that Boaz's behavior is consistent with lots of developmental and neurological disorders. For as many appointments with experts in the field, there are as many names for what *may* be going on with him (autism spectrum, bi-polar disorder, disorderly conduct), a different disorder each day. Disorder du Jour. Ah, the trial and error of diagnoses!

Did we do the right thing keeping Boaz back a year in school? Is he getting what he needs? Is he bored? Is he sick and tired of observations and assessments and sitting in waiting rooms while I fill out forms that I've already filled out a hundred other times? (Because I sure am.)

In any case, where we are right now, if things go accordingly, Boaz will get his driver's license when he's a sophomore in high school. Sometimes, I admit, I have this squeamish vision of Boaz turning into one of the burnouts from my graduating high school class, the kids that wore plaid flannel and got straight D's, skipped class to smoke cigarettes and sip 12-ounce cans of beer wrapped in brown paper bags in the parking lot and failed at every extra-curricular activity except the one that involved making wood birdhouses.

But then I also see him doing something pretty remarkable with his life, like inventing video games or going to a top film school or becoming a large animal veterinarian with a stable of horses like the ones he loves to ride.

And that tiny glimpse into the future tells me that Boaz is going to be OK.

About the Author

Malina Saval is the author of *The Secret Lives of Boys: Inside the Raw Emotional World*

of *Male Teens*. Her essays and articles have been featured in the Los Angeles Times, LA Weekly, Variety, Heeb, Forward, Flaunt, Glamour and the Jerusalem Post. She received her undergraduate degree from Cornell University and her MFA from University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts. She can be reached at <http://www.MalinaSaval.com>.

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