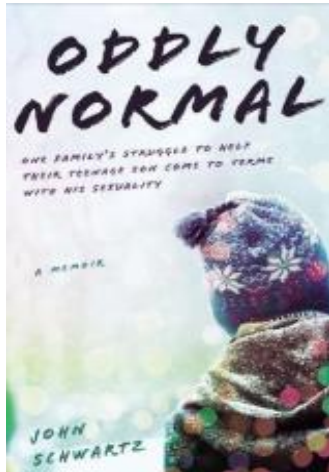


Oddly Normal: One Family's Struggle to Help Their Teenage Son Come to Terms with His Sexuality

by John Schwartz



About the Book

A heartfelt memoir by the father of a gay teen, and an eye-opening story for families who hope to bring up well-adjusted gay adults.

Three years ago, John Schwartz, a national correspondent at *The New York Times*, got the call that every parent hopes never to receive: his 13-year-old son, Joe, was in the hospital following a failed suicide attempt. After mustering the courage to come out to his classmates, Joe's disclosure --- delivered in a tirade about homophobic attitudes --- was greeted with dismay and confusion by his fellow students. Hours later, he took an overdose of pills.

Additionally, John and his wife, Jeanne, found that their son's school was unable to address Joe's special needs. Angry and frustrated, they initiated their own search for services and groups that could help Joe understand that he wasn't alone. ODDLY NORMAL is Schwartz's very personal attempt to address his family's own struggles within a culture that is changing fast, but not fast enough to help gay kids like Joe.

Schwartz follows Joseph through childhood to the present day, interweaving his narrative with common questions, including: Are effeminate boys and tomboy girls necessarily gay? Is there a relationship between being gay and suicide or mental illness? Should a child be pushed into coming out? Parents, teachers, and counselors alike will welcome ODDLY NORMAL and its crucial lessons about helping gay kids --- and any kid who is different --- learn how to cope in a potentially hostile world.

Discussion Guide

1. What drew you to read **Oddly Normal**? How did it affect your understanding of the challenges facing gay children and youth?
2. Even as a toddler, Joe liked playing with Barbies and wearing pink shoes. Do you agree with Richard Green's educated guess that cross-gender behavior in boys is the age-appropriate expression of underlying homosexuality? (p. 19)
3. During Joseph's year in kindergarten, Jeanne put away his Barbies so he wouldn't face ridicule from his classmates. Is it better to edit his personality so early in the game (p. 28) or let him risk peer rejection?
4. In addition to his budding homosexuality, Joe struggles with learning disabilities that are initially diagnosed as ADHD and his parents are pressured to put him on drugs like Ritalin. Schwartz writes, "a battle is raging over whether or not doctors overdiagnose conditions like ADHD and overprescribe drugs for it. [But] no study I've found conclusively proves either side is right" (p. 36). What are your experiences with or opinion of psychoactive drugs for children?
5. Joseph's fourth grade year was miserable from the start. When the Schwartzes ask the principal to switch Joseph to another teacher, the principal told them: "there are a number of reasons why I cannot support this" (p. 75-76). If a teacher and student don't click, should the school separate them, or is such a change ultimately not in the child's best interests?
6. When Joseph was in elementary school, his parents realized "that while it's okay for millionaire entertainers to be gay, girly little grade schoolers still have some problems" (p. 25). With the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell and movements like Dan Savage's It Gets Better, have things improved for "girly little grade schoolers," or is their situation about the same?
7. Should middle school have gay-straight alliances? What share of the responsibility for educating children about sexual orientation lies with the schools? With parents?
8. After Joseph's suicide attempt, John and Jeanne "were emotionally scourging ourselves over the missed signals and actions not taken" (p. 166). Many teens have suicidal thoughts and make self-destructive gestures. Are they a normal part of adolescence or should they always be addressed?
9. Tyler Clementi's tragic suicide brought national attention to the prevalence of bullying and cyber-bullying. Is enough being done to curb the problem?
10. John Schwartz shares the results of a Gallup poll showing that people who view homosexuality as a biological fact rather than as a lifestyle choice are more accepting of gay marriage. Why might a story about gay penguins convince someone about the biological origins of homosexuality when a story about gay humans wouldn't?

11. John Schwartz writes articles about same-sex marriage, but asserts that having Joe doesn't make him biased. "I do have opinions, but all journalists have opinions. The work of a journalist is not to bleach his brain of opinions and life experiences, but to write fairly in light of all available information" (p. 209). Do you agree?

12. Schwartz describes **Oddly Normal** as a "chimera of a book, which is part memoir, part journalistic exploration, and part mess" (p. xiii). Did it satisfy your expectations? Who else might benefit from reading it?

Author Bio

John Schwartz is the author of **Short: Walking Tall When You're Not Tall At All** and a national correspondent for *The New York Times*, where he has covered law, science, technology, business, and a broad range of other topics. His writing has also appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *GQ*, *Texas Monthly*, and other publications. John and Jeanne have three kids — Elizabeth, Sam, and Joseph — and live in New Jersey with two difficult cats.

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Publication Date: November 8, 2012

Genres: Family, Nonfiction

Hardcover: 304 pages

Publisher: Gotham

ISBN-10: 1592407285

ISBN-13: 9781592407286