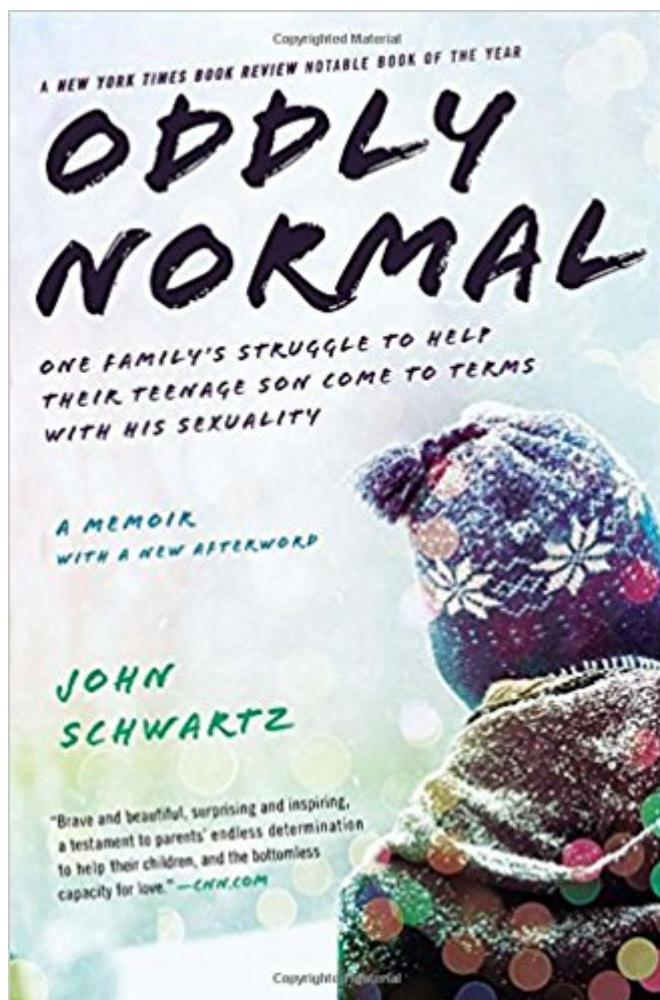


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# Oddly Normal: One Family's Struggle To Help Their Teenage Son Come To Terms With His Sexuality



## Synopsis

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. Four years ago, John Schwartz, a national correspondent at The New York Times, got the call that every parent hopes never to receive: his thirteen-year-old son, Joe, had tried to commit suicide. Hours before, he had come out to his classmates— and was met by dismay and confusion. After school he took an overdose of pills. *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 Joe 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In this moving account of a family’s journey to raise and protect their gay son, New York Times correspondent Schwartz begins with his son Joe’s suicide attempt, discovering afterwards that his son had come out to his classmates that afternoon. Joe’s parents had always suspected the youngest of their three children might be gay, playing with dolls and wearing pink lightup shoes, but he had only coyly revealed his sexuality to his parents a week before his suicide attempt. With an unusual condition therapists variously diagnosed over the years as Asperger’s, bi-polar, ADHD,

among others, school was always a challenge for Joe. With the growing awareness of his sexuality, however, came increasing sensitivity to fellow students' homophobic slurs and taunts, as well as a growing realization that he was different and even that there was something possibly wrong with him. Schwartz recounts in sometimes painful detail his and his wife's difficulties in getting Joe the help he so desperately needed, from working with school officials on appropriate ways of dealing with Joe when his condition overwhelmed him, to joining the Youth Enrichment Services at the Gay Center. With the new support, Joe thrived. Equally humorous and heartrending, this memoir reveals just what it takes to raise children who are different in a world still resistant. Agent: Rafe Sagalyn. (Nov.) --This text refers to the Audio Cassette edition.

Praise for ODDLY NORMAL

“Schwartz’s frank discussion of a subject many still find taboo will be helpful to parents of LGBT children as one example of how to accept a natural condition with dignity and love. An added bonus is the delightful story written and illustrated by Joe. An honest, earnest, straightforward account of one boy’s coming out.” *Kirkus Reviews* “[A] moving account of a family’s journey to raise and protect their gay son.” Equally humorous and heartrending, this memoir reveals just what it takes to raise children who are different in a world still resistant.

“John Schwartz and Jeanne Mixon are the heroes of Oddly Normal. Still, the star of the book is Joe. It’s impossible not to fall in love with a kid who, even amid his torment, displays such droll humor and fierce intelligence.” *The New York Times Book Review* “Schwartz writes a poignant and well-documented account of what it meant to be a father who had tried all he could to make his son feel comfortable, but still came terrifyingly close to losing him.” *The Daily Texan* “An inspiring story, and much needed at a time when so many others end tragically.” *ModernTonic.com* “Oddly Normal chronicles the Schwartz family’s mistakes, heartaches and triumphs in raising a child coming to grips with his sexuality.” *Mother Jones Magazine* “Oddly Normal is a funny, touching and indispensable book. Moving as well as buoyant, it will give parents of gay children a great deal of hope.” *Gary Shteyngart*, New York Times bestselling author of *Super Sad True Love Story* “John Schwartz has written a moving and important memoir about the challenges that even the most enlightened parents face when bringing up a gay son. Combining personal experiences with rigorous reporting, Oddly Normal will be tremendously useful to anyone raising a child perceived as different.” *Charles Kaiser*, author of *The Gay Metropolis* “John Schwartz shares his family’s bumpy journey with humor, a

journalist's eye for detail, and a generous honesty of emotion. Jennifer Pizer, Senior Counsel and Director of the Law and Policy Project at Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund. "Oddly Normal" is a book for parents, teachers, and anyone who works with children. Mr. Schwartz illustrates how even the most accepting parents often need assistance staying engaged, to best help a child who is not fitting in. In fact, there is a little bit of Joseph Schwartz in every kid. Joseph Clementi, founder of the Tyler Clementi Foundation. "Jeanne and John Schwartz are inspiring parental role models, and I'm sure I'll think of them often." Slate.com. Schwartz, an ace reporter for the New York Times, peppers his emotional response with vital research and telling anecdotes. Queerty.com. Schwartz's memoir is brave and beautiful, surprising and inspiring, a testament to parents' endless determination to help their children, and the bottomless capacity for love. CNN.com. "[A] very personal, touching, funny and frank memoir. Anyone with a teenager, gay or straight, will be able to relate to a parent's struggle when dealing with their troubled child." USATODAY.com

This is a brave and big-hearted book, one that could well be a life raft for any family coping with the experience detailed here -- lovingly raising a child who, in the eyes of conventional society, is "different." But it would be a tragedy if "Oddly Normal" did not reach a much larger audience -- the vast population of people who help create the society that presents such obstacles to people like Joe Schwartz and his parents. Wise people know that abolition frees both the slave and the master. Similarly, tolerance liberates both the bully and his target. And this book is a moving manifesto for tolerance, one that will enrich anyone who reads it -- and everyone should read it. A universal truth of human society is that there is a constant tension between the security of "fitting in" and the adventure of "standing out." It takes different forms -- fitting into a gang culture or standing out as a scholar; fitting into a loving traditional family role or standing out through some demanding role outside the home; fitting into a supportive office society or standing out by being ambitious. Or, of course, fitting in by conforming to some middle-school notion of "a normal boy" or standing out by being oddly normal, whether that means being gay or a chess prodigy or a precocious reader or a klutz at sports. This is a book for everyone who has wrestled with that "fitting in/standing out" tension or tried to help others in that struggle. In short, a book for all of us. You can disregard any canard about "exploitation." The author makes it clear that this book would never have been written if young Joe, its hero, had not wanted his father to write it -- indeed, he helped his father to write it. No one who meets Joe and his parents in the painfully honest pages of "Oddly Normal" could ever suspect

otherwise. Full disclosure: The author of this book is a colleague of mine, although I did not know about the ordeal he and his family were experiencing until I read about it in his book. Indeed, as someone without children, I might not have picked up this book if he had not been a colleague. So I consider that connection a blessing. (Dozens of books have made their way into the world from the ranks of my colleagues without an accompanying review from me, so you know these comments are from the heart.) This is an extraordinary, important, potentially heart-changing book, and a joy to read.

I have finished reading the book "Oddly Normal" by John Schwartz. It is the best book on growing up gay, (and coping with the Mental Heath System), I have ever read. It follows the life of young Joe from his birth through the present where Joe is a high school student. The author is Joe's father who alternates between gripping chapters on the life of Joe and chapters with research and practical information about the issues raised in the story unfolding in the alternate chapter. The book is extensively researched as one would expect from a journalist from the NY Times. I kept uncovering instances where the book mirrored either memories from my childhood and adolescence or my latter work as a Public Health Professional and an advocate for LGBTQ Youth for 25 years or so.

I found the story well written, but as I read and after I finished, a number of issues arose. First, there is way too much simple listing of support resources; those resources are important but a quick Google search will locate almost all of them for anyone who is interested. Also, in a few years many of those references will change and then the book's lists will be far less useful. However, they do add pages to a thin volume. This is perhaps a comment more relevant to the author than to the book, but far too often I felt that the parents were more concerned with their being correct than with what was going on in their son's head. When you say to a psychologist to whom you are sending the boy for help "we think he may be gay", the psychologist responds "what a horrible thing to say." In my opinion the proper response is not to worry that you might be wrong about your son's sexuality but to be horribly upset that you have sent your beloved son to someone who thinks being gay is "horrible." Yeah, that will make him comfortable with himself real fast. In the same vein, it often seemed to me that the parents believed that there is some one "right" way to get through life and their job was to make sure that Joe found it. But guess what, human life is not that simple. Much, if not most, of the story revolves around getting various schools to give special treatment to their son. We are told what various people in the public education system did or did not do to the parents' satisfaction. If people in the educational system are able to and wish to offer extra effort in helping

the son through this difficult period of his life, I believe that is indeed wonderful and commendable. But I do not understand why it should be the inherent responsibility of public educators or a public education system to attend so delicately and especially to the problems of this specific boy. As a gay man who found my teenage years to be full of fear, anxiety, and depression over my closeted sexual orientation, I did not then and do not now believe that it was the responsibility of my schools to resolve my problems. However, to be sure, I do strongly agree that schools must provide a safe environment for all students. But surely teachers and education administrators have more than enough to do merely trying to instill a minimum level of mandated learning in their students without also having to accommodate themselves to the personal details of every child's life. By the end of the book I felt that I knew the parents, but I had only a faint image of Joe. I would have much preferred that the author replace the lists of resources with more personal information about Joe. Would I like Joe if I met him? Why or why not? Would I care about him and what happens to him more specifically than I would for any suffering person? To that end, I welcomed finding Joe's comic strip included in the book. Overall I found the book interesting, easy to read, and a pleasure to read. It seems a reasonably honest account of how John Schwartz has handled the issue of his son's sexual orientation. I do recommend it to others.

John Schwartz brings his journalistic skills to his writing about the problems of teenagers coming out of the closet. His own son struggled with these issues for years before attempting suicide at age thirteen. We see the struggle as the family attempted to understand their son and navigate the school system and help them understand as well. There is a chapter (written in 2013) where Mr. Schwartz analyzes the right of gays to marry, and the issues this brings up for the future. How nice that I read this book one week after the right to gay marriage was passed by the Supreme Court!

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