Two of these kids are doing their own thing. And they both belong to her. Conformity, getting along, and worrying in the age of Music Together.

All the Other Kids

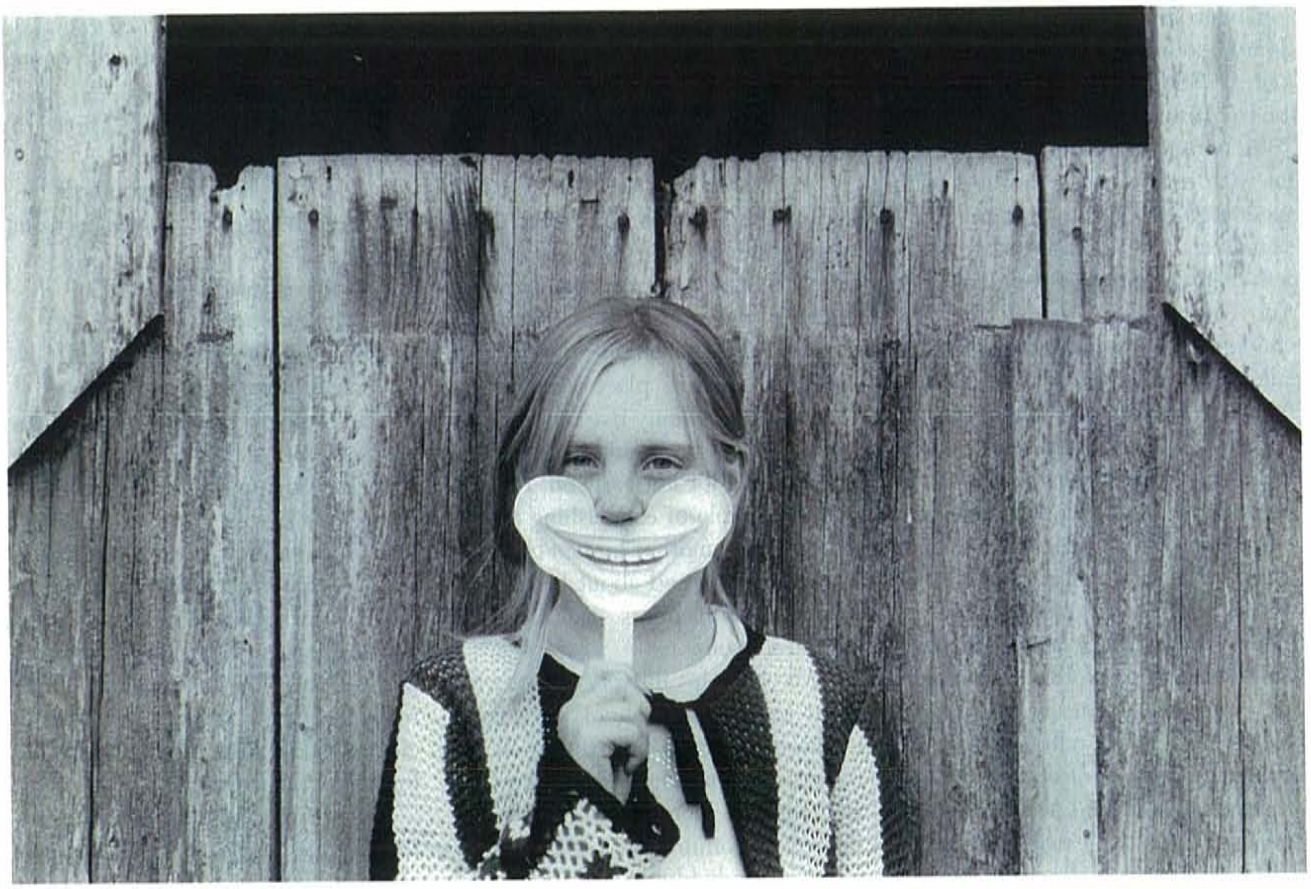
BY CAROL PAIK

I FIRST NOTICED that my son Jonathan was a nonconformist when he was very small. He was not yet walking, so he must have been younger than eleven months. At that time, I was so starved for adult companionship during the interminable days at home with my baby that I had joined a "support group" of other new mothers. We gathered each week, and in the interstices between changing diapers, nursing, and wiping up drool we would take desultory, desperate stabs at conversation. The fact that I voluntarily joined such a group is a revealing measure of the depth and breadth of my need. I've never been much of a gatherer.

We took turns hosting the group. Typically the hostess would serve a snack and spread a blanket of some kind over her living room rug to protect it from spit-up and coffee and we would sit around its perimeter. Or perhaps, now that I think about it, some people spread the blanket not to protect the carpet from the babies, but the babies from whatever was on the carpet. I myself spread the blanket to protect the carpet. Jonathan was not a "spitter," but some of these other babies were. "Spitter," by the way, is not a term that does justice to the thing it is meant to describe. "Spitter" suggests that the child referred to produces small, discrete units—droplets or blobs—of liquid. In fact, from the slack mouth of a "spitter" gushes a volume of smelly tan stuff that does not seem capable of having gone in there in the first place. You really don't want that on your rug.

One day I noticed one of the babies crawling over to a plant. As it was neither my home nor my plant, I watched the child with some detachment. A crawling child was something of a novelty to me because Jonathan never crawled properly but hitched himself around on two hands, one knee, and one foot. The other mothers said his hitching action was "so cute!" But I thought I could tell by the relief with which they then regarded their own children's symmetrical scooting that they didn't think it was cute at all; they thought that it was bizarre and that I should be pretty worried. Frankly, I'm sure I had the same look of relief when other people's babies "spat." I began to suspect that whatever we mothers were providing for each other might not exactly be "support."

The baby crawled over to the plant and reached a fat, damp, ill-intentioned hand out towards the low-hanging leaves. Another baby looked over, noticed the



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first baby reaching for the leaves, and crawled over to join in. As I watched, one by one, all the other babies crawled over to the plant. I waited for Jonathan to notice and hitch himself over, too. He continued to play with his toes. Eventually he looked up and gazed at the activity in the corner. He watched for a while and then went back to his toes.

That evening, I described this episode to my husband.

"Well, why would he want to do what the other babies are doing?" he asked. "Why would he be interested in some plant?"

Perhaps it is no great mystery why our son is this way, given his genetic composition. With one antisocial parent he might have had a chance, but not with two.

I also noticed Jonathan's nonconformist tendencies during his weekly music class. It was called "Music Together," and every week I cursed myself for having paid money to sit in a fetid basement and sing "Eensy Weensy Spider" with accompanying hand motions in a group. Surely, if one felt an irrepressible urge to sing "Eensy Weensy Spider" and do hand motions, one could and probably should do it in the privacy of one's home, free of charge. And in fact, Jonathan and I often sang songs at home, and that was kind of nice.

But I had found myself the victim of a strange phenomenon: the tyranny of parenthood. Into the beaker of your weary and defenseless mind is poured, in equal parts, your desire to do right by your child and your fear of doing wrong by him and being blamed by him and everyone who meets him in years to come. Some regular old peer pressure is spooned in, and sprinkled on top are all the grudges you hold against your own parents for not doing enough for you. Then you agitate everything all together until the toxic mixture slimes up the parts of your brain that are meant to produce rational, independent thought. Where I had once kind of liked to think of myself as different from the crowd and where I had learned to accept and even embrace my discomfort with what I regarded as mindless group activity, I now feared that I was proclaiming my individuality a little too energetically and at my child's expense. It's fine to be an individual and a loner, but suddenly, when

applied to your child, "individual" and "loner" sound like euphemisms for "outcast." So I dragged myself and my son to Music Together.

At Music Together, we sat in a circle with a few other mothers with uncombed hair and a lot of put-upon "caregivers." ("Caregiver" is late twentieth-/early twenty-first-century Upper West Side speak for "nanny." I always wonder if the children should then be called "caretakers.") The Music Together teacher led the group in songs that we were expected to know because we had been given tapes of the songs at the outset so that we and our practically inanimate lumpish children—who, in some cases, couldn't even sit up—could "practice" at home. Halfway through the class, the teacher, with a beneficent expression, brought out a duffel bag and shook plastic instruments from it onto the floor. At the sight of all that colorful plastic, the other babies slithered over to the pile and drew out rattles or shakers or strings of bells and proceeded to clonk each other with them or wedge them into their mouths and take them out again, dripping wet, or shake them with gestures ranging from gently idiotic to frenzied. Jonathan sat on my lap, his brown eyes reflecting bewilderment and regret over how he had ended up in an insane world with nothing but a weak, easily manipulated mother to protect him.

I realize one might argue that it was not Jonathan's antisocial tendencies that became evident at Music Together but my own. In my defense I'd like to point out that I sang the songs, I shook the rattles—he did not. I confess, though, that before long I became a Music Together drop-out. Being the child of a drop-out will no doubt have some detrimental long-term effect on his development, but it was becoming clear to me that I was defeating my own lofty socializing goals: no matter how enthusiastically I shook the little rattles for him, I was sure he was too sensitive not to discern that I hated being there.

At that point, I was able to laugh about his isolationist proclivities. They were kind of charming, just as a crooked baby tooth can be charming because you assume that one day a strong, white, straight-edged adult tooth will take its place. Also, when Jonathan was twenty-two months old, Meredith was born, and he exhibited his affection for her early on. He was plainly capable of establishing a connection with another human child, so I wasn't concerned about his lack of interest in his peers. But then he started school.

We chose his nursery school with great care. The school we chose declared, most comfortingly, in its mission statement: "We believe that all creation is sacred; each member of the school community is respected as a unique individual." "Unique" and "individual" were exactly the words we were looking for—they seemed to shimmer there on the brochure. But in spite of the school's commitment to the Individual, once Jonathan was there, it was difficult for me not to view him against the backdrop of what struck me as disconcertingly homogenous community behavior. Here were the fifteen other three-year-olds in Jonathan's nursery school class, skipping past me on a hot June day in bright stripy t-shirts and cargo shorts, laughing, singing tunelessly, shoving each other. There was Jonathan at the end of the line, perfectly solemn, with his hooded sweatshirt zipped up to his chin and the hood up.

And here was I, in spite of myself: "All the other kids wear short-sleeved shirts when it's 85 degrees." I had always believed that I would never start a sentence with *all the other kids*. But there was that oily substance gumming up my brain.

Jonathan looked at me. "They do?" he said.

"Yes, they do. Aren't you hot?"

"No," he said. "I'm cold. Freezing cold."

"You look hot," I said.

"Well, I'm not."

"You cannot possibly be cold."

"Well, I am."

How did I end up with Bartleby the Scrivener for a son? I could make him, I thought. I could exercise my stronger will or, at any rate, my larger body. I could tear off the sweatshirt, force his little arms into an adorable stripy t-shirt while screeching, "Why do you have to look like a weirdo?" But the kid said he was cold. Did I really know better? Or, the more difficult question: Was his physical comfort really the issue?

Along with school came the torture of birthday parties. The parents of the birthday child would rent out a gym or a basement or some other empty and indestructible play area around which the children would race, trying to fell and then kill each other. Boys, in particular, would stomp on each other with both feet and wrestle each other to the floor with their hands around each other's throats. The party organizers would take the situation in hand and organize a game of dodge ball. At one party I saw Jonathan settle down, cross-legged, to watch the game. He seemed content, so I just watched him.

"Hey, buddy, what's your name?" a well-meaning organizer called.

"Jonathan."

"Come on, buddy, don't you want to play?"

"No."

And then I felt terrible, seeing him sitting there. Suddenly he seemed

How to turn the tables on your uncommunicative thirteen year old.

alone, an outsider. I walked over to where he sat.

"Sweetie, if you're not having fun, we shouldn't come to these parties," I said to him.

"I am having fun," he said, looking up, surprised.

"You don't look like you're having fun."

"But I am."

The adults in charge of the party were clearly discomfited by his refusal to participate. At this party, the hired party assistant was so determined to make him have fun that he took his hand and dragged him out into the dodge ball arena. Jonathan promptly got hit by a ball and that's when he became unhappy. He came back over to where I stood and asked, "Why do people think it's fun to be hit by a ball?"

"Do you want to go home?"

"No, I want to watch. It's fun to watch."

"Okay, you can watch."

"Why did that man keep calling me 'Buddy'? I told him my name is Jonathan."

"Don't worry about it."

By the end of the party, as always, I was catatonic with frustration and some other feeling I couldn't quite name that came over me whenever I saw my son sitting by himself on the side, a feeling that was partly hot, partly sick, and resulted in an overwhelming desire to buy him ice cream, which he doesn't even like that much. I couldn't decide whether to blame the world, him, or me. Then, as we were leaving, Jonathan took my hand, smiled up at me, and said without a hint of irony, "I had such a great time!"

"Are you trying to make me lose my mind?" I asked him.

"No," he said. "Why would I do that?"

"I don't know," I said. "It's not in your best interest."

"I'll take him to parties from now on," my husband offered after one look at me when we got home.

On the other hand, Jonathan and Meredith both love adult parties. They mingle, they chat. I asked Jonathan why he seems to have such a good time at adult parties but only sits on the side at kids' parties.

"Because grownups don't shriek and run around throwing things and pushing each other down," he said.

"Well, for the most part, anyway," I had to agree.

When Jonathan was in first grade, his teacher expressed some concern about his recess behavior.

"He doesn't play with the other kids," she said.

"Does he seem unhappy?" I asked.

"No," she said. "But you know, in a few years, the other children won't be so accepting. Maybe you could have a talk with him," she suggested.

I tried. "Do you play with the others at recess?" I asked him.

"Why would I want to play Killer Ball?" he answered.

I told him, "If you want to play, you can just ask the other kids. I'm sure they'd let you."

"I'm sure they would, too," he said. "But I don't want to."

I asked him until I knew I was being a pain in the ass, and then I forced myself to stop asking. I didn't want him to think he was supposed to want to play Killer Ball.

I decided to ask the opinion of a psychiatrist whose name I got from the school.

"He doesn't interact with other children," I told him. "He does fine with adults, but he won't speak to kids his own age. Plus, he won't wear shorts."

"He won't wear shorts?"

"No, or short-sleeved shirts. Is there something I should be doing differently?"

The doctor asked me some more questions, about my pregnancy, about doubts I had about my parenting, and then looked at me thoughtfully.

"Your son sounds just fine," he said. "He exhibits some oppositional behaviors, but they are all well within the normal range."

"Okay," I said. "I'm glad to hear that."

The doctor sat back.

"Now," he said. "Would you like to talk about your own anxiety?"

The children have recess on what is called the "playdeck." At that time, Meredith's school day ended at 12:30; I'd pick her up and then the two of us would go to the park until it was time to pick up Jonathan at three. One afternoon I arrived early to fetch her. Her class was still at lunch, so I wandered into her empty classroom and, gazing idly out the window, noticed that it overlooked the playdeck and that I could see Jonathan's class at recess. Quickly, I crouched to avoid being observed and waddled over to the window. There was Jonathan, watching his classmates hurl balls at each other. But as I watched, a couple of other children came up to him. They stayed for a moment or two each, asked him questions, it looked like, and it looked like he answered. Then they returned to their game. He didn't look unhappy. He didn't look excluded. His classmates seemed to treat him with affection and respect—how could they not respect someone who so obviously didn't care what they thought? For the next few days I made a habit of arriving early so I could spy on the playdeck. And then one day I heard some bigmouth girl shout, "Hey, Jonathan! I can see your Mom! Why is she all hunched over?" and that was the end of that.

On Jonathan's third-grade report card his teacher wrote: "Jonathan is never involved in peer conflicts"—high praise, until you take into account the fact that he's never involved in peer anything. He received the highest marks in all subjects but two: French and Music. I asked him about these.

The music teacher wrote: "[Jonathan] sometimes shies away from participating fully in music. I hope that he will become comfortable enough with me and the class to participate more actively in all aspects of music this year."

"I like music class when he teaches music," said Jonathan. "But he wants us to do all these dumb body movements. How is moving around in some ridiculous way helping us learn about music?"

The French teacher wrote: "Jonathan is focused, attentive, and applies himself seriously to his tasks. However, he is still reluctant to speak up and he is uncomfortable playing unfamiliar roles in improvisations."

Jonathan said, "I hate skits."

"Well, okay," I said. "but ... " and then I realized that I used to hate skits too. I truly believe that one of the greatest things about being a grownup is that I never have to do things like skits. Everybody attributes Jonathan's non-participation to shyness, but I know it isn't that. I myself was shy. I would never have done anything to draw attention to myself, and I certainly would never have dreamed of refusing to do a skit. Jonathan, by this definition, is not shy.

"Well, okay," I said. "In a few years, they won't want you to do skits and body movements, you'll just sit at your desk and conjugate verbs and stuff. All right? Until then, can you just do what the teacher asks you to do?"

"Well, I'll try," he said. He really is a good boy. "But I'll hate it."

In October, we engaged in our annual School Photograph Battle. Every year, everyone else's children smile for their school photographs. Everyone else's children.

"Just smile, for God's sake," I said to Jonathan. "It's not that hard to smile."

"It takes forty-seven muscles to smile," said the little pedant.

"Look, think of the poor photographer," I tried. "It's his job, all day long, to take pictures. He needs to make them look nice so people will want to buy them. Just give him a break."

"I'd smile if there was anything to smile about," said Jonathan. "It's easy to smile if something's funny. But he just tells some stupid joke that's not funny at all."

"At all," Meredith chimed in.

"Why should I smile when there's nothing to smile about?" Jonathan asked.

I couldn't think of a good response, so I tried being honest to see how it would sound.

"I want you to smile because I'm afraid that if you don't smile, then everyone who looks at the yearbook will notice that only two children in the whole yearbook aren't smiling, and that those two children have the same last name, and then they'll look in the cross-referenced last name index and find out that those two children are mine, and then they'll wonder what I do to you at home to make you so glum."

"Oh," said Jonathan. He mulled that over for a moment. "But we aren't glum. So why would they think that we're glum?"

"Because you look glum."

"No, I don't," he said. "I look the way I look when I'm not smiling."

"Never mind," I said. "Fine. Don't smile. See what I care."

"Why should they smile?" asked my husband helpfully that evening. "It's an annoying American thing. Americans think children are naturally happy. The English think children are naturally miserable."

Would I prefer it if my children obediently stretched out their mouths in insincere grins? I realized that in all the photos in the newspaper of children who have been abused—scalded or starved or beaten to death—they always seem to be smiling. Beaming, even. So I should know better than to believe in those smiles. But a photograph of a smiling child is something you can hold in your hand, something you can show the world. It doesn't matter if it's true or not.

When the photos came back from the photographer, all the class pictures were posted in the big glass cases right by the entrance. I took a quick surreptitious survey. Many stretched-out fake smiles, many deer-in-headlights. My two didn't stand out so much. In fact, their individual portraits turned out very nicely. Jonathan looks dignified and Meredith's mouth is a little wavy line that makes her look as if she's making up her mind about something. I ordered many copies and distributed them to the relatives.

Every February the children's school holds an event called the "Gospel Breakfast" as part of its recognition of Black History Month. The mother of one of Jonathan's classmates, a dynamic and widely respected black minister, leads the assembly, which also features performances by the school's brass band and spirituals sung by all the children. Two years ago the kindergarten class was taught to sing "Jesus Loves Me This I Know," but here is where "Recognition of Black History" collided head on with "Respect for Jewish History," and now the kindergartners learn "This Little Light of Mine" instead.

So this past February the whole school and a large group of parents crowded into the gym, which looked like a quintessential American grade school gym, with navy blue pads covering the lower walls and basketball backboards cranked up to the ceiling. The band was playing, with much volume and little tune, and the Reverend was swaying. You could see her enthusiasm beginning to spread through the crowd.

"Let's see you put your hands in the air!" she encouraged. People laughed and began to do as she said. But suddenly, in spite of my genuinely warm feelings towards the Reverend and the people gathered there, I began to feel unhappy.

"Feel that rhythm!" the Reverend said. Her arms were in the air, and the mostly white parents, singing, followed her lead and waved their arms back and forth. They all seemed to be enjoying themselves, and I had the sinking feeling that I often have in such gatherings that I am the only person on the planet who doesn't know how to have a good time.

All three hundred-odd students did little derivative dances, which involved a lot of kicking as well as arm-waving—all the students, of course, but two. Two students stood perfectly still with their arms by their sides, quietly absorbing the scene with wide eyes. I happen to know that both those children possess a great deal of rhythm. But they revealed nothing. They were not standing near each other, so a casual observer might not have made a connection between them. They couldn't see each other, so they weren't imitating each other. They weren't enacting some secret pact; the impulse to not participate was born independently in each. But I could see them both.

Suddenly I became aware that only one adult in the audience was not waving her arms. And at the same moment I felt an overwhelming pressure. What should I be demonstrating for my children? Should I stay still to show solidarity? If I chose that route, wouldn't I be dooming them not to feel the rhythm? Wouldn't everyone think—especially me—*those poor kids, they just don't stand a chance with such a stodgy, self-conscious, and mean-spirited mother*. Maybe there was affirmation and protection to be found in the crowd. If so, I wanted that affirmation and that protection for my children, and I would do anything to get it for them. I forced myself to raise my arms and sway. I lifted the corners of my mouth into what I hoped resembled an expression of easy good humor, in case my children were watching me for cues (which they weren't). I feared for my children because they're braver than I ever was or ever will be, and even though I knew that waving my arms wouldn't help either them or me—still, I waved them, just in case.

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It has already been a couple of years since I wrote the first draft of this piece. My son is now thriving in fourth grade, with a wonderful teacher and a great group of classmates, for which I am helplessly, sappily grateful. One of the many reasons I wrote this piece was to try to convey that feeling of helplessness. You can never be absolutely certain you're doing the right thing for your child, nor do you know whether anything you do actually affects his or her development at all—but of course, that doesn't stop you from trying.