

COMMENTARY

A commentary on children's books about autism: What messages do they send about neurodiversity?

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Abstract

The past three decades have seen an exponential increase in the publication of children's books about autism. This increased availability of children's books is exciting because they have the power to promote understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of neurodiversity. However, growing concerns have been raised by both autistic and non-autistic people that some children's books about autism may work against neurodiversity, rather than promoting it. This Commentary discusses the strikingly different ways in which children's books about autism portray key concepts related to neurodiversity, including autistic differences, agency, abilities, and communication. We present concrete examples (including books by autistic authors); highlight the views of autistic and non-autistic parents of autistic children; and discuss how different books may leave readers with different impressions of autism and neurodiversity. Given the vastly different themes that emerge across different books, we conclude that it is important for educators, families, and other members of the autism community to make informed and individualized choices about what books they use for what purpose. We emphasize the need for systematic, high-quality research on children's books about autism, including content analyses and studies that determine what messages these books send to their intended audience: children. It is vital that autistic people continue to shape this conversation, contributing unique insights that inform research priorities and the methodological approaches used to investigate them.

Lay Summary

Children's books about autism have the potential to promote neurodiversity, but they also have the potential to (unintentionally) work against it. It is important to make informed and individualized choices about what books we use for what purpose. The field needs more high-quality, systematic research on children's books about autism—particularly studies that involve autistic perspectives.

KEYWORDS

autism, books, child, empathy, friends, intellectual disability, respect

INTRODUCTION

The past three decades have seen an exponential increase in the publication of children's books about autism (Azano et al., 2017; Barrio et al., 2021; Gaffney & Wilkins, 2016; Kelley et al., 2015; Lemoine & Schneider, 2021).¹ This increased availability is exciting

because children's books have the power to promote understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of neurodiversity. As defined by Baumer and Freuh (2021),

¹According to the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database (a collection of over 1 million children's books), there were 47 children's books about autism published from 1990 to 1999; 265 books published from 2000 to 2009; and 408 published from 2010 to 2019, with new books steadily released into the 2020s.

“Neurodiversity describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways; there is no one ‘right’ way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences are not viewed as deficits” (p. 1). Children’s books that feature autistic characters may serve both as mirrors, reflecting and affirming young autistic readers’ views of themselves as neurodivergent people, and as windows, increasing non-autistic readers’ understanding of autism and neurodiversity (Bishop, 1990; Lian et al., 2020). Indeed, as autism touches the lives of more and more people (Maenner et al., 2023), educators and clinicians are increasingly using children’s books about autism as a tool to promote neurodiversity (Azano et al., 2017; Barrio et al., 2021; Dyches et al., 2006; Gilmore & Howard, 2016; Kelley et al., 2015; Lemoine & Schneider, 2021).

Yet at the same time that children’s books about autism have the power to promote neurodiversity, they also have the potential to (unintentionally) work against it. Growing concerns have been raised by both autistic and non-autistic people that some children’s books about autism contain messages that are inconsistent with neurodiversity (F.R.B., 2020; J.S., 2022; Morton & Morton, 2016a; Morton & Morton, 2016b). These concerns align with our own observations, which we have made over years of using these books as a teaching tool and recently beginning to study this issue empirically. Given the focus of this Commentary, it is critical that we define our relationship to autism and neurodiversity. We approach this Commentary through our roles as neurotypical speech-language pathologists and scientists in the field of autism. Neither of us is autistic; as such, there is a limit to the experiences and insights we bring. We return to this in the Conclusion.

In this Commentary, we illustrate the strikingly different ways in which children’s books about autism portray key concepts related to neurodiversity, including autistic differences, agency, abilities, and communication. We present concrete examples (including books by autistic authors); highlight the views of autistic and non-autistic parents of autistic children; and discuss how different books may leave readers with different impressions of autism and neurodiversity. We end with a call for systematic, high-quality research on children’s books about autism.

DIFFERENCES

A central tenet of neurodiversity is that differences are not deficits and there is no one right way of being (Baumer & Freuh, 2021). Children’s books about autism often focus on differences (including autistic interests, which often differ from non-autistic interests in focus and/or intensity), but how differences are described has the power to affect readers’ perceptions of neurodiversity. Some books present differences in relatively neutral

terms, as when a non-autistic boy describes his autistic sister by saying, “...she thinks and acts differently” (Daniels, 2012, p. 1), or when an autistic boy’s love of trains is straightforwardly described: “Tomas loves watching toy trains on the tracks” (Welton, 2015, p. 1). Other books present differences positively. For example, *Noah Chases the Wind* features a boy whose love of science and weather leads him on a magical journey that shows him where the wind goes (Worthington, 2015). When presented in a balanced and respectful way, focusing on autistic interests aligns with neurodiversity and strengths-based approaches to autism (Barrio et al., 2021; Donaldson et al., 2017).

Some books include negative descriptions of autistic differences, such as when a non-autistic girl describes her autistic classmate as “not quite like the rest of us” (Ely, 2004, p. 1), or when a book about Temple Grandin features non-autistic characters saying, “She’ll never be normal” and “Her brain’s not quite right” (Mosca, 2017, p. 9). In *Jasper and the Magpie*, a boy’s non-autistic parents initially discourage his interest in shiny metals (Mayfield, 2015). His father says, “I’m worried he likes metals more than having mates. I don’t want him to be the boy who’s weird or people hate” (Mayfield, 2015, p. 8). In most cases, non-autistic characters with negative views about autism ultimately accept autistic differences. The non-autistic characters in the Temple Grandin book reach this conclusion: “She was ‘DIFFERENT, NOT LESS,’ they all finally agreed” (Mosca, 2017, p. 11). Similarly, Jasper’s parents revisit their views: “His mum and dad decided, after thinking for so long, that Jasper’s love of shiny things was not so very wrong” (Mayfield, 2015, p. 23). For some readers, this transformation from rejection to acceptance may be inspiring. For others, encountering non-autistic characters who (even temporarily) express negative views of autism may be detrimental because these views emphasize “otherness” and frame autistic behaviors as undesirable (Azano et al., 2017; Gilmore & Howard, 2016). Such negativity could be especially harmful for young readers, who may retain negative themes independent of the broader narrative context. One autistic parent of an autistic son expressed this type of concern in an online review of a book they perceived as pitying and othering autistic children, saying, “...it will do so much more harm to autistic kids and the autistic community” (F.R.B., 2020).

Even when framing appears neutral, the way autistic differences are described may reveal a hidden neurotypical (NT) standard. This idea is best illustrated by a book called *Why Johnny Doesn’t Flap: NT is Ok!* (Morton & Morton, 2016a; Morton & Morton, 2016b), which The Autistic Self Advocacy Network and the Thinking Person’s Guide to Autism both include on their lists of recommended books. The autistic narrator introduces his NT friend, Johnny, like this: “We have a lot of fun together, but sometimes he acts pretty strangely. Mom says it is because he is NT, or neurotypical. He doesn’t

have autism, so his brain works differently from mine, but that's OK" (Morton & Morton, 2016a, pp. 2–3). Because autistic people are commonly described as “different from” non-autistic people (for an exception, see DeThorne, 2023), it is unexpected when the NT character is described as “different from” his autistic friend—particularly alongside the phrase, “...but that's OK,” which is often used when discussing autistic behaviors (Azano et al., 2017; Doering Tourville, 2010; Hayden & Prince, 2020). The authors, who are neurodiversity advocates and parents of an autistic child, describe their conceptualization of the book like this:

“When we first started writing the book, we saw it strictly as a satire on children's books about autism, which, though well intentioned, always end up being condescending. Even as they call for tolerance of autistic behaviors, many of them make it clear that they consider those behaviors bizarre and wrong. So we were poking fun at those books... in order to point out the prejudices that most people are unaware of” (Morton & Morton, 2016b).

AGENCY

Another important neurodiversity-related consideration is agency—the extent to which autistic characters make their own decisions, play an active role in their lives, and impact the world around them (Donaldson et al., 2017; Haggard & Tsakiris, 2009; Kapp et al., 2013; Prince & Hayden, 2022). Autistic agency illustrates empowerment and self-determination—key components of neurodiversity and strengths-based approaches to autism (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022; Donaldson et al., 2017; Dyches et al., 2001; Hayden & Prince, 2020). One book that highlights autistic agency is *Benji, the Bad Day, and Me* (Pla, 2018), which features Benji, an autistic boy, and his non-autistic brother, Sammy, who had a bad day at school. Benji and their mother seem too distracted to notice Sammy's distress, but then Benji *does* notice. Benji comforts Sammy by wrapping him in a blanket and saying, “You're my little burrito,” as their mother does when Benji is upset (Pla, 2018, p. 23) Benji's simple yet powerful action resolves the conflict of the story—an illustration of autistic agency and empowerment.

It Was Supposed to be Sunny (Cotterill, 2021) also highlights autistic agency. Laila, an autistic girl, cannot have her birthday party outside because it is raining. Her mother reminds her that she has been through change before and can do it again, and they decide to have the party inside. Then Laila's unicorn birthday cake crashes to the floor. Laila remembers: “I've been through this before...and I can do it again...” (Cotterill, 2021, pp. 23–24). She chooses unicorn ice cream cones instead, which

is a huge success. Again, the autistic character's actions drive the successful resolution of a narrative conflict. Notably, *It Was Supposed to be Sunny* is one of the relatively few children's books about autism written by an autistic author (also see Hammond, 2023).

Other books portray autistic characters more passively. In *Ian's Walk* (Lears, 1998), Julie, a non-autistic girl, reluctantly takes Ian, her autistic brother, on a walk to the park, but Ian disappears. Julie finds him only when she thinks like him, remembering he loves the old bell in the center of the park. The non-autistic sister resolves the narrative conflict by finding her brother; Ian plays a passive role. Another example is *Looking After Louis* (Ely, 2004), in which an observant non-autistic girl discovers that her autistic classmate, Louis, has a new interest: soccer. She brings this discovery to their teacher's attention, which leads to a surprise soccer game for Louis. In this way, the non-autistic classmate's actions drive the story, with the autistic character as more of a bystander.

Highlighting things that are done for, because of, or around autistic characters, may suggest that autistic people are not capable of playing an active role in their own lives (Hayden & Prince, 2020). Some books explicitly describe autistic characters as needing to be watched over, which further contributes to themes of passivity and helplessness that contrast with messages of independence and self-determination (Barrio et al., 2021; Ely, 2004). We do not suggest that there is no place for books that include non-autistic agency; after all, such books could help non-autistic people become strong, respectful advocates for autistic people in their lives. However, consistently portraying a lack of autistic agency may have unintended negative effects. Books that depict autistic characters with strong agency are more likely to promote neurodiversity.

ABILITIES

Many children's books about autism focus on autistic characters' abilities, which are sometimes referred to as “special talents” or “superpowers” (Azano et al., 2017; Barrio et al., 2021). Though focusing on autistic abilities is not inherently problematic, the way in which abilities are described may imply that some ways of interacting with the world are better than others—a theme that is inconsistent with neurodiversity.

Leah's Voice (DeMonia, 2018) tells the story of an autistic girl, Leah, and her non-autistic sister, Logan. Logan's non-autistic friend Abby doesn't like being around Leah, but then Leah receives a national art award. Abby subsequently apologizes to Logan, saying: “I saw the article in the paper about Leah and it got me thinking...I need to treat Leah like I would anyone else...Can I congratulate Leah about her art award?” (DeMonia, 2018, pp. 23–25). Abby then gives Leah a

hug and admires her artwork. *The Perfect Project* tells the story of an autistic boy, Charlie, who gains his classmates' acceptance and appreciation during a group presentation (Alloway, 2019). He tells the judges many train facts; the more facts he shares, the more points his team receives. Alongside cheers, a group member says, "Your amazing memory for train facts helped us win first place" (Alloway, 2019, p. 21). *Anthony Best: A Picture Book about Asperger's*, features Hannah, a non-autistic girl, and her neighbor, Anthony, who has Asperger's (Fahy, 2012). Hannah says that despite his name, Anthony is "not always the best boy" (Fahy, 2012, p. 5). He doesn't look at her when she talks to him, runs in front of cars, and doesn't understand jokes. Then Hannah finds Anthony playing beautiful piano music and exclaims, "Wow!...when it comes to music, Anthony really is the best boy" (Fahy, 2012, p. 29).

In these books, special talents emerge as the primary path through which non-autistic people come to value autistic people. It is unclear how these stories would have ended if Leah, Charlie, or Anthony had *not* possessed a special talent; would the non-autistic characters still have come to accept them? Such themes may lead young autistic readers to infer that to be accepted, they need to demonstrate an exceptional ability—a task unachievable for most autistic and non-autistic people alike. Messages about the importance of autistic abilities are sometimes explicit, as when *The Perfect Project* provides "...some handy tips to expand children's long-term memory and help them be superheroes like Charlie!" (Alloway, 2019, p. 24) or when a book states, "...it is okay to be different, because of the wonderful things that you might have to offer the world one day" (Watts, 2012, Author Note). It is natural to celebrate autistic people's contributions, but linking someone's abilities with their worth is not consistent with neurodiversity (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022; den Houting et al., 2021; although see Jaarsma & Welin, 2012). An autistic mother of an autistic child expressed this sentiment in a negative review about one book, stating, "...you don't have to earn kindness from others by being good at things" (J.S., 2022).

One common autistic "superpower" in children's books about autism is intellectual ability, including memory and factual knowledge (Abdullah, 2015; Alloway, 2019; Walsh, 2016; Watts, 2012; Yarborough, 2010; also see Nordahl-Hansen et al., 2018). Books about Temple Grandin commonly discuss how her intellectual contributions (which revolutionized the world of cattle-based agriculture) serve as "openings for respect and inclusion" from non-autistic people (Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019, p. 591). This is no doubt an accurate description of her (and some other autistic people's) experiences, but the autism spectrum also includes people with intellectual disability and the full range of abilities between. Over-emphasizing intellectual strengths can contribute to harmful stereotypes that lead non-autistic people to expect intellectual

superpowers in all autistic people (Barrio et al., 2021; Treweek et al., 2019; Van Hees et al., 2015). Messages about a character's value and individuality may be more universal when they emphasize not skills, but behaviors and attributes, as when *All My Stripes* highlights the autistic character's kindness and curiosity (Rudolph & Royer, 2015).

COMMUNICATION

Another fundamental aspect of neurodiversity is how a person communicates. Language and communication skills vary widely across autistic people (Ellis Weismer & Kover, 2015); accordingly, books include autistic characters with a range of spoken language skills. In many instances, autistic characters communicate through spoken words, often utilizing complete sentences (Bailey, 2019; Cotterill, 2021; Malia, 2020; Rudolph & Royer, 2015). In other books, autistic characters speak but struggle to communicate in some contexts, as when one autistic character states, "It's really hard for my brain to come up with my own words to say..." (Cook, 2018, p. 22); when a non-autistic sibling says of his sister: "Because of her autism, sometimes Samantha gets anxious and doesn't know how to use the right word to tell us that she needs a break" (Daniels, 2012, p. 3); and when a non-autistic peer states, "Talking is sometimes hard for my friend" (B. Bishop, 2011, p. 11).

Some autistic characters do not communicate using speech. For example, one non-autistic sibling says, "Ian doesn't answer me, though, because he has autism" (Lears, 1998, p. 1); a non-speaking autistic boy is shown with empty speech bubbles (Amenta III, 2011); and another book explains, "In fact, some people with autism don't speak at all" (Thomas, 2014, p. 9). It is fitting that some books include non-speaking autistic characters, because many autistic people do not speak. Seeing themselves represented in books can support non-speaking or minimally speaking autistic children's confidence and validate their agency (LISTEN, 2021). Encountering non-speaking or minimally speaking autistic characters may also increase non-autistic readers' empathy and understanding of neurodiversity.

What is surprising and concerning, however, is that children's books rarely include autistic characters who communicate using augmentative and alternative communication (AAC; all the ways people communicate besides speaking; ASHA, n.d.). Approximately 30% of autistic individuals are non-speaking or minimally speaking (Rose et al., 2016), yet AAC is rarely portrayed in children's books about autism. This sends the presumably unintended message that spoken language is the only or the best option, which is not consistent with the neurodiversity-affirming perspective that all communication modalities should be equally valued (Donaldson et al., 2023; Donaldson, Corbin, McCoy, 2021;

Smolkin & Young, 2011; Zisk & Dalton, 2019). When AAC is portrayed, the systems are often minimal and inconsistently used. For example, one autistic character knows three signs (Amenta III, 2011), and another autistic character uses a picture card to request to use the bathroom (Robbins, 2020), potentially sending the inaccurate message that autistic AAC users have minimal language or little to communicate.

One notable exception is *A Day with No Words*, a book by Tiffany Hammond, an autistic mother with two autistic sons (Hammond, 2023). This story portrays a mother and her son each using speech-generating devices to communicate across a variety of settings: at home, at a park, and at a restaurant. At the park, the mom uses AAC to advocate for her son. At the restaurant, the autistic boy orders food using AAC, saying, “chicken nuggets...orange soda...a large side of fries” (Hammond, 2023, p. 37). This book is notable because it centers AAC in the story, features strong AAC advocacy, and provides a window into the lives of both an autistic mother and her autistic, non-speaking child. Given how rarely these important topics have been included in children’s books about autism, it is not surprising that *A Day with No Words* has received a stunning amount of publicity, an astoundingly positive reception, and is on the New York Times best seller list. Celeste Peña of Autistic Families of Color WA wrote an editorial review stating, “It was so wonderful to see families like mine represented in *A Day With No Words*. As an Autistic self advocate and as the parent of an Autistic child it’s rare to find a book that both speaks to the experience of Autistic children in a way that is respectful and understanding of their humanity” (Pena, 2023). Books like *A Day with No Words* are likely to support understanding and appreciation of autistic individuals who use AAC, as well as validate the experiences of autistic AAC users.

CONCLUSION

Although children’s books about autism have the potential to promote neurodiversity, they also have the potential to work against it. Growing concerns have been raised by autistic and non-autistic voices that some books—though well intentioned—completely “miss the mark” and may even do harm to autistic children and the broader autism community (F.R.B, 2020; Gaffney & Wilkins, 2016; J.S, 2022; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Morton & Morton, 2016b). Given the vastly different themes that emerge across different books, it is important for educators, families, and other members of the autism community to make informed and individualized choices about what books they use for what purpose—perhaps by considering some of the specific guidelines and recommendations that have been put forward (Fries, 2017; Gaffney & Wilkins, 2016; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Prince & Hayden, 2022). The ability to make informed

choices will be supported by research that quantitatively and qualitatively analyzes the content of children’s books about autism (Azano et al., 2017; Lemoine & Schneider, 2021).

Research is also needed to determine what messages children’s books about autism send to their intended audience: children (Lian et al., 2020). Different children may experience the same book in different ways, and the messages that autistic and non-autistic children perceive about neurodiversity may not be the messages we think they will perceive. As mentioned, both authors identify as neurotypical, which inherently limits the experiences and insights we bring. It is vital that autistic people continue to shape this conversation, contributing unique insights that inform research priorities and the methodological approaches used to investigate them. Incorporating the full range of viewpoints within the autism community will maximize the potential of children’s books to promote understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of neurodiversity.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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