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April 2021

Volume 9, Issue 8

Autism Agenda



Linn Benton Lincoln ESD-Cascade Regional Autism Program

Socially Connecting, Learning, and Meeting While Physically Apart – Ideas for the ASD Community

By: Maureen Bennie February 8, 2021

Meeting and connecting virtually was a part of our world before the pandemic started, but it is now a part of life more than ever. At the moment, it is the only way to socialize safely in larger groups. In some areas of the world, schooling remains online rather than in person.

There are advantages and disadvantages to being online. The internet allows us to connect with a wider group of people from places outside of our locale. There are groups that meet around specific interests. I have written about my daughter's improvement in her writing and storytelling ability since joining the Fan Fiction Wattpad group online in March 2020 (over 80 stories written so far). Meeting platforms keep us in touch with family members and friends that we can't visit with right now.

Online communication is complex, though. People may misrepresent themselves or be more aggressive with what they say in the absence of in person contact. Social cues are missing such as full body language, which adds to meaning and understanding. Eye contact can feel more intense. Zoom fatigue – the tiredness, worry, or burnout associated with overusing virtual platforms of communication, is a real thing. It is thought that audio is the main reason for fatigue due to millisecond delays in virtual verbal responses which negatively affect our interpersonal perceptions. Auditory processing tends to be a problem in individuals with ASD. The Psychiatric Times wrote an interesting article on the psychological explanations for Zoom fatigue – well worth reading.



Although there are pros and cons to connecting and learning online, it will remain the safest mode to do so for some time. How to we make the experience the best and safest it can be for individuals with ASD?

Continued on page 2.

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SOCIALLY, CONNECTING, LEARNING CONTINUED....

SETTING THE RULES, GUIDELINES AND EXPECTATIONS FOR YOUR GROUPS

In Kerry Mataya's webinar on [Helpful Tips and Resources for Teaching Conversation Skills to High Functioning Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder](#), she had a section about teaching conversation skills online. Many of her guidelines would be applicable for any online group activity or meeting. Kerry suggests :

1. Using PowerPoint slides to share rules and expectations in writing.
2. Assume there are people around and choose appropriate topics for a larger group audience.
3. Be aware of talking about personal topics with different categories of people present. (ex. siblings, parents)
4. Move away from others to keep distractions at a minimum.
5. Maintain confidentiality and privacy by not recording the meeting.
6. Review participation rules like mute your microphone when not speaking, use the raise hand function when you want to speak, mute background noise, sit in a well lit area.
7. Disable chat functions when working with students to avoid them private messaging each other in groups.

There are many **articles** on how to establish online guidelines for community groups. Do a little searching and reading to pick and choose what rules and expectations would work best for your group's purpose and support it running smoothly.

WHAT TO DO ONLINE TO CONNECT WITH OTHERS

There are many activities to do online – discussion groups, meetings, and clubs for every topic imaginable. Joining groups that share a common interest can be rewarding. Here are some ideas of what you can do online.

Connecting with Family and Friends

Sometimes coming up with things to talk about or maintaining a conversation can be difficult. If your child/student struggles with conversing, consider a show and tell format for an online visit. This can be done by sharing photos of the family pet or discoveries on a walk, doing a project together online, or making something like an art project. Some people cook together. A friend of mine hosts story time for her grandchildren and divides each segment of reading by age.

You can plan what to say ahead of time by jotting down some highlights of the week or writing out a script that can be read aloud. Shoot some videos of children in action. Seeing a video can also help with the recall and sequencing of an event.

Book Clubs

Found a book that you love? Want to talk about it? There are hundreds of online book clubs. Check with your local library. For example, [Jane Austen book clubs](#) are all over the world.

Movie Night

Watch a movie together through video conferencing or chat on text while the movie is playing.

Board Games

There are numerous online sites to access for playing board games online. There is [Board Game Arena](#) or [Tabletopia](#). If you are looking for the classics like Boggle, Clue or Monopoly, [here they are](#).



Continued on page 3.

SOCIALLY, CONNECTING, LEARNING CONTINUED....

Physical Activity

Staying active is an important part of well being. There are many exercise classes online both prerecorded programs and live groups. You can find many different sports. Special Olympics has great virtual health and fitness programs as well as guidelines for keeping fit at home.

Local Library Offerings

Libraries are more active than ever with many online lectures on a variety of topics. While some are large meetings, many are smaller with 20 people or less.

Favorite Places

Many attractions that are now closed or have capacity limits are offering experiences online. These can be webinars, live discussion, or short courses on topics of interest. For example, zoos, science centers, museums, art, galleries, and symphonies have many programs online now.

WHERE CAN YOU FIND ONLINE GROUPS?

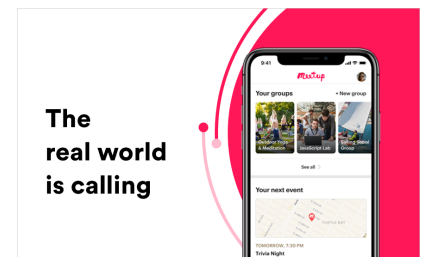
Meetup – a platform for finding and building local communities. People use Meetup to meet new people, learn new things, find support, get out of their comfort zones, and pursue their passions, together.

Local Autism Society or Autism/Disability Organization – most are offering groups online right now. Here is an example of some [online programs](#) offered by the Centre for Autism Services Alberta. Cerebral Palsy Alberta offers [virtual programs](#).

Self Advocacy Online (USA)

Autism Shifts

List of Online Autism Groups



LOCAL LIBRARY – FOR SPECIFIC INTERESTS AND TOPICS

TEN ONLINE SAFETY TIPS – WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT

No matter what a person does online, safety and care for a person's well-being has to be top priority. Here are some things to be aware of:

1. Cyberbullying- this can be abusive messages received through email, text message, and instant chat. Other examples on online threats, humiliation, online stalking, sharing posts and photos without permission and gossip.
2. Misunderstandings – not everything you read on the internet is true and not everyone is honest.
3. Scams, Manipulation or Hacking of Accounts
4. Exposure to Inappropriate Content
5. Sensory Overload – loud clicking keyboard sounds, bright lights, blue light, sudden loud sounds. Take regular breaks away from screens.
6. Internet Addiction
7. Protecting a Person on Social Media Platforms – risks, changing account settings to avoid explicit content, scammers, fake profiles, and cyberbullies
8. Fake Profiles- knowing how to verify if a person is who say they say they are
9. Signs That Something May Be Wrong – if online contact is making a person feel upset, uncomfortable, or unsafe
10. Know the Ways to Keep Children Safe – keep computers in a communal space, a handy checklist for information they can't give out over the internet, reporting cyberbullying to an adult, install child-friendly filters.

[HTTPS://AUTISMAWARENESSCENTRE.COM/SOCIALLY-CONNECTING-LEARNING-AND-MEETING-WHILE-PHYSICALLY-APART-IDEAS-FOR-THE-ASD-COMMUNITY/](https://autismawarenesscentre.com/socially-connecting-learning-and-meeting-while-physically-apart-ideas-for-the-asd-community/)

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UNTOLD STORIES OF ADULTS WITH AUTISM

Untold stories of adults with autism

Most of the conversation about autism — whether about services or science — concerns children with the condition. But what happens when children with autism grow up? That’s the focus of this special report, “Untold stories of adults with autism.”

The report covers issues that affect a majority of adults with the condition — as well as issues that touch just a few. We made an effort to feature the perspectives not just of scientists, but of the true experts: people with autism.

Many children fall off a ‘social cliff’ after leaving high school and becoming adults, as journalist [Deborah Rudacille](#) describes in “[The twenty-something free fall](#).” But a few manage to do well. Those who fare best are the ones who participated in organized activities as students, writes [Julie Lounds Taylor](#).

Some of the social difficulties people with autism face stem from lack of eye contact. [Craig Erickson](#) and [Rebecca Shaffer](#) explore whether adults with autism are [uninterested in others’ eyes](#) or actively avoid them. The answer may help shape therapies for the condition.

Artist [Leironica Hawkins](#), who has autism, depicts her occasional aversion to eye contact in a series of evocative cartoons. Another artist on the spectrum, [Nicole Appel](#), creates unconventional portraits that have appeared in prominent art shows.



For [Brooks Wolfner](#), a young man on the spectrum, a job-training program has led to [stable employment](#) and an entrée to a new social life. Brooks lives with family, but when his grandmother is in Florida, he is by himself, adhering to a strict schedule that gets him to work by 6 a.m.

Housing can be more complicated for others on the spectrum. And states are increasingly refusing to pay for disabled adults to live in [large residential communities](#) designed for them. [Amy S.F. Lutz](#) reports that these communities are a particularly good option for those who need extensive support.

For most people with autism, isolation is unwelcome. [Liz Pellicano](#) and [Felicity Sedgewick](#) describe the difficulties women with autism have making friends because they struggle to interpret the subtle social cues that form the glue of [female friendships](#).

People with autism may similarly find romantic relationships challenging. In “[Sex and other foreign words](#),” reporter [Ann Griswold](#) describes the complications that make sex and romance difficult for those on the spectrum, and the sweet success many have found.

This is the first generation of people with autism who have a diagnosis and are choosing to become parents. Although raising children poses its own set of problems for any parent, many are finding “[the unexpected plus of parenting with autism](#).”

One pitfall of parenting on the spectrum can be an inability to respond appropriately to a child’s emotions. [Nathan Caruna](#) and [Jon Brock](#) discuss technology that brings a better understanding of [social cognition](#) in adults with autism, and the promise of virtual reality for helping these individuals hone social skills.

Adults with autism often have multiple health conditions. At a few [healthcare centers](#) designed for this population, specialists coordinate their care to consider all of an individual’s health issues before deciding on treatment.

In other cases, the healthcare of adults with autism is compromised by a late-in-life diagnosis. [Judith Miller](#) suggests potential ways to uncover cases of autism that go undiagnosed in community health centers.

You can hear some of these voices in our [Spectrum Stories podcast](#) (below). Articles from our archives round out this special report, which we hope captures some of the experience of being an adult with autism.

<https://www.spectrumnews.org/features/special-reports/untold-stories-adults-autism/>

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AUTISM ACCEPTANCE MONTH IDEAS FOR FAMILIES

Autism Acceptance Month Ideas for Families

By. Dyan Robson

In case you didn't already know it, April is Autism Acceptance Month. But you probably know it as Autism Awareness Month, right?

And there are lots of things you can do as a family to educate yourself and teach your children about autism and neurodiversity.

Why?

Because even if you don't know an autistic person yourself (although you likely do), you likely have an autistic co-worker. And there's likely an autistic child in your child's classroom or school.

They deserve to be accepted and embraced for who they are, just like every other human being on this planet. It's why autistic adults have been pushing for years for the world to ditch the idea of autism awareness campaigns and instead turn to autism acceptance.

So this April, I encourage you and your family to move beyond autism awareness by learning more about autism and neurodiversity with these **autism acceptance month ideas** and activities.

AUTISM ACCEPTANCE VS. AUTISM AWARENESS: IT'S AN IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

You probably notice that I am using the term acceptance instead of awareness here. And there's a reason.

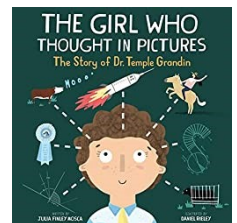
I strongly encourage you to [rethink who and what you support during autism acceptance month](#) because the autism awareness campaigns and initiatives that you're likely familiar with aren't ideal. In fact, autistic adults have continually spoken out against these ideas and push for celebrating autism acceptance instead of the widely publicized autism awareness month and World Autism Awareness Day.

If you'd like to read more about the distinction between the two, this article called [Acceptance vs. Awareness](#) is really helpful.

AUTISM ACCEPTANCE MONTH IDEAS & RESOURCES: 10+ WAYS YOUR FAMILY CAN PARTICIPATE THIS APRIL

Now that you know a bit more background information on acceptance vs. awareness, here are some **autism acceptance month ideas** and activities to do with your family.

1. Read an [autism picture book](#) with your kids.
2. Watch the Pixar shorts "[Loop](#)" (can't find a full version on YouTube for this link, you need to go to Disney Plus+) and "[Float](#)" as they are great for promoting autism acceptance.
3. Color a [neurodiversity infinity symbol](#) to display at home. It's important to avoid the autism puzzle piece icon due to its problematic and ableist history.
4. [Talk to your kids about autism and disabilities](#) and explain that not all disabilities are visible. I can almost guarantee that there will be a kid in their class or school that has an autism diagnosis.



Continued on page 6.

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AUTISM ACCEPTANCE MONTH IDEAS FOR FAMILIES CONTINUED...

5. Learn more about autism by reading a [book about autism](#). My top picks for someone new to autism and neurodiversity would be Uniquely Human or The Reason I Jump, but if you are ready to dive into something more meaty, I highly recommend Neurotribes. Or try one of these [free neurodiversity ebooks](#). Even better yet, read a book by an autistic author, such as [The Reason I Jump](#), or an autistic anthology, such as [Loud Hands](#).
6. Join an [autistic-led group](#) and start listening to and learning from autistic people in the autism community themselves.
7. Read a [book that features an autistic main character](#) or read one out loud together as a family. Or better yet, look for an #OwnVoices book that is not only written by an autistic author, but features an autistic character.
8. Educate yourself about these common [autism myths](#). These myths are often perpetuated and shared as part of autism awareness campaigns, which further stigmatizes the autistic community. Unfortunately, these myths also delay people from pursuing an autism diagnosis because their concerns are often dismissed along the lines of something like, "Oh he can't be autistic because he's so social!" Knowing about these myths means that you are better able to combat them and correct others when they push these harmful narratives.
9. Donate an [autism picture book](#) to your child's classroom so that it can be shared with lots of children.
10. Learn about neurodiversity. This [calendar of neurodiversity resources](#) from The Neurodivergent Teacher is a fantastic starting point.
11. Start reading blogs and sharing articles and content written by actually autistic people. For example, you could start watching and sharing some of these [Ask an Autistic videos](#).
12. Read up about identity-first language and start getting comfortable using the word autistic. This article called [The Significance of Semantics: Person-First Language: Why it Matters](#) from Autistic Hoya is a great read!
13. If your child's school or your workplace is promoting autism awareness events, then skip the blue on April 2nd (which well known as Autism Awareness Day) and wear #RedInstead.
14. Watch the ["Amazing Things Happen"](#) short. This video would be great for world autism month events, assemblies, and presentations.
15. Color in a [Neurodivergent Narwhals coloring page](#) from [The Neurodiversity Library](#). They are an adorable way to promote autism acceptance.
16. Donate to an autism organization, but please research the organization you are donating to first as not all are created equal. The [Autistic Self Advocacy Network](#) is a good one to donate to. You might also have one local to you that might be worth donating to.

Hopefully you find these autism acceptance month ideas helpful!

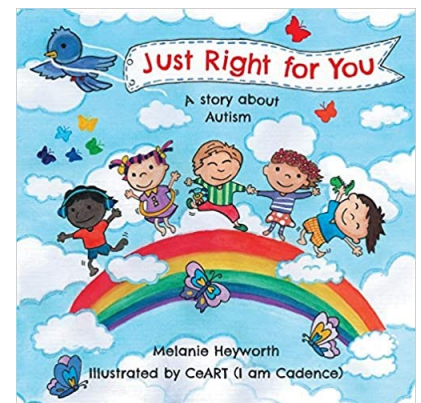
OTHER AUTISM ACCEPTANCE RESOURCES YOU'LL LOVE

[Autism Resources for Parents](#)

[What I Want my Autistic Child to Know](#)

[The One Thing You Should Know About Autism](#)

<https://www.andnextcomesl.com/2019/04/autism-acceptance-month-ideas.html>



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APRIL IS AUTISM ACCEPTANCE MONTH 2021



Here are some organizations supporting Autism Acceptance Month 2021:

ASAN: Acceptance is an Action: ASAN Statement on 10th Anniversary of AAM

<https://autisticadvocacy.org/2021/04/acceptance-is-an-action-asan-statement-on-10th-anniversary-of-aam/>

Autism Society: <https://www.autism-society.org/get-involved/national-autism-awareness-month/>

UMCE: <https://www.unmc.edu/mmi/news-events/community-events/autism-acceptance-month-toolkit.pdf>

YouTube Videos all about individuals with autism:

Neuro & Wonderful: Ask an Autistic: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9Bk0GbW8xqvTqQlheNG5uw>

25 Autistic Youtubers to check out: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OtNwQ4nCpfE>

How to support individuals with autism after April Autism Awareness Month: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ifpdvd6QmWU>

USING BOOKS AS RESOURCES

4/1/2021

Using Children's Picture Books About Autism as Resources in Inclusive Classrooms | Reading Rockets



Launching young readers!

Reading Rockets

Using Children's Picture Books About Autism as Resources in Inclusive Classrooms

By: [Miranda L. Sigmon](#), [Mary E. Tackett](#), [Amy Price Azano](#)



Children's picture books about autism can be a valuable resource for teachers in inclusive classrooms attempting to teach awareness, empathy, and acceptance among students. This article provides instructional tips for educators and offers suggestions for using children's picture books about autism to encourage positive, inclusive instruction.

Introduction

This article focuses on developing teacher understanding of how to carefully select and use children's picture books about autism as a tool for teaching awareness, empathy, and acceptance in an elementary classroom setting. We describe how the increased rate of autism and growing practice of inclusive educational settings affect classroom practice and provide implementation tips for using specific picture books and activities. Knowing that picture books are often used as a teaching tool for elementary educators, the use of books addressing autism could teach empathy while enhancing students' awareness and acceptance of students on the autism spectrum.

With an increase in the prevalence of children diagnosed with autism and the continuing movement toward inclusion in elementary classrooms, general education teachers must meet the challenge of planning instruction for students with autism and their neurotypical peers. To be effective in the inclusive classroom, teachers need to create inviting and safe environments so that students learn to work together and support one another while respecting neurodiversity. Picture books about autism can be used to teach children understanding, empathy, and acceptance.

The increase of autism and need for inclusion

<https://www.readingrockets.org/article/using-childrens-picture-books-about-autism-resources-inclusive-classrooms>

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USING BOOKS AS RESOURCES CONTINUED...

4/1/2021

Using Children's Picture Books About Autism as Resources in Inclusive Classrooms | Reading Rockets

Currently, one in 59 children is diagnosed with autism, a number that has risen substantially within the last decade (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Autism is a complex neurological disorder. Typically, autism is characterized by limited communication skills, social anxieties, and atypical behaviors (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Autism is described as a spectrum disorder to represent the varying degrees of severity.

For example, some individuals with autism are nonverbal, whereas others can be quite communicative, although their speech is often limited by an extreme focus on a particular topic. Some students with autism may have particular self-stimulating (or "stimming") behaviors, such as rocking back and forth or spinning objects, whereas others may have a heightened sensitivity to the loud ringing of the bell.

Not all individuals have the same types of anxieties or sensory challenges; however, these characteristics can make learning in a traditional classroom environment a challenge for the child with autism, for other students, and for the teacher. While recognizing these challenges, more schools are moving toward inclusion as an instructional model for best meeting the educational needs of students with autism and other disabilities. This inclusive setting allows the growing population of children with autism to work and learn alongside their neurotypical peers.

Students with autism are "increasingly visible in public schools" (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009, p. 549), but many general education teachers are unaware of evidence-based strategies to meet the needs of their learners with autism (Friedlander, 2009; Rogers, 2000). The increasing number of students with autism affects literacy instruction in the general education classroom (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009). As such, teachers must be given easily accessible literacy tools to adapt instruction to meet students' learning needs.

This article provides instructional tips for educators and offers suggestions for using children's picture books about autism to encourage positive, inclusive instruction. We believe that all students benefit from increased awareness and identification of the characteristics, strengths, and challenges experienced by students with autism and that children's books about autism provide an accessible tool for modeling and encouraging positive, accepting relationships among students.

These picture books and the characters in them can also serve to enhance the classroom environment by highlighting diversity, social justice, acceptance, and empathy for students with disabilities.

Using Picture Books as a Teaching Tool

Picture books are an essential resource often used as a teaching tool for elementary students (Leininger, Dyches, Prater, & Heath, 2010; Prater, Dyches, & Johnston, 2006), especially for teaching complex or challenging content. Teachers use picture books to teach such topics as diversity, bullying, and acceptance. Similarly, picture books portraying children with autism provide a viable tool for addressing autism. Using picture books in the classroom provides a nonthreatening way to introduce children to the characteristics of students with disabilities, which can lead to positive impacts on student acceptance (Prater et al., 2006).

Implementation Tips

As part of a larger research study, we identified 35 picture books about autism that met our selection criteria (e.g., narrative picture books for children versus nonfiction informational texts). Thematic messages varied depending on the author's perspective and the book's publication date. Some books, for example, were written from the vantage point of a friend with an overall message of "We're alike but different," whereas other books focused on the experiences of the parents or siblings trying to manage or understand the idiosyncratic behaviors of the child with autism. A sample of book notes from the readings is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Notes on Selected Children's Books From the Larger Study

Children's Book	Relationship of Main Characters	Character Behaviors Related to Autism
<i>A Friend Like Simon</i> (Gaynor, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child with autism = new student (male) Other main character = male classmate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stares off into space Does not like loud noises Likes organization Does not like change Screams Makes verbal repetitions Is easily upset
<i>My Friend Has Autism</i> (Tourville, 2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child with autism = young male Other main character = young male friend 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stares off into space Makes verbal repetitions Does not like loud noises Does not like change Does not like to be touched Has strong expertise in specific area Likes control of environment

<https://www.readingrockets.org/article/using-childrens-picture-books-about-autism-resources-inclusive-classrooms>

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USING BOOKS AS RESOURCES CONTINUED...

4/1/2021

Using Children's Picture Books About Autism as Resources in Inclusive Classrooms | Reading Rockets

Children's Book	Relationship of Main Characters	Character Behaviors Related to Autism
<i>My Brother Charlie</i> (Peete & Peete, 2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child with autism = younger brother • Other main character = older sister 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoids physical interaction • Is adventurous/unaware of danger • Feels trapped • Shows empathy to others

After meeting several times to read, reflect on, and discuss the books, we categorized them based on thematic understandings and how teachers might find them useful. We provide three implementation tips using exemplars from our sample of books. A complete list of all the books is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Children's Picture Books About Autism

Book Title	Author	Publication Date
<i>The Adventures of Suther Joshua From Planet Yethican</i>	Jacqueline Williams-Hines	2008
<i>All About My Brother: An 8-Year-Old Sister's Introduction to Her Brother Who Has Autism</i>	Sarah Peralta	2002
<i>Andy and His Yellow Frisbee</i>	Mary Thompson	1996
<i>Apples for Cheyenne: A Story About Autism, Horses, and Friendship</i>	Elizabeth K. Gerlach	2010
<i>ASD and Me: Learning About High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder</i>	Teresa DeMars	2011
<i>Augi Has Autism</i>	Gaylord	2014
<i>Autism Is...?</i>	Ymkje Wideman-Van der Laan	2012
<i>Autistic? How Silly Is That! I Don't Need Any Labels at All</i>	Lynda Farrington Wilson	2012
<i>David's World: A Picture Book About Living With Autism</i>	Dagmar H. Mueller	2012
<i>Ethan's Story: My Life With Autism</i>	Ethan Rice	2012
<i>The Flight of a Dove</i>	Alexandra Day	2004
<i>A Friend Like Simon</i>	Kate Gaynor	2009
<i>The Friendship Puzzle: Helping Kids Learn About Accepting and Including Kids With Autism</i>	Julie L. Coe	2009
<i>I See Things Differently: A First Look at Autism</i>	Pat Thomas	2014
<i>Ian's Walk: A Story About Autism</i>	Laurie Lears	1998
<i>In Jesse's Shoes: Appreciating Kids With Special Needs</i>	Beverly Lewis	2007
<i>In My Mind: The World Through the Eyes of Autism</i>	Adonya Wong	2009
<i>A Kid's Guide to Autism</i>	Cameron Davis	2013
<i>Little Rainman: Autism—Through the Eyes of a Child</i>	Karen L. Simmons	1996
<i>Looking After Louis</i>	Lesley Ely	2004
<i>Lucy's Amazing Friend: A Story of Autism and Friendship</i>	Stephanie Workman	2014
<i>My Brother Charlie</i>	Holly Robinson Peete & Ryan Elizabeth Peete	2010
<i>My Brother Is Autistic</i>	Jennifer Moore-Mallinos	2008
<i>My Brother Sammy Is Special</i>	Becky Edwards	2011
<i>My Friend Has Autism</i>	Amanda Doering Tourville	2010
<i>My Sister Katie: My 6-Year-Old's View on Her Sister's Autism</i>	Mary Cassette	2006
<i>Nathan Blows Out the Hanukkah Candles</i>	Tami Lehman-Wilzig & Nicole Katzman	2011
<i>Playing by the Rules: A Story About Autism</i>	Dena Fox Luchsinger	2007
<i>Russell's World: A Story for Kids About Autism</i>	Charles A. Amenta III	2011
<i>Say Hello to Me: A Story About a Little Girl on the Autism Spectrum</i>	April Charisse	2012
<i>Since We're Friends: An Autism Picture Book</i>	Celeste Shally	2012
<i>Squirmy Wormy: How I Learned to Help Myself</i>	Lynda Farrington Wilson	2009

<https://www.readingrockets.org/article/using-childrens-picture-books-about-autism-resources-inclusive-classrooms>

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USING BOOKS AS RESOURCES CONTINUED...

4/1/2021

Using Children's Picture Books About Autism as Resources in Inclusive Classrooms | Reading Rockets

Book Title	Author	Publication Date
<i>Sundays With Matthew: A Young Boy With Autism and an Artist Share Their Sketchbooks</i>	Matthew Lancelle & Jeanette Lesada	2006
<i>Talking to Angels</i>	Esther Watson	1996
<i>Waiting for Benjamin: A Story About Autism</i>	Alexandra Jessup Altman	2008

Tip 1: Teach Common Characteristics of Autism While Focusing on Unique Qualities of the Individual

Autism is a spectrum disorder and thus does not have a finite set of characteristics. Two students diagnosed with autism may behave differently: One may be completely nonverbal and may resist physical touch, whereas the other may be talkative and crave hugs and interaction. Teachers should select a variety of books that highlight these differences. These books should center on characters who exhibit many different characteristics across the autism spectrum, and reading several different books will help point out that not all children with autism have the same characteristics and abilities.

For example, stories such as *Looking After Louis* (Ely, 2004) and *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee* (Thompson, 1996) provide examples of characters who are nonverbal or who speak very little. By comparison, *Say Hello to Me: A Story About a Little Girl on the Autism Spectrum* (Charisse, 2012) portrays a character with autism who is outgoing and able to perform daily tasks more consistent with her peers.

Some of the characteristic behaviors of autism (i.e., stimming and increased sensitivity to loud noise) were present in multiple books, including *A Friend Like Simon* (Gaynor, 2009) and *Squirmy Wormy: How I Learned to Help Myself* (Wilson, 2009). The main characters in these stories displayed atypical behaviors such as lining up items and watching a ceiling fan spin and exhibited social anxieties about, for example, being on the school playground.

Many of the picture books about autism include general characteristics of children with autism throughout the story as the author develops the characters. By reading multiple books about autism, students may see that, although there are general characteristics, an individual with autism has unique abilities, too. In doing so, we caution teachers not to single out any student with autism as the spokesperson for the disability.

Inclusive classrooms should celebrate diversity but not make students feel self-conscious or alone in their experiences. A major goal of inclusion is acceptance, so it is important that students not generalize from the experiences of one or two classmates. In fact, by using books portraying characters with autism that illustrate the range of the spectrum disorder, students can better understand that, although autism has common characteristics, individuals with autism are still *individuals*.

Many stories told in the first person, whether told by the individual with autism, a sibling, or a close friend, focused on the characteristics that made the student unique and gravitated toward either the “normal” behaviors the students could exhibit or their special talents and strengths, such as in *A Friend Like Simon* (Gaynor, 2009). These varied perspectives can give students the background knowledge to identify and understand characteristics of children with autism while teaching that characteristics these differ from student to student.

Finally, teachers may need to address and discuss the context in which labels are used in the picture books. One specific example is the word *special*, which is sometimes used to describe a child with autism. In *Waiting for Benjamin* (Altman, 2008), an older brother says, “I don't want a special brother” (n.p.), referring to his younger brother with autism. Although we generally use *special* as a positive term, the context of this sentence presents “being special” as a negative characteristic. This could serve as an instructional opportunity for discussing with students that some labels can be hurtful. In doing so, the teacher is highlighting why empathy and using influential language is important in creating a community of care.

A strategy for discussing characteristics of autism is to use poster paper to list all of the characteristics of autism introduced in the books (e.g., communication skills, anxieties, lining up pencils, disliking loud noises, various stimming behaviors) and then discuss them with students.

These books also present opportunities for neurotypical students to recognize that they too might have a similar characteristic, like disliking loud noises. Inviting students to safely discuss these similarities and differences builds trust and community in the inclusive classroom.

To focus on the unique qualities of the individual characters with autism, read a different book each week and discuss how the characters are alike and different. This strategy provides opportunities to discuss similarities and differences between students with autism and their neurotypical peers and to celebrate the neurodiversity of inclusive classrooms.

Tip 2: Discuss How Children With Autism Need to Be Accepted, Not Changed

In many of the books, there was a turning point in which the character with autism would overcome a particular challenge, an obstacle, or social anxiety. For example, the child with autism would speak at the end after being nonverbal. This turning point often resulted from one or more characters in the story accepting the child with autism for who he or she is and the child with autism reciprocating by exhibiting a previously unmet social convention. Although inclusive practices and positive social interactions can affect the behaviors of a student with autism, we caution against using books that serve only as examples of celebrating change rather than teaching acceptance.

This reciprocating action occurs in Lewis's (2007) *In Jesse's Shoes*, when the brother with autism addresses his sister by her real name at the end of the story instead of calling her “Sisser” (np.p.). Another example of this reciprocating act occurs in *Lucy's Amazing Friend* (Workman, 2014). In this story, the character with autism goes down the big slide at the pool with the other kids at the end of the story, which is a huge accomplishment for the character with autism and is celebrated by the other children. Finally, *Waiting for Benjamin* (Altman, 2008) includes a sibling relationship that changes throughout the book as the older brother begins to accept, love, and learn to play with his younger brother with

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USING BOOKS AS RESOURCES CONTINUED...

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autism. This change occurs, however, along with the younger brother making consistent progress with language use and play skills that may not mirror the general timeline of progress for children with autism.

Many other books had similar reciprocating acts toward the end, in which the character with autism overcame a characteristic of autism after being accepted by peers or siblings. Although a student with autism may respond positively to other students' acceptance and interaction, it is important for students to realize that overcoming the social anxieties associated with autism is not likely to happen after one or even a few friendly, accepting encounters in class or on the playground. The big idea is that students should be taught to be accepting without the notion that they will get any validation in return for their efforts, which is sometimes misleading in the books.

Teachers may want to focus on the accepting behaviors of characters in the story regardless of whether or not the child with autism is able to reciprocate appreciation in some way. Following a read-aloud, students could model ways of showing empathy based on characters from the books and then apply them to examples in their school environment.

Tip 3: If Your Student Has Autism, Communicate With Parents About Using These Books in the Classroom

Teacher communication with parents is a vital part of any student's educational experience, but special attention should be given to cultivate the relationship between the teacher, child, and parent of a student with autism. Just as no two students with autism are the same, families view and respond differently to student disabilities (Kluth, 2003). As such, it is important to choose children's picture books whose message aligns with that of the parents.

Within the available books about children with autism, some highlight school settings (e.g., *Looking After Louis*; Ely, 2004) and some focus more on family connections and everyday situations (e.g., *My Brother Charlie*; Peete & Peete, 2010). It is important to use a variety of books and to openly communicate with parents about your intentions for their use in the classroom.

Nathan Blows Out the Hanukkah Candles (Lehman-Wilzig & Katzman, 2011) is another story focusing on family and sibling relationships in which the brother's feelings evolve from embarrassment to acceptance of his brother with autism. Similarly, *Playing by the Rules* (Luchsinger, 2007) also highlights sibling relationships by depicting an older sister who "knows the rules" (n.p.) for taking care of her brother with autism. Both of these stories present siblings who understand the characteristics of a child with autism and have a somewhat supportive and protective relationship because of that understanding. These titles may be helpful for families and can also be discussed in the classroom as models for how students can learn to accept one another.

Be sure to make it clear to parents that your goal in introducing students to these books about autism is to increase students' awareness and acceptance of autism, not to single out their child. Working with parents to create a partnership and to identify your goals to promote an inclusive philosophy is important in the relationship and experiences of students with autism in the general classroom and their families (Kluth, 2003).

One idea for approaching the use of these books with parents is to send the books home ahead of class read-alouds so that the student with autism can read and discuss the story with their parents before hearing it in front of peers. Additionally, teachers can invite parents of students with autism to be guest readers and to answer questions students might have.

Conclusion

Using children's books as a resource is common in elementary classrooms and could address and increase awareness and acceptance of autism among students. We hope this article helps elementary educators feel more comfortable using children's picture books that portray children with autism in their classroom as a teaching tool for learning about and understanding autism.

By acknowledging and openly discussing autism, we hope autism becomes part of a celebration of neurodiversity — and not characterized as tragic (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009). By incorporating these children's picture books into the classroom through read-alouds and discussions, students are introduced to characters who exhibit empathy and acceptance toward students with autism while also learning to appreciate differences and unique talents in all individuals.

We are hopeful that the use of these children's picture books will help students better understand, empathize with, and accept students with autism in order to advance toward a more positive outlook about differing abilities in a truly inclusive classroom.

<https://www.readingrockets.org/article/using-childrens-picture-books-about-autism-resources-inclusive-classrooms>

Reading Rockets has a wonderful booklist to support individuals on the autism spectrum. Please go to <https://www.readingrockets.org/booklists/children-s-books-featuring-characters-autism-or-asperger-s>

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VISUALS

Autism

AWARENESS VS ACCEPTANCE

Neurodiversity is not just a conversation topic! Help build a community that welcomes Autistics into your world, into your and your children's friendships, into your neighborhood gatherings, into your workplace, places of worship, schools and playgrounds!

- 1** Awareness means you know it exists
Acceptance means you connect personally and learn more
- 2** Awareness means you can identify it
Acceptance means you talk to people and gain understanding, compassion, and sensitivity
- 3** Awareness means you know something is happening
Acceptance means you offer help and support without judgement
- 4** Awareness means you cope with it deal with it tolerate it
Acceptance means you embrace it, grow from it, and build relationships with people who have it not only those who love someone with it!
- 5** Awareness Is Not Enough
acceptance is the next step towards a truly inclusive and community driven society!

Amanda J Friedman
AtlasForAutism.org



We have a voice, and it's not silence

AuTalkz April Awareness

April is Autism Awareness Month!
So what does that mean?
Well, to be 'aware' means to have knowledge and perception.
In this case, it means to keep an open mind and learn about autism!



It means that you should think twice afore give'n a strange look to that kid in your class who behaves strangely, or is super focused on some 'geek' thing. It means ask'n "why" before just acting.



It means 'knowledge is power', and that you shouldn't segregate that person at your workplace who thinks differently than you do. It means take'n the time, even just five minutes, to find out "why".



It means learn what you can and maybe start to understand and even to empathize! Course, there's nothin' stoppin' you or anyone else from learn'n about autism outside April! After all, you wouldn't learn to play a trumpet for a month and then think you can play Mozart's Horn Concerto #4!



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