



Neurodivergent representation in fiction books

Professor Sarah McGeown

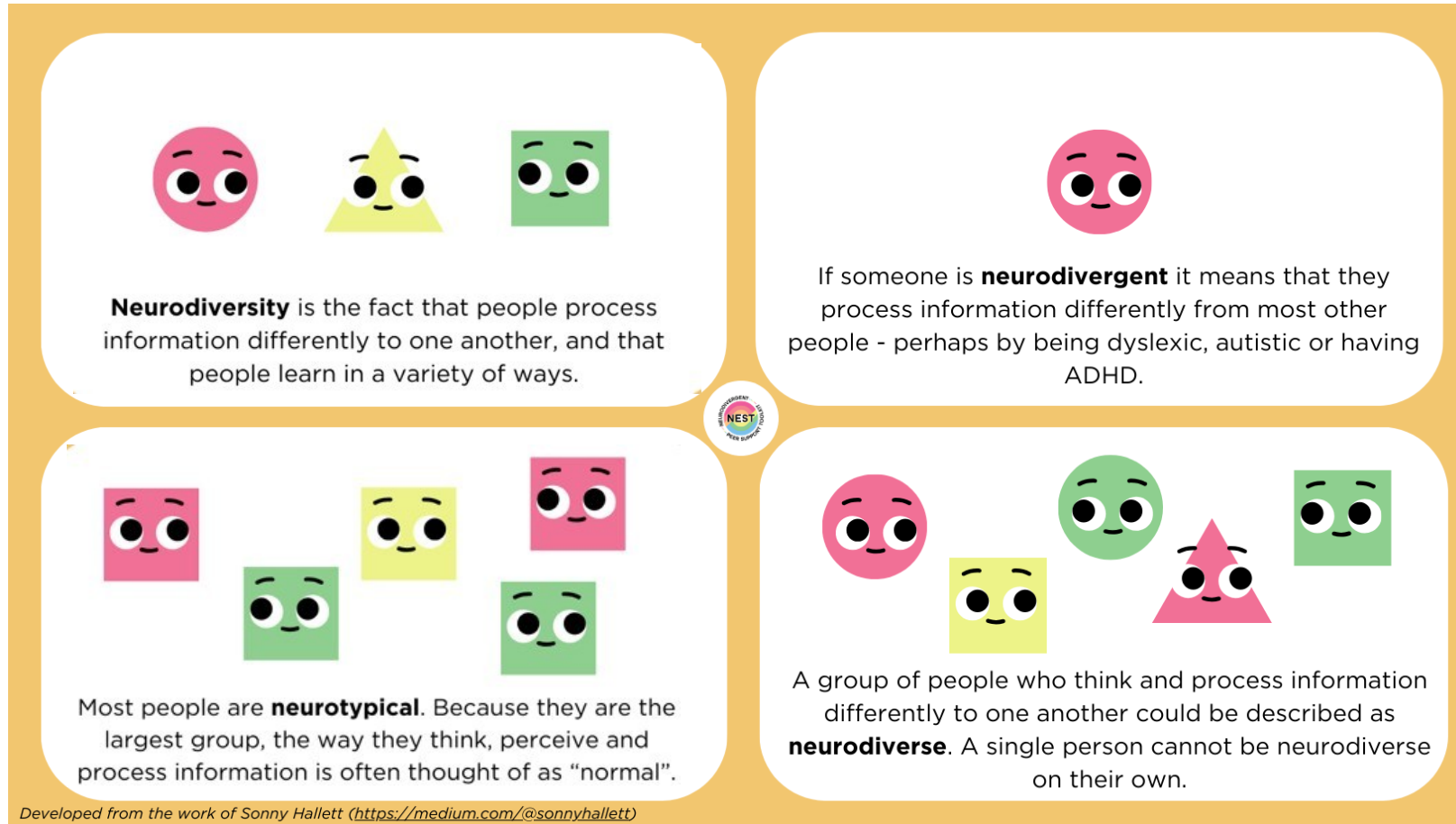
Literacy Lab, Moray House School of Education and Sport,
University of Edinburgh

NHS Peer Leadership Group, January 2026



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Neurodiversity and neurodivergence



Background

- Approximately 15% of the school-aged population in the U.K. are neurodivergent.
- Neurodivergent young people often report lower levels of **psychological wellbeing**.
- Psychological wellbeing: Hedonistic (presence of positive emotions and absence of negative emotions) and eudemonic (finding meaning and purpose in life, autonomy and control, connection, realizing ones' potential).
- For neurodivergent readers, seeing their experiences reflected could have powerful effects on their **self-awareness, sense of belonging** and **self-worth**.
- For neurotypical readers, learning about neurodivergence through accurate representation could help to **promote understanding** and **inclusion**.

Neurodiversity & Fiction Reading project

Explored neurodivergent young people's experiences with **representation** in **fiction** books.

Database

- Explored the scope and scale of representation of neurodivergent characters in fictional texts for teenage readers.
- Created a database of these texts for future use.

Interviews

- Interviews with 16 neurodivergent young people, (14–16-years-old) from 2 Scottish secondary schools.
- Focused on benefits and potential harms associated with neurodivergent representation in fiction, and perceptions on 'good' representation.

Collaborative project including University-based researchers, literacy organisations (Book Trust, National Literacy Trust, Scottish Book Trust), children's publisher (Barrington Stoke) and YA author (Victoria Williamson) and two teachers. Also involved neurodivergent young people in the design and piloting of interview schedule.



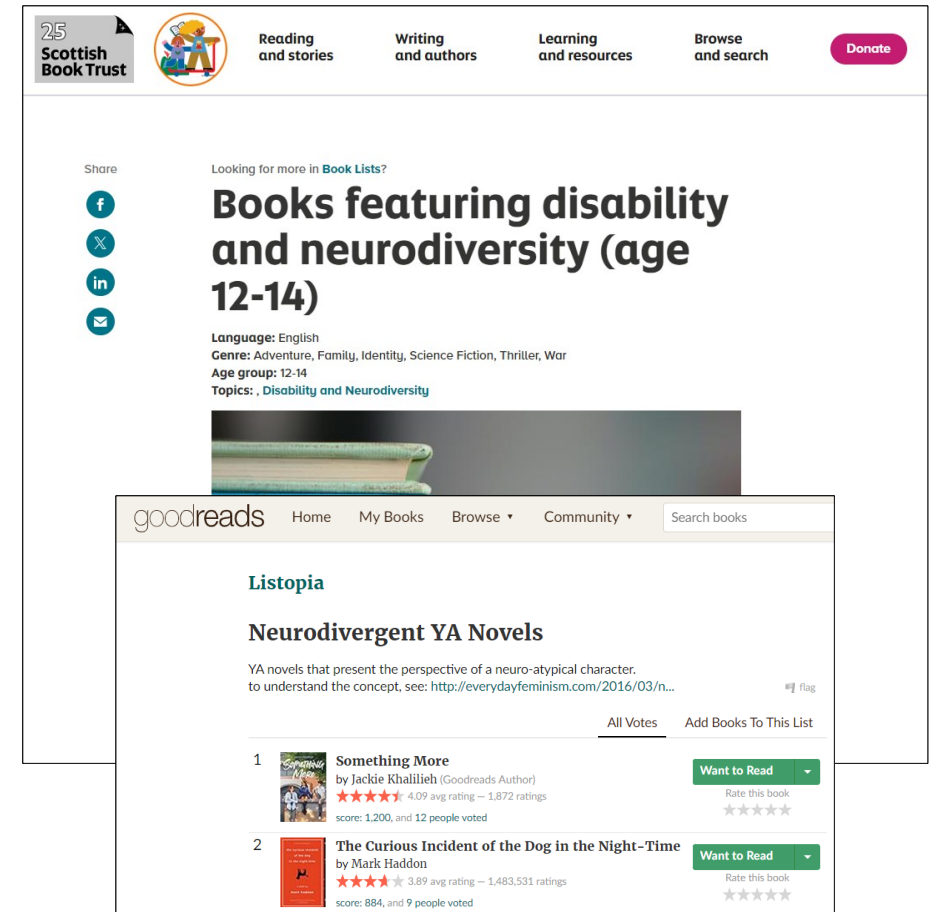
Database: Does current Young Adult (YA) fiction represent diverse neurodivergent experiences?

Database search criteria*

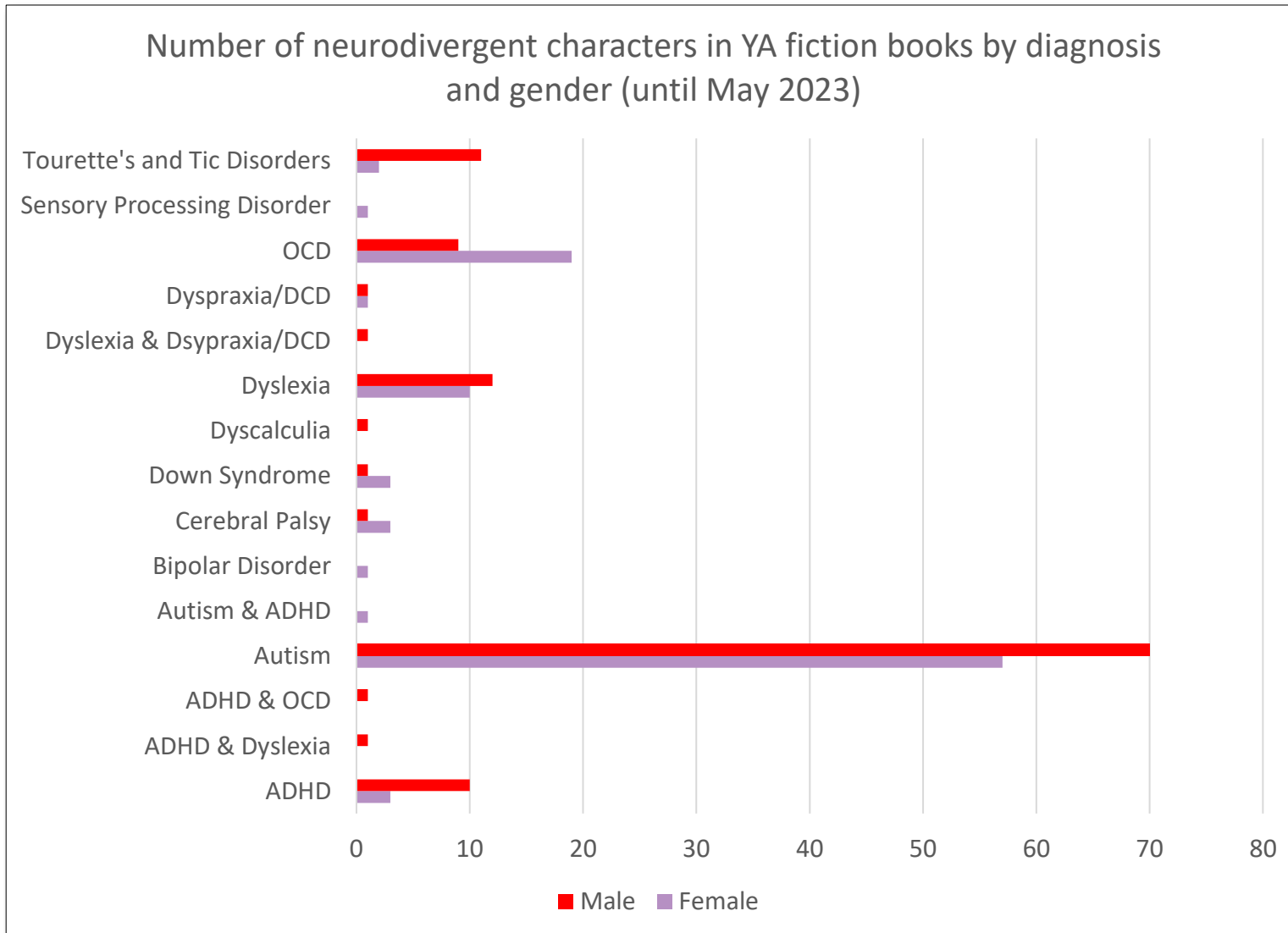
- Target age range: 12-18-years-old
- Contains at least one neurodivergent character

Collected data about

- Title, author, publication date
- Diagnosis of neurodivergent character/s
- Gender, age, race, LGBTQ+ status of character/s
- Coded or explicit representation



Database



Outcomes

- 239 books.
- 15 different neurodivergent identities.
- Autism (127) most frequent, followed by OCD (28), Dyslexia (22), ADHD (13), and Tourette's and Tic Disorders (13).
- Slightly more male characters represented (119) than female (100); 1 non-binary character.
- Most characters had one diagnosis.

Neurodivergent characters in YA fiction: who is being represented?

www.scottishbooktrust.com/articles/neurodivergent-characters-in-ya-fiction

Database

LITERACY LAB

Collaborative research practices, to understand and improve children and young people's literacy experiences and outcomes

Welcome

Our Team

Current projects

Love to Read: Primary

Love to Read: Reception

Reading and Wellbeing

The Young People's Reading Project

Narrative Fiction: Understanding Ourselves and Others

Adults' e-Reading Behaviour

Augmented Reality Books

Measuring Reading Engagement

Neurodiversity and Narrative Fiction

Disability Picturebooks

The Writing Lives of Children and Young People

Previous projects

Publications

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Talks

Literacy Lab > Current projects > Neurodiversity and Narrative Fiction

Neurodiversity and Narrative Fiction

2022-2023

Stories often reflect the social world we live in, and can enrich our understanding of ourselves and Adolescence is a period of life characterised by exploration of identity and discovery of self; book opportunities for young people to explore personally meaningful content.

Research focusing on inclusive representation in young people's literature has focused almost on and ethnic representation. This study will be the first to provide detailed insight into neurodivergent people's perceptions of how their lives and experiences are represented in narrative fiction (and with neurodivergent young people informing our research process.

Project Aims:

To understand the scale and breadth of representation of neurodivergent young people in fictional texts for secondary school readers.

To understand neurodivergent young people's opinions and experiences of representation of neurodivergence in narrative fiction.

Project methodology:

Read a summary of how we carried out the research here: [Neurodiversity and Narrative Fiction preregistration](#).

Project Findings:

Database of YA books featuring neurodivergent characters

Database of YA books featuring neurodivergent characters

Please note: the database search finished in May 2023; any books published after this date will not be recorded.

When referencing this website database, please cite: Santi, E., Webber, C., McGeown S, and the Neurodiversity and Narrative Fiction project team. (2024). Fiction Books for Teenagers featuring Neurodivergent Characters. University of Edinburgh Literacy Lab.

Database of YA books featuring neurodivergent characters (May 2023)						
File Edit View Insert Format Data Tools Extensions Help						
This database was created using publically available sources. Specifically, from searching the following book lists: BookTrust book list; Goodreads book list – Neurodivergent YA Novels + Disability in KidLit Goodreads List; Lizzie Huxley Jones - THE						
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2	The search stopped in May 2023; books published after this date will not be listed in the database.					
3	We have not read all the books listed in the database and therefore cannot endorse any of the titles included. Please conduct your own research regarding the suitability of each text before recommending it to readers.					
4	To cite this database: Santi, E., Webber, C. & the Neurodiversity and Narrative Fiction project team. (2024). Fiction Books for Teenagers featuring Neurodivergent Characters. University of Edinburgh Literacy Lab.					
5	Book title	Author name	Diagnosis of Neurodivergent character/s	Are there neurodivergent	Has the author disclosed	Publication year
6	Sidelacked	Diana Harmon Asher	ADD	Yes (Main character/s)	Not disclosed	2017 If middle school were a race, Joseph
7	Check Mates	Stuart Foster	ADHD	Yes (Main character/s)	Not disclosed	2019 Felix is struggling at school. his adhd
8	Concentr8	William Sutcliffe	ADHD	Yes (Main character/s)	Not disclosed	2016 Troy, Blaze, Karen, Femi and Lee are
9	Focused	Alyson Gerber	ADHD	Yes (Main character/s)	Yes (ADHD)	2021 Clea can't control her thoughts. She k
10	I am not a Label	Carrie Burnell	ADHD	Yes (Author's own voice)	Not disclosed	2021 Meet 34 trailblazing disabled role moc
11	It's the End of the World and I'm in my Bathing Suit	Justin Reynolds	ADHD	Yes (Main character/s)	Not disclosed	2022 Twelve-year-old Eddie Gordon Hollow
12	Joey Pigza Series, 1: Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key	Jack Gantos	ADHD	Yes (Main character/s)	Not disclosed	2014 Joey is a good kid, maybe even a gre
13	Joey Pigza Series, 2: Joey Pigza Loses Control	Jack Gantos	ADHD	Yes (Main character/s)	Not disclosed	2014 Joey's dad is well and truly wired! Afte
14	Joey Pigza Series, 3: What Would Joey Pigza Do?	Jack Gantos	ADHD	Yes (Main character/s)	Not disclosed	2014 Are they flirting or fighting? This is Jo
15	Joey Pigza Series, 4: I Am Not Joey Pigza	Jack Gantos	ADHD	Yes (Main character/s)	Not disclosed	2014 Everything changes for Joey when his
16	Joey Pigza Series, 5: The Key That Swallowed Joey Pigza	Jack Gantos	ADHD	Yes (Main character/s)	Not disclosed	2015 Joey Pigza is back in his fifth hilario
17	Kat and Meg Conquer the World	Anna Priemaza	ADHD	Yes (Main character/s)	Not disclosed	2019 Kat and Meg couldn't be more differ
18	The Boy with the Butterfly Mind	Victoria Williamson	ADHD	Yes (Main character/s)	Not disclosed	2019 Since her dad left, Elin has strived to
19	The Extraordinaries	T.J. Klune	ADHD	Yes (Main character/s)	Not disclosed	2020 Nick Bell? Not extraordinary. But bein
20	The Love Letters of Abelard and Lily	Laura Creddie	ADHD	Yes (Main character/s)	Yes (Dyslexic + ADI)	2018 When Lily Michaels-Ryan ditches her
21	This is Not the Abby Show	Debbie Reed Fischer	ADHD	Yes (Main character/s)	Not disclosed	2016 Abby was born for the spotlight. Now
22	Percy Jackson and the Olympians series, 1: The Lightning Thief	Rick Riordan	ADHD + Dyslexia	Yes (Main character/s)	Not disclosed (Auth)	2005 Percy Jackson is a good kid, but he c
23	Percy Jackson and the Olympians series, 2: The Sea of Monsters	Rick Riordan	ADHD + Dyslexia	Yes (Main character/s)	Not disclosed (Auth)	2006 It's not easy being a half-blood these
24	Percy Jackson and the Olympians series, 3: The Titan's Curse	Rick Riordan	ADHD + Dyslexia	Yes (Main character/s)	Not disclosed (Auth)	2007 But when you're the son of a Greek G
25	Percy Jackson and the Olvmioians series, 4: The Battle of the Labvrinth	Rick Riordan	ADHD + Dvslexia	Yes (Main character/s)	Not disclosed (Auth)	2008 As the son of a Greek God. I've had n

Access via our website:

<https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/literacylab/current-projects/neurodiversity-and-narrative-fiction/>



Interviews

What do neurodivergent young people think about representation in Young Adult (YA) fiction?

N=16 neurodivergent young people (14–16-years-old) from 2 Scottish secondary schools

Webber, C., Santi, E., Crompton, C. J., Fletcher-Watson, S., & McGeown, S. (2024). Representation in fiction books: Neurodivergent young people's perceptions of the benefits and potential harms. *Neurodiversity*, 2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/27546330241237881>

Webber, C., Santi, E., Cebula, K., Crompton, C. J., Fletcher-Watson, S., & McGeown, S. (2024). Representation of neurodivergence in fiction books: Exploring neurodivergent young peoples' perspectives. *Literacy*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12369>



What are the benefits of neurodivergent representation?

1. Helps neurodivergent young people feel positive emotions (e.g., happiness, comfort, safety)

“I could like, figure out, like, a few things, like, that remind me of autism and stuff, and it's really cool to spot like stuff like that in characters ... it made me feel, like, really comfortable and happy.”

“It could also be good for other people who may feel left out ... and it can make them feel like they’re not alone, even though it is just a book.”



What are the benefits of neurodivergent representation?

2. Helps neurodivergent young people to understand and accept their neurodivergent identity

“if I was to read a book that, like, accurately represented someone with a similar neurodivergence to me... I’d sort of understand and be able to, like, connect [my] experiences to neurodivergency.”

“[The book] was about accepting that this is a thing that you have, and that it has strong points as well. That it is not all bad.”



What are the benefits of neurodivergent representation?

3. Helps neurodivergent young people understand other neurodivergent identities

“I know what neurodivergence I have, but I don’t know about what it's like to have other neurodivergences, so I think I could benefit from that by learning about others that have similar things to me, but not the same as what I have.”



What are the benefits of neurodivergent representation?

4. Could help reduce stigma and increase peer understanding

“it's quite hard to explain what you struggle with when it's not something that you can physically see with the person, because if they don't-, if you've never experienced it, then it's probably harder to understand...So if they read the book, then they might understand.”

“It's easier when you see things as, like, a story than if you're just meeting someone, because if you don't understand prior then you'll just think they're weird ...[they could understand] the way we think and the way we see the world and the way we feel. Seeing us as actual people.”



What are the benefits of neurodivergent representation?

4. Could help reduce stigma and increase peer understanding

...but where young people had friends who they felt already understood their needs and experiences, reading books about neurodivergent characters was not as necessary

“Because [your friends] already know you more as a person and they’re going to know ways how you will struggle and how you can cope with that, and the things you’re good at.”



What are the benefits of neurodivergent representation?

5. Reading about neurodivergent characters at a younger age could have helped them experience these benefits sooner

“I think if I read more books with dyslexic characters, I think I would-, I think, I don't know. I think I would realize that maybe I'm not just really rubbish at spelling, maybe I do have a problem that can be supported.”

“When I was diagnosed, I was very scared of telling people...but I feel like maybe if I'd sort of read books at a younger age...think it probably would have helped me a lot more back then, sort of, telling people.”



What are the potential harms of neurodivergent representation?

1. Negative, inaccurate, or stereotypical representations of neurodivergence could increase stigma

“What the misrepresentation could also do is it can lead to stereotypes, it can lead to things being built, it can lead to these sort of, you know, misunderstandings or hatreds of the conditions.”

“I think a good way for representation is when...[it] doesn't, like, sort of perpetuate, like, harmful stereotypes, because otherwise I'd just rather not be represented if it's, like, offensive.”



What are the potential harms of neurodivergent representation?

2. (Negative) changes in peers' attitudes/behaviour

“The way [others] act around you, or maybe the way they perceive you would probably change if they’re seeing all these negative things about a condition and then, you know, it can just sort of change how they might behave towards you.”

“The only thing I wouldn’t like is, if it came off as a thing where people will start like being, around me all the time, like asking me how I am ... it would need to be a positive thing that isn’t coming off as ‘I feel sorry for you’, you know?”

How do neurodivergent young people want to be represented in fiction?

Three themes:

- (1) Representation of neurodivergence should be complex, realistic, and positive**
- (2) Representation of neurodivergence should be normalised**
- (3) Representation of neurodivergence beyond books is important.**

“Especially as a trans person, like, usually if you see Autistic representation it's, you know, a cisgender white child and it just doesn't feel very true to life”

“it's maybe just one character as opposed to multiple, but ... most of my friends are neurodivergent ... and that's not always portrayed. It's always .. token represented character”.

“It doesn't have to be exactly like me, it just has to have some elements that I can relate to”

“Just don't make a big deal out of it. Making a big deal out of it sort of gets rid of the actual point that we want this to be casually embedded, we don't want a big deal made”.



Quick reads...

- **Neurodivergent characters in YA fiction: who is being represented?** (Scottish Book Trust)
- **Writing neurodivergent characters: advice from neurodivergent teens** (Scottish Book Trust)
- **Why schools need books featuring neurodivergent characters** (BookTrust)



Literacy Lab website:

<https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/literacylab/current-projects/neurodiversity-and-narrative-fiction/>

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Looking for all Articles by Charlotte Webber?

Neurodivergent characters in YA fiction: who is being represented?

This article was written by Charlotte Webber, an Autistic researcher on the Neurodiversity and Narrative Fiction project who works at Scottish Book Trust and the University of Edinburgh.

Genre: Identity
Age group: 15-18, Adults
Audience: Writers
Topics: Disability and Neurodiversity, Writing tips, Creative writing
Last updated: 17 April 2024

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Home / News and features / Features / 2023 / December / Why schools need books featuring neurodivergent characters

Why schools need books featuring neurodivergent characters

Published on: 19 December 2023

We at BookTrust know that children benefit from seeing their experiences, and those of their friends, reflected in the books they read.

We asked Charlotte Webber to share some of the findings from a University of Edinburgh project on neurodiversity in children's fiction.



Learning about Neurodiversity in School (LEANS)

Created to:

- **Inform** teachers and children about the concept of neurodiversity
- Encourage everyone to **see neurodiversity as relevant** and valuable to them and their classroom.
- **Increase inclusive attitudes** to neurodiversity and neurodivergent people
- Encourage individuals to make positive and respectful choices about their **actions** at school.

LEANS 
Learning About Neurodiversity at School



LEANS

Includes 7 units:

- Introduction to neurodiversity
- Learning and thinking differently
- Communication and understanding
- Getting along together at school
- Is that fair?
- Different ways to make a friendship
- Neurodiversity in our classroom



For example - Unit 1 Key Points:

- 1 Defining neurodiversity.
2. Differences between people's brains can be little differences, or big differences.
3. Neurodivergent people are different from each other.
4. How we treat other people (and ourselves) in class affects their/our ability to learn and thrive.

Neurodivergent Peer Support Toolkit (NEST)

Aims to facilitate peer support for neurodivergent young people in mainstream secondary school.

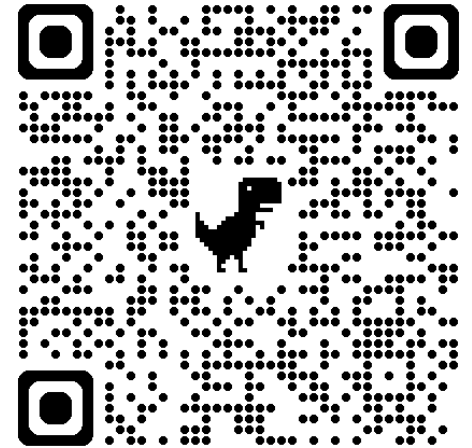
The NEST handbook:

- Provides information about neurodiversity, neurodivergence, and peer support.
- Provides guidance for setting up and running a NEST group, including how to ensure the groups are student led, activity ideas and resources, and safety considerations.



To summarise....

- We need more books, texts and other media featuring a range of neurodivergent identities and experiences, including greater consideration of intersectionality.
- Neurodivergent representation needs to be normalized and authentic, and ALL children and young people need access to books, texts and other media featuring a diverse range of neurodivergent identities and experiences.



Prompts for discussion....

- Have you ever read a book, or watched a film or TV series with a neurodivergent character? What were your thoughts in relation to this? Are there any books/films/series you'd recommend to others?
- Was there anything surprising in the talk, or anything you'd like to discuss or explore further?
- What are your own interests in relation to neurodivergent representation and/or experiences?



Thank you for listening

Questions and discussion

With thanks to Elena Santi and Dr Charlotte Webber for their brilliant work on this project.

Thank you to UoE Challenge Investment Fund for funding this project.

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