

Neurodiversity & Young Adult Fiction



What do neurodivergent young people think about how their lives and experiences are represented in YA fiction?

What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity means that we are all different in how we think, feel, and learn, because our brains process information differently.

What is neurodivergence?

People with diagnoses of Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, among others (including those with more than one diagnosis) may be referred to as neurodivergent

The Neurodiversity & Narrative Fiction Project

Fiction books can help us better understand ourselves and others. For neurodivergent young people, reading about characters whose experiences are like their own can have powerful effects on their sense of belonging and self-acceptance. For non-neurodivergent readers, learning about the experiences of their neurodivergent peers can promote understanding and acceptance.

As part of the **Neurodiversity and Narrative fiction project**, we interviewed 14-17-year-old neurodivergent young people about their perceptions of the representation of neurodivergence in YA fiction.

Neurodivergent young people helped us design the questions we asked our participants. The findings show us (1) what neurodivergent young people think are the benefits and potential harms of neurodivergent representation in YA; and (2) what they think 'good' representation looks like.

Representation

Representation is how media present characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, disability, national and regional identity, social issues and events to an audience.

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What do neurodivergent young people think representation should look like?

Representation should be complex, realistic, and positive

- Books should show the diversity both between and within diagnosis
- Books should represent non-stereotypical neurodivergent experiences
- Neurodivergence should not be presented negatively or as a ‘problem to overcome’
- Readers should be able to find similarities with the characters in terms of gender, race, and other identities such as social class, sexuality, and disability

Representation of neurodivergence should be normalised

- Books don’t have to draw attention to neurodivergent characters; simply ‘being there’ can be enough
- Characters don’t have to be explicitly labelled as neurodivergent; ‘coded’/implied representations are important too
- Neurodivergent representation should also be normalised in other forms of media

Beyond representation in books

- Access to books should be combined with education and training about neurodivergence
- There is a need for greater representation of neurodivergence across society
- Books about neurodivergence should be read by everyone, not just neurodivergent readers
- Books should be made more accessible for neurodivergent readers
- Engaging with neurodivergent characters in other ways (e.g., TV, film) is also important



Stop and think!

- Which books have you read that feature neurodivergent characters?
- How were those characters represented? What did you take away?
- What do you think it would be like for a neurodivergent person to read about that character? How would they perceive them?



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We’re developing a database to catalog YA fiction books featuring neurodivergent characters.

Check our website for updates!

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What are the benefits of neurodivergent representation in YA fiction?

Neurodivergent young people reflected on the benefits they thought could come from reading about neurodivergent characters in books.



Self-understanding and acceptance

- Understand themselves
- Identify strategies to use in their own lives
- Feeling positive about their neurodivergent characteristics
- Challenge negative stereotypes that may have been internalised



Positive emotional experiences

- Feeling happy, comforted, and invested in the characters
- Feeling like they have others to relate to
- Feeling a sense of belonging
- Feeling less isolated

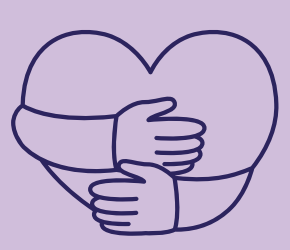


Reducing stigma

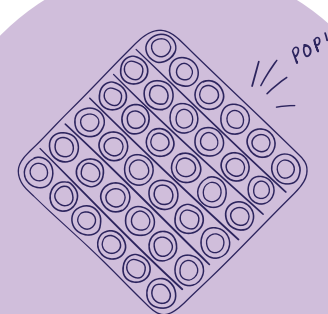
- Peers learn more about neurodivergent experiences
- Peers are more accepting of neurodivergent young people
- Peers feel less stigma towards neurodivergent pupils
- A tool for explaining their experiences to others

‘If I’d read about neurodivergent characters when I was younger...’

We asked neurodivergent young people what they thought the outcomes could have been if they had read about neurodivergent characters earlier in their lives.



Recognise, understand, and accept neurodivergent traits at a younger age



Find strategies for support earlier



Pursue diagnosis sooner



Feel more confident to tell others about their diagnosis



More opportunities for peers to learn about neurodivergence sooner

This tells us that it’s important to read about neurodivergent characters when we’re younger, as well as when we’re older. It’s also important that this representation is accurate and positive to help neurodivergent people understand and accept themselves as early as possible, and for their peers to understand and accept them too.

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Is there anything neurodivergent young people are concerned about when reading about neurodivergent characters?

Young people also reflected on any possible harms that might come from neurodivergent characters being represented in books.



Perpetuating stereotypes and stigma

- Inaccurate representations could increase stigma
- Risk of perpetuating (rather than challenging) negative stereotypes



Changes in peers behaviour

- Neurodivergent young people might become the centre of attention
- Inaccurate representations could make peers behave unkindly

What should authors & publishers do?

We asked neurodivergent young people what authors and publishers can do to make sure YA fiction represents neurodivergence well.

Speak to neurodivergent people about their experiences

Don't fall back on stereotypes

Neurodivergent characters don't need to be the focus - we just want to be there!

Carry out research using resources approved by the community

Make books accessible to readers with different skills



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