



LEARNING TO BE CURIOUS

Lessons from The Jim Henson Company's Dinosaur Train on PBS KIDS by Stephanie E. Meyer, Ph.D.

The Dinosaur Train creative team contacted me to be an advisor when they were developing a new character who would serve as a challenge for Buddy the T-Rex in their new episode "Junior Conductor Academy" (check your local listings). Buddy, whom they described as a "super nice, positive guy," was going to have to adjust to being put "out of his comfort zone by another kid named Dennis who beats him at every turn."

"Oh, and we're thinking that maybe Dennis has autism," they said.

I loved the idea that Dennis' autism was beside the point. As a child psychologist, the most exciting part to me is that the episode isn't about Dennis having special needs, in fact, it's an episode about friendship, understanding, and acceptance. Meeting Dennis is a growing experience for Buddy, not because Buddy has to learn to accept Dennis' developmental challenges, but rather because at first Buddy feels threatened by Dennis' strengths.

As articulated by University of Cambridge professor Simon Baron-Cohen, if we're able to portray children with autism spectrum disorder in value-free and nonjudgmental terms, in the future, it "could mean the difference between whether the diagnosis of autism is received as a family tragedy...[or] received as interesting information, akin to being told that the child is right- or left-handed."

This episode provides an opportunity for dialogue among parents, teachers, and children about differences in various ways:

The Distinction Given to Similarities

Having watched the episode, I am completely smitten with Dennis. He's a deeply lovable character, whose quirks make him all the more compelling. Dennis is cozy and familiar, not alien and mysterious. Dennis is a fully nuanced character whose behavior goes well beyond stereotypes. The episode highlights the ways in which his behavior overlaps with those of his peers, not just the ways he is different from his peers.

Differences Are Valued, Not Shamed

I recently had the opportunity to watch this episode with a 5-year-old super fan named Benjamin. As Buddy, Shiny, Tiny, Don, Oren and Ollie each arrived at Junior Conductors Academy, Benjamin confidently informed me of each character's species, but when Dennis showed up, he seemed unsure how to categorize him "I don't know what Dennis is!" Benjamin said. He was somewhat perplexed by his idiosyncrasies "I can't even hear Dennis because of the way he talks! Why does he talk so funny? Why does he always talk so loud?"

As "Junior Conductors Academy" got underway, Benjamin watched in awe as Dennis repeatedly outperformed the other students in class. While he continued to take note of Dennis' social idiosyncrasies, these seemed to increasingly engender feelings of empathy and familiarity, rather than fear and distancing: "I wonder if he has super-human hearing, like me!" said Benjamin.

Ultimately, when Dennis' uniqueness proved instrumental in everyone earning their Junior Conductors' First Class pins, Benjamin turned to me, his face lit up with excitement. He was eager to know whether Dennis could be a regular

character on the show. He had come to view Dennis' differences as a source of strength, and reason to celebrate. "Dennis is kind of awesome! he declared "He's like a whole different species!"

Empathy Is Demonstrated

While Dennis does not always conform to the laws of etiquette, he experiences deep feelings of connectedness, and displays genuine kindness and sensitivity toward his new friends. In turn, the other dinosaurs lower their voices when they notice Dennis covering his ears, and no one judges his verbal rituals, atypical speech patterns, and tendency to blurt out answers.

The episode breaks down the barriers of discomfort, using narrative storytelling to engage viewers in a way that can promote empathy, identification, and recognition of our common humanity. Dennis faces realistic issues faced by children who are seen as "disabled" while at the same time he is able to thrive despite, or even because of, his differences.

The overarching revelation of "Junior Conductors Academy" is that, in a setting where differences are valued, celebrated, and expected, outside-the-box characteristics are viewed as gifts rather than evidence of impairment.

Dinosaur Train offers a new approach to portraying the varied behaviors of children, including those with autism spectrum disorder. Its central insight is that we have more in common than different. When parents, teachers, and children remain curious and open, autism spectrum disorder becomes beside the point, allowing all children to explore friendship in new and mutually supportive ways.

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