IF I WERE A BOOK CHARACTER

By Naomi Grugan

Being a parent is a tough job. You give a large amount of time and effort in the often thankless task of caring for and teaching your child. There are times however, when you are rewarded in unexpected ways.

Recently I was helping my 8 year old with his homework. He had to present a speech to the class titled If I Were a Book Character. For most kids this presents with numerous options to fulfil fantasies of becoming a superhero, a princess or a superstar. For most kids the hardest part is deciding which character to be. Not for my son.

You see, my son has Autism. While he is high functioning and is able to attend a mainstream school, it can still present many challenges in everyday tasks. And this speech presented an unusual challenge.

When we first started working on his speech his response was very matter of fact and always the same. “I do not want to be a book character”. For a week it was always the same. My chatterbox son, who can usually talk for hours on his favourite topics (at the moment Pokémon and Minecraft), had shut down. After working through the usual homework routine, asking, telling, and demanding, he choose a character, I finally changed tactic. I decided to ask him why he did not want to be a book character. This was the first step in getting the speech written and in gaining a new understanding of my son.

His response, when I asked, was simple. Being a book character is boring. For my son, this was all the information I needed. He did not want to be a book character because being a book character was boring. As far as he was concerned his speech was written. While he can become overwhelmed by details, in some cases, such as this one, fine details are not important. He had made his decision, given a reason under duress and had let the idea escape from his mind. The challenge for me became in getting the idea back into his mind and getting him to elaborate.

I begin by trying to find out his reasons for not wanting to be a book character. I wanted him to be able to tell me, and by extension his class in the speech, what was bad about being a book character. I wanted to know why he could not imagine himself as a character. I wanted to know what it was about the life of a book character that was unappealing to him. While most kids see the life of a character as exciting and filled with adventure, my son did not. Instead he saw the life of a character as boring. He saw the character as standing absolutely still all day. For him this is something that he would never want to, or choose to do. He saw their life as lacking in many ways. Never having the ability to play, run, eat, read and love. And for him, this was a life he could never imagine or want.
This started me thinking about the way he has always played, compared to the way other children play. Children often play pretend games. Make believing they are princesses or superheros and many other infinite possibilities. They insert themselves into a make believe world, becoming characters within the confines of their made up world. My son was different. He would play within a made up world, often one corresponding to his current obsession. He would be in a world of dinosaurs, Ninja Turtles and Skylanders, acting out battles and saving the world. But instead of becoming another character, he would remain himself. The other characters were always, and still are, there. But he was playing alongside them instead of becoming them.

We were finally able to begin work on his speech. His first draft went for 20 seconds. The speech was meant to go for around one minute 20 seconds so he tried again. The second draft went for 30 seconds. After more work (and arguing, yelling and begging) we combined the two speeches and expanded on them. We finally had a workable speech. And his final speech gave me more to think about.

In the beginning of his speech, my son tells us why he does not want to be a book character and things he would rather do instead, including losing at games, although he really hates to lose at games. It is then that he shows a moment of clarity. He tells us that a book character is not alive. And that being alive is better. This 8-year-old boy, who is seen as different, and lacking in empathy and creativity, is able to see the joy in being alive. He can see that, even though he enters this make believe world that is filled with characters who become his friends, that world is not real. The characters within that world, while brought to life in his mind, are not really living beings. The desire to play with and interact with them does not translate into the desire to be them. He is able to maintain his own identity within a make believe realm.

My son has, at a very young age, already gained an understanding about the difficulties in being different. He has experienced first-hand the pain of rejection, the sorrow of feeling left out when all he wants to do is be accepted. I have always and will always encourage the differences in him. I have tried to teach him the beauty of being different. That being different can lead to amazing and wonderful experiences. One of my saddest moments as a parent was when he told me he wished he wasn’t different because people don’t like different. His speech however, showed a different side. It showed his acceptance of himself. Faced with the choice of changing who he was, even if it was in a make believe world, he chose to be himself. Instead of wanting to be bigger, stronger or more popular, he wanted to be who he was. In his own words, “I would rather be me”.

This experience has given me the unexpected reward of seeing him accept himself. Of seeing him accept himself. This beautiful, wonderful, quirky boy has seen the value in himself. While the rest of the world has trouble with seeing the value of those who are different, my son is finding a way to accept and value himself. He has learnt a lesson that has taken me, and many others, a lifetime to learn. It is better to be who we are than someone who is make believe.
However, I may be completely wrong in my interpretation of his speech. It may be as simple as just not wanting to think of anything else. It could be as easy as he just doesn’t want to be a book character. I choose to believe otherwise. I choose to see the honesty in his words, the understanding of himself and the beauty of his thought process. And I feel rewarded that this quirky, fun and exhausting boy is mine.

If I were a book character......

Hello. My name is xxxxxx. I have been told to talk to you today about being a book character. I do not want to be a book character. The reason I do not want to be a book character is because you have to stay still forever and ever, even when the book is destroyed.

I really do not like being still. I would rather run around a lot. I would rather lose at a game. I really, really, really hate to lose at games.

A book character is not alive. Being alive is better. If you are alive you get to run around, play with your friends, hug people, eat yummy food, sleep, read about characters in books, and even write about characters in books. I would rather be alive.

I do not want to be a book character. I would rather be me.

Thank you for listening.