

Book review

Book review of *Kids Across the Spectrums: Growing Up Autistic in the Digital Age*

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Kids Across the Spectrums by Meryl Alper offers an in-depth exploration of autistic childhoods, media and technology. The book is the product of evidence-based research from a diverse sample of kids living in Angeles and Boston. Through a “sociotechnical” lens, the author explores many complex issues faced by autistic children, such as identity formation, family dynamics and emotional development.

The book has an introduction chapter, beginning with the story of “Joey,” an autistic boy profiled in a 1959 article that framed autism as a detachment from humanity and popularized the image of the “mechanical boy.” The author argues this notion persists and urges retelling Joey’s story from the perspectives of diverse autistic youth today. It is then followed by in-depth thematic chapters (2 to 7) and a conclusion. In *Identity Development* (Chapter 2), the author explores how media and technology influence autistic children’s sense of self and identity, with a focus on media representation, gender and intersectionality. Learning (*Chapter 3*) discusses how digital media complements formal education and fosters self-directed learning among tech-savvy autistic children while being mindful that technology alone cannot resolve educational inequality.

This is followed by *Family Relationships* (Chapter 4), in which the author investigates the role of technology in family dynamics, including parental mediation strategies, sibling interactions, the fluidity of parents’ media management in response to child factors, the ubiquity of behavioral language and the interplay of clinical advice, personal values and structural constraints in shaping household technology use.

Friendships (Chapter 5) focuses on the role of media and technology in social relationships, while *Sensory Processing* (Chapter 6) explores how sensory experiences shape media engagement for autistic youth, framing sensory differences as social and contextual, not individual deficits. Finally, *Emotions* (Chapter 7) examines the role of media and technology in autistic children’s emotional lives, linking debates over affective computing to the lived emotional realities of autistic kids and arguing that these technologies encode neurotypical biases about emotion.

The book covers a wide array of topics, with each chapter contributing to a different layer of understanding of autistic children’s interactions with media and technology. The author developed the terminology of “sociotechnical shaping of sociality” (STSS) to explain how technology both shapes and is shaped by social norms, including “autistic sociality” coined by the anthropologists Elinor Ochs and Olga Solomon. The book is successful at capturing the interest of readers seeking to integrate concepts from disability studies, developmental psychology and media studies.

The conclusion summarizes the book's three key main themes: cultural belonging, social relationships and physical embodiment, and advocates for more inclusive online and offline spaces that leverage media and technology's potential to promote autistic youth's fullest expression, independence and communication. It counters prevailing assumptions about autism's relationship to technology and society.

The rigor of the author's research is demonstrated at the end of the book in the methods appendix. The study used a mixture of three methods for greater empirical depth: semistructured interviews (both parents and children), seminaturalistic observation (autistic children and their households) and participant observation. The study's limitations, such as the inclusion of few nonspeaking child participants and a lack of peer network observations, are openly acknowledged, adding to its credibility. Data was transcribed, coded and analyzed using the constant comparative method. Importantly, the child participants were offered an opportunity to provide feedback on the

methodology, enhancing the study's reflexivity.

Gender, race and class are considered throughout the study, providing a well-rounded perspective on autistic children's experiences with media and technology. The discussion of race thoughtfully examines how structural inequities shape social vulnerability. However, it could be argued that the book could benefit from a broader global perspective and more focus on nonverbal autistic children as well as high-functioning children along the entire spectrum of autism as defined in DSM-5. Future research would no doubt aim for greater involvement of autistic collaborators, as recommended in the conclusion. Overall, the book is a valuable contribution to improving our understanding of the relationships between autism, media and technology and also to improving health outcomes and quality of life for autistic individuals.

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