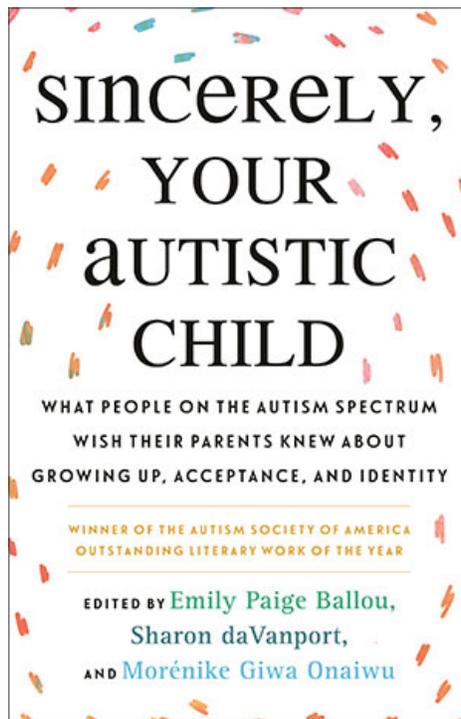


*Sincerely, Your Autistic Child:*  
*What People on the Autism Spectrum Wish Their Parents Knew About Growing Up,*  
*Acceptance, and Identity*  
by **Autistic Women and Nonbinary Network**,  
edited by **Emily Paige Ballou, Sharon daVanport, Morénike Giwa Onaiwu**

Readers' Guide Discussion Questions



## Early Memories, Childhood, and Education

### Chapter 1

- Can you describe an example of someone (perhaps yourself if this applies) not following a linear timeline?
- Why do you think the author's parents often assumed the worst will happen, such as thinking that people would make fun of their child for being different or that everyone is a potential abuser?
- **For parents:** Do you think your child is aware of your feelings about them, even the ones you try to keep hidden? Explain.

### Chapter 2

- Explain why you think the father was so angry at the author for being autistic.
- Have you ever felt like you're not praised enough for the good things you do? If so, what are some things that you wish others would mention more frequently about you?

- Can you highlight qualities that you think made this mom a great parent who the author felt connected to?
- **For parents:** In what ways do you, like the author's mother, reassure your child that you accept and embrace them and their differences? Explain.

### Chapter 3

- Did you have playdates as a child? If so, describe what they were like for you.
- Have you ever had trouble being able to tell if people were really your friends? If so, explain.
- Is there anything about the education system (including special education) that you feel needs some serious adjustment? If so, what are those things, and why have you chosen them?
- **For parents:** The author describes how her autistic children thrived in nontraditional educational environments (smaller daycares/schools, homeschooling, highly structured and/or inquiry-based programs, private schools, carefully selected public school options). What educational settings have you found to be a good fit for your child, and why?

### Chapter 4

- If you have ever been in therapy, can you describe what your best therapy experience was like and what your worst therapy experience was like?
- Do you feel that you were adequately taught how to set and express boundaries, or is that something you had to learn on your own? Explain.
- **For parents:** When you talk to your child about problems they might be having, how do you ensure that they feel heard and that their needs and concerns are front and center during the discussion?

### Chapter 5

- Have you, like the author, had to "mask" through entire (school and/or work) days? If so, describe what it was like; for example, were you tired by the time you got home?
- What do you think the school should have done so that the author could have remained in academically challenging classes while still getting the support that was needed?
- **For parents:** In what ways can you help create an environment at home where your child feels safe to be themselves?

### Chapter 6

- Why do you think so much emphasis is placed on teaching autistic people to fit in rather than on teaching them to fight for their rights?
- Why do you think it is hard for some parents to accept that there are situations their children are perfectly capable of handling? Why is underestimation some parents' first instinct?

- **For parents:** Why do you think some parents seem more concerned with strangers' perceived opinions of their child rather than with the experiences of their own child? Explain.

### Chapter 7

- Do you sometimes react to people and/or situations in a way that others find confusing? How so?
- What is something that people underestimate you for but that you “have a handle on” way more than they may think? Explain.
- **For parents:** How do you let your child know that you take their feelings seriously?

### Chapter 8

- Why do you think the author's mother felt threatened by the little boy, even though all he was doing was playing with blocks?
- Can you think of any harmful media and/or stereotypes that cause people to fear autism? Explain.
- **For parents:** Why do you think the author's mother believed that someone “with autism” and someone who could “change the world” could not coexist in one person?

### Chapter 9

- Have you ever had an instance where you felt someone else's emotions so strongly that you almost felt that they were your own? If so, describe.
- Is there a “little Heidi” in your life who could use encouragement (a relative, a classmate, a friend, maybe your inner self)? What are some ways that you can think of to support such a person?
- How old were you when you first met someone similar in age who was both autistic and proud of it? How did you feel when you met them?
- **For parents:** The author mentions that even though she believed that her parents loved her, she often had difficulty expressing herself to them in a way they could understand. In what ways do you strive to understand what your child needs, wants, and feels even if it's not always easy to tell? Explain.

### Chapter 10

- In some countries, the term “autism spectrum disorder” (ASD) is used “officially” as opposed to “autism” or “autism spectrum condition” (ASC). Which term(s) do you mostly use, and why?
- Do you object to autism being called a “disorder”? Explain why or why not.
- Can you think of a specific time when you paid less attention to social cues because your own senses were overburdened? If so, describe.
- **For parents:** In what ways do you honor your child's “no” and help them prioritize being safe (physically, emotionally, etc.)? Describe.

## Acceptance and Adaptation

### Chapter 11

- Can you think of a time in your childhood when you were confused about what people were talking about? In what ways do you think this can affect a child?
- Have you ever rehearsed potential things to talk about with people? Explain.
- Some people do not obtain an autism spectrum diagnosis until later in life. If you know anyone who has had that experience (yourself, your child, an acquaintance), please describe.
- **For parents:** Are you aware of when your child is struggling when communicating with others? What are some things that help?

### Chapter 12

- Do you experience sensory processing issues? How so?
- Were you ever picked on because social interactions were too hard for you?
- **For parents:** The author discusses how, though people can have different perspectives of autism, parents should be accepting of their children and that “other people do not have to like it, but they can respect it.” In what ways do you, as a parent and an ally, ensure that people treat your autistic child with respect even when the child might be struggling a great deal?

### Chapter 13

- Do you have any interests, passions, or hobbies that are really important to you? If so, what are they, and how do you feel when people listen to you talk about them?
- Who were your role models growing up? Why were they so influential?
- If you are autistic, did your friends and classmates know? If you are not autistic, can you think back on any friends, classmates, or neighbors whom you now think might have been autistic?
- **For parents:** The author praises her mother’s use of analogies from Harry Potter novels about “muggles” and “wizards” to explain autism in a way that was not stigmatizing. How do you talk about autism in the presence of your child and others: in a neutral way, a negative way, a positive way? Explain.

### Chapter 14

- Why do you think it is so hard for some people to reconcile that one can simultaneously be “high achieving” as well as autistic? Explain.
- Why do you think there are educators and therapists who don’t believe in the kids that they’re helping? What measures do you think can be taken to be sure that only people with the right intentions can be placed in those jobs?

- Have you ever felt like autism is used as a weapon against others (yourself, your child, an acquaintance)? Who was involved, and how was autism weaponized in the scenario(s)?
- **For parents:** The author’s mother was not willing to seek a formal autism evaluation for her child because the child was intellectually gifted. Cognitive ability (from intellectual disability to giftedness) varies in all people, including autistics. What misperceptions do people have about your autistic child with regard to intellect, and why do you think that is?

## Chapter 15

- List and describe some of the characteristics that make up who you are and your overall identity.
- In this chapter, the author states: “Normality is not a virtue, and defiance of the norm is not a sin.” What thought comes to your mind when you ponder that quote? Explain.
- **For parents:** The author states “there is no hating the autism and loving the child.” Please explain why you agree or disagree.

## Chapter 16

- The author describes her difficulty in finding information about people like her. Why do you think there has been a lack of representation of autistic people of color?
- Was there ever a time where you felt like you were viewed as a tragedy rather than a human being? Please describe.
- The author discusses the “medical model of disability.” What are your thoughts about the different models of disability? (If you are unfamiliar or need to review, please consult <https://disabilityinpublichealth.org/disability-models-resources/>.)
- **For parents:** By saying “autism ... does not define you,” the author’s mother intended to empower her child, but although the mother meant well, this mindset made the child feel pressured to conform to neurotypical standards. Are there certain things that you have said/done/thought with good intentions that you later came to regret or disagree with regarding autism and your child? Explain.

## Chapter 17

- How, do you think, have things changed from the 1990s to now regarding autism? Explain.
- Despite being a nonspeaking AAC user with high support needs and many co-occurring health challenges, the author emphasizes how much better living in an apartment with support was in comparison to years of living in institutions. What are your thoughts about community integration for autistic people? What are your thoughts about institutionalization for autistic people?
- **For parents:** The author describes experiencing significant regression in and loss of skills, ability, and speech. Some people are skeptical of the notion of “autistic burnout” and/or losing skills; what are your thoughts on regression, skill loss, and/or burnout?

## Chapter 18

- Nearly all people (autistic and non-autistic) “[stim](#).” What are your stims, and are any of them nontypical stims? Explain.
- For years the author was misunderstood by many because of not presenting the way others expected. In what ways do you also defy/not fit into people’s “molds”? Explain.
- The author shared how hurtful being dismissed as “low functioning” by others felt. Do you use the terms “low functioning” and “high functioning” to describe autistics? If so, why, and if not, why not?
- **For parents:** Though the author’s parents loved their child, they unintentionally caused their child harm because they implemented providers’ recommendations that contrasted sharply with their own parental instincts and their child’s cues. Have you ever been in a situation where you, as a parent, doubted your ability to rear your child because of the opinions of professionals and/or greater society? Explain.

## Chapter 19

- Have you ever felt out of place because of your personality? If so, describe what it was like.
- Have you witnessed and/or personally experienced ableism? Please explain.
- **For parents:** Summarize what you think the process of self-acceptance should be and how you’ve tried to model this for your child.

## Chapter 20

- Explain why you think people, including the author, are often overlooked with regard to screening and diagnostics.
- Do you (or, if you are non-autistic, an acquaintance or a loved one who is autistic) exhibit observable autistic traits? Please describe.
- The author mentions spending a significant portion of childhood and adolescence hiding autism. Discuss some of the tactics people utilize to try to hide aspects of autism from others.
- **For parents:** The author’s family tried unsuccessfully to convince the author not to be ashamed of being different. Share some ways you have been effective in helping your child to consider a particular viewpoint in relation to the world around them.

## Chapter 21

- What, in your opinion, should make someone an autism “expert”? Explain.
- Have you and/or anyone in your family ever been fed false information about autism? If so, specifically what was shared? Was it believed?
- **For parents:** Have you ever sought out information (research, articles, books, creative works, speeches, and/or interviews) conducted solely or primarily by autistic people about autism? If not, do you intend to, and why or why not? If you have, please share why it was or was not helpful?

## Intersectional Identity and Finding Community

## Chapter 22

- Has your family ever blamed you for being bullied or told you it was your fault? Explain.
- Have you, if you are autistic, and/or an autistic acquaintance or a loved one ever been yelled at about displaying autistic traits? How did being in and/or witnessing that situation make you feel?
- **For parents:** The author recounts discomfort with being pressured to endure unwanted physical touch. Have you, a family member, or a friend ever told your child to hug someone without asking all parties (including your child) if hugging was okay? Why or why not?

## Chapter 23

- In your opinion, what are some of the pros and cons of discovering at a young age that you are autistic? What are some pros and cons of discovering this later in life? Explain.
- Share resources that you use to educate yourself more about autism. Are they different from the information you might have initially used to understand autism and/or to find out if someone, perhaps yourself, your child, or a loved one, might be on the spectrum? Explain.
- **For parents:** When did you first perceive that your child recognized that they might be different from others? Describe what signs indicated that your child was becoming aware of this.

## Chapter 24

- Did/do the “rules” for switching topics in conversations ever confuse you? Explain.
- Explain how you perceive small talk, i.e., its utility and value, how you feel about engaging in it, etc.
- **For parents:** Does your child experience sensory issues when it comes to clothing? If so, how?

## Chapter 25

- Whether you are autistic or not, did you know other people on the autism spectrum as you grew up, and if so, could you share any impact this has had on your perception of self and others?
- Why do you think some parents view being autistic as worse than death? Explain.
- What are some positive and supportive autism organizations that you know of? Also share specifically why you mentioned these ones.
- **For parents:** Annually, the disability community hosts a day of mourning for people with disabilities who have been murdered by parents or caregivers; sadly, many autistic people are on the list. Describe the safeguards and supports you and your family have in place to ensure that your child remains safe from abuse and violence. (One possible resource is this [anti-filicide toolkit](#).)

## Chapter 26

- Would you consider yourself a literal or a concrete thinker, an abstract thinker, a creative thinker, or some other type? Explain.
- What situations do you think need to be talked about more in the autism community and why?
- **For parents:** Describe ways that you can help your child be involved in the autistic community as well as in the overall autism community.

### Chapter 27

- Have you ever felt as though you were the only person in the world who feels the way you do about certain things? If so, please elaborate.
- Were you or someone you were acquainted with ever bullied for being who you are? What happened? Was it addressed/resolved, and if so, how?
- **For parents:** Do you feel that you have always been accepting of your child and their identity? How can you make sure they feel accepted?

### Chapter 28

- Think of a period of life where you felt like you didn't belong. Explain what it was like.
- Have you, like the author, developed friendships that might appear unconventional, i.e., you have friends of varying ages, friends you've formed through online communities, or friends whose background is significantly different from yours? If so, what advice would you give regarding making connections with others and building friendships?
- **For parents:** The author notes that though their parents made mistakes, they also demonstrated different ways that "love across identities and experiences is possible." Describe some creative, possibly unconventional ways that you have learned to "speak" your autistic child's love language.

### Chapter 29

- Are you living the type of life your parents imagined for you? Explain.
- How do you imagine your future, going forward? Please describe in detail.
- **For parents:** What ways can you continue to support your autistic child as they grow up?