

# Actually Autistic Educator

## Episode 1.5: The Harms of the Deficit Model of ASD

### TRANSCRIPT

[six seconds of soft music]

Hello again, it's Jeanne the Actually Autistic Educator.

Quick note: Transcripts, provided by InterACTT, for this and other episodes are posted to our Twitter and FB pages at Actually Autistic Educator for people who prefer text or to read and listen simultaneously.

This is a mini-episode with just me speaking, full episodes drop the first of each month, with these shorter ones in-between.

Before my next episode about autistic communication, I wanted to talk about something that underpins my philosophy around ASD, and which is frequently a major source of disagreements between non-autistics and autistics about how we should talk about autism. I and most other self-advocates disagree with what is called the deficit model, where when looking at differences in people you focus on what the individual needs to change and treating it as their personal problem for being different, rather than acknowledging the larger societal pressures or structures which may be influencing things, or being just accepting of variety. This lens of viewing autism exclusively as differences between what is considered "normal" vs autistic, and considering any differences as being inherently and automatically negative does serious real harm to autistics, and their families and loved ones. Quick content warning, we won't go into any great details but I will be briefly discussing violence to and killings of autistics later, and a lot of this episode is about the trauma we autistics face due to societal ableism and hatred of autistic behaviors, which may be upsetting for autistics to listen to.

Where I see this disagreement between autistics and non-autistics most frequently is when an autistic adult posts something saying about how they like a part of being autistic, or sharing an autistic trait they see as a strength, or stating that certain "treatments" for autism are harmful, a non-autistic professional

or caretaker steps in to disagree about how we don't understand how tragic and awful autism is for "real autistics." Now in a future episode we will be addressing more deeply why functioning labels have a lot of issues, and there are a lot of things wrong with this argument, but I want to address this general debate early on with this podcast. I'm betting if you're listening to me talk here you're more open than many who say these things, but hopefully this can give some useful talking points when you see this argument being made, or help address it if you do have these sorts of concerns or questions.

The big thing to keep in mind here is that I can say anything on this podcast or Twitter about how autism makes me better at different things, and a caretaker can say anything about how autism is the enemy that stole their child, but nothing either of us will say will actually change the number of autistic people out in the world. When we as autistics are saying "I like being autistic" or "autism is not a bad thing" it's not because we are trying to make people catch autism (which to be clear is not a thing that can happen), it's because we are trying to push back against an incredibly harmful narrative that talks about autistic individuals as being sub-human, drains on society, a cause of divorce in parents, and a group that many are hoping to eliminate through genetic testing and termination so that we won't ever be born. Autistics face regular violence and death from caretakers, as well as other professionals, yet when our murders are reported there is inevitably a call for compassion for our murderers because of this narrative of autism as inherently negative and exclusively a source of discomfort to others.

Autistics often get accused of lacking empathy, though new studies we will be speaking about in the next episode are finally proving the serious flaws in this interpretation, but if you're not autistic I'd like you to do an empathy exercise with me. Please imagine what it might be like to have spent your entire life being told that what you are was broken and wrong, that you don't care about other people (even though

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you desperately do), that the ways your brain works are bad, that you don't have a personality or soul, that people like you should be locked up so as to not hurt others, that the only way you will be loved and accepted is if you change inherent parts of yourself because no one would love you as you are. How would that influence how you thought about yourself? About your self-worth? Those are all things I have personally been told over the years, many times in an educational environment from professionals who genuinely thought they were helping me or one of my siblings. For years I thought that I was evil, broken, and wrong because that's the message I was given about what autism was.

I've really struggled with how much of my own issues I should be up front about in this podcast, because I've seen how autistic adults are treated. If I say "yeah, actually if I get out-sensored I go mute and am unable to make words even if I want to and can only text" or that I frequently struggle with food issues to get myself to eat because my body says "nope, none of that is food" I have seen the looks on people's faces where they suddenly get concerned that they have been treating me like a regular human but maybe they should have been treating me like a child. And this is the double-sided sword all autistics are stuck with. If we share our struggles to validate our perspective we are infantilized and told we are too autistic to understand the realities of autism, but if we mask and drive ourselves to exhaustion to try to look "normal" enough to be listened to we get told we're not autistic enough to understand what autism is really like.

When we say autism can be a good thing, that our autistic perspectives and traits have value and should be appreciated, we're not being blind to or ignoring the struggles that we face, trust me we are well aware. I had a pain spike this week from my joint issues that triggered my sensory issues and I've barely been able to eat anything beyond cold cereal. But we autistics are facing a world that constantly and explicitly denies our humanity, so we scream

back into the void that we are real, and good, that autism isn't a bad word, that we all, speaking or not, whatever limitations we have, deserve respect and to be listened to.

Non-speakers who get assistive devices later in life have shared word for word the horrific things that were said to them years before when people assumed they didn't understand, and maybe someone might not get every word you say but the disgust for us and how we think and act still comes through. We understand so much more than is thought. I encourage everyone to check out Communication First on Facebook or Twitter, or at [communicationfirst.org](http://communicationfirst.org) a group led by non-speakers where they share their thoughts and experiences and self-advocate.

We need to stop treating autistics and autistic traits as lesser or broken. We need to stop the infantilization of autistic adults who have greater support needs who are often not given any control over their lives just because they communicate in different ways, and even intentionally harmed just because of a disability. It's been repeatedly documented that numerous adults with disabilities over this past year with Covid have had do-not-resuscitate orders signed for them merely because of being autistic, deaf, having mobility issues, and more. Autistic and other disabled children and adults have been denied life-saving organ transplants merely on the basis of a neurological disability. Autistic children are horrifically injured by a variety of things called "treatments" including bleach enemas, with the justification that autism is so bad anything that makes them look less autistic is worth the pain and damage inflicted to them.

We need people to stand up and push back when they see this narrative being used in schools, trainings, and on social media. Especially to the non-autistics listening, our autistic voices are constantly being intentionally excluded from these conversations, so please use your privilege

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and platform to help improve things by speaking up.

I'm autistic, my brother was autistic, my sister, my cousins, and so many of my friends are autistic. It's not a bad word. All of us will have different combinations of traits and differences, some more frustrating for us than others, but we also have joy, and cool things we want to share, and passions, and ideas. All of us are human, all of us are real and valid, and our perspectives and knowledge are important.

The question isn't if you think autism is good or bad, it's do you want your autistic student, client, or child to feel that they are good or bad. You can't change our autism, but you can change how we all feel about being autistic, how we feel about ourselves. And if you are open to it, there really actually are a lot of

cool things about being autistic I'd love to share in future episodes.

Our next full length episode with guests will be dropping July 1st, and if you connected with what I had to say please share us on social media, leave a review, come comment on Facebook or Twitter at Actually Autistic Educator, and help us grow.

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