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*Hug Skill Increase*

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## ***Hug Skill Increase***

A. Rose

Throughout my life, I had a lot of experience with disability and children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Through my mother's work as a teaching assistant at a special needs school, I was exposed to children with various disabilities, the most prominent of which were Down syndrome and Autism. It quickly became a passion of mine to write about these under-represented voices, with many of my creative works featuring disabled protagonists. My aim is to create literature around disability that not only features protagonists in positive and uplifting ways, but also represents an honest viewpoint of living with mental and physical handicaps. Realism around disability is important to me. *Hug Skill Increase* aims to create a character who displays many aspects of Autism, and explores the psychology and development of ASD children from an early age.

The title *Hug Skill Increase* refers to the process the character goes through during the story, in which he has to 'go to these classes to make [his] hugging better' and the idea of increasing the skills you need to hug someone is a very literal interpretation. This is a common trait of autistic children, in which 'Young people on the autism spectrum take things literally. This means they may not be able to identify the hidden meaning behind certain phrases or even understand the difference between fact and fiction.'<sup>1</sup> Henry is very factual and understands life in a very logical way, so he reasons that to improve certain skills one must practice until those skills increase. It goes to show how removed Henry is from the world, an avatar, without the same deep connection with the world and those around us.

Incorporated into Henry's logical mannerisms and clear deferral to authority ('mummy says') is an attempt to engage with broader literary and psychological themes such as nature and nurture, by juxtaposing the reactions of the mother with that of Henry. The mother character displays nurturing and loving characteristics, and emotional responses when she receives his touch despite his sensory sensitivity, whereas the child is simply acting out of a natural compliancy with what is expected of him, and does not understand the associated sentimentality that his mother took from the experience. This follows the idea of learnt actions, of doing things that you know make someone else feel good without fully understanding the emotions or the need to do such.

There were three difficult elements to consider when writing this piece: the challenge of writing from the perspective of a child, writing as a character who has ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), but above all creating a realistic depiction of disability. Books such as *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *A Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* do this very well, and heavily influenced my work. They craft larger narratives, fictional tales of adventure, as well as creating a realistic portrayal of those with autism (specifically Asperger syndrome in *Extremely Loud*). In *Hug Skill Increase*, I wanted to focus on mundane struggles which many people with Autism will go through, whilst emulating the honest and engaging voices and perspectives of these extraordinary characters.

The piece is particularly character-driven, centring on Henry and his journey towards accepting and interacting with the world around him. Sculpting the free, indirect discourse of the text was a struggle; to create a realistic Henry, a variety of techniques were used. Repetition is one of these structural devices

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<sup>1</sup> Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, 'Does Your Child Have Autism?', *Think U Know* <<https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents/articles/Does-your-child-have-Autistic-Spectrum-Disorder/>> [accessed on 28 January 2020]

that has been harnessed to communicate patterns, order, and a systematic thought process, which are common autistic traits. This has been done to the extreme in the text, for instance through the constant reminder that blue is his favourite colour and the intense focus on his shells. Combined with less complex language, neologisms such as ‘gazillion,’ and basic explanations of objects and situations, repetition also helps to construct a ‘child-like’ tone of voice.

This is reiterated by the lack of understanding and empathy towards other people’s emotions, an egocentrism that many children (especially those with autism) tend to show. ‘Childish egocentrism is, in its essence, an inability to differentiate between the ego and the social environment’.<sup>2</sup> This is also demonstrated by the first-person narrative making other characters minimalistic and beyond the scope of a child’s understanding. This was an important element to the story, as it can be easy to see someone with autism as a social outcast, or as cruel or uncaring. I hope to make the reader feel more positive towards and connected to Henry, by showing his confusion and lack of understanding of emotions, as well as his genuine fear of other people’s touch.

There is no dialogue in the tale, to represent another autistic phenomenon where ‘most autistic people hardly communicate in a social environment, living in their own world’,<sup>3</sup> being secluded and tending to live with very little regard for what is occurring around them. It is believed that most autistic children have the same emotional development as other children their ages, but they just don’t know how to interpret or show these emotions, and *Hug Skill Increase* attempts to demonstrate this ‘gap between the “what you see” and the “what’s inside” of non-verbal autism’<sup>4</sup> through a total absence of dialogue. The reader may perceive Henry as a highly intelligent, creative and perceptive child as we are allowed into his thoughts and feelings, where the other characters within the story are not, and therefore may perceive him as difficult or obstinate. Subsequently, I hope that this demonstrates how children with disabilities such as autism may be misjudged, or misrepresented in literature, and how I aim to change this within my own writing.

Disability is a subject often under-represented in literature, or negatively represented, such as in the case of *A Christmas Carol* (1843) in which Tiny Tim is described as a ‘cripple’. His introductory sentence, ‘Alas for Tiny Tim, he bore a little crutch, and had his limbs supported by an iron frame!’<sup>5</sup>, carries unexpectedly negative connotations through the words ‘alas’ and ‘bore’. To quote humourist Josh Billings, ‘Pity costs nothing, and it ain’t worth nothing’.<sup>6</sup> To pity Tiny Tim and Henry does nothing in aiding an understanding of their character, or the personalities and psychological proses of children with disabilities. Instead of pitying Henry, my hope rather is that readers gain a deeper understanding of him and the ways in which he grapples with autism. Placed in his shoes, the reader has the opportunity to grasp how small things, like getting dressed and hugging, are difficult, but also the unorthodox mindset and reasoning that contribute to these experiences. Although other mediums can portray disability in a more positive light (for instance, *Atypical* on Netflix), *Hug Skill Increase* aims to highlight the powerfulness of literature specifically, to dispel negative portrayals of disability, and most importantly, promote the notion that disabilities and differences should be ‘positively valued and celebrated’.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgement of the Child*, (London: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 93.

<sup>3</sup> Sandra Costa, Jorge Resende, Filomena Oliveira Soares, Manuel Joao Ferreira, Cristina P. Santos and Fátima Moreira, ‘Applications of Simple Robots to Encourage Social Receptiveness of Adolescents with Autism’, *2009 Annual International Conference of the IEEE Engineering in Medicine and Biology Society* (2009), 5072–5075 <<https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/abstract/document/5334269>> [accessed on 18 February 2020].

<sup>4</sup> David Mitchell, ‘What My Son’s Autism Has Taught Me’, *The Guardian*, 8 July 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jul/08/david-mitchell-son-autism-diagnosis-advice>> [accessed on 1 February 2020].

<sup>5</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1843), pp. 77–78.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Aaron Ben-Ze’ev, *The Subtlety of Emotions* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), p. 328.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Oliver, *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice* (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 1995), p. 89.

## **Hug Skill Increase**

I'm Henry and I'm six, and mummy says I'm a big boy, but sometimes she tells me off for not acting like one. Because I don't like hugs and I don't like it when people try to hold my hand and sometimes I get angry and hit them. She says I need to be better at touching and kindness. She says it's unkind to hit people, and we don't do unkind in our house. She also says that it's unkind not to share toys with the other kids, but I don't like it when they touch my things because they put them in the wrong order and I get angry again. She says I need to get better at that too. I have a special toy which is a bucket that has shells in and the shells are all different colours and there are holes in the lid to put the shells back in, only they aren't real shells, they are plastic.

I like them. I put the shells back in one colour at a time, first blue, and then green, and then purple, because blue is my favourite, so the blue one has to go first, and then green and then purple.

Mummy says I have to take turns to let the other kids put the shells back if they want, but I don't want to and I don't understand why I have to. She says it will make them upset if I am horrible, but I don't care if they get upset as long as they don't touch my things. Sometimes the other children cry when I hit them, and I put my hands over my ears and hum because I don't like the sound. I just pretend that I can't hear them. Then mummy tells me off and I scream.

Today, mummy says that we are going to special classes. I don't like our special classes because they make me do things I don't want to and I don't understand why they make me but mummy says I have to. We have been going to special classes for soooo long. When she wakes me up, she says I have five minutes until I need to get ready. She lets me play with the dollies that she has on her dresser: there is a big one and a middle one and some tiny weenie ones that all fit inside the biggest one. I like to take them all out and line them up and make them all straight. I get cross because they are not straight enough, so I put them all back inside the big one, get them out again, and line them up along the edge of the dresser, less wonky this time. I keep doing this until mummy comes in and tells me it is time to brush my hair.

I hate it when she brushes my hair. Most mornings I go to school without my hair brushed because I don't want the brush near me and I scream. Then I get told off. The teachers call me 'bed-head' but I don't get it so I just ignore them and play on my iPad. Mummy gets the comb and I punch her hands and I slap the comb away because it feels like she is dragging nails across my head. After this she tries to put my new jumper on but I don't like that either because it feels scratchy against my skin and it hurts me. It's the same colour as my old jumper but it doesn't feel the same and it doesn't smell the same and I don't like it.

We go down for breakfast and I have some strawberries cut in my special way and some yoghurt in my blue bowl, and the spoon with the white handle on my tray. My bowl is blue because blue is my favourite. I bite a strawberry, chomp, chomp, chomp. This is the same breakfast that I have every morning because it's yummy. When we get ready to go, I put my shoes on and stick the sticky stuff together really straight because I don't like it when it's not straight and I don't like the sound when it has to be opened and stuck down again because it wasn't straight, so I'm really careful.

In the car I play on the iPad, and I unlock it and I practice maths because I like maths. My favourite are multiplications and I can multiply any number, even a gazillion! Mummy says that I'm much better at maths than most boys my age, but I don't get why, because it's easy and everyone should be good at it because they are just numbers.

They go in the right order and everything should have a right order, like the shells in my bucket. First blue, and then green, and then purple, because blue is my favourite, so the blue one has to go first, and then green and then purple.

As we drive, mummy plays some music and I bounce in my seat until we pull up outside the centre. It is a really long building that stretches up high into the clouds. I don't like it. It's ugly because

it's wonky and the lines don't match. When we get out of the car, the lady who teaches us special classes comes out and says hello. The grown ups start talking so I sit down in the mud. I keep the iPad in my lap and I dig my fingers into the ground. I take some soil, lay it on my tongue, and then I close my lips and move it around my mouth. I like feeling the different bits, some bits are bigger and some bits are smaller and there are little bits of sand that feel like rocks when I bite them in my teeth.

I pretend to be a T-rex, chomp chomp, chomp. Mummy notices what I'm doing and makes me spit it out before I can swallow it. She doesn't like me eating it but I like it so I do.

When we go inside to the special classes, we practice the same stuff as before. First the lady gives me little toy cars that I line up all along the table. There is a blue one that I put first, because blue is my favourite. Then she asks me lots of questions but I ignore her. Then we get to the part that I don't like. I have to go to these classes to make my hugging better, so that I don't hit people when they touch me. The lady makes mummy and me face to face although I am standing and mummy is sitting. First she brushes my fingertips with hers. Then we put our palms together. I used to hate it when she slid her fingers into the gaps between mine, because it felt funny and they didn't fit there, but now I'm used to it, so that's what she does next.

She runs her hands up my arms until they are on my shoulders, and I want to scream and kick because it touches my jumper and my jumper feels scratchy against my skin and it hurts me. But I stay silent and keep my eyes on her face. Mummy pulls me towards her and puts her hands around my back. It feels strange like last time, but we stay like this for a little while so that I can get used to the feeling. This time I decide to copy her. Slowly, I lift my arms up and wrap them around her too. She has long hair and I like it because it is soft, so I hold on to it and ball my hands up around it. I can feel that mummy is shaking. She is crying, and I don't understand why, because I didn't get told off, and I didn't be mean to the other children and I didn't swallow the mud outside.

But she is hugging me, and I am hugging her back and that's okay.

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