

Original Research Paper

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Recognising Difference: A Neurodiversity-Affirming Poetic Autoethnography of Autism in Family Life

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Abstract

This article explores one family's evolving understanding of autism through a neurodiversity-affirming lens, guided by lived experience, poetic inquiry, and critical reflection. As both researcher and parent, I reflect on how my own autistic identity emerged while supporting my neurodivergent children—especially my middle daughter, whose internal distress was initially dismissed. Using Poetic Autoethnography and Poetic Ethnography, I weave together original poetry, personal narrative, and academic insight to examine how identity, recognition, and advocacy develop within everyday family life. This work adds to neurodivergent scholarship by centering lived experience and community-informed perspectives, and by promoting more inclusive and compassionate approaches to education, parenting, and research.

Keywords: Neurodiversity, Autistic Girls, Autistic Women, Poetic Inquiry, Adult Autism Diagnosis, Neurodivergent Families

Introduction

This article explores my family's evolving journey of understanding autism through a neurodiversity-affirming lens. Drawing on advocacy reflections and poems written during pivotal moments, I use creative writing and poetry as primary data (Tarisayi, 2023). The methodology combines Poetic Ethnography, which presents life stories in poetic form, and Poetic Autoethnography, which examines personal experience through poetic expression. These approaches align with Hanauer's (2021) framework for poetic inquiry, capturing the emotional depth and authenticity of lived experience. Through personal narrative, emotional insight, and reflexive consideration, I connect our family story to broader cultural and institutional contexts, illustrating how relationships, environments, and systems shape identity and support. In doing so, this article presents a multifaceted account of personal transformation, inviting readers to consider how understanding, acceptance, and support evolve within the lived experiences of neurodivergent families.

When Being “Good” Hides a Struggle

From a young age, my middle daughter displayed signs of sensory distress, heightened anxiety, and emotional overwhelm. Despite our early concerns, she was described by teachers as quiet, compliant, and academically able, traits that did not match their expectations of autism. She effectively withheld her neurodivergent behaviour during the school day, which made her significant struggles remain hidden. As an example of how she concealed her differences, I remember when she was about 9 years old and I asked her how she coped with the noisy classroom. She replied, “I let my ears hurt.” The thought of my daughter being in pain, without the support to express this among her peers and teachers, was heartbreaking. However, at home, she would no longer feel the need to hide; tensions would surface through meltdowns, disrupted sleep, and emotional exhaustion. I was met with the teacher’s disbelief, subtle blame, and repeated reassurances that she was “fine”. It took several years and ongoing advocacy for her to receive an autism diagnosis. By then, her needs had intensified, and the emotional toll was evident. In contrast, my son’s autism was recognised quickly; his traits were more externally visible and aligned with the standard diagnostic criteria familiar to professionals.

The difference between my daughter’s and son’s diagnostic journeys revealed how prevailing frameworks often reflect a male gender bias (Milner et al., 2019). Girls who internalise distress are frequently overlooked, even when they experience significant emotional and sensory challenges. These experiences emphasise the need for gender-sensitive approaches to recognition and support (Munroe & DeLeavy, 2023). For families like ours, delays in recognition can prolong distress and obscure opportunities to access affirming, informed strategies that could otherwise support wellbeing and identity development.

Good Little Girl: Poem

The following poem, “Good Little Girl,” was written in response to my middle daughter’s early years of being unseen. It speaks to the emotional labour of hiding neurodivergent characteristics, the pain of being misunderstood, and the strength it takes to hold it all in just to be perceived as “good.” Like many autistic girls, my daughter was praised for coping when in fact she was struggling to be heard. This poem gives voice to that experience and invites a deeper awareness of the different ways autism can present, especially in children who internalise rather than openly express their distress in public.

Good Little Girl

This is a story of a good little girl who, despite specialists saying she's autistic.

The teachers mock, “Oh, another one,” and refer to an “epidemic”.

She isn't like the autistic boys, so it isn't autism they see.

Instead of support, they leave her alone, saying, “She is such a good girl for me”.

This is a story of a strong little girl who battles on day in and day out.

She learnt not to fuss about stomach aches and pains.

She would sneak off to corners where there weren't any games.

She always waited until the end of the day,

Before her tensions were released, so no one could say,

That she wasn't a good girl at school that day.

This is a story of a brave little girl who persevered with all her might.

The impact and scars that were left behind could not be outwardly seen from her fight.

Exhaustion, fatigue, low self-worth, and stress are the consequences she must bear.

The lack of support for autistic girls is undeniably unfair!

Unfortunately, our experiences of exclusion as autistic girls and women remain a challenge, leading to long-term mental health implications for many (Mandy et al., 2022). Recognition of these experiences is essential for developing more equitable approaches to identification, intervention, and care across childhood and beyond (Munroe & DeLeavy, 2023).

Reframing Motherhood Through Self-Recognition

As our journey continued, the challenges my daughter faced did not ease with diagnosis alone. Like many families, the absence of post-diagnostic support meant that daily life continued to be difficult (Scattoni et al., 2023). Despite our best efforts, stress levels in our household were high. Navigating support systems, managing sensory needs, and responding to anxiety left us all feeling depleted. My children were struggling—and so was I. I often felt overwhelmed and frustrated that I could not be the calm, supportive parent I aspired to be. I had spent so much time worrying about my children that I had not paused to consider my own needs.

Like many families navigating a new diagnosis, I set out to learn everything I could about autism (Hughes et al., 2024)—not only from textbooks, but also from autistic advocates who generously shared their experiences and support strategies online. Along the way, I noticed familiar patterns in myself: sensory sensitivities, social exhaustion, and emotional intensity I had long overlooked. This gradual recognition brought an unexpected sense of clarity and began to shift how I understood both my children and myself. Over time, a realisation took shape that was both surprising and deeply affirming: I was not only parenting autistic children—I was autistic too.

With this understanding came a vital shift: to support my children in a meaningful way, I first needed to support myself. I could not expect them to embrace their identities or learn self-regulation unless I was willing to do the same. I needed to embody the calm, care, and acceptance I hoped they would come to feel within themselves.

Closed Flower Bud: Reflection

The reflection “Closed Flower Bud” emerged as I gained a deeper understanding of myself, my children, and the reality of our situation. It captures an epiphany moment (Hanauer, 2021) about the long-held habit of concealing differences, the inherited patterns of hiding neurodivergence, and the courage needed to begin revealing one's true self. This marked a turning point in my journey, both as a parent and as a neurodivergent person learning, gradually, to bloom.

Closed Flower Bud

Growing up, my expression of difference was wrapped inside me like a closed flower bud waiting for spring - cocooned within a toughened shell and buried deep within. You may have only glimpsed this difference by spending time with me...time that the people around me didn't have. Instead, I was left a complete but closed bud for the whole of my childhood, teens, and twenties. Of course, I stood out as 'different', but my difference was never the subject of enquiry. Easily explained away by the unhelpful strategies my parents adopted to further strengthen the closure of their own armoured buds.

On birthing little closed buds of my own, wrapped in their own unique expressions of difference, I saw how closed they were. Initially, I tried to force their buds open...I knew there was no need to conceal their beautiful differences because I understood that what I saw in them was the difference I also held

within me - I wanted them to open their buds for the world to see because I thought that they were so incredibly beautiful, but the truth is that they had learnt to conceal their difference in the same way the generations of closed buds had done before them.

We see the other buds who do not carry this difference, and as they grow, their petals start to open - open for the world to see. But for us different buds we know that the colours held within us are not the same. We suffer in silence, we keep our buds closed, we do not talk about our struggle with sights, lights, and sounds. We get through our day tightening our buds, concealing our difference, and harbouring it as our personal secret.

We are different but we do not tell.

We do not tell you what our everyday is like because we are scared that in disclosing our differences you will dislike what you see!

So, we hide within ourselves.

As I watched my own little buds concealing their true self like their parents and grandparents before them, I thought to myself...how do I teach you to bloom?...how do I help you to see that your colours may be different from many of the other buds, but your colours within you are beautiful and bright?

I then took a look at myself, and I realised...I am just another tightly closed bud. In this realisation I learnt that you cannot teach other closed buds to bloom, without first blooming yourself.

I had to take it a petal at a time.

I learnt about my expression of difference little by little and then slowly showed it to the world. This was extremely painful at first because my bud had been closed for far longer than what was intended - but by exploring myself and using strategies to help me throughout my day - I slowly started the blooming process. The process that everyone with the same-coloured petals seemed to have done years ago, but non the less I was at last starting to bloom.

It was only through showing my children how I could manage my own blooming process that they could then start the process for themselves. I was honest with them, and I showed them that it was sometimes scary to show your true colours but in the long run, being open - and blooming into my truest self - is amazing!

Yes, my colours shine differently to many people and there are still some people who look at me and think 'what an odd-looking flower - she is not like the other flowers I see' but other people, the most loving people, the people I call my friends. They come to me to embrace my beautifully different petals and value the uniqueness that they hold.

So, if you are that closed bud, holding tightly to your difference, concealing them within and not wanting your true self to be seen - I invite you to bloom...the journey may not be easy, and the learning will take time but once the blooming process begins it's filled with self-love, self-care and sensory support that makes you a little stronger and your days a little brighter.

In the absence of meaningful recognition, families like mine are likely to encounter prolonged periods of uncertainty, emotional strain, and difficulty accessing appropriate strategies. Recognition of neurodivergence can offer a valuable lens through which to interpret experiences and foster a greater sense of self-understanding (Leedham et al., 2019).

From Personal Discovery to Research and Advocacy

What began as a personal commitment to my family gradually developed into a broader academic and advocacy journey. My work now spans education and the workplace, underpinned by lived experience and a commitment to inclusive, community-informed research.

In education, I have explored the retrospective experiences of adult-recognised autistic women in secondary school, evidencing the strengths, impact, and missed support needs of a “lost generation” (Dark, 2022). I have dedicated time in my current and upcoming work to developing a neurodiversity-aligned understanding of autism (Dark, 2023) and inclusive research frameworks that value the insights and culture of autistic people (Dark, 2024). My current doctoral research in organisational psychology builds on this work, exploring the experiences of autistic women disclosing their diagnoses in the workplace. Across both fields, my research aims to contribute to more inclusive and responsive systems by centering the voices and experiences of our autistic and broader neurodivergent communities.

My journey has not always been easy; there have been moments when my perspective has been questioned or undervalued, yet these challenges have only deepened my resolve. With support from autistic advocates and others within the neurodivergent community, I have learned to value the integration of personal, professional, and collective insight. This journey has reinforced what many scholars and advocates have long asserted: that knowledge grounded in lived experience is not only legitimate but vital to meaningful change.

Ode to Our Neurodivergent Community: Poem

This final poem, “Ode to Our Neurodivergent Community”, is an expression of deep gratitude. It reflects the ongoing struggle many neurodivergent people face in being heard and understood within mainstream systems that prioritise conventional ways of thinking, communicating, and behaving. The poem honours the countless autistic and neurodivergent people who generously share their time, insight, and strength to uplift and support others.

Ode to Our Neurodivergent Community

YOU say that we are not what society dictates as being 'right' or 'good'. That the empathy we display, is not shared in the way YOU think we should. YOU tell us that being different, is ultimately being weak. That we must conform to what YOU say, we must be more of what YOU seek.

Our sensitivities are seen as weakness in YOUR eyes. Our differences shamed by YOU as being less and our demise. We strive for recognition that our brains work at their best. We do not want our thinking to be the same as all the rest.

For different isn't lacking and different isn't wrong. The way the world is processed is beautiful and strong. The kindness that prevails and the sensitivities that are seen. They come from the most loving hearts that there have ever been.

I am sick of shouting 'help' to people who cover ears. My energy depleted from fighting for so many years. So much noise is made by many with little progress to be seen. They choose to not recognise all the suffering that has been.

So together we stand as a community and share our experience and strength as one. For no one knows neurodiversity better than the neurodivergent one. So, let's share what makes life easier, let's build each other up.

For the future must be paved by us and we will never ever give up!

I would not have come to recognise myself, deepen my understanding of how to support my children, or find the motivation to continue studying and working without the support of online neurodivergent communities. The shared knowledge within advocacy groups, social media spaces, and neurodivergent-led literature has been instrumental in expanding both public and academic perspectives on autism, moving beyond narrow, medicalised frameworks. This community-driven insight offers validation, practical strategies, and culturally attuned perspectives that are often absent from formal systems.

Closing Comments

This article has explored my family's evolving understanding of autism through a neurodiversity-affirming lens, shaped by our lived experiences, emotional insights, and critical reflections. Engaging with poetic inquiry alongside narrative allowed me to examine these experiences in ways that traditional academic writing often overlooks. Adopting a creative approach to self-expression provided a space to express the layered and often unseen aspects of neurodivergent life, helping me to make sense of how we live, connect, and understand who we are as a neurodivergent family.

The contrast between my middle daughter's delayed diagnosis and my son's earlier recognition highlighted how gendered expectations and internalised distress influence access to support. These experiences led to a deeper questioning of diagnostic frameworks. They sparked a process of self-recognition that reshaped my parenting, professional focus, and identity as an adult-identified autistic woman. Throughout this journey, connection with the neurodivergent community provided vital insight, validation, and shared understanding, particularly when formal support systems proved limited. These relationships continue to shape my work, grounding both research and practice in lived experience and reinforcing the value of support rooted in deep listening, trust, mutual respect, and a sense of belonging.

While this article reflects the experience of one family, it contributes to a broader conversation within neurodivergent scholarship, one that values personal narrative to challenge assumptions and shape more responsive systems. This journey has been complex, yet it has offered moments of clarity, connection, and growth that continue to guide my work. Above all, it has shown me the power of being seen and heard in ways that reflect authentic identity. When recognition is offered with care, strengths become visible, opportunities emerge, and healing can begin, especially for those whose experiences have too often been overlooked. I offer this work as part of a continuing effort to build practices, policies, and communities that affirm neurodivergent lives and make space for each of us to be known, supported, and valued as we are.

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