>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you, everyone, for joining us today. My name is Lauren Appelbaum, and I'm the Vice President of Communications at RespectAbility, a nonprofit organization fighting stigma and advancing opportunities so people with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of community. As an individual myself with an acquired, non-visible disability, reflex sympathetic dystrophy, I have had the privilege of conducting trainings on the why and how to be more inclusive and accessible. Thank you for taking your time today to join us for this panel discussion. If you would like to view the ASL interpreter, Alison, in a larger screen, we invite to you pin her video by clicking on the three little dots in the upper right corner of her video, which will spotlight her video throughout the entire panel for you. In addition, we have live-captioning that is available in the Zoom app by clicking on the CC button, or via web. We will post that link in the chat box. We will also be taking questions from you during the second half of the panel - please add your questions to the Q&A box to do so. Now to get to our panel today. With one in five people having a disability in the U.S., the lack of representation, just 3% onscreen and even less in children's television, which according to the recent study by the Geena Davis Institute, is less than 1%. It means that millions of people are unable to see themselves in media today. In the first part of a two-part series, “Examining Representation in Children's Media,” we'll take a look at preschool content and examples of best practices in the journey that content creators are taking. How can you learn from their journeys to advance your equity goals in both representation onscreen and in hiring people behind the camera? We have some amazing panelists joining us today, and we're going to first start with Nava Silton. Nava is a developmental psychologist who is balancing life with five kids at home, including a newborn. So thank you so much for taking the time to join us today. Nava has worked at Nickelodeon, Sesame Workshop and MediaKidz, and has consulted for Netflix and the Autism Seaver Center. She also created the Reelabilities educational comic book series, which offers 15 comics and two instructional manuals for use in classrooms across the world. Due to the popularity of The Reelabilities series in schools, she created “Addy and Uno,” the first family musical about disabilities, bullying and kindness. “Addy and Uno” ran off-Broadway for 18 months at Theater Row on 42nd Street in New York City. Nava, you’ve talked about the importance of showcasing characters and individuals with disabilities and ensuring that people have high expectations of children with disabilities. Can you elaborate on that importance of that specifically for parents, teachers and peers?

>> Nava Silton: Absolutely. So there was a study done by Rosenthal in the mid-1900s which spoke about how important it is for people to have high expectations of their classmates, of their students, of their peers, and the idea is that when you have high expectations of other people, you're going to be motivated to interact with them, to get to know them. And unfortunately, if you have negative expectancies or if you have low expectations of individuals, then it can often be a self-fulfilling prophecy. In other words, you will assume that they can't do so much, so it's super important in programming to show that these are individuals - individuals with disabilities, they might have a disability, they might have struggles in certain areas – but they have great strengths in other areas and have interests just like other children do. They have passions and interests and all those different types of things, and so in my work, we have Addy who has ADHD but she also is super creative and super exuberant, and we have Uno who has autism and he struggles with his social-emotional skills and different social cues and has anxiety, but he is incredible in mathematics and spatial orientation, and we have all of our characters, our five main protagonists, Swho have a disability and we showcase not their passions and interests but their beautiful strengths as well. We try to offer the positive expectations - we want individuals who see them to have positive expectancies of them and of their peers with disabilities or their children or their students.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent. Both Reelabilities and “Addy & Uno” have allowed children with varying disabilities to see themselves in a positive and strong light. Can you talk us through your motivation to help pave the way in authentic representation of young children with disabilities through this content creation?

>> Nava Silton: Yes, I have two nephews on the autism spectrum. I was very moved one day when I was speaking to my sister who has a son who is now about 21 on the spectrum: at the time, he was younger and I asked her, “what is the hardest aspect of this disorder for you?” and she said “the hardest part is that people pretend like Ellie is part of the wallpaper. And they take all their time to interact with my other children, my neurotypically developing children,” and I recall being very upset by what she had said, that she had to go through that, that Ellie had to go through that. And I thought, “how wonderful would it be to create a show, to create a comic book series, to create an off-Broadway musical, that would teach typical children about the beauties of these individuals.” Again, the fact that they're multidimensional, complex people with interests and passions - they might struggle with a certain skill or a certain ability, but they are just like you and me, and we should take the wonderful time to get to know them more and to spend time with them, to interact with them and so, that conversation was a big motivation. When I worked at Sesame Street, I did some work - I did a very large study there where I spoke to parents of typical children and parents of children with disabilities and I learned that these parents were really interested in a show that would showcase their children with disabilities in a positive light, and show the realities of the disability while also showcasing the positive strengths and the beauties of their children. So all of these were motivations for the creation of my work.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you. Everyone, children included, are having a lot more screen time right now during this COVID-19 pandemic. Many parents who typically would care about limiting screen time especially for young children and, speaking of myself as a mom of a five-year-old, has kind of gone out the window. So I’ve personally looked for content that is either educational and/or teaches some skills like being respectful of people different from them. Why is it important to include characters with disabilities in preschool content specifically?

>> Nava Stilton: I think it's wonderful because I think it starts kids off early on with the idea that this is the norm - that these are kids just like me. Some kids really don't love math and some kids love math and they love this subject or hate that subject. These are kids who might struggle with, again, with some things and beautiful strengths in other areas, and for them to see it as a normative thing, to have an individual who uses a wheelchair or an individual who is hard-of-hearing or is on the spectrum - whatever it might be, whatever the disability might be, to have them sitting next to other typically-developing children in the classroom or having conversations or doing projects with them and having it be the norm, then the kid grows up knowing that this is the norm, and I can't wait to get to know more about this individual. And they get to be the investigators, to find the beautiful strengths in each of these individuals.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you. So what are some of the projects that you are currently involved in and planning to help continue to move this needle, fighting stigmas and advancing opportunities in the world of entertainment?

>> Nava Stilton: So we just completed our 12th comic on disabilities: this one relates to facial differences and to proportionate and disproportionate dwarfism. That is in addition to the 11 earlier comics, which relate to autism, ADHD, physical, visual and hearing disabilities as well as Down Syndrome, William Syndrome, stuttering, a whole bunch of different things, traumatic brain injury. So we keep adding - every time you think we're done, people ask us for more comics to cover more disabilities. In addition to the disability-related comics, we also have moved on to work on comics related to mental health disorders. People have said these comics have gone so well, they have been in over 20 schools across the country and they keep growing. So we’d love to see mental health representation as well. So we have now started to create a series for 11 to 15-year-olds, the disability comics are for 8 to 11-year-olds, so the 11 to 15-year-old series deals with mental health disorders like anxiety, depression, specific anxiety disorders, eating disorders and we're moving onto others as well. We're working on those comics and everything we do is research-based: we do pre- and post-testing to test out every single material to make sure it's doing what we hope it will. I'm also working on getting “Addy & Uno” onto TV, hopefully - because it’s gone over so well off-Broadway and then, of course, in the comics, I have a pretty good feeling it will go over well on TV and I love the dissemination-capability of TV. We're also working on a videogame, so that 11 to 15-year-old kids can kind of simulate what it would be like to live with a disability - the beautiful strengths and the struggles that might be associated, and so that's an exciting project, and I'm also - I worked on a few other show bibles and one of them just got optioned by a production company, so that's another side thing. But yeah, so some exciting things going on and everything research-based so we know what we're doing is that making a difference, thank G-d, in terms of attitudes and intentions and knowledge.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you so much. We will come back to you for Q&A but now I'm going to move on to Krista Tucker, who developed and currently serves as a co-producer and story editor of Disney Junior’s animated series “Fancy Nancy,” about a high-spirited young girl whose imagination and enthusiasm for all that is exquisite transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary. An episode that aired in April this year to celebrate World Autism Awareness Day, featured a character on the autism spectrum. Sean is first animated character on Disney Junior who is on the spectrum. We’re gonna take a quick look at the clip right now.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: So Krista, can you talk a little bit about the processes, as story editor, to ensure authentic representation of an autistic character?

>> Krista Tucker: Yes. Well, how we started with creating Sean was the writer of this episode, Matt Hoverman, wanted to try to create a character who was on the spectrum. So our process relied heavily on getting help from outside sources, such as RespectAbility, to make sure we got it right. Initially, what Matt and I did individually was we spoke to our own personal circles of people who we knew who either had children on the spectrum or for example, my sister teaches children who are on the spectrum - we started there, and then we went to Disney with this idea and they were 100% behind it and then they connected us with Elaine Hall at RespectAbility, and also with the organization Autism Speaks, and so they were with us every step of the way. We initially pitched them, and you, the story on a phone call. They gave us notes. As the writing process progressed, they were with us along the way to make sure that we were hitting the mark. So my job as story editor was just to kind of shepherd that process and to get as much input from people who know more about this than I do, so that we could get it right.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent, thank you. So a majority of characters with disabilities are played by actors without those disabilities, so it's really important when - the fact that the character of Sean is voiced by 11-year-old autistic boy named George Yionoulis, who did not speak until he was 3-years-old himself. So series writer Matt Hoverman, who I know is watching this event right now, discovered him from a video that he and his mother had created for his fourth grade class to explain what it means to be autistic. Can you talk about the process of finding George and working with him and did you receive any pushback about hiring an voice actor who was on the spectrum himself?

>> Krista Tucker: Right. Well, as you said Matt Hoverman - hi, Matt - found this wonderful video of George on YouTube - because Matt is a big researcher and he wanted to get this right, so he was doing a lot of his own research, along the way, as I said - and he just immediately fell in love with George and he shared the video with me and I, too, fell in love with George and we just thought - he's perfect to voice Sean. We just loved his energy, he was just the perfect, perfect voice actor for this role. So, we got absolutely no pushback – on the contrary, Disney was 100% behind casting George. We sent the link to our executive producer, Jamie Mitchell - he was behind it, then collectively, we sent it to our Disney execs - because they approve everything - and they were 100% behind it and so casting reached out to George and the rest is history. And he was so excited and we were so excited to have him. He lives remotely so - doesn't live in Los Angeles - so it had to be done through, I guess, Zoom records or however they do in the recording studio, but it worked out great, and he was wonderful and he was perfect and we were thrilled to have him.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: And I guess how you worked with him is how the new reality might be for working with almost everyone in the near future?

>> Krisa Tucker: Yeah. Well, and also, voice records, for example - the girl who voices Nancy lives in New York City, so it's very common to do voice records remotely. Not all the time - it's not every time that the actor is actually in recording studio, and George did a great job.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: How, with this whole experience, does it influence your future creative process?

>> Krista Tucker: Do you mean with working with George or with the story or -

>> Lauren Appelbaum: With bringing on a character who is on the spectrum and highlighting a disability and then working with different disability organizations, has this influenced you to be thinking about doing more of this in the future?

>> Krista Tucker: Absolutely. I've worked in children's animation for 15 years and this is, sadly, the first time I’ve done a story like this. So it really brought just so much awareness to me as a writer of - just that there's so many more stories out there to tell about characters with disabilities and after this experience, it just has kind of opened my own eyes as I look to create new shows and look to create new characters, I definitely want to bring more characters with disabilities into the fold. Absolutely.   
  
>> Lauren Appelbaum: So Elaine Hall, who you mentioned, consulted on this episode of behalf of RespectAbility, and she often talks about a misconception that individuals with autism cannot focus or attend to the demands that might be made on them in a professional TV setting. This oftentimes causes production companies to hire those without autism to portray a character who is on the spectrum. As you know from experience, that is an inaccurate perception. What advice do you have for showrunners to ensure that they will continue to collaborate and develop this talent pool through these opportunities?

>> Krista Tucker: My advice is just give people a chance, and let them prove you wrong. We don't know what we don't know and a lot of people who perhaps haven't worked with people with disabilities have maybe assumptions and just throw all that out the window and give someone a shot. And I think that they’ll be pleasantly surprised. Because people want the chance - they want the chance. To work.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Yeah. You're 100% correct, and this leads into the next thing that I’d love to talk to you about, which is there are a lot of folks with disabilities who want to work, both in front of and behind the camera, and I know that mentoring is something that is very important to you. What advice do you have for writers with disabilities trying to get into this industry?

>> Krista Tucker: I think the first point of my advice would be just to really know that there is a place for you in the writers' room and that we need you in the writers' room - we need that voice in the writers' room. We need diversity. We need people with disabilities - in the writers' room – there’s more stories to tell. So know there is a place for you, and then my other advice, which I guess is pretty common advice I would give any writer, is just to have two very solid samples of your work to show and just send them out and insist on getting read. And a lot of people say, “write what you know,” and I happened to agree with that, so - what I look for when I'm reading samples is, I'm looking for a story where I'm feeling heart, I'm feeling connected, I'm emotionally engaged with the writer. So if there are writing samples to really work with what perhaps your own experience is or at least the emotions that you feel in your life and pour that into your scripts and don't take no for an answer. Get out there, get read, don't be afraid to hustle, don’t think that you’re gonna be perceived as rude or pushy. It's a writer's job to get yourself out there and be your own advocate for being read. That would be my advice.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you very much, Krista, and I see some questions that have come in specifically for you, but we're going to hold them until the end because it might be applicable for others to reply to them along with you. I’d like to introduce Rachel Kalban now. She is the VP of Research and Curriculum at Nine Story Media Group, which is an industry-leading creator, producer and distributor of award-winning animated and live action content for young audiences around the world. She has served in a key role and the development and success of many shows, including “Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood,” which we will show a clip of later. Rachel, how did you get into child development research for children's television as a career?

>> Rachel Kalban: Thanks, Lauren. It actually started back in college - Nava and I went to college together and in Psych 101, freshman year, there was a small article that we were assigned to read about “Sesame Street” and how it bridged the gap between low income and high income kids entering kindergarten. And I was blown away - I think it opened my eyes to the way media could have an impact in a much broader way than any other thing that was available at the time, and so I was determined to make a difference through this lens. Didn't know exactly how that was going to happen, went on to do some work Nickelodeon, and at Penguin Publishing and when I was at Nickelodeon I had the great fortune of seeing all the great research that went into their really impactful programming like "Blue's Clues," and decided that that was the route I wanted to go because I believe you need to talk to kids to know what they need and what will resonate with them. So I went to back to school to get my master's in developmental psychology, and just took it from there. I’ve been at this company – at first it was Out of the Blue and now it's Nine Story. We've been acquired for 13 years now so it's been an amazing ride.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: And what is your role in shows like “Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood”?

>> Rachel Kalban: We call it a curriculum and research department. We start off by deciding what is the impact that we want to have for each show that we're creating that I'm working on, so for “Daniel Tiger,” that was a project that was brought to us from the Fred Rogers company, and it was very clear that we were gonna be pushing the legacy that was created by Fred Rogers, pro-social lessons. But each of our shows starts off with a different goal and we reach out to the experts in that area to help us create a curriculum and approach of how we're gonna be teaching those areas in each of our shows. Once we're in production, we have a research process, in which we test each of our episodes that I'm working on with children of that age group. We create storybooks, out of a draft of one of our scripts, and we usually go to schools and sit down with a little four-year-old, three-year-old, or six-year-olds, depending on the show, and read them the story and ask them a lot of questions about what they think about the story, what they're learning from the story, and then that gets turned into a memo that has been shared with the writers and then we work together to figure out how to best address what we saw in research. In this time, we've been relying on Zoom, which isn't the same as being with the little ones, but it's been amazing in that we have such a wider reach - we're able to talk to kids all across the country which has been incredible - and we also get to talk to their parents, who are sitting with them very often. So, it's been a really interesting experience for us here in quarantine.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Being the mom of a five-year-old and often being asked to consult on different shows, especially when it's a show that she watches anyhow, I often will have her watch it with me and so it's very interesting to hear from the mouth of little ones what their impressions are and how they're viewing it and interpreting items ,and she's also had the opportunity to learn what a storyboard really is - of seeing things not really done ye,. which is a fun experience. But now I would like to turn to talk about Chrissie, a girl who uses crutches and leg braces to help her walk. I personally love how Daniel, who has never seen braces like these before, asks Chrissie honest questions and how she is shown to be independent and a helper, too, just like Daniel. So we're going to take a look at a clip of Daniel first meeting Prince Wednesday's cousin, Chrissie. And so we're kinda starting in the middle of a clip but what they’re doing right now is they're all having fun like a bunch of children would be doing.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: So Rachel, if you wouldn't mind talking a little bit about how a show like “Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood” evolved to be more disability inclusive.

>> Rachel Kalban: Sure. You know, we were, like I said, really lucky to be tasked with continuing this legacy of Fred Rogers and it was so critical for him to be showing diversity with empathy and he always showed such curiosity and asked a lot of questions of the guests and neighbors that came onto his show, and so when we set out to cast this whole new neighborhood of Daniel Tiger, we knew that it had to be diverse and that it had to include characters of all ages and races and disabilities and abilities, and so when we decided to introduce Chrissie, it was really important for us that we were really intentional about all of the decisions of how we were going to do this. So like Krista said, we reached out to a whole host of consultants to decide who she was going to be, how we were going to portray her disability, in addition to the wonderful child development consultants that we work on all the “Daniel Tiger” episodes with the Fred Rogers' company, we added physical therapists, pediatricians, parents of kids who had to wear braces, and so all of their input was really instrumental in figuring out not only who this character was but how she was going to move, what her walk cycle was going to look like - the limitations of 2D animation, it could be a big task to figure out how to make this accurate, and it was critical to us to get it right. That was one way that we included some of our consultants. The other thing that was really important was that she wasn't just a token character for us. This is the episode where she's introduced but it's not the only episode where you see Chrissie. Chrissie is a fixture in our neighborhood, she's a friend of ours, she's a little bit older than Daniel - she's Prince Wednesday's older cousin, but only by a couple of years, so we wanted to show a character that was really strong and confident and was also aspirational for all kids - it didn't really matter if you had a disability or not. Chrissie is this really confident, spunky girl who everybody wants to hang out with. So sometimes we'll see her horseback riding on her horse, Peaches. We worked with an adaptive horseback riding academy on that episode to see how we would get her on and off the horse and things like that. Yeah, she's just like one of our fun friends and that is what was really important to us. The other thing that I will say, what was important to us in addition to modeling how Chrissie could be, was how Daniel reacts to her. I think growing up, the way disability was often portrayed was very other, and it was hush hush, we don't talk about that, we don't ask those questions, but we know now from all the research that, it's really important to ask those questions and to be okay with asking for the facts, because if we shush them and turn away from them, we give kids negative connotations. We know that about race, we know that about abilities, and so we want it to be really matter of fact and honest with the kids about this is something that Chrissie needs to help her walk and that's okay. It's just another thing that makes her different just like there are things that make other kids different and like the song said, in so many ways we are different. in so many ways we are the same.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you. In a moment, I'm going to show a little video that you shared with me of a child and mom talking about what it means to see this. But I’d love to ask you, oftentimes story involving disability inclusion are developed due to a personal connection to disability. Why is disability inclusion important to you personally?

>> Rachel Kalban: I should start by saying I think it's really important - it was important to our whole team - the writer of this episode, Becky Friedman, who really ‘birthed’ Chrissie in a lot of ways, she was a preschool teacher in a mixed class of kids with different abilities and disabilities, and so it was really important for her and she advocated for this role from the very beginning, I remember. For me, personally, I grew up with disability in my life very early on. I had my father's cousin was Down Syndrome and was also deaf, and I had an autistic brother so, for me, I always had really positive experiences in my personal life with kids with disabilities and people with disabilities, but then when they were sort of presented on the screen, it was often like very othered and very negative, I would say. So for me, Krista, I just think the character that you are portraying on “Fancy Nancy” is fantastic.

>> Krista Tucker: Thank you.

>> Rachel Kalban: As a child, I didn't have the words to describe what it was like to have an autistic brother, and it was like a really big burden to have to explain what that was and so to have a show that helps with that and for those kids to be able to see themselves on TV is just so important.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you. And you and I have talked a lot about how much new development is happening at Nine Story and I know no one can share a lot of details but I'm wondering if inclusion of people with disabilities is a big priority for you going forward?  
  
>> Rachel Kalban: It absolutely is. I wish that I could tell you all of the details because we have such exciting projects coming up. But really, a lot thanks to your group - my team has been coming to your conference for the past few years and I feel like we have just learned so much about how important this representation is. I can think of four or five new characters across some of our shows that are going to be really special in showing different kinds of disabilities, some are invisible. some are visible. They are also going to be across kids and adults in this series and for kids they are going to be a little bit younger, a little bit older - I can't give away too much. But, the other piece that we really thought about is something that we talked about a lot, which was very often, shows show kids with disabilities as - they're only white children that you see. Adults, too, I think. And so it was really important to us to look at what that spectrum looks like, racially and ethnically, as well as what the disabilities were going to be that we're portraying. So you'll see all different kinds of representation in the next two years.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: I'm looking forward to it, and being privy to working with multiple different studios and production companies, I feel we could have this panel in another year or two and be showing a dozen examples which makes me very optimistic. Before we go to our last panelist, I want to show a video that really kinda talks about the impact that content like this can have on children and families, who have a child with a disability.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: So, now I’d like to turn to Diana Romero. She, herself, is a film maker and writer with a disability, and she began her film career after many years of doing social work with both run-away and homeless kids in Hollywood. At the time, she realized that she could bring awareness to the issues that young people are facing via the media. And after many years of working in production and writing scripts, due to multiple sclerosis, she switched to be a wheelchair user for mobility. Now she uses her experience as a social worker, as a woman of color and a person with a disability, to create multidimensional characters and stories. So I figured we would bring it all around to you, Diana. So how are you working now to ensure authentic role models exist for children today?

>> Diana Romero: Hello, hi everybody. So, let me start by saying that I got really teary-eyed watching the last two clips, because quite a bit of what Chrissie is dealing with is similar to mine, my legs don't work. So, one of the things - I thought this was a recent thing, this happened a few years ago, where my legs just stopped working - like she says, they don't work the other way people's legs work, but I remember when I was transitioning to that point, I went from a cane to a walker to a wheelchair. When I was in a cane and a walker, I realized how little there is in our media about people with disabilities and especially so with kids, and I remember - Lauren, I was telling you this the other day - I just remember going places with my cane, I couldn't walk very well or going to places with one of my walkers and the looks that I would get from kids would make me feel so embarrassed or ashamed or put me in a – just, because they just looked at me and I felt like I was an oddity to them, and I think that these shows that Krista and Rachel and the clips that they showed just, we need a lot more of that. So one of the things that I’ve thought a lot about is how could I – we need - the education needs to start from when they're kids - preschool, even younger - the youngest that they can be. And so I started thinking about what I can do, and one of the things I have been thinking about a lot is creating a series that deals with things kids go through, whether, let's say you are talking about teenagers and pre-teens or preschool, is puberty, it's growing up, it's mom and dad and school and control and all of these different things that everybody experiences, yet, as disabled people, we don't see that for ourselves. And so, I would imagine - I don't have the experience with kids with disabilities but I would imagine with kids with disabilities might feel like, well, they're not talking to me, they're not talking to what's happening with me, that's somebody else. So, for me, a series like that is something that I'm developing, I've been thinking quite a bit about. I tend to write mostly adult dramas and mostly very dark dramas, based on the experiences I have had as a social worker, but, with that being said, I think that - and those - the scripts that I write and my projects are always - have somebody with a disability, and that only started because I became disabled and I realized at that moment we don't see - but we don't see people in regular roles, like teachers, lawyers, professors, doctors, anybody, we don't see anybody - we rarely see somebody like that, somebody in that kind of a profession with a disability. I remember "ER" many year ago, the chief of the surgeons, the head of the surgeons, she used a cane, and I know that more lately we've been seeing a lot more, which I'm happy about. So I think it's to ensure the authenticity of the disability that’s being portrayed, and I think starting as young as possible and creating characters that will lead to people realizing that all of us are just the same as the next person. I'm the person as the person who’s blind - they can't see, I can't walk. I'm the same as a person who can do everything physically, they just can do things that I can't do. So that would be the way that I would answer - that's how I answer your question. So yeah. I think the most I can do is by my realizations and by what I'm learning and by the realization that I didn't have this as a child, and it's so neat that the kids are able to see what's going on. I mean, get an idea and treat it, normalize it. somebody said about normalizing disability, which, should be just as much as our hair color is different, our eye are different, our legs are different.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Great. When we were talking, we also talked about children with both visible disabilities and non-visible disabilities. Why is it important to be also kind of shifting a focus to really highlight children with non-visible disabilities as well?

>> Diana Romero: So yeah, I definitely – so visible disabilities are visible obviously, so people realize right away and you go through the whole process of it, and I love the honesty in the clip where she says, “what's wrong?” would be the same thing, when - I have adults ask, they do ask sometimes “what’s wrong? What happened?” They try to guess that maybe I was in an accident. And I try not to tell people too much that I have multiple sclerosis because they all want to come up with a solution. So everybody will say, “well, I read about this,” “I read about that,” “Did you try this?” “Did you try bee-?” there was something about bee venom, something or another, and so people just want to try to fix the problem and there is really no fixing the problem. So with visibility, there is that, there is the fact that it's obvious. Invisible disabilities are much tougher to deal with and I think it's important like the autistic child, cartoon character - I forgot his name. Is it George? No. I forgot his name. But anyway –

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Sean.

>> Diana Romero: What’s that?

>> Nava Stilton: Sean.  
  
>> Krista Tucker: Sean.

>> Diana Romero: Sean. Thank you. Oh, George was his voice.

>> Krista Tucker: Yeah, George was the actor.

>> Diana Romero: Got it. So being able - for the child, themselves, to understand what their disability is and for the child to learn how to be able to explain to others in that child's terms and in the way that child understands their own disability, but definitely, I think - sadly, I think that for me, I can't get away without telling anybody what's wrong with me - they can see what I have. There's people who don't want to talk about issues they have, whether, if it's an invisible disability, they don't want to - they know it's happening, but they don't want to tell other people. When I was first diagnosed with MS and before physical issues, I never told anybody I had MS. A lot of that, I think, comes from - I'm not going to say my age but the age that I am, I never grew up seeing disabilities portrayed in TV shows or cartoons or anything like that. And I think, if anything, there was a certain amount of shame that was put towards being disabled or if you - the older I got, there was more disability being portrayed in film and one of those was “Forrest Gump,” and I remember watching “Forrest Gump” and thinking, “wow, he's so inspirational, he’s so amazing, he’s everything” - these feelings that came from somebody not being disabled at the time. But, at the same time, people still to this day, make fun of that character. Still to this day, and people my age make fun of that character or use certain quotes that he used in the movie or speak the way that he does, and so we have to change that mentality, too. The mentality that it's funny to make fun of the special needs busses that I don't even know exist anymore, but people would, still to this day, make fun of that. I guess what I'm trying to get at is it's really important to start really, really early and it's not only important just to see children with disabilities, it's important to see adults with disabilities and also realize that I was a fully-functioning adult, no problems at all whatsoever physically, until this happened. And so anybody watching this that doesn't have a disability could end up having a disability at any given moment. And when you're an adult and you have grown up with the jokes and the mocking and the everything, you feel ashamed - you start feeling like, “what's wrong with me?” And again, as an adult woman, feeling like “what's wrong with me? Why can't I do this? I don't want to show other people. People are going to laugh at me. What are they gonna they think of me? Maybe they think I'm not smart enough,” - all of those things. So, again, to your question about what's important about portraying and seeing visible and non-visible disabilities, both are equally important. Just as important as the other.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: And where do you hope to see children's entertainment in regard to fighting these stigmas in five, ten years?

>> Diana Romero: I'm so, so, so excited to watch the clips I just did today, and I want to go watch some more, and I’ll probably cry because I almost started crying right there. Tt's happening. It's happening right now. So I think in ten years from now, there's going to be a lot more and so that's exciting. Even in toys - I'm seeing Barbie now has Barbie in a wheelchair. Black Barbie has a wheelchair. Barbie's house is accessible, which I’m like, “I want that house.” So, we're seeing that. Kids can play now with toys and see that, just because you're in a wheelchair doesn't mean you can't be friends with that person. So, I'm hoping that we're just going to see a lot more of it and I'm hoping that with children's shows, yes, I love the inclusion - it's the kids and how some kids explain to the other kids what's going on with one kid, I love that and also I love in adult programming, seeing a lot more people with disabilities in positions that aren't because of their disability, like we see in "House" - those examples. Yeah.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you. I'm going to be mindful of time. I know we're running a little bit over, so we might go a little bit over with questions because w’ere seeing a lot of questions that have already come in. For people who want to add a question, please do so by putting it in the Q&A box on this platform. For our friends watching on Facebook, the comments are being monitored by my colleague, Tatiana, and she will be sharing those with me as well so we can ask them, too. I'm going to just jump right in into some of these questions, and anyone who wants to answer, I welcome you to jump right in. “Do you think disability media aimed at kids is more accurate than disability related media aimed at adults?”

>> Lauren Appelbaum: I mean, I’m glad to take a stab at that, where I’ve been privileged to consult on both children's and adult content and I personally feel that people creating children’s content [mic cuts out] per se, but feel responsibility of that they are educating children and so pretty much every content creator I work with that’s dealing with children's content is - not to say that those who are doing adult content are not, but I feel that it's much more likely to come across children content creators that are really doting their I’s - they're really ensuring that they are getting their content accurate.

>> Nava Stilton: And I would just add that if it's any indication from the two beautiful clips that we watched, you guys had advisors, you had RespectAbility and, or others inform what you did, and the outcome was so incredible, so, that speaks to children's TV and to everything that RespectAbility is doing as well as how you guys are looking for those advisors to inform your content.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you. Okay. This is one talking about accessibility and it's specifically with animation. “Do you think voice recordings make things more accessible for disabled actors to participate?”

>> Diana Romero: Absolutely.

>> Krista Tucker: Absolutely, yeah. Please, Diana.  
  
>> Diana Romero: Oh, no. I was going to say, absolutely, I think for voices, being able to do remotely like Krista, I believe you were mentioning that you were able now because of what we’re dealing with, you guys were able to expand the search for the voices you were looking for. Was that you, Krista?

>> Krista Tucker: Well, with George, our actor who played Sean, this was pre-pandemic and recorded from where he lives.

>> Diana Romero: I guess even just with the invent of the technology.

>> Krista Tucker: With technology, yeah. It's really - if it's the right actor for the role, they'll find a way remotely to make it work. It's become a non-issue, which is wonderful.

>> Diana Romero: I think that's pretty amazing and I think, my agency that represents me, it's KMR and their disability division, the diversity division, and a lot of times there's posts that comes out that they’re looking for a particular kid or person with a disability, or a voice, but they don't have, because there’s not - it's growing, it's getting much, much bigger, but I still don't think the message is out there for people with disabilities that you can be in film, that you can be behind the camera or in front of the camera. To your question about - absolutely, 100%. Even auditions - even for somebody to audition, that they don’t have to - commercial auditions, you have to go and sit there for a really long time and you have to wait and da, da, da, all of the work that takes to go to auditions while sending self-tapes in and sending that audition as a self-tape, there's no reason why not do that, and then open up for a lot more people that can do the audition for whatever role that's being cast.

>> Nava Stilton: I’ll just add when we were doing “Addy & Uno” for 18 months off-Broadway, one of the big considerations was the theater - we had to ensure that the theater was accessible not only for members but also if we were incorporating individuals with disabilities in the roles of the actors, that the backstage had to be accessible. When you don't have to have those considerations because it's via animation, that can be incredibly helpful and again, animation with its dissemination capabilities makes it so exciting.

>> Rachel Kalban: I’ll just add to that, though, that this kind of education is so critical in making that happen because, although it is easier to do it with remote recording, you really need a producer who’s advocating for it. It's really, really important to have people on the crew of the show who know how important its authenticity is to be advocating for it because that's how things will get done and without that, it's just not as turnkey as you would think.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: So we have another question, we have two questions that are very similar, asking about recurring characters being more impactful and what can be done to make sure that children with disabilities in children's TV shows can be on more than just a special guest? Hoping that this can lead to more with children with disabilities wanting to pursue careers on television after they see the show.

>> Krista Tucker: So I think it's just, kind of what Rachel was saying earlier, and Nava - we bring these characters in, they're three-dimensional people with problems and with great things to contribute, they're real people, and so we don't want to make them a one-off - we wouldn't want to make any character, any rich, interesting character a one-off. For example, with Sean, he will be coming back in "Fancy Nancy," we made sure of that, we definitely didn't want to do that. And I think that, if, as a writer, you develop these characters as real rich, fully-developed people, then it just is a natural thing that they'll be coming back.

>> Rachel Kalban: Yeah, I’ll add to that - I think it's critical. I think, in the real world, if you have a person with a disability as a neighbor, they’re gonna continue being your neighbor. One conversation that you with them about their disability, you’re gonna be talking to them about the weather and about the groceries and all of that, and we need to create our characters with the same respect. They're just people in our world. Not every conversation needs to be about the disability, and I think it really does help to further our impact with this work

>> Nava Stilton: And I'll just add to that, that we have five protagonist in the Reelabilities series and in “Addy & Uno” and we got a lot comments from people who said, “why does everybody have a different disability? Why don't you have one character – one character who just shows up sometimes?” There's a real reason: we wanted the main characters to have disabilities, and the stories are about their adventures - it's about the mysteries that they're trying to solve, the adventures that they're going through - you learn about their disabilities in some adventures, there's a lot of sensitivity when they're trying to accomplish certain adventures with their disabilities, but we love the idea that - all five of them, it's okay, they all have disabilities and they're wonderful, and they work so nicely, in such a complimentary way. And so that's been a really successful thing with the comic book series in the schools, schools have really enjoyed that and so I think it resonated well off-Broadway as well and hopefully on the TV show version, too.

>> Diana Romero: And I'm just gonna add to that really quickly, too, is that I think also the importance of seeing recurring characters with disabilities is that attempt or the goal that we have to normalize disabilities in people. And so the more we see people in regular roles with disabilities, the more we can start watching TV and not think, “oh, look at that! They have a professor who’s in a wheelchair,” right? “Oh my G-d, that's such a big deal. Oh my G-d, that's such a big thing,” but instead, recurring and more and more seeing more of that, we start seeing the world differently because a lot of what we see on TV, we take out into the world. I think that's the way - recurring characters will bring in that normalization - not only that, but it’ll also an actor a job - an ongoing job, which is something that many actors, many people in the industry with disabilities want - just like everybody else in the film industry wants.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: This question is directed at Rachel, but if others want to answer, they can as well. “How did you approach parents of kids without disabilities and their kids with the idea of portraying a character with a disability on TV? How did they react to that?”

>> Rachel Kalban: We’ve only had positive reactions. I think parents are really thankful to have this represented on television and have these questions answered in a way that sometimes they don't feel comfortable in and of themselves to be answering them. I think, although for “Daniel Tiger” we're really making the show for kids, we do a lot of modeling for parents, and I think that they are very thankful for us showing them how to approach when you're meeting somebody with a disability. So we haven't - there's just been positive feedback all around the addition of this character and we think it will continue.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: We have another question about - any vision for developing and engaging shows for children and young adults who are not verbal and have challenges with both expressive and receptive language skills? Is that on anyone's radar?

>> Nava Stilton: I’ll just say that our character with autism is verbal, but we actually have thought of different episode ideas where we could introduce those who are non-verbal and have our character, Uno, teach his friends about other friends of his who fall on different parts of the spectrum and the different ways he communicates with them - maybe not a verbal way, but in other ways, using gestures, using computers, ATC devices - there's so many ways today that those who are non-verbal can communicate with the world, thankfully. And so really opening up people's minds to non-verbal, as well. And I think it's supremely important to do so.

>> Rachel Kalban: We’ve also heard a lot from parents of autistic children, both verbal and non-verbal, that they're using “Daniel Tiger” as social stories in their lives, which has been really interesting. It was always really important for us for the young kids to be handholding them through these new experiences and we learn anecdotally that this has been used really successfully with young children on the spectrum and also older children on the spectrum. There's a researcher at Texas Tech that heard so much about it that decided to do his own study about this phenomenon with “Daniel Tiger,” so I think sometimes there's benefits for both communities when you're making really thoughtful, intentional material.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Did anyone else have anything else they wanted to add to that?

>> Krista Tucker: I’ll add just that as I continue to create stories and shows that, as I spoke to earlier, this experience has just kind of opened me up so I'm interested in exploring a lot of different option as I move forward to create new characters.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent.

>> Krista Tucker: We'll see what happens.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: And you know you'll hear from us with different ideas.

>> Krista Tucker: I'll be reaching out to you, for sure. Yeah.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: It's something that I hear from psychologists of what is going on and how, especially in preschool now, there are a lot more children and even pre-COVID-19, a lot more children being diagnosed with anxiety and depression, and so whenever my team or I do any trainings, that's something that we always stress because we know that it's valuable to you to know what is happening in the real world, to then be able to reflect that in the content that you're creating, and so I know we have a bunch of different questions on specific disabilities, on if we're going to see representation of that. So I'm not going to ask about every single disability, but just know that it is something that I have witnessed, in terms of all of you and others thinking about diversifying the type of disability as well as cutting across racial, gender and even sexual orientation lines for slightly older content, and I loved, Rachel, when you talked about parents, showing parents with disabilities - I think that is vitally important as well because, there is a huge stigma against specifically moms who have disabilities and have kids - how can they be a mom and have a disability? And so to see something like that modeled on TV, I think, can go a long way for moms with disabilities, kids who have parents with disabilities and just the general public, which I think is very important. So, that's something that I hope to see from everyone across the board. I am also going to answer one question that has come across a lot of people saying, “will you hire writers with disabilities?” And so, I’ll pass that off to you, but a lot of people are saying, “how can we become writers on staff?” and I wanted to share with everyone watching that, I do get a lot of requests from different studios and production companies for writers with ‘x,’ or whatever the background might be. So please share your name with me because when I get those requests, I'm only helpful if I know who you exist and Krista, I think you wanted to address that?

>> Krista Tucker: Yeah. I would say, that process would be two-fold: the first step in that is getting all of your own ducks in a row, getting your samples really strong, getting your resume together - even if you don't have any experience at all, writing a great spec script or something that's original. I can only speak really for Disney because that's where I am, but I know Disney has a lot of different mentorship programs that perhaps somebody could come into. I've mentored - I've been involved with women in animation. That's also another thing - if you're a woman that you can do - to find a mentor, to find somebody to possibly help you with the process. And the major studios and Netflix and Amazon, Hulu, they all have, I think, set up parts within their company where they're trying to help usher in new talent. So I would do your homework, try to find out who those contact people are and make yourself known.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: So I'm going to end with a fun question, especially for parents who might be watching, looking for content. D wWhat was your favorite TV show growing up? Anhat current show do you recommend, especially to parents who are kind of looking for good content for their preschool-aged children to keep them engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine? I welcome any of you to answer that question.

>> Nava Stilton: I will say that I am the youngest of – I’m a twin, but I'm the youngest of seven children, and so we didn't watch much children's programming when I was very young, but when I worked at Nickelodeon, I was very much into “Jimmy Neutron,” I loved his create genius. “Alvin and the Chipmunks” was quite fun, too. I would say that – I have five kids of my own and I see that they gravitate toward certain shows. I'm super excited to introduce them to “Fancy Nancy” now, but they're big fans of “Daniel Tiger.” They’re also very much into “Butter Bean’s Café” - my two-year-old calls it ‘butta bean café,’ and just the social-emotional lessons that they really convey. Again, “Fancy Nancy” is gonna now be on our roster, I'm super excited about that. But I find that they really tend to enjoy shows where there is often music, social-emotional lessons - I love “Blaze and the Monster Mchine” because my kids will talk about velocity and inertia and aero-beings and my in-laws will think that I'm the genius who taught them all those words, so I'm a big fan of that, as well. But I think anything that can offer some really great take-homes as well as social-emotional lessons and maybe some good music as well are all real beautiful benefits and a good preschool show.

>> Rachel Kalban: I can tell you that when I was a kid, we did Sunday night family TV night and it went from “Punky Brewser,” who - I thought I was Punky Brewster - to "Life Goes On," which was just a really special show for our family - I don't know if you can find repeats of that - I don't know remember it so in detail, if that still feels appropriate. It was just a special place in my heart. For today, in this time, we have a show called "Creative Galaxy" that I don't know if too many people know about it - it's on Amazon. But what I love about it for this time is that it’s what we call ‘view and do,’ and so in each episode, it features an art project or craft project that they can do on their own afterward. I think in this time, there is no such thing as TV time - I don't know if you all saw the Conan Doyle rant about that, but as much as we can, take what we’re doing on TV and then getting kids to act create after that, I think iSs fantastic.

>> Krista Tucker: When I was a kid, pretty little, my favorite show was "Little House on the Prairie" - which I used to watch with my father, and he would get so mad every time because it would make him cry and he wasn't a big crier, so I think that's why it stuck in my heart because, I loved it and my dad would cry. And then as far as children's programming, I am pretty partial to Disney. Unfortunately, that's most of the - not unfortunately, but that's most of the shows I'm aware of, so I would push anything on Disney Junior, although “Daniel” is wonderful - I was watching some “Daniel” to prep for this call and I would absolutely recommend that show as well.

>> Diana Romero: Okay, I guess I’ll answer that. But I - from the age of five to ten years old, I lived in Colombia, South America, so I don't remember really the programming I watched there. A little bit after that, I mean, I loved “The Smurfs” – “The Smurfs” were my favorite. I had every single Smurf, and I think I still have Smurfette somewhere. I loved “The Smurfs,” just cartoons - I loved “Sesame Street” - we weren't allowed to watch “Electric …” what was it called? “Electric Company” - we weren't allowed to watch that because my parents thought it was too violent, but we could watch “Contact, 321,” or “3,2,1, Contact,” which, I'm totally aging myself, but that was back then. “Mr. Rogers,” shows like that that were about teaching a lesson is what really my parents wanted us to - and to be inclusive, because we’re diverse because my parents are from Colombia, South America, and so coming here, you didn't see any shows that featured Colombians or even Latinos. But we never felt any different - I never had the role model in that sense of a TV actor or a show that portrayed somebody with a background of Latinos, but we were in the world of complete inclusion so that didn't bother me and as a grownup I'm not saying, oh, I'm now have problems with that. That said, I love "Life Goes On.” “Life Goes On” was amazing. Great show. “Little House on the Prairie.” Those ones that have lesson that you learn afterwards, whatever lesson.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Well, I want to thank everyone for joining us today. This recording is on Facebook and will be available. We also will be creating a higher quality video version with open captions that we’ll be posting and sharing at some point next week. And so that will be found on the page that you used to RSVP for this event, as well as in all of our social media channels. I will hope you will join us next week, on Wednesday, June 17th, where we will continue this conversation with a focus on older children's and family content. Speakers include Sophie Kim, she is an actress, and Eric Spates, who is an executive producer and writer of “The Healing Powers of Dude.” We will feature Shaylee Mansfield, who is an actress of the Disney+ film “Noelle,” the Disney Channel TV show “Bunk'd” and the upcoming Netflix feature film, “Feel the Beat.” Lachi, who is an award-nominated recording artist and voiceover actress, and Bethany Johnson, who is a screenwriter and actress. So we will continue this conversation on the importance of inclusive children's content and this is not an end to a conversation, it's very much a beginning and one that we will continue to revisit over the months and years ahead. So thank you, everyone, for joining us and I hope you have a good rest of your day.