>> Lauren Appelbaum: Well I want to thank everyone for joining us today. My name is Lauren Appelbaum and I am the vice president of communications of RespectAbility, a non-profit fighting stigma and advancing opportunities so people with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of our community. I am a white woman with long brown hair and glasses, wearing a navy blue shirt, standing in front of a black banner with the RespectAbility logo in white and yellow. My pronouns are she and her. As an individual 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, as well as producing events such as this one today. I want to thank all of you for taking your time to join us for this discussion. If you would like to view the ASL interpreter in a larger screen we invite you to pin her video if you are joining us here on zoom. In addition we will have live captioning done by a real live person that is available in the zoom app by clicking on the CC button, as well as via your web browser. We're going to post that link in the chat box for you. This panel is live! We will be taking questions from you during the second half. Please add your questions to the Q&A box to do so. If you are watching us on Facebook during this live airing, we'll be monitoring for questions there as well. This panel also is being recorded and will be available on RespectAbility's Facebook page and website after this event concludes. A higher resolution recording with open captions and our ASL interpreter will be posted and sent to everyone who registered next week. If you want to stay connected to RespectAbility, I invite you to sign up for our weekly newsletter on disability inclusion and equity in the entertainment industry. Check out the link in the chat box to do so. With one in five people having a disability in the U.S. today, the lack of representation - less than one percent in children's television - means that millions of children are unable to see themselves in media today. Furthermore, when representation does exist, almost all representation of autism on screen is of white males. By introducing a new character who is both autistic and black, "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" is ensuring that a population which is often overlooked is represented. The show authentically cast Israel Thomas-Bruce, who was diagnosed with autism when he was four years old, as Max. I'm going to read a quote from him. He was unable to join us for this panel, but I wanted to share a quote that he sent us ahead of time. "It was exciting to play Max because it gave me the opportunity to help shed light on children living with autism," he said in an interview via email with me last week. "I am excited to know that another child can see Max on TV and see himself being represented. I felt at ease playing Max because it didn't feel like I was pretending. I also like that Max looks like me." Today we will talk about how the character of Max offers an authentic representation of autism for both children and adult audiences alike. As we talked about in a pre-interview, Max can be viewed as a snapshot of an autistic person, as no single representation can represent every single autistic individual. We have some amazing panelists joining us today. Before we hear from the Daniel Tiger team, I'd like to introduce my colleague Ava Rigelhaupt. She is a writer, actress and advocate for disability and autism representation in the entertainment industry. She also is an alumna of RespectAbility's 2020 entertainment lab for professionals with disabilities, and currently is serving as an entertainment media communications fellow with RespectAbility this spring. Ava, I hand it off to you.

>> Ava Rigelhaupt: Hi! Thank you Lauren and RespectAbility for having me today. As Lauren said, I'm Ava Rigelhaupt. I'm a chinese woman with long black hair and bangs. Today I'm wearing a white button-down shirt, red lipstick and some silver jewelry. I'm also sitting in front of the virtual RespectAbility logo background. I'm excited to be here with you all today and the team at Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood. As many of you know, April is Autism Acceptance Month. Many advocates, including myself, emphasize the importance of changing the word to acceptance over awareness. As the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network wrote, "awareness is easy. Acceptance requires work." The Autism Society of America explains that "words matter, and the word acceptance ignites change." Acceptance is currently the biggest barrier to people on the autism spectrum finding and developing a strong support system. According to the Autism Society of America, one in 59 children are diagnosed on the autism spectrum, twice as great as the rate in 2004. The CDC says autism is four times more common among boys than girls -- because a lot of the research is on autistic boys, and girls sometimes present differently than boys. It's been said that girls with autism are hiding in plain sight. While autism diagnostic rates in underrepresented communities and access to services is changing, white children are still about 19 percent more likely than black children, and 65 percent more likely than hispanic children, to be diagnosed with autism. In the media, disability representation overall is beginning to make strides. Still, only about 3.1 percent of scripted television characters have disabilities. Actors without disabilities play more than 95 percent of all characters with disabilities. One show -- I'll be a little more adult than the one we're talking about on this panel -- is another example of breaking the autistic white male mold. It's called "Everything's Gonna Be Okay." It's on Freeform and stars Kayla Cromer, an actress on the autism spectrum. Max on Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood and his authentic casting continues to break stereotypes of autism and disability representation in the media and children's entertainment. It's so important for children to learn about the diverse peers in the classroom. I believe through showing disability on T.V., shows like "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" can reduce bullying and lead to acceptance and inclusion of autistic children. According to the Autism Society, autistic children are 63 percent more likely to be recipients of bullying behavior than typically developing peers. Let's change that! Representation matters! Acceptance by our peers matters.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you so much Ava. Hearing these stats makes it so important that this character of Max now exists. The first episode with Max premiered earlier this week, on Monday April 5th on PBS kids as well as the PBS kids app. Let's go to take a quick peek at a scene with Max and Daniel Tiger where Daniel Tiger learns how to play with Max.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Well I hope everyone enjoyed that clip, and I hope if you haven't had a chance to watch the full episodes yet, you will take a chance to do so this week. Now I would like to invite our panelists to join us. Wes Dotson, an associate professor in the special education department in the college of education at the University of Missouri. Rachel Kalban, Vice President of research and curriculum at 9 Story Media Group. Chris Loggins, supervising producer, "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood," and Jessica Rosh, a writing consultant for these episodes of "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood." We're going to start with Chris. Chris, you oversee all aspects of TV production, working closely with partners on everything from scripting through final episode delivery and beyond, as well as directing live action segments for the series. An Emmy award-winning producer, you've served as a production manager for many many shows that have aired on PBS kids. Before joining Fred Rogers productions, Chris served as the development coordinator at WQED, the PBS station in Pittsburgh, and he held a BA in American studies with a focus on African-American history from Kenyon College. So you bring a lot of experience to the show, which pretty much all of our panelists do, which is really great. So Chris, what spurred the team to create an episode with an autistic character?

>> Chris Loggins: Well I'll answer that in a second, but thank you for that great introduction. I'm Chris Loggins. I'm a biracial man with -- I'm wearing today -- I'm wearing a blue jacket with a blue button-down shirt and I have long curly hair with a purple headband. My background is a bookshelf with lots of things, books and there's a -- neighborhood trolley back there. But yeah, that's a great question. And like you said all the panelists here have so much expertise, and I want to thank them for helping us bring Max into the neighborhood. And also, those comments from Ava were such a great way to ground the discussion. And a lot of what she said is background on why we made this decision and why we wanted to bring Max into our neighborhood. But in addition, it was something that we've been wanting to do for quite some time, we being Fred Rogers productions and our partners at 9 story. It's been something we've been discussing, and we knew from the very very beginning that when we did this, we wanted to do it with great care and authenticity. We wanted to start from the very beginning knowing that this character is autistic and work with people from the community and experts to help us bring this character to life. Another reason is over the years we've actually heard from children from the autistic community and their families about very personal ways in which the show has been helpful to them. And I think part of this decision is that we wanted to be responsive to all of that feedback and introduce a new character that hopefully even more children who watch our show can relate to. And I think it's important to everyone who works on the show to always be thinking about ways we can increase representation so even more children can see themselves on T.V.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Definitely. And as many might know, "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" is based on the original characters from "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood." Some of the Fred Rogers production team members worked on Mr. Rogers, and the "Fred-ish" approach, which we kind of talked about in our pre-interview, is often mentioned as a way to ask "what would Fred Rogers say about this?" How do you think you put the "Fred-ish" approach toward explaining autism in this episode?

>> Chris Loggins: Well, one of the things that we do for every episode of "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" is we consult with a group of child development experts and other advisors who worked directly with Fred Rogers, and I think their input is a really big reason the show maintains that strong connection to the "Fred-ish" approach. And working with the 9 Story team, the writing team there, and all of the production staff, I think has that same sensibility and want to approach everything we do with that same level of care and respect for children. But in this case, I think of a quote from Fred Rogers. He would say "what is mentionable can be more manageable." And in this episode, Teacher Harriet says directly that Max is autistic, and she takes the time to explain what that means in child friendly terms. And I hope that that discussion can serve as an entry point for viewers watching to talk about it and understand what that means a little more and a little bit better. And at the same time, one of the things that I found interesting as we were crafting these stories is our advisors helped us understand that the term itself, the term autistic, might not be easy for young viewers to grasp. So we did spend a lot of time making sure we get to know Max and who he is: his interests, his likes, his needs and strategy -- strategy of the episode, that little jingle that is sung throughout is actually "when a friend needs different things than you, there are some things you can do." So in that way, the episode is really about thinking of the unique needs of others. And I think those are some examples of the "Fred-ish" approach to this episode where we first meet Max.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: I think something you said is so important that Max is a fully fleshed out character. He's not defined by being autistic, you know -- as his sole personality trait. And I think that's what makes the character of Max really really great. In fact, my five-year-old daughter was watching the episode with me and she -- often when she's watching things with me she's looking for a disability, because she knows the work that I do. And she even said -- "where's the disability?" Like, to her, she didn't see Max as anyone different than her and her friends. And so I think that it was a really great way to kind of show that, you know, we can all co-exist.

>> Chris Loggins: Well that's wonderful, thanks for for sharing that. I always love hearing the reactions of people who watch the show and, you know, those real responses. And I just also wanted to say that it was just a real joy bringing Max to life and figuring out who he was.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: We're going to come back to you in a bit, but now I'd like to turn over to Rachel, who is the VP of research and curriculum at 9 Story Media Group, an industry-leading creator, producer and distributor of award-winning animated and live-action content for young audiences around the world. A child development expert with a Master's degree in developmental psychology from Columbia university's teachers college, Rachel is involved in all projects to develop curriculum-driven brands that enrich the lives of children and families. Rachel has served in key role in the development and success of many shows, including "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood." Rachel, before we get into a little bit more about Daniel Tiger, how did you get into child development research for children's television as a career?

>> Rachel Kalban: Thanks Lauren. Hi, I'm Rachel. I am a white woman with reddish hair. I am wearing glasses as well as headphones and a beige sweater. I am a little overwhelmed by Ava's remarks and then Chris's. You know it takes a long -- we were saying before the panel started, it takes two years I think since we first started talking about this, and that it is actually on air and being talked about with this important group is just -- it's a little bit overwhelming to me how important this is, and just -- the reactions that we've been getting from Facebook and from the community has been so wonderful. So thank you so much for having us and doing this with us. As far as how I got into this field, it's funny. I was thinking about it the other day, and I have my packaged professional answer which is is true. But I think when I think back further, when I was a kid in the 80's there was a jingle that said "I don't want to grow up, I'm a Toys 'R' Us kid." And that was like me -- like, that was my theme song. And I was not a kid that was rushing to grow up, I wanted to stay a kid. And I think that's where I just continued. And so a lot of my job is to try to stay into the heads of kids. But my professional journey was that I went to Cornell university and I got to read an article about how "Sesame Street" bridged the gap between low income and high income kids going into kindergarten, and that was just -- blew me away that media could have such a strong influence on such young minds. And so I decided that that was the kind of work that I wanted to be doing. So I went on to work at Nickelodeon, and then I was with Out of the Blue, before we got acquired by 9 Story, and got a master's degree from Teacher's college in child development so I could understand their minds a little bit more. But that was -- my more adult trajectory.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you for that. As we kind of talked about over the past two years, you know, autistic characters are often portrayed as white boys, and it's really great to see diverse disability representation. How was Max's character conceived in terms of trying to buck some of the trends that had been existing?

>> Rachel Kalban: You know, I think it actually started when we were at the RespectAbility conference. This was before we had conceived of Max in concrete ways. And I remember hearing in your conference in D.C., I think it was 2018, about how there was this lack of representation -- diverse representation for disability as a whole. And like Ava said, we know that disability isn't discriminating based on race or ethnicity. And so it just felt like that was a huge misrepresentation and a huge gap. And so when we started to talk about what Max would look like, Noriko Louison, who's on my team, did a tremendous content analysis. And at the time, there was not one non-white autistic character on television for preschoolers. That's changed now, there is somebody else on PBS. But at the time there was no representation at all. And so we just thought how important is for everybody to be seen on T.V.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent. And you authentically -- the show authentically cast now 13 year old Israel Thomas-Bruce as Max, and I think that that's so important on -- authentic casting, you know, whether it's live action or animation with voice actors, is vital. So how did your team find Israel, and did you receive any pushback about hiring an autistic voice actor at any point?

>> Rachel Kalban: No. I mean, we are a family that just wants to have the most authentic representation that we can. I would say actually if anything, we got pushed forward - that he had to be both autistic and a black child. You know, it had to be Israel, really. And I would say Nathalie Toriel, who's our voice director up in Canada, was incredible, in that she went through her usual acting agencies and wasn't finding that child. And so she started calling acting classes in schools and she just found this teacher who had Israel in her class and matched us up. And it was just the perfect match. So when he did come in from the audition, it was in a voice booth, which is really different. It kind of looks like this closet that I'm in now. But it is very different for actors to get used to. And so our producers, Alexandra Cassel Schwartz and Haley Hoffman, actually made a social story for him. So it went through the steps of what the audition would be like and then what the recording process would be like, so that we could meet him where he was at and get him ready for the process.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent. And I know that in taking a look at the variety of social media around it, a lot of people were asking "was this character authentically cast?" So it clearly is on the top of mind for people, and I think it just makes the character of Max all that more real and all that more important. One last question before we move on to our other panelists. We know that research is kind of your team's secret sauce. Can you describe the research process -- I know that that involved working with both Wes Dotson and Jessica Rosh, we're going to hear from shortly, as well as folks from the Autism Society of America.

>> Rachel Kalban: Yeah, sure. So we have a two-pronged approach. We take our stories' early drafts and read them to children, and with a storybook to go along with it. So we did that process in a school and read the story about Max to a group of kids and got a lot of feedback that was then incorporated into the story. But also right from the beginning, we were working with Dr. Dotson, as well as Jessica, as well as the Autism Society - Kristyn Roth there. It is really important for us to get that expertise when we're writing. And so Dr. Dotson and I have known each other for a very long time and he's done amazing research using Daniel Tiger with the autistic community, as well as Jessica was brought to us with a colleague from the JCC Manhattan, and it was just such a wonderful partnership. And then you led us to Kristyn Roth, and so they got to review scripts, character design, animatics -- which is like a a storyboard with voiceovers on it, just to make sure that all of our dialogue sounded true to Max's character, and that everything that we were saying about him and how the world was relating to him would be the best practices.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent, thank you. We're going to actually move over to Dr. Dotson now. So Dr. Dotson, I know you're an associate professor in special education department at the college of education at the University of Missouri. After earning his Ph.D. in behavioral psychology in 2010 from the University of Kansas, he spent 10 years at Texas Tech University and the Burkhart Center for Autism. He has spent more than 19 years in special education and clinical practice, working with individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities of all ages across school, clinic, home, community and residential treatment settings. His primary areas of research and practice are social skills, relationship development and successful life outcomes for adolescents and young adults with autism, as well as preparation of teachers and other professionals to work successfully with individuals on the spectrum. Dr. Dotson, can you talk us a little bit through your work on Max, from character design to ensuring a consistent representation across all episodes?

>> Wes Dotson: Sure, thanks Lauren and hello everybody. My name is Wes Dotson. I'm a white man wearing glasses with a full beard. I've got on a blue shirt and a gray tie and I'm sitting in my home office with my two white labs at my feet - even though you can't see them, they say hi. I got involved with Daniel Tiger in a kind of roundabout way. I was the director of an autism center at Texas Tech University, and a couple of my colleagues - Eric Rasmus and Melinda Caldwell - reached out because they were working with "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" with kids in daycares and preschools to kind of understand how they responded to the show. And they've been hearing reports that kids with autism really seem to engage with and enjoy "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood." And they say well, what does that mean? Can we use that basically. So I've spent several years now investigating how kids with autism respond to the show and what parts of the episode might gather their attention, or whether or not they can learn skills from the show. And that led to these discussions, as Max started to take form, that I was incredibly honored and privileged to be able to give some feedback on the development of the character. And I really kind of joke, I see my role as being the detail guy. I'm looking for continuity stuff and just making sure the little, you know, aspects of Max's personality -- that maybe he always covers his ears, or he always goes this direction versus that direction, is just consistent across episodes and consistent with what we know about autistic folks and how they would tend to respond in a situation. And I think the most exciting part of this is it's come from a place of Max first and seeing that he's a person, and this is an aspect of his personality and who he is and his strengths, rather than a place of disability and trying to show the struggles. It's more just showing the difference and how that can come to the table and be welcomed and included in the community, in the neighborhood. So it's been a really exciting process. Like Rachel, it's amazing that it's been a couple of years now, and we're already multiple more episodes into that sort of process now that this first one's just come out. But I really see it as -- Max is such an amazing character because he has such a different character than has traditionally been put on the screen for someone who's autistic.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: And you mentioned that you've worked with Fred Rogers productions for years . Can you talk a little bit more about your early work with the show and -- whether that influenced Max or not, but I think -- some of it is separate but also very very interesting.

>> Wes Dotson: Absolutely. So as I said I got directly involved because I had colleagues who just asked me, do we think "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" does something unique for kids with autism? And actually, the very first thing I did was I took a DVD of the show into a respite event where there were 30 kids with autism and their siblings. And I just put it on a T.V. in the middle of the room and turned it on. Wanted to see what was going to happen. Of course most young kids are hopping around and playing and doing things that little kids do, but there were a few of them that just plopped in front of the show and were enthralled and clearly just absolutely enamored of the show. And that's not what I would call a normal response for a room full of kids, to see the kids get drawn in like that and to be really deeply focusing on the show. And what we found in the years since is that that's one of the big predictors of how kids respond to "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" is that when you have that initial response, when kids react to the show in a way that they're interested and engaged, then those are the kids that when their parents talk to them about the show or as the show's teaching skills, they're the ones that are going to learn. They're the ones who are most likely to respond to that show. And I think that's where representation matters. We know that one of the things that drives whether kids are interested in the show is whether they see themselves in that show, whether they feel like they can relate to what's going on there, it's a place they've seen. And so that's where my current research in this is going, is just looking at -- now we're starting to look at other shows as well to see if there's something unique about "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood," and can we predict preference. And then helping parents learn how to use that interest in the show to teach their kids and help bring the skills from the show out to the real world.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: 100%. I think --something that is kind of the core at the work that I do is everyone wants to see themselves represented on screen, and I love when there is research to back things up like that. Because some people -- you might know that, hey, this is the right thing to do. But when the research exists it's so much easier to convince people why and to actually make a change. So thank you for the research that you were doing. Thank you. Now, while having an expert like Dr. Dotson is really important, it's also important to have autistic consultants on board as well. And so Jessica Rosh has served as a writing consultant on several episodes of "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" that introduced this new character of Max. In addition to her work on the series, she is on staff in the human resources department at the Mount Sinai Health System. In her free time she enjoys writing, reading and spending time with friends from adaptations, a community based group. Jessica holds a BA in sociology from Hunter College. Jessica, thank you so much for joining us today. Can you talk a little bit about your experience consulting on these episodes - what type of advice did you provide?

>> Jessica Rosh: I am a white woman wearing a blue top with flat flowers on it. I provided advice on how Max should act, and I wanted him to be as authentic as possible. I was looking at how he would respond to different situations, stimuli and the other characters on the show.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent. How were you connected to do this work?

>> Jessica Rosh: Well, Allison Kleinman from the JCC Manhattan connected me to this opportunity, and I was thrilled to say yes.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent and why is it so important to you personally and in general that writers rooms hire autistic writers, especially when a character is autistic themselves?

>> Jessica Rosh: I would say because we know the experience very well, and we can have people really see that no two autistic people are alike.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent. Do you hope to do more consulting and/or writing? Are we gonna hear your name with additional shows, is that your hope and dream?

>> Jessica Rosh: Yes I do love to write and edit. I would love an opportunity to continue working with 9 Story media group, if that's possible.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent. Well, I know that a lot more people representing a whole range of different -- is my video going in and out? Okay. Thank you. So the next question is for both Dr. Wes Dotson as well as Jessica Rosh. In addition to watching this episode, how do you recommend parents or teachers explain autism to non-autistic children?

>> Jessica Rosh: I would say that it's a difference, but ultimately we make the best of friends. You should -- people should just get to know us, our interests and our sensitivities and stuff like that. And we should be met with kindness and respect.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Definitely. Dr. Dotson, would you like to add?

>> Wes Dotson: I don't think I can improve on that answer, Jessica, but I would just say one of the things I really try to do when talking about folks on the spectrum is to say that it's a difference, and a lot of the things that are characteristics of autism can be great strengths, if we learn to to see that and accept that. And you know, I'd say that they are very honest, very literal, very clear, often in their communication, and they have the same kinds of preferences and and desires that everybody else has. It's just a matter of learning how to communicate and provide different supports. But that's no different than what everyone needs. We all have different preferences different -- some people like loud environments and some people like quiet environments. Some people like a lot of people in the room, some people like too few people. You know, too few -- there's my preference, too few people in the room I get uncomfortable. [Laughs] But the point is it's just a different way of interacting with the world, not better or worse. And that when understood it's often a great advantage in a lot of ways.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thanks. I'd like to stick with you for another moment. Everyone, children included, are definitely having a lot more screen time during this past year due to the COVID-19 pandemic . Many parents who previously cared about limiting screen time, especially for young children, you know, the Daniel Tiger demographic, but speaking as a mom of a five-year-old that's really kind of gone out the window. And so I personally try to look for content that is either educational or teaches some soft skills like being respectful. Why is it so important to include characters with disabilities in preschool content specifically?

>> Wes Dotson: I think it's an amazing opportunity for parents and caregivers to talk to their kids about ways to interact and build relationships with anybody. I think that's the great advantage of television shows that are created with an awareness of developmental growth in kids and how they see the world, and showing them that struggles and frustrations, getting angry or not getting your way is aggravating and difficult for everybody, but also modeling strategies for what to do about it. But as parents or caregivers, we can look at that and that can become a jumping off point of -- I don't know how to talk to my kid about this, but if there's an episode that covers it then we can talk about Daniel Tiger, about what he did. Is there a time that you feel like you felt that way or that you've seen me do that, and could we do what Daniel Tiger did? And so it's this jumping off point to help them anchor, "hey, this is the character I like, and if they can do it, I can do it." And so I think that again -- that's that representation piece. You've got to then have people on the show that look like and struggle with the same things that the audience struggles with.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Most definitely. I think one thing that is such a signature thing from Daniel Tiger are the little songs that kids learn, parents learn, and that can really make that huge huge difference. Rachel, something that you shared on a previous panel with us last summer that kind of talked about the importance of disability representation and preschool content in general was that, you know, having a personal connection to the disability community. Oftentimes stories involving disability inclusion are developed due to someone on the back end having a personal connection. Giving you the opportunity to kind of share why is this important to you personally.

>> Rachel Kalban: Yeah sure. I think I shared back in the summer about several relatives of mine who had disabilities, and my brother is autistic. And so this was really personal for me. I did push when we first made the character of Max that he have a family, that it not just be Max on screen, because I know how special those relationships are, and how I think my brother and I have a really special relationship. And growing up I think there was an understanding that we had of each other and I had of him that was able to help him through certain situations. And you know, we just have a really unique bond, I think. And so to be able to not only see Max on screen as representation for an autistic child but to see the greater family and what that connection looks like and those relationships -- was really important for me. I mean, when I was a kid there is no representation of autism on screen, I would say for adults or for kids, is my guess, until I was an adult. And so especially as a kid, it was really hard to explain when people asked me about my brother. I was a kid, I didn't necessarily have the words. And so for kids now to be able to say well, he's his own kid but he has autism, he's autistic like this character on this show that we all love, it's just a really wonderful thing, I think, to be bringing to the world and something that I'm really happy that we were able to do.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Yeah. And we already saw from some time ago with "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" including Chrissie, she uses crutches to walk around. Also this week something that I kind of just saw one of the existing characters -- we see her receiving an asthmatic treatment. And so this idea of normalizing all different types of disabilities is so important. So I wanted to just ask you, how does this experience, Rachel, of including disability influence your future creative process?

>> Rachel Kalban: Oh, it just inspires me. I mean, the idea that we were able to put this on screen and give this to so many kids just makes me want to do it for more kids. I mean, the response in the last two days of parents of young children seeing their kid on television for the first time or, you know, some representation was so powerful. And just keep on looking for where those holes are in representation, whether they be for race, ethnicity, disability, and continuing to plug those holes in in really meaningful ways, right. So not just the token character that you're gonna see once and never come back to, but that they be true multi-dimensional characters with personalities and families and bigger storylines than just about their disability. It just inspires me to look for more and more opportunities to be doing that.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent. And Chris, I'd love to kind of add, picking up on something Rachel just said, how do you plan to further develop Max as a recurring character throughout the neighborhood?

>> Chris Loggins: Sorry just taking a second to unmute myself. And I also want to take the opportunity to do something I forgot to do before - that's thank you, Lauren and everyone at RespectAbility, for hosting this panel. It's just so awesome to have this opportunity to discuss the episode, so thank you very much. I'm having a great time, this is awesome. But yeah, Max and his sister Amira will be lasting and important members of our neighborhood. They will be coming back. And we're already actually working on new stories with both of them. And these stories, you know, it was important for us to introduce Max and help everybody understand that Max is autistic in this first episode. These other episodes aren't necessarily about that. They're just normal episodes of things that are happening in the neighborhood of make-believe. You know, in that same vein of social-emotional learning. So we're just really excited about that. And I also just wanted to take a moment to underscore how much of a team effort this whole thing was, and just say again about how we chose to work with Dr. Dotson and Jessica and Autism Society. We wanted varying perspectives -- we wanted to talk to people who are academics, we wanted to talk to advocacy groups, we wanted to work with people in the community. And our hope was that all these people would challenge us to do this right and make sure that we were doing everything that we could to do this right, and they have come through so well in doing that. And I think thanks go out to all of them. And they're still with us on this journey with Max. So that's amazing.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent, thank you. And I'd also like to give you an opportunity to answer a question that I had just recently posed to Rachel, since you also are working on many projects beyond just "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" as well. How does this experience influence your future creative process in general?

>> Chris Loggins: I would just agree with everything that Rachel said. I think that it has only strengthened our commitment to seeking out experts and individuals from the communities we want to feature in the show, and to work to ensure authenticity at every phase of development, from the very beginning to what ends up on the screen. You know, this -- served to just reinforce that that is so important. Sorry Lauren, I think you're on mute.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you very much. A question for all, we'll go in the order that I see you on my screen. So we'll go Rachel, then Wes, then Chris and then Jessica. What was your favorite part about creating this episode?

>> Rachel Kalban: That's so hard. I mean, to echo a little bit of what Chris said, I love learning everybody's different perspectives. To mo, to be able to hear from Jessica and Wes and Kristen and and the advisors at Fred Rogers, and incorporate that all into one beautiful episode hopefully, and hear what those different perspectives are, was so interesting and opened my eyes up to a lot of things that I never heard about, I never knew about before. So that was really up there.

>> Wes Dotson: I would second that. I think the thing that I enjoyed the most was the engagement across multiple perspectives, and then it wasn't just, oh, you want an expert that's going to give you a black and white answer, because that's not -- what hopefully we try to do is ask questions that get people thinking and represent the spectrum that is autism. And so I really very much also appreciated that things would come back and there would be questions from multiple directions. And it's like does this fit given that? Does this fit given that? And so much care was taken. I like the way Chris said I like to make sure it was done so carefully and with an open mind to getting it right, and I don't know if getting it right, you know I don't know how to measure that. I just know it felt right. It felt like the process really worked well to make sure we considered every angle.

>> Chris Loggins: Again, I'll third both comments. I thought the process was really rewarding all the way through, and what Wes said reminded me of a Daniel strategy - ask questions about what happened, it might help. So we were asking a lot of questions and learning a lot along the way and -- funny thing, kind of an aside. My colleague Margy Whitmer, who was the producer of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, recently told me a story about how she went to her doctor and the doctor said oh, knew she worked on Daniel, and said oh, "my kids love the show." And Margy said "well, don't you get tired of those songs?" And she was like "no no no! We want more songs, more songs!" So that was really really cool to hear. So as far as developing Max, very cool to see the first images of him from the design team, and then, you know, when we found Israel, and to hear the voice acting and just -- just like with everything that we do on the show, it's really rewarding to see something come from from an idea to moving pictures and then you know, this might be a little bit of a -- I don't know, easy answer, but now the show has aired and it's just been really rewarding to see all the feedback on social media and elsewhere. People who appreciate Max and the show.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent. Jessica, what was your favorite part about working on this episode or the character?

>> Jessica Rosh: I would say it was saying that -- in one part of the script it said that loud noises hurt Max's ears. They don't -- an earache hurts but loud noises don't really hurt someone's ears. I would say that they bother someone's ears. So using that language really really stood out to me.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent. It shows that just changing one word here or there can make a huge difference, and the importance of bringing on consultants, so I am glad that you were brought onto the team. Now I'm going to invite the audience to ask questions. I'm going to invite Ava to join us as well for the Q&A, in case if you have a question that should be directed at her as well. Please add your question into the Q&A box on this platform. For our friends watching on Facebook, the comments are being monitored, and the questions will be shared with us on Zoom as well. If you are unable to do a question on zoom you also can send an email -- and I'm letting my colleague Eric now know who would be receiving such emails -- but to your -- if you, for example, use a screen reader or whatnot and you can't put a question in via text here, you can send it back via email and that can be -- and that will be forwarded to me and I'll monitor if any of them come in that way as well. We like to try and be as inclusive as possible. While we wait for these questions to come in from the audience, I'd love to ask our panelists one more question, a fun question. And so you can answer one or both of these. What was your favorite T.V. show growing up and what current show besides "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" do you recommend, especially for parents that are kind of looking for good content for their preschool age children to kind of keep them engaged during this ongoing pandemic? Should I choose who starts? All right. Let's go in reverse order. We'll start with Ava, then Jessica, then Chris, then Wes, then Rachel.

>> Ava Rigelhaupt: Okay. Hello again. So this is Ava. I have two answers to your question. So one of my favorite shows growing up was on PBS called "Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat," based on the children's book by Amy Tan. I really loved talking animals. And the other show that I loved watching when I was growing up was on Disney channel, "The Suite Life of Zach and Cody." I still honestly wish I lived in a hotel and played with my friends on the luggage cart. Also I just remembered that it was one of the few shows with Asian-American representation at that time. And to answer your question about children's shows, I honestly don't watch a lot of preschool age content, but I know my younger cousin watches "Peppa Pig," and I have seen some fun clips of the show and heard her cute little British accent. Additionally I also believe there is a reboot of the original "Blues Clues" which I watched, now called "Blues Clues and You," which I researched, is another show by 9 Story Media.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Jessica?

>> Jessica Rosh: I would say growing up my favorite television show was Full House. I liked watching the show over and over again because of the little girls. But I don't really have much time to watch television these days. But I will give "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" a plug.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent. Chris?

>> Chris Loggins: Okay unmute. Thanks for the plug Jessica, that's great. Let's see. I did watch "Mister Rogers's Neighborhood" growing up. I've said before, maybe Rachel has heard me say this, but one of my first television memories is watching one of those factory visit pieces from the show, and it was all about how people make peanut butter. And I just remember the jars going around and being filled with peanut butter and being mesmerized. I also did like "Reading Rainbow" but you don't have to take my word for it. And I watched a lot of Nickelodeon game shows, because I thought it would be really cool to be on there, like "Double Dare," "Wild and Crazy Kids," that kind of thing. And then as far as new shows, you really can't go wrong with PBS. You asked about shows during the pandemic. I think "Let's Go Luna!" is a really cool show, just as a reminder that there's a great big world out there, because they always are going to different places around the world and learning about their history and culture. And then I'm also a fan of "Curious George" and "Molly of Denali."

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent. Wes?

>> Wes Dotson: Well it sounds like Chris and I had very similar upbringings, it was a lot of those things. Although I was also a fanatic for Nick at Night, so Mr. Ed and all the black and white shows that used to show from like eight to ten o'clock at night, that was my going to bed television. And I was usually still enough to watch T.V. Since I do predominantly work with adolescent young adult populations, I don't spend a lot of time watching early childhood television as a rule. So I don't really have a firm answer on that. But I will say that what I know is that it's come a long way in terms of -- there are a lot more shows today being mindful and intentional in how they're handling both representation, but also just that social-emotional learning component.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Rachel?

>> Rachel Kalban: I watched a lot of T.V. as a kid, but I loved, I loved "Punky Brewster." I talked about that a lot, like, that was just such a go-to for me. I think I thought I was Punky Brewster. But as far as today's quarantined kids, I think there is a lot of great content out there, right now which is fantastic. I think, you know, Sesame is putting out great stuff, PBS is putting out great stuff, there's been a resurgence of viewers for "Super Why!" which was one of the first shows that I got to work on, which is a great show in teaching kids how to read. I'm hoping now that it's good weather that more kids will be outside than in front of the screen more often, so I would also push for that, exploring your own neighborhoods.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Yep. And then I definitely try to push for all the fun games that go along with all the PBS kids shows, you know, the free apps. Because at least I feel like my daughter is learning a little bit of something, versus just sitting and watching. So we have some questions that have come in. So I'm going to start with a question from Alex Martinez. "When promoting disability representation on your shows, how do you create a balance to normalize disabilities and not make the overall storyline about the disability? The little amount of children's literature that have disability representation usually focus heavily on the disability, which makes it considered less normal to the viewers perception." Who would like to take that first?

>> Chris Loggins: I saw Rachel unmuted so I'll let Rachel go --

>> Rachel Kalban: No no, I'll let you go.

>> Chris Loggins: Oh, I was just going to cite something I said earlier about how we are making new stories with Max that aren't about his disability. And also if you look at Chrissie in our show, you know, it takes some time to introduce somebody and learn who they are and about them. But once they're established, they just come back in episodes and they're just one of the friends. And that's the approach that we take to it. Now, this week is the first time people are meeting Max, so it might feel like it's a little bit limited right now. But we are, again, working on these stories where you know -- for example, I don't want to give too many things away, but you know, Max is just doing fun things in the neighborhood with the friends and it's not about his disability. And that's what we try to do with all of these characters, is make sure that they are fully formed people and integrated into the group of children in our show. So that's just one thing I would say about that from the Tiger perspective.

>> Rachel Kalban: Yeah. I would add that I saw that on the PBS video app they've already put up a second episode that has Max in it, and it is not about Max's disability. Max is in the playground with Daniel and he is playing the xylophone and he loves music. And the strategy is used on the other kids, he is there as a friend. And so right away we knew that that was important to put out there, so that it's not just focused on the disability, like so much of literature, I think, is sometimes. And also, when we set out to make a new character in any of our shows, we want to know who are they in every respect. So what's their favorite books to read? Like, what are they loving to play with? What kind of music would they listen to? Things like that. So if we know that from the get-go, it's easier for us not to have just to focus on the disability.

>> Chris Loggins: And I want to thank Rachel too, for pointing that out that the episode is already up, and that was like a conscious production decision too, to make sure that we were doing two episodes. So we could run, you know, the first one where we first meet Max, and he's already back in another episode that is about something totally different.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent. That is such a best practice that I hope any children's content creators that are watching this panel right now will kind of take to heart. And I know that it's something that is on the top of mind for many creators now, which is a really great thing to see. I'd like to turn to a question from Christine Hill. She says that she is so impressed with this work and wished that this show and its characters existed when her now young adult children, all who have disabilities, one with autism, were younger. To see kids like themselves would have gone so far to support their sense of themselves and to reduce the stigma surrounding disability. Her question is around the order of the consultation process. At what stage in the develop -- at what stage do you bring the consultants in?

>> Rachel Kalban: I mean, right in the beginning, right? Like, we were speaking with Jessica from -- right from the get-go. Wes as well. You know, who was this character going to be? What was his disability going to look like on screen? For us it's really important to know that early on, so that we're writing with the true character in mind, and it's not just writing and then fixing. I think that's how you get to authenticity really. So you know, we try to bring in consultants as early as possible.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent. And another question I think is for you Rachel, from Hannah Pikas. I apologize if I mispronounced your last name. Did you test the storybook with kids as well?

>> Rachel Kalban: We did. We tested the storybook with kids -- I will say we tested it in a mainstream classroom. I do not know, to be very honest, if there were autistic children in that classroom. There wasn't a way for me to find out. But that is part of why we worked with these consultants so closely, so that we could have really both perspectives on the script.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: And then a question for anyone. Mike Hipple asks about kids with autism who are non-verbal, and I think something that I heard from all of you during pre-interviews was that Max is a snapshot of one autistic individual, that he couldn't represent every single person. So if anyone wants to talk about that, or just the idea of increased representation of a whole wide variety of disabilities as well, including those who are non-verbal?

>> Wes Dotson: I'll jump in with a kind of academic intermediate perception. When I came into this field over 20 years ago, that was almost the only representation you might ever see. Movies like Rain Man, or you would have somebody who had an incredibly visible and impacted presentation. They would have big motor movements and they would be disruptive, they couldn't tolerate or appear to be interested in social interactions. And it mirrored kind of what the perception of what people -- what autistic people were capable of. You know, 20 years ago it would be expected that 60 or 70 percent of people with autism would live in a residential facility or a hospital for the rest of their life after they finish school, as opposed to today, 50 to 60 percent of people with autism go to college. So in 20 years, what we see as possible and what we see as representation along the entire spectrum is very different. We see so much more now of the top end of the capabilities, and the strengths, and the things that autistic folks bring to the table, that I think that's some of -- at least for someone like me, I think it's really important to show that in representation. But I think it is also important to represent the entire spectrum. And so I do think there is value in having a full picture of that spectrum, and I think -- we have balance now, if you look back 20 years. But at the same time bringing it into the modern day, where that representation of somebody who is non-verbal or who has more visible -- impacting stuff, that wasn't done as respectfully then as I would hope it would be done now.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Yeah, and if someone's looking for good representation of someone who is non-verbal autistic, I would recommend checking out Loop, a Pixar short. And so there is a good example of a non-verbal autistic representation. I'd like to -- before I close us out, I'd like to give if any of our panelists had anything else that they wanted to say that they didn't get a chance to share with everyone yet. No? Okay. I'm gonna close us out with a comment that was sent to us from Kara Dymond. She says "thank you for this panel," and she wanted to send a message that she is Israel's teacher, and that she's taught him for four years now and has been encouraging him from the sidelines. And so she's mentioned that the difference in his life has really been huge from this opportunity of being Max, and that -- he's very proud and confident, and did have to miss a few classes to go and record, but the entire group was really excited for him. And when he was playing a game, he referred himself as an actor, which really is a great thing to be able to do for any 13 year old, to really have an identity of like, "I am something." And so -- also shared that he treated the entire class to a pizza lunch with his first paycheck to thank them for supporting him, shows the character of Israel as a person. And so thank you Kara for joining us and for sharing that. It's really great to hear that perspective. And yes, we are hoping to have more and more people who are autistic and have other disabilities to be able to call themselves a working actor, working writer, director animator, producer etcetera. So I wanted to share that if you would like to stay up to date on areas of best practice, we have a weekly newsletter that goes out on Thursdays, and we highlight lots of different things. All the way from preschool to content for adults, film, television, animated, live action. And so if you're looking for more examples of best practice, I invite you to sign up. My colleague Lesley Hennen has put the link in the chat. We also will send it around to everyone who has RSVP'd for this event, as well as the recording of this event. If you have other questions that pop up, please don't hesitate to reach out to us. And I just really want to thank all of our panelists: Rachel, Wes, Chris and Jessica, as well as Ava for your introduction and Courtney for doing lots of fingerspelling for lots of acronyms and names, which is definitely not an easy thing to do as I kept throwing those in. And I hope everyone will get a chance to to watch the now several episodes of Max on Daniel Tiger, and I hope everyone has a good evening or afternoon, depending on where in the world you are based today. Thank you very much.