

RAISING NEURODIVERSE FANS

By Katherine Anderson Howell

LET ME OFFER a fast and unnuanced definition of “fan.” A fan loves a piece of media, or a character from a piece of media. Popular fandoms include *My Little Pony*, *Star Wars*, RuPaul’s Drag Race, anime and manga of all kinds, both the DC and Marvel comics universes (and the associated superheroes), and *Harry Potter*. The fan may show her love in many ways. Usually this goes beyond reading, watching, or listening. The fan writes stories, draws pictures, goes to conventions, and/or many more activities. The fan often does these things in a group, online or offline, with other fans.

In this article I’ll share some thoughts about neurodiverse individuals—including those with ADHD—who happen to be fans. But first, let’s meet some fans.

A little girl at camp sits slightly separate from all the other campers. She intently draws a picture, rewriting the ending of the movie she watched over the weekend. Her focus is so intense that she has a potty accident. The camp counselors call her father at work asking how to encourage the girl to listen to her body’s needs.

At bedtime, a young boy rereads a book from his favorite series. At lights out, his mother discovers him writing in the book. She scolds him for marking up his books and turns out the light. Five minutes later, the light is back on, and the boy is, again, reading and writing in his book. His mother discovers that the boy has written himself into the story. She considers calling his pediatrician, worried that this means his anxiety is getting worse.

These activities, the intense focus accompanying them, and the behavioral issues involved, may concern parents. Parents may worry about the seeming isolation of the girl,



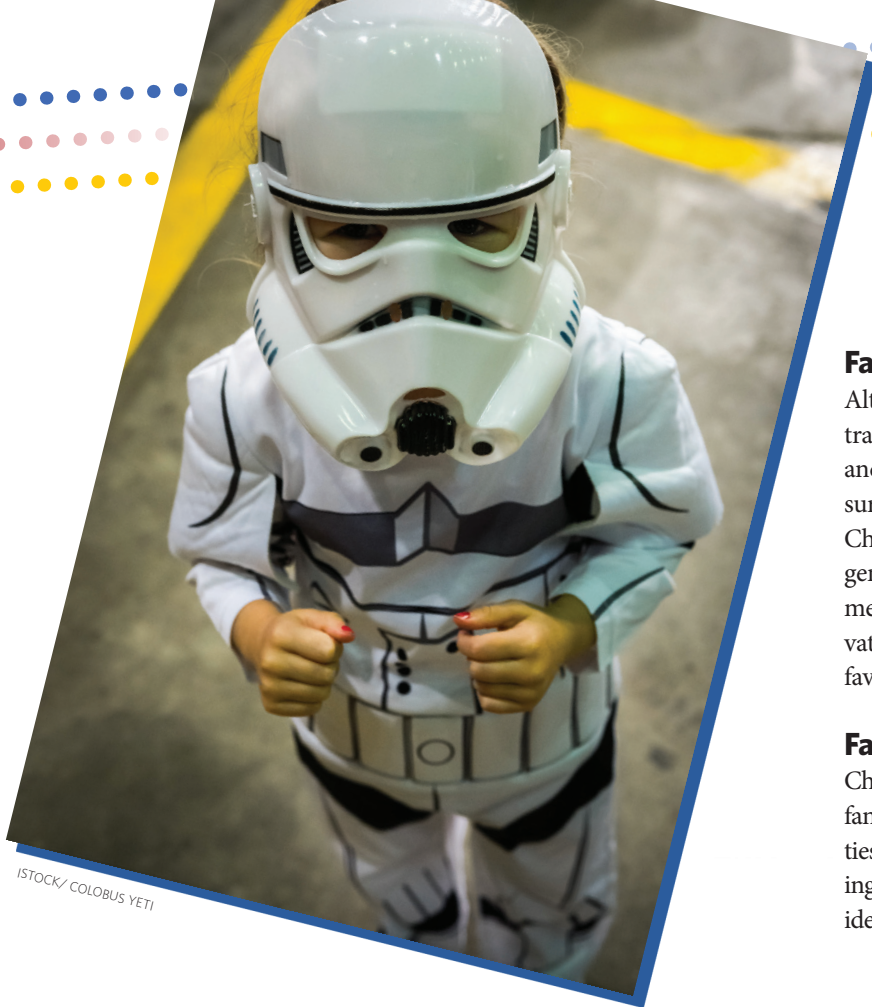
ISTOCK/ S DIVIN09

and her inability to stop drawing and use the restroom. The boy’s parents may worry about defiance in defacing a book, obsessiveness when he writes himself into a story, and violation of bedtime rules. However, these activities could be first fan activities. As children grow, new ones may come. They may record songs and make videos. They may participate in costume play or “cosplay” and dress up as a favorite character. They may even attend conventions.

As a fan scholar and a mom to a young fan with ADHD, I offer a new way of viewing the fandoms of our children. Rather than thinking of children’s growing fan activities as escapism, isolation, defiance, or obsessiveness, try to think of fandom as a potentially positive kind of identification.

Identification creates relationship

Identification does not simply mean a one-to-one relationship. For example, a boy’s identification with the lead boy character might represent a deep, emotional, and creative process. This process involves the experiences of fictional characters and of the young fans. The girl in the first example may have been correcting an injustice done to an animal character. She might identify with the ani-



ISTOCK/ COLOBUS YETI

Fandom and focus

Although fan activities can certainly be a source of distraction, fandom can help children move beyond fleeting and superficial engagement. By nurturing play and pleasure, fandom helps deepen focus and sustain attention. Children's fan creations involve many kinds of thinking: genre knowledge, observation of drawing styles, development of story lines, and self-reflection. Fans are self-motivated to learn because they enjoy identifying with their favorite film, comic, or book.

Fandom and community

Children who participate in online or face-to-face group fandoms may perceive them as safe, welcoming communities. The results can be both heartwarming and heartbreaking. Certain fandom spaces may feel safe. Our children may identify with the characters and with the other fans. They

mal because she has experienced similar injustice. By entering into a relationship with that character, she may feel less alone. The boy may find the world of his book matches his imagination or his way of thinking so well that writing himself into it gives him great pleasure.

Play and pleasure

Fandom offers opportunities for play and pleasure. Raising a child with ADHD and other developmental differences can be serious business. Writing fan fiction and drawing fan art offer ways to express love and pleasure in a book, TV show, game, movie, or even a celebrity. Fans engage in playful interaction with words and pictures. We sometimes expect children's creative expressions to be free of references to things they love or "more original."

By encouraging our children's popular culture fandoms, we are not discouraging originality. Let them play first, and the originality will come. This kind of participatory play has a long history. Lawrence Lessig calls this a "read/write culture," in which young people write using elements of what they have read. Lessig places this in opposition to a more passive "read only culture," in which young people are expected to only consume the culture and not interact with it.



SHUTTERSTOCK/ LADY BIRD STUDIO



Rather than thinking of children's growing fan activities as escapism, isolation, defiance, or obsessiveness, try to think of fandom as a potentially positive kind of identification.

will encounter other fan's fiction, cosplays, art, and comments. Fandoms will broaden children's exposure to differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability.

Some of this content will be wonderfully positive. But like everything else on the internet, some fan discussions will contain subject matter that we do not want our children to read or see. There may be violence, explicit sexuality, racism, sexism, and/or ableism. Parents must guide children through fan-produced discussions, writing and art.

Setting good boundaries

Fandom does not cause inconsistent attention. But children with ADHD need clear rules and behavioral boundaries. For young children, supervised offline fan activities express identification with a character in playful ways, while protecting their safety. As children age, they may find peers offline that share their fandoms. Online fandoms are a whole different story. Children need parental guidance and limits as they explore the world of online fandoms.

Part of raising a neurodiverse fan will mean participating in fandom with them and setting a good example. At first, this may seem overwhelming and exhausting. Here are some suggestions.

1. Acknowledge that it is hard to stop the fan activity.

Fans need parents to model when to let go of the beloved activity and take care of other needs, such as self-care, social, school, etc. For example, it may not be best to engage in fan activities before bed.

2. Learn about your child's favorite fandom communities.

The details matter. For example, if your child watches streamers on Twitch, a live-streaming platform owned by Amazon that primarily focuses on games, sports, and independent creators, it may help to know that Twitch does not allow streaming of games rated Adults Only by the Entertainment Software Rating Board. Twitch moderates the chats that streamers can allow under their streams via a semi-automated tool.

However, parents should consider the following: Does the streamer have the chat function on or off? If the chat function is on, does the streamer moderate the chat beyond the built in tool? Are certain words (slurs, curse words, and misspellings of each) blocked? Limit your child to watching only those streams with chats off or heavily moderated by a human.

3. Most fanfiction stories are marked with a tag, similar to a hashtag on Twitter or Instagram.

These tags are intended to give readers guidance to what the story contains. Stories could be marked with tags that indicate mundane content, like what characters the stories focus on. The genre of story may also be tagged. "AU" means "alternate universe," and involves changing the setting of the book or TV show. Slash, or a forward slash (/) between two character names, is sexual content. If your child reads fanfiction online, does the platform use content tags? If so, limit what tags your child can read from.

Make sure safe websites stay safe. For example, if your child watches makeup tutorials on YouTube, do you have the parental controls set so that explicit channels do not come up in the recommended section? Have you watched the tutorials to make sure that the language used is appropriate? To play it safe, always watch YouTube videos with your child.

4. In your home, use extremely strict parental controls on all devices.

Our young children have their own Apple ID. That way, anything their father and I may research, receive as a message, or email does not show up on the family iPad. When not under adult supervision, turn off internet access on the iPad. In our home, I do allow writing in books that belong to my children, but not at bedtime. Gaming stops a half hour before bedtime ritual begins.

It might seem strange that, while espousing the play and pleasure of young fandom, I also advocate such strict parental controls. As my children grow, these restrictions may relax. More freedom to navigate online spaces will depend upon each child's needs and abilities. They must prove an ability to use the internet in a safe and healthy manner.

As parents, we cannot let ourselves get "out of touch" with what platforms our children use. Our family boundaries around technology, behavior, and body needs should be held firm. At the same time, our children's fan-nish play can be embraced for the joy and creative capacity it brings. 🎧

Katherine Anderson Howell is an independent scholar and the editor of *Fandom in the Classroom: A Teaching Guide* (University of Iowa Press, 2018). She parents a child with ADHD and a child with severe allergies, and is currently working on a monograph about fandom and disability.