



AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Representation Matters: The Power of Finding Yourself in a Book



Seamus Kirst, author of *Papa, Daddy, & Riley*, shares his thoughts on the power of representation in children's books.

You can purchase *Papa, Daddy, & Riley* with 20% off and free domestic shipping [here](#). Enter code **MPKIDS20** at checkout.

Throughout my life, I have discovered that reading provides an almost miraculous way of changing the way I think.

There is no medium that better offers insight into the perceptions, feelings, and humanity of someone who is different from us. Through reading we become empathetic. Through reading we evolve. I have often emerged from reading a book, and felt like I was changed. In that, even in this digital age, I know I am not alone.

As children, reading shapes how we see the world. The characters, places, and stories we come to love in our books inform us as to what life might offer us as we grow up, and our world begins to expand beyond our own backyards.

For that reason, representation in all books, and particularly in children's books, can have life changing meaning. Just as it benefits us all to see and read about characters who have little in common with us, we all deserve characters in books who reflect our lives and our own varied experiences, as well.

I grew up in the early 1990's. I do not remember reading any children's books with LGBTQ characters. I know some—though not many—were out there, and I am grateful for the writers who paved the way. Yet even with those books in existence, I do not remember being aware of them until I was an adult.

As a kid, I did not see LGBTQ characters in books, which became one more subtle, but powerful, factor in making me feel abnormal, my life impossibly out of the mainstream. I have spoken to countless other LGBTQ people who reflect on similar experiences, and I know that is true across the spectrum of identities, as well.

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If they all feel a similar absence, one thing is clear: Fill it, and many young readers will feel far less alone.

Since losing myself in a book was one of my favorite parts of growing up, I always dreamed of writing for children once I had the chance. Even so, when the time came to actually do it, I kept trying ideas that somehow lacked resonance.

Eventually, frustrated, I almost gave up. What changed everything was a piece of simple yet profound advice from a friend: “Why don’t you write something that you wish had been around when you were a kid, or a book you want to exist once you have kids of your own?”

From that piece of advice, *Papa, Daddy, & Riley* was born. For me, this book, which follows a young girl named Riley’s journey of emotional discovery after she is asked which of her two dads is her “real dad,” meets the two thresholds my friend wisely put forth.

I am grateful for the opportunity to write a book that answers a question pondered by many children, especially once they start attending school and meet people whose lives can look so different from their own: “What makes a family a family?”

The answer, of course, is love.

I know I am not the first person to make that point in a book, but in a day and age when there are still legal battles throughout our country over whether LGBTQ couples should have the right to adopt children, I do not believe what Riley discovers can be expressed enough.

Hopefully, this book provides comfort and underscores a sense of belonging for children with LGBTQ parents, or young readers who will one day grow up to be LGBTQ parents. The sign of true progress, though, will be when it is read and enjoyed—and the theme fully embraced—by children and adults who are not part of the LGBTQ community, as well.

This Article’s Author

Seamus Kirst is a writer whose work has been published in *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *Teen Vogue*, *Forbes*, *The Advocate*, and *Vice*. Follow him on Twitter and Instagram @SeamusKirst or on Facebook @seamuspatrickkirst.