



After **Siena Castellon** was diagnosed with autism, she started to campaign for a society that both embraces and benefits from neurodiversity

### So, what do you do?

I am a neurodiversity advocate. I believe that neurological differences, such as autism, dyslexia and dyspraxia, are natural variations in the human brain. Our society pathologises these conditions and focuses on trying to cure them. I am trying to flip the narrative so that society stops viewing us as defective and starts to embrace and harness our many strengths and talents.

### Your new book is called *The Spectrum Girl's Survival Guide*. Why did you write it?

When I was growing up, there were no books specifically aimed at autistic teen girls. They were all written for autistic boys by neurotypical adults.

I decided to write the book that I wish had been available. I also wanted to write an uplifting book that encouraged autistic girls to embrace who they are and that reminds them that they aren't alone.

### What is in the book?

There are two main themes. The first is that we deserve to be accepted and embraced for who we are. Society pressures autistic girls to mask their true selves so that they can fit in and appear "normal". This can be devastating to our sense of self-worth and our mental health. The second theme is advice on how to navigate school as an autistic teenager. I discuss socialising and making friends, crushes and dating, gender identity, social media, bullying and much more.

### You talk about being bullied. Does this happen a lot to children with autism?

Unfortunately, society isn't very tolerant of people who are different. I can't remember a time at school when I wasn't bullied, which explains why I have been to 11 schools. When I was diagnosed as being autistic, I learned that 75 per cent of autistic students report being bullied.

### What are you working on right now?

Neurodiversity Celebration Week is coming up soon. I launched this campaign in 2018 to encourage schools to recognise the strengths and talents of neurodiverse students, instead of just focusing on their weaknesses and difficulties. There are currently more than 600 schools and 458,000 students taking part from across the UK, Australia, Canada and the US, and many organisations, including The Alan Turing Institute.

### Is autism awareness and understanding improving?

I don't think so, especially not in relation to girls and women. I am constantly told I look "normal" and that I don't look autistic. The people saying this genuinely believe that they are complimenting me, when it is actually an insult. Most people's benchmark seems to be Raymond from [the film] *Rain Man* and so people often tell me I can't be autistic. Also, awareness isn't enough. We should be striving for acceptance and equality.

### What areas of science are you most interested in?

Physics and maths. I have been passionate about both since primary school.

### If you could have a conversation with any scientist, living or dead, who would it be?

Alan Turing. He was a brilliant mathematician, computer scientist, cryptanalyst, theoretical biologist and philosopher. I can also relate to him because I know what it is like to not be accepted for who you are.

### Do you have an unexpected hobby, and if so, please tell us about it?

I collect packs of cards. I have been able to count cards from a young age, which means I almost always win. That may explain why I love cards so much.



### How useful will your skills be after the apocalypse?

Physics and maths are the language of nature. So my skills would be useful in rebuilding civilisation.

### OK, one last thing: tell us something that will blow our minds...

Did you know that there is a hidden bear and fish in the Toblerone logo? One of the many advantages of being autistic is that I see details others may miss. ■

Siena Castellon's book *The Spectrum Girl's Survival Guide: How to grow up awesome and autistic* is out this month (Jessica Kingsley Publishers). Neurodiversity Celebration Week begins on 16 March @NCWeek

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New Scientist events

### Is autism a gift?

Join Siena and cognitive scientist Anna Remington for our evening event on 12 May in London [newscientist.com/events](https://www.newscientist.com/events)