"I want no other daddy but you". The movie *I Am Sam* is a heartwarming story of a father’s love for his daughter. Sam may have a mental disability, but he takes his role as Lucy’s father quite seriously. He has his peculiarities and autistic routines that should not be disrupted such as Wednesday is video night, Thursday is dinner at IHOP and Friday is karaoke night, but he manages to spend much time with his daughter, Lucy [Wilkins, 2002].

Sam has his own circle of friends who happen to be just like him. One of my favorite scenes from the movie is when Sam and his friends take Lucy shoe shopping and when it’s time to pay for the shoes, Sam is low on cash. But Sam’s friends come to the rescue and start pulling money out to pay for the shoes.

Sam doesn’t let his disability stop him from living life, and although he is labeled “slow” and uneducated, he manages to obtain a few different jobs throughout the movie and proves to be very organized by replenishing sugar packets at Starbucks, taking care of multiple dogs and organizing pepper packets at Pizza Hut.

The character of Sam really impresses me and I don’t think his disability should define him as a person, but his strong will and determination should. He has this genuine kindness that really shines through. Sam is a fighter and what impresses me the most is that despite his disability, he tries his best to be a good father.
In-depth description of the character's language abilities.
Please use the five areas of language described in your module.

**Contributors:** Nicholas Cochran & Lindsey Perdeck

Sam, the main character from the movie is a 40 year old man with a developmental disability. Although biologically he is 40 years old, he has the mentality and language ability of a 7 year old. At the age of 7, a child’s speech and language ability is still not complete and will continue to grow for years. Children at the age of 7 are unable to articulate all sounds, have a limited vocabulary, are still growing syntactically and many are pragmatically inappropriate.

Sam being developmentally delayed has issues with the five areas of language. The movie displays Sam in some conversations in which he is unintelligible. It takes him a long time to express his thoughts and once he does, the content of what he intended to say is uncertain. He’ll sometimes leave out words or say phrases that are not worded correctly. For example, when he was asked who was smarter between him and his daughter, he replied “I kind of think we are the same smart.”

Sam also has a difficult time understanding the content of words. For example, in a scene that takes place in the court room, his lawyer asks for “a motion to recess” and Sam responds, “I don’t exactly like recess very much.” He does not understand that words have multiple meanings and that his lawyer is not referring to a school recess.

Along with semantics, Sam has many issues with syntax. He is grammatically incorrect throughout the movie. Sam was eating lunch one afternoon with his daughter Lucy and they were talking about him being a unique father but in a good way. He said “we are lucky, are we lucky.” He said “are we lucky” not as a question but as a statement. He would make these types of errors throughout the movie. At times you would have difficulty understanding what he’s trying to say because he would shorten his sentences, but generally you can figure out what he’s trying to get across.
A major characteristic that hinders Sam’s language abilities is that he has no patience, which causes difficulties with turn-taking during conversations. In the movie, a waitress tries to explain to Sam that they didn’t have what he ordered but instead of listening to her, he got angry and kept repeating his order in a high tone of voice. While talking to Lucy he forgets that she is just a child and talks to her inappropriately, which is an example of how Sam misuses language pragmatically.

Pragmatics is the social use of language and exhibits how you speak to different people in different settings. Sam talks to Lucy, his lawyer, his boss, his friends, etc in the same manner. Sam lacks appropriate eye contact, constantly looks away from others and looks up at ceiling. Frequently, Sam’s use of morphology would be incorrect as well. He would use affixes incorrectly, for example when he would place “ed” at the end of words where it didn’t belong to make words such as “hurted” or “thoughted.” I did however find Sam’s use of phonology very good. He was always very articulate and pronounced all his words. He would sound out every letter in the word. I believe he would do this because he thought about what he was going to say before he said it.

Sam has a lot of trouble communicating with other people, but it is in fact a result of his disability. He also uses words that a 7 year old would use such as “oopsies” and “meanie.” Additionally, he tends to repeat words or phrases that he’s familiar with, for example while working at Starbucks, he’ll repeat back the customer’s order then say “that’s a wonderful choice.” Sam faces many difficulties due to his disability but he finds a way to get through them. He’s a positive person who reaches for the stars, even if the stars is being promoted to making coffee at Starbucks.
Based on your knowledge of language development, was the character accurately or inaccurately characterized? How? Contributors: Kimberly Williams & Nejha Edwards

In the film *I Am Sam*, there were accuracies about the character in the way he was represented. For example, whenever Sam would try to read to his daughter Lucy, he would use books that were at his IQ level which was equivalent to a 7 year old. There was one book that he wanted Lucy to read to him because he knew that he didn’t have the ability to read at that level.

Another example would be when Sam visits his neighbor Annie. She gives him advice on how to care for his daughter. Instead of using time from a clock, she uses the timing of television shows to explain when he should bottle feed Lucy. Also, in a scene that takes place in his lawyer’s office, Rita was arguing with her assistant and kicked the candy dish off of the coffee table. Then Sam scurries off into a corner and is scared of her just as a child would act when someone is showing this type of anger.

In another scene, as previously mentioned, Sam and his daughter Lucy are at the Big Boy restaurant. Sam orders a familiar dish from the IHOP menu and doesn’t understand why he can’t get that dish at the Big Boy restaurant. His inability to understand the waitress caused him to make a scene which demonstrates the intellect of a child when they don’t get their way.

However, Sam’s character was also inaccurately characterized at times. I found the film to be a little unrealistic. It was missing some key elements about the characters’ background so the viewer wouldn’t have to make assumptions.

When people think of someone who is handicapped or mentally retarded, the first thought may be what the severity of the person’s mental illness is. Some are just physically handicapped, others are mentally handicapped, and some are both. Sam being mentally disabled and at the
level of a 7 year old, I found it unrealistic that he would even know how to take care of a baby or know anything about babies.

In the movie, he took the baby home and was abandoned by the daughter’s mother, which her story alone is ridiculous and seems like it was a last minute thought. He took the child home and knew how to give her a bottle and change the baby’s diapers, but in reality someone with that type of disability would be clueless. The fact that he knew to get up when the baby was crying was not an accurate depiction of someone with his mental illness. I felt that the director juggled between Sam’s mental retardation and someone with an average IQ.

Also other characters in the film inaccurately portrayed their view on his mental disabilities, since they were just as irresponsible as he was. For example, Sam was able to take his baby to work in a front carrier until his boss finally told him that he couldn’t because the baby was 5 months old and was too big to bring to work. What employer allows you to take your child to work especially working at Starbucks? Even the hospital staff allowed him to take the baby home without noticing that he’s mentally disabled and that the mother was clearly depressed. It literally took until the child was around 7 years old before a social worker became involved in the situation.

All things considered, the movie was entertaining as it should have been but it was unrealistic and an inaccurate view of Sam’s character. I think more research should have been conducted to make sure that these slight inaccuracies would not appear in the movie.

How did the person's language disorder help develop the character?

**Contributors:** Margaret Black & Darlene Gutierrez

The character of Sam has a main diagnosis of Autism. This mental disability affects his language and speech patterns. Although there are many different forms of autism which may or
may not affect the individual's speech and language, Sean Penn's representation of a man with autism exhibits common language and speech disorders typical to the mental disability. The interpretation of autism throughout different variations in the film creates a believable character and leaves the viewer with a sense of authenticity for the story line and other characters.

A person with autism “who can speak, will (often) say things that have no meaning or that seem out of context in conversations with others” (National Institute of Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD), 2010). For instance, when Sam was being questioned on the stand about what it takes to be a good father, he started explaining his idea in his own words. Yet somehow he integrated a scene from “Kramer vs. Kramer”, which confused everyone in the courtroom, then he started talking about a little boy instead.

Also throughout the movie, Sam has instances of Echolalia, a common condition where an individual with autism continuously repeats words (NIDCD, 2010). He will often repeat himself several times when he is flustered, emotional, or when he is being asked many questions in a fast paced conversation. The character of Sam also speaks in a higher pitched voice, often having trouble with fluency and word rhythms, which is another typical attribute of autistic speech disorders (NIDCD, 2010).

Another feature of speech and language disorders that creates Sam Dawson as a believable character with autism is his developmentally delayed speech and language patterns. The fact that Sam Dawson was developmentally around the age of 7 was a big factor in the case of whether or not he was a fit father. In the movie, Sam's language is typical to that of a 7 year old.

For instance, Sam can understand the representation of the color red in Lucy's paintings, to be her foster mother's love of the color. This understanding and connection was the reason
why he asked Randy to continue to be in Lucy's life as a mother figure. This ability of connecting relationships between people and items are usually seen developmentally between ages 6 and 7 (Child Development Institute, 2010).

Sam’s language disorder also helped to give depth and interest to the plot. If you think about it, the movie actually has two unique storylines. One describes a situation where a father is classified as incapable to provide for his 7 year old daughter due to his financial status, small living quarters and inability to help her intellectually grow.

When you look at the other side of the story you see a man in his thirties that has a mental disability which prevents him from living a normal life. You watch his repetitive daily habits and social interactions with friends that have disabilities similar to his. You are then able to connect with the character through a sympathetic point of view. When you put these two storylines into one movie it makes for a compelling story that teaches two morals: “Love is all you need” and most importantly “learning to love who you are” as a unique individual.

Sam tries to be the best father he knows how to be. He gave Lucy a roof over her head, new clothes and shoes, delicious meals from their favorite IHOP restaurant and organized a fun filled party fit for a young girl. But from the outsider’s perspective, you can see that Sam’s favorite things to do with Lucy are the same activities that a 7 year old boy would enjoy doing such as playing on the swings, climbing trees, folding paper birds, pillow fights and reading his favorite Dr. Seuss book over and over again.

All of these activities make for cheerful memories spent with his young daughter, but as she grows older she begins to realize that her dad is different than other dads. This is what makes Sam’s character in the movie more intriguing. It gives an insight on how families with disabilities operate on a day to day schedule and what alterations they have to make to
accommodate their special needs. The movie highlights the abilities and limitations people with mental disabilities have, and in Sam’s case, explains the story of his failure as being a father and how he overcomes this life changing dilemma.

Sam’s everlasting love for his daughter gives him the strength to step out of his comfort zone and reach out for help. Whether it was fate or dumb luck, Sam finds Rita, a “cold ruthless” Los Angeles lawyer from a yellow pages ad, to help him fight a custody battle to keep his daughter. Rita is a high energy, “high-powered, intense, angry”, and yet sophisticated woman that has to learn what it is like to slow down and help somebody less fortunate that is desperately reaching out for her assistance. After much struggle she finally has a breaking point where she discovers that Sam, although mentally disabled, really has a heart filled with “love, devotion and goodness.”

In the movie she makes a heart-warming statement when she says, Sam you “did much more for me than I did for you.” She realized Sam had taught her that life is not about social status or high end clients but about the love of family and the lengths you will go to do everything you can to protect it.

Did it assist in plot development?
**Contributor:** Jennifer Choe

Sam’s disabilities are portrayed throughout the movie and assist in many aspects of the plot development. From the beginning of the movie, to the rising climax and to the conclusion, Sam’s disabilities interfere continuously. His everyday life, including his minimum wage paying job for eight years and his ability to raise a child is affected due to his developmental disorder.

One of the key points in the movie is when Lucy is born. Lucy’s mother leaves Lucy and Sam shortly after she gives birth. This undoubtedly is a direct reaction of Sam’s disabilities.
There is a part in the movie where Sam explains that Lucy’s mother told him, “This isn’t my life and I didn’t want a baby with you. I just needed a place to sleep” (I Am Sam, movie). She clearly did not “love” Sam or Lucy for that matter. She was just using Sam for a place to stay because she knew Sam is mentally challenged. Sam is therefore left with the difficult task of raising a daughter alone. This sets the plot for the remainder of the movie and everything else is a direct effect of this one event alone.

Sam somehow takes on the challenge of raising an infant child alone with some help from his hermit neighbor, Annie and succeeds by raising a gifted 7 year old child. However, there is a crucial turning point in the plot of the movie. Sam is confronted by a hooker in one scene and is arrested. Due to his disability, Sam is not able to recognize a hooker let alone fully understand the situation. Sam was able to avoid prosecution because of his obvious impairment however he was not able to escape the social workers.

Sam’s difficulties to understand situations and his unintentional social mistakes lead to the social workers removing Lucy from his custody. Lucy was intentionally holding back in school to avoid surpassing her father’s intellect. The social workers believed Sam to be an unfit father for Lucy and believed he lacked necessary attributes to be a suitable father.

After losing Lucy, Sam is able to acquire a high-powered lawyer (Rita Harrison) pro-bono. This is due to Sam’s unfltering perseverance. It is clear throughout the movie that Rita did not want to help Sam. The only person that could not pick up on the obvious was Sam himself.

Through his constant visits, he was able to call attention on both himself and Rita throughout her workplace, which led to Rita unwillingly taking on his case in order to save her
own reputation. Rita eventually learns to understand and accept Sam’s disabilities. She eventually develops a deeper relationship with Sam which in itself helps to sort out her own crumbling life. Rita’s new found relationship with Sam helps them work together and fight for Sam’s parental rights.

There are many factors that prevent Sam from showing his abilities as a good father. These factors include unsubstantial witnesses as well as his disabilities. The only witnesses Sam could provide are his close group of friends that are all suffering from mental disabilities as he is. Also, there is a critical part in the movie where Sam takes the stand. Sam’s disabilities are clearly revealed when he is unable to handle the pressures of the lawyers and is unable to convey any of his thoughts. He clearly shows signs of panic, anxiety, confusion and emotional distress.

Sam is able to win Lucy back in the end of the film through one person, Lucy’s foster mother. She is a character who in the beginning, judges Sam based on his disability. She views his developmental disorder as a problem and does not believe he is fit to raise Lucy. Later, like many people who come and go throughout Sam’s life, she realizes his innocent child like heart. His true love and care for Lucy are evident through many run-ins with her foster mother and she does something unbelievable. She takes Sam’s side and undoubtedly in the end, becomes one of the key characters in returning Lucy to Sam.

The plot development is directly influenced from Sam’s disabilities. With his disability, he is able to capture many hearts and make unbelievable friends throughout the film. His disability single-handedly leads to losing his daughter in the beginning, however, his disability also helped him gain several close relationships throughout the film as well as his most beloved relationship of all, his daughter.
Sam’s language disorder has also allowed the plot to resonate with viewers much after the film ends. This may have been just a character in a movie, but this story represents real life situations that people face every day. The integration of Sam’s disorder and his journey throughout the movie can help people that are unfamiliar with the trials of those with a communicative disorder to empathize with them and be more accepting.
Works Cited


