

Children's Agency in Jory John's *The Good Egg*

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, American children's literature has increasingly highlighted children's agency, reflecting broader cultural shifts toward recognizing children's autonomy and decision-making abilities. This paper analyzes the exercises of agency and the triggers behind them in a picture book titled *The Good Egg* by Jory John. Drawing on Bandura's Agency Theory, we analyze the exercises of agency done by the main character and the triggers that caused them to exercise it. The analysis reveals that the Good Egg exercises his agency by making proactive commitments, future planning, self-regulation and motivation, and self-reflection. While his agency initially appears rigid, often rooted in idealized or externally influenced standards, it gradually evolves into a more reflective form. In addition, he exercises his agency after being triggered by his past experiences. Ultimately, the main character's exercise of agency, including the triggers behind them, illustrates ways for young readers to use agency in their daily lives.

Keywords: children's agency, future planning, proactive commitment, self-reflection, self-regulation

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature is defined as creative work specifically created for and aimed at children (Pulimeno et al., 2020, p. 14). It helps them understand different viewpoints and learn about complex ideas in a child-friendly manner (Simpson & Cremin, 2022, pp. 5–6). One significant genre in this category is picture books, which are illustrated stories for young readers, typically between 4 to 8 years old (Laundry, 2019). These books often simplify difficult concepts through engaging narratives and a lot of visuals. The focus of this paper is on picture books, particularly "The Good Egg" by Jory John, which highlights themes of personal growth and pressure to be perfect.

"The Good Egg" tells the story of the Good Egg who feels overwhelmed by the expectations of his community. He decides to take a break from the community that stresses him and takes time off to reflect on the conflict. He eventually comes back with a changed view, no longer clinging to perfection, and that way resolves the issue on his own (John, 2019). The character's journey emphasizes self-reflection, personal choice, and the importance of addressing one's challenges independently, without relying on adult intervention. This portrayal in the story promotes ideas of self-reliance, critical thinking, and the ability to shape one's life decisions.

The story shows that agency—the idea that individuals can make choices and act on their own, shaping their environment based on their decisions—is a key theme in American children's literature, reflecting a growing recognition of children's autonomy in the 21st century (Rutherford, 2009). The research aims to explore how the character in "The Good Egg" exercises his agency and what prompts him to do so. The purpose of this paper is to explore the ways the Good Egg exercises his agency and factors that trigger him to exercise his agency.

To analyze agency in "The Good Egg," the research will use Bandura's four core features of agency theory: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. According to Bandura, to be an agent means to cause effects through one's own actions. The

moral value of these actions is less important than the intention behind them (Bandura, 2005). The analysis will explore how the character's actions reflect personal agency despite external pressures. Bandura's triadic reciprocal causation model, which includes interactions between personal factors, behavior, and the environment, will also be applied to understand how agency is influenced by external challenges while still being exercised by the individual (Bandura, 2005). This framework helps identify how the protagonist's self-awareness and intentional change reflect personal agency despite external challenges.

The Exercises of Agency in *the Good Egg*

In this book titled *The Good Egg*, the main character, known as the Good Egg, strives to maintain his reputation for being perfect and upholding his title. In trying to achieve his goal, he exercises his agency through making proactive commitments, future planning, practicing self-regulation and motivation, and doing self-reflection.

The first way he exercises his agency is by making a proactive commitment. According to Bandura, intentionality involves having a proactive commitment to achieve a goal. In this case, the Good Egg is determined to maintain his reputation as the "good egg." His proactive commitment to being good is not occasional but a constant, purposeful effort to uphold this identity. It is demonstrated through the Good Egg's actions. The first action that shows his proactive commitment is that he constantly feels the need to help others. This reflects his internal drive to live up to his identity as a "good egg" by acting in ways he believes are helpful and kind. For instance, in figure 1, he is seen helping a cat, carrying groceries, watering plants, and changing a tire.



Figure 1. "The Good Egg Helping a Cat, Carrying Groceries, Watering Plants, and Changing Tires" *The Good Egg*, page 1 and 3

His actions reveal that he feels obligated to assist others, which demonstrates the intentional effort he puts into maintaining his reputation. He demonstrates his willingness to assist those in need right away. It all happened in the early part of the book, which shows that he is very determined to be the good egg right from the beginning. Though he puts a lot of effort into ensuring that he is the reliable Good Egg, it can also be seen that some of his help is not actually helpful. He over watered the plants and made someone lift a heavy car. Although some of his help does not yield a good result, it does not affect his agency. As Bandura suggests, the result of his action does not matter in determining his agency, as it is only the consequence of his actions. What matters is that the Good Egg constantly shows his agency through his determination to make his goal happen.

In addition to his desire to help, the Good Egg's proactive commitment is shown in his action of maintaining order in his community. His act of controlling others, which includes

things such as correcting misbehavior and trying to impose rules, is not random or passive but an intentional choice rooted in his own understanding of what it means to be truly “good.” For the Good Egg, being good must extend beyond his own behavior. He believes that a truly good egg should not only behave well but also encourage or enforce good behavior in others. One instance that shows his strong belief in the importance of being a role model to maintain his status as a 'good egg' is proven by his statement in the figures below.

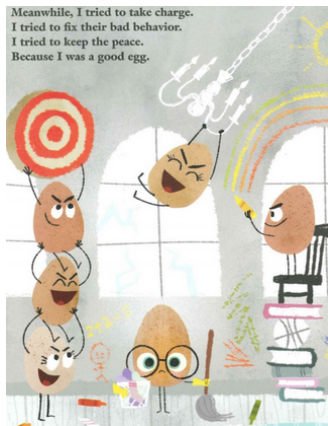


Figure 2. “*The Good Egg Trying to Take Charge of the Situation,*” *The Good Egg*, page 9

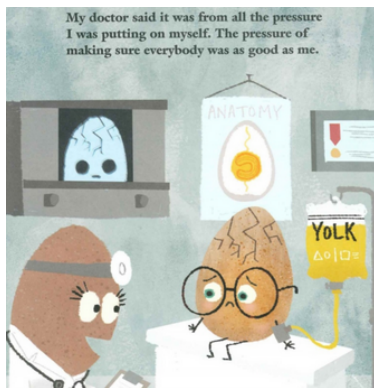


Figure 3. “*The Good Egg Going to the Doctor because of the Crack,*” *The Good Egg*, page 13

As shown in figure 2, the Good Egg fails to fix his community of unruly eggs and states that he was a good egg. By using the word 'was,' he signals his belief that failing to influence the other eggs means he is no longer a good egg. As explained earlier, despite his failure to maintain order, the result of his commitment does not matter. His agency is still shown through his proactive commitment to being perfect, as reflected in his actions. While it is only stated once in figure 2 that the Good Egg tries to fix his community, it can be seen in figure 3 that the Good Egg even has to go to the doctor as his shell starts to crack from the constant pressure. That means he constantly has to deal with situations as such, and it does not only happen once.

Extending his proactive commitment, the second way he exercises his agency is by doing future planning. According to Bandura’s concept of agency, forethought extends intentionality as the agent does future planning by choosing a path that can bring good results and avoiding the one that can bring bad results. Future planning explains more on why his proactive commitment is done intentionally. It is done by showing the reason and deliberation part that he takes in order to do the action that he thinks can help him to reach his goal. In future planning, he anticipates good results and avoids bad consequences.

The Good Egg's future planning begins with anticipating good results. This anticipation leads him to choose a path that can bring good outcomes. This extends his intentionality by showing the thought process and the reason behind his actions in expectation of the future. A clear example of this future planning is his consistent effort to help others. As mentioned earlier and shown in figure 1, the Good Egg has been trying to do kind actions since the beginning, such as helping a cat, bringing groceries, watering plants, and changing tires. He thinks that by doing these things, he will be able to maintain his status as the "good egg." He holds himself to a standard that a good egg does good deeds. He wants to perceive himself that way, and he also hopes others will see him as such. Therefore, this act of helping is done in order to preserve his image as a good egg. Each act is performed with the expectation that it will have a positive impact on how others perceive him. This shows that The Good Egg is not simply acting on impulse. He is consciously planning his behavior to maintain his identity.

At a glance, this act may seem pretentious, as if he is only doing it for personal gain, but that does not matter in determining his agency. The morality of his actions is not what determines his agency. According to Bandura, what determines his agency is the intentionality behind his action. His act of helping is done intentionally, with a specific goal of positively impacting his reputation, and therefore his agency still stands. It also may appear that he is simply merely answering society's pressure, but Bandura, in his theory about agency, acknowledges that someone's agency can be the result of their internal desire, which interacts with outside influences. In the Good Egg's case, he might have been pressured by social expectation to keep his reputation, but ultimately the decision is made by himself. His agency still stands, as the existence of outside influences does not cancel out his intentional actions.

Besides anticipating good outcomes in future planning, he anticipates the bad outcome. In this process, he is stopping bad things from happening by using preventive measures. A clear example of this future planning is his consistent effort to stop the other eggs from creating chaos. As mentioned before in figure 2, the other eleven eggs are not on their best behavior, and he feels the need to stop them. He feels that by managing the chaos around him, he can bring order and prevent things from escalating further. He thinks of it as a threat to his good reputation, as sometimes others view someone's identity by judging who they engage with. The other eleven eggs do things as they please, and he does not want to be associated with that. This forward-thinking behavior shows how the Good Egg plans for the worst. By stopping the other eggs, he is protecting his role and his reputation, which is in line with what he wants to achieve. Although his controlling behavior may not be morally ideal, his agency still stands, as Bandura does not add morality as the criteria of agency.

From these two early exercises of agency, we see that the Good Egg shows his agency in a weak way. While he generally means well and does things with calculated intentionality, he pushes himself too hard to fulfill his own standard of perfection and tries to control everything around him to also fit that standard. As time goes on, things become too much and difficult for him as that self-imposed standard pressures him. The constant pressure starts to affect his overall well-being in life. His shell begins to crack under that immense pressure, which shows that this strict way and standard of being good is not working anymore. This becomes a turning point in his journey. From this moment on, his exercise of agency begins to evolve in a more balanced and healthier way.

Besides the two exercises of agency mentioned earlier, the third way he exercises his agency is through self-regulation and motivation. These two processes are vital for emotional well-being and are especially significant to see the agency of the Good Egg. According to Bandura, self-reactiveness involves making self-evaluations and creating self-incentives to sustain their efforts for goal attainment. In the Good Egg's case, self-regulation enables him to manage his emotions, while motivation helps him pursue healing and growth. The first step in

his self-regulation is acknowledging his emotional distress. As mentioned earlier in figures 2 and 3, when he cracks, he admits that there is something wrong. He interprets the crack as the fact that he is no longer a good egg because a good egg has to be functional, and he cannot function properly while unwell. After recognizing that, as mentioned previously in figure 4, he seeks professional help. He is aware that he cannot fix his crack alone and therefore goes to the doctor for medical care. By going to the doctor, he demonstrates emotional regulation in action. He is acknowledging his problem and taking active steps to deal with it.

Once he has taken action to stabilize his emotional state, the Good Egg turns to self-motivation to support his healing. The goal of the Good Egg remains the same, that is, to stay as a good egg. As has been mentioned, he believes he has to heal from the crack in order to come back as the good egg. In order to reach that, he is aware of his need to take some time alone to heal the cracks in his shell. He then engages in calming activities, taking time off from his stressful environment. These calming and creative actions are some of the ways the Good Egg actively takes charge of his healing process, showing growth in his agency, such as illustrated in figure 4.



Figure 4. “*The Good Egg Reading, Floating in the River, Writing, Doing Breathing Exercises and Painting*” *The Good Egg*, page 19 and 20

The activities above are significant signs of growth. The Good Egg prioritizes his healing. He is no longer clinging to making sure everything is done correctly. By choosing to prioritize his healing journey, the Good Egg demonstrates a deeper understanding of his own needs and limitations. The shift from simply trying to be good and perfect to actively taking care of himself is an important point of transformation in his growth. These actions reveal how healing is not just about fixing what is broken but also about being a start of the Good Egg’s growth and his healthier way to exercise agency. His complex journey emphasizes that personal growth often requires pauses that allow individuals to return stronger and more balanced after the period of break.

The final exercise of agency done by the Good Egg is self-reflection. According to Bandura, self-reflection involves a metacognitive activity where individuals evaluate their past actions and beliefs based on the outcomes and consequences they have experienced. In doing self-reflection, the Good Egg reflects on his past behavior and moves on with the new outlook. In Good Egg’s case, self-reflection plays a really pivotal role toward his emotional healing and transformation. As explained earlier, after the crack, he takes time to step away from the pressure of perfectionism. He is using activities such as walking, painting, reading, and breathing exercises to relieve stress and take care of his emotional state. The time he takes in solitude really enables him to reflect on how his obsession with perfection and wanting to do

things up to a high standard has created a very negative and harsh impact on his well-being. This moment of realization and acknowledgement marks an important turning point in his emotional journey. He learns to treat himself with the same kindness he wants to show others. With this newfound insight, the Good Egg returns to his community, no longer driven by his highly impossible standards. This is especially evident in figure 5 below.

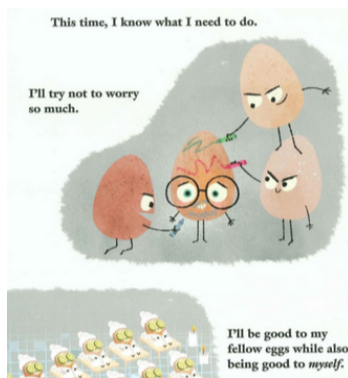


Figure 5. “*The Good Egg’s New Outlook*,” *The Good Egg*, page 26

As seen in figure 5, the Good Egg's new outlook represents his decision to move forward and exercise his agency in a healthier way. In the picture, he physically lets the other eggs draw and scribble on him, which he would not have tolerated before. This shows that he has learned to accept that it is not a problem to have a little fun when it is not necessarily dangerous or damaging. In that specific case, he knows he can just wash off the crayon later on even when his shell is colorful now. From all the exercises of agency, it is clear that it reveals how the Good Egg actively does things on his own to solve problems in interacting with his community. He is actively making his own choices, setting goals, and adapting to challenges. However, understanding how he exercises agency can only tell a part of the story. To fully understand his development, it is also important to analyze why he acts the way he does.

Factors That Trigger the Good Egg's Agency

Behind his exercises of agency, there are two primary factors that drive the Good Egg's exercise of agency. Those are his relentless pursuit of perfectionism and the emotional breakdown represented by the crack in his shell. In the first half of the story, the Good Egg's agency is primarily triggered by his internalized personal standards and the external pressure of his environment in his pursuit of perfectionism. His desire to uphold the identity of being a “good egg” drives his proactive commitment and future planning. He believes that he and others can consider him a good egg if he does good deeds. His unideal community of eleven other eggs is also what drives him to be controlling in order to be a good role model. This is shown in figure 6.



Figure 6. “*The Other Eggs Ignoring Bedtime, Only Eating Sugary Stuff, Throwing Tantrums, Crying, and Breaking Stuff,*” *The Good Egg*, page 7 and 8

By helping and being a good role model, he believes he can keep his status as the good egg. The main factor that triggers his exercise of agency is seeing how his standard is not reflected and respected by his community. Constantly living with other eggs that are the polar opposite of him will indeed cause him a lot of stress. While it is mainly triggered by his community, which is an outside influence, it is important to remember that, according to Bandura, it does not cancel out his agency. It still stands as the Good Egg still ultimately makes the decision to act by himself.

In contrast, the second half of the story marks a turning point. At that point in the story, his agency is triggered by the emotional and physical consequences of striving for perfection. It is symbolized by the crack. This moment forces him to reevaluate his beliefs through self-regulation, motivation, and ultimately, self-reflection. He comes to understand that perfection is an unattainable and harmful goal and instead shifts his agency toward healing, emotional balance, and self-compassion. That allows him to be good to himself while also being good to others, which is the true meaning of being a good egg. In this stage his agency is done in a healthier way, in that he has achieved acceptance. He understands that he cannot force people to live like him, and he can still be a good egg even without forcing himself or others to live a perfect life.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of *The Good Egg* through Bandura’s concept of agency shows how the Good Egg exercises his agency through proactive commitment, future planning, self-regulation, motivation, and self-reflection. He demonstrates that agency is not limited to big and perfectly good gestures but is often expressed through even imperfect kinds of actions. It reveals how agency works as a continuous and evolving process shaped by personal aspirations and influenced by external forces.

His strong desire to be perfect reflects his strong commitment to a self-image, supported by future planning where he aims for good outcomes and avoids bad ones. Even when his actions benefit only himself and may seem morally questionable, they still reflect agency, as Bandura emphasizes intentionality over morality. As challenges arise, the Good Egg continues to exercise agency through self-regulation. He does that by taking time off and spending time in nature. He then motivates himself to adjust and pursue his goal in a better way. His self-reflection helps him look back on what didn’t work and redefine his goals. These exercises of agency are triggered by his strong view of self-image and past experiences with the imperfect community. Even though his community influences him, his agency stands, as Bandura notes that agency results from personal aspirations interacting with external forces.

As a picture book for children, *The Good Egg* carries an educational message. It models agentic behavior in an age-appropriate way by showing children that it is acceptable to struggle and change direction. The absence of adult’s intervention shows that the story wants children to see that it is possible to act and solve problems on their own. Watching the Good Egg solve his problem and grow turns abstract ideas like reflection and motivation into concrete examples for young readers. The story teaches that agency does not mean that one has to get everything right immediately, but it means choosing to act, reflect, and grow despite challenges.

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In our opinion, *The Good Egg* successfully blends emotional and moral lessons with agency. It normalizes struggle and shows that growth is possible. Through the story, children are not just entertained but also empowered to think and act independently. The character's evolving agency offers valuable life lessons for navigating identity, pressure, and change.

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