

EVALUATING CHILDREN'S BOOKS THAT ADDRESS DISABILITY

Multicultural literature serves as both a mirror that reflects students' identities and a window to the world beyond their individual experiences and communities. Books can be powerful vehicles for self-affirmation, and for the development of empathy and appreciation for those who are different.

When it comes to books that address disability, educators and families may need to make a special effort to ensure that children are exposed to diverse and positive images of people with physical, mental, emotional, and learning differences. The historical isolation and marginalization of people with disabilities in the U.S. has resulted in book and media portrayals that are frequently negative, outdated, and stereotypical. Too often, people with disabilities are entirely absent from children's literature.

In 2000, a study by Blaska examined 40 early childhood programs in Minnesota for literacy rich environments. A total of 1,677 books were reviewed for the inclusion of disability or illness. Of these books, 24 had some inclusion, representing 1.4% of the literature available for children's independent use. While most of the classrooms had an ample supply of books representing diversity of culture (73% had 1–10 multicultural books available for students), few had books available that had characters with disabilities. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of the classrooms had no books with characters with disabilities or illness. The remaining 42% had one or two books available (Blaska, 2000).

When Blaska conducted an informal survey of parents and professionals about their knowledge and use of children's literature with characters with disabilities, she found they didn't know what books were available or how to use them appropriately. Many professionals indicated they would include literature about a disability only when a child with a disability became a member of their class.

By the time children encounter people with disabilities in their communities, they may already have integrated negative stereotypes and prejudices, and may display fear or uneasiness. Introducing young children to literature with diverse and textured depictions of people with disabilities can help to offset societal prejudices and instill healthy attitudes about a population of people larger than any single ethnic,

racial, or cultural group in the U.S.—at 57 million or 19.3% of the population, the number of people with disabilities exceeds the next largest group (Hispanic people) by over 13 million!

ADL's [Books Matter](#) suggests a number of positive and age appropriate ways. Educators and parents are encouraged to work with their school and community librarians and local disability organizations to identify additional books that address disability. The following guidelines are offered for reviewing and selecting children's books that address disability.

AVOID BOOKS THAT...

- Cast people with disabilities as victims and evoke pity, sorrow or sentimentality toward them.
- Include characters with disabilities only in tokenistic ways, or as objects of curiosity, rather than as developed characters with distinct lives and personalities.
- Define characters' personalities by their disabilities and portray them as sad, incomplete, bitter, or angry in disproportionate ways (rather than as distinctive individuals with the full human range of character traits).
- Characterize people with disabilities in stereotypically positive ways that compensate for their "deficiency," such as having unusual emotional or physical characteristics, special spiritual or moral insights, superior intellectual abilities or wisdom, or unnaturally inspirational qualities
- Represent the achievements or ordinary actions of people with disabilities as heroic.
- Never show people with disabilities as independent, but rather depict them as overly helpless and in need of excessive support and assistance from people without disabilities in order to lead a functional life.
- Portray people with disabilities as overly preoccupied with their conditions and consumed with the hope of recovery or cure
- Represent people with disabilities or the disabilities themselves as shameful, unattractive, or something to be hidden.
- Utilize condescending or pejorative language (e.g., special, crazy, sick, slow, cripple, dumb, retarded, idiot).

- Only show people with disabilities in passive roles and never show them in active or leadership positions.
- Show people with disabilities only in “special” settings and programs, and never show them participating in activities considered typical for their age group.
- Dwell on what people with disabilities can’t do rather than what they can do.
- Represent disabilities as deficiencies rather than differences.
- Present disabilities as problems only for the people who have them and not for the broader society (i.e. prejudice, discrimination, inequity, access).
- Depict adolescent and adult people with disabilities as asexual and without the same emotional or sexual needs and attachments as other people their age.
- Portray allies to people with disabilities as inspirations or “saints” for helping them, or as especially wonderful simply for simply being their friends.

CHOOSE BOOKS THAT...

- Use language that stresses the person first and the disability second (people with disabilities, not disabled people).
- Promote empathy and an overall feeling of understanding for people with disabilities, as well as provide accurate information about a specific disability.
- Demonstrate respect for and acceptance of people with disabilities, and depict them as more similar than different from other people (“one of us” rather than “one of them”).
- Emphasize the successes of people with disabilities and show their strengths and abilities along with their disabilities.
- Promote positive images of persons with disabilities and represent them as strong, independent people, who others can look up to or admire.
- Represent people with disabilities from different racial and cultural backgrounds, religions, age groups, and sexual orientations.

- Depict valued occupations for persons with disabilities and show them in diverse and active roles.
- Depict people with disabilities in integrated settings and activities—in school, at work, or in the community among peers with and without disabilities.
- Illustrate characters and adaptive equipment accurately.

References

Blaska, Joan K.. 2004. "Children's Literature That Includes Characters With Disabilities or Illnesses." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 24(1). <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/854/1029>.

Circle of Inclusion Project. 2002. "Nine Ways to Evaluate Children's Books that Address Disability as Part of Diversity." University of Kansas: Circle of Inclusion Project. www.libraryweb.org/images/NineWays.pdf.

Circle of Inclusion Project. 2002. "Quick Ways to Analyze Books that Help Schools Support Disability Awareness." University of Kansas: Circle of Inclusion Project.

Council on Interracial Books for Children. 1980. *Guidelines for Selecting Bias-Free Textbooks and Storybooks*. New York, NY: Council on Interracial Books for Children.

Derman-Sparks, L. and the ABC Task Force. 1989. *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1989.

Schneider, Marj, and Moss, D.J. 2004. *Disabled Characters in Children's Literature*. CT State Department of Education, 2004.

Slapin, Beverly, Lessing, Jill, Belkind, Elaine. 1987. *Books Without Bias: A Guide to Evaluating Children's Literature for Handicapism*. Berkeley, CA: KIDS Project.

PROVIDED BY: Education Division