

Nine Ways to Evaluate Children's Books That Address Disability as Part of Diversity

1) Check The Illustrations: Look for Stereotypes. A stereotype is an over-simplified generalization about a particular group, race, or sex, which usually carries derogatory implications. Some common stereotypes suggested by Derman-Sparks and the Anti-Bias Curriculum Task Force (1989) include Native-Americans as being naked and savage or “Primitive” crafts persons; or African-Americans as being happy-go-lucky, watermelon-eating Sambos or fat, eye-rolling “mammys.” Children’s books should not help support or perpetuate any stereotypes. Consequently, books that represent children with disabilities should do so in ways that do not promote stereotypes. For example, look for books that show children with disabilities in the same classes as their non-disabled peers, participating in the same activities as their peers.

Look for Tokenism. The term tokenism was originally created in order to address the issue of how minorities are represented in books. For example, in evaluating tokenism in a book, one would look to see if all minority faces appeared stereotypically alike or if they are depicted as genuine individuals with distinctive features. In the same respect, it is desirable that children with disabilities be represented in books as genuine individuals with distinctive features. It is appropriate to have a child with a physical disability in a wheelchair or using another type of adaptive device as long as the reader also views the child as being a distinctive individual with his/her own personality and characteristics.

Who’s Doing What? The illustrations should depict children with disabilities in leadership and action roles. The children with disabilities should not only be active observers while the children without disabilities are always the “doers.”

2) Check The Story Line: Standard for Success. To gain acceptance and approval, the child with a disability should not have to exhibit extraordinary qualities, such as exceptional memory or math skills. The child should not have to walk or run with his friends to be accepted by them.

Resolution of Problems. Look at how the problems in the story are presented, conceived and resolved. The person with the disability should not be considered part of the “the problem.” When appropriate, the reasons for the disabilities should be explained to the child.

Role of Person With a Disability. The achievements of the person with a disability should be based on his/her own initiative and intelligence. This story should be able to be told in the same way even if the main character did not have a disability.

3) Look at the Lifestyles: If the person with the disability is depicted as “different,” no negative value judgments should be implied. The illustrations and text should offer genuine insights into another person.

4) Weigh the Relationships Between People: The people without disabilities should not possess all of the power, take all of the leadership roles, and make all of the important decisions. The children with disabilities should not only function in supportive or, subservient roles. Neither should the reverse be true. There should be a clear balance of roles.

5) Consider the Effects on a Child's Self-Image: Norms should not be established which limit any child's aspirations and self-concept. By continuously bombarding a child with a disability with images of "typical" children as the ultimate in beauty, cleanliness, and virtue, we are harming the child's self-image. In each story, there should be at least one or more persons with whom a child with a disability can readily identify as a positive and constructive role model.

6) Consider the Author's or Illustrator's Background: Analyze the biographical material on the jacket flap or the back of the book. Look for qualities that the author or illustrator may have that would help them understand and contribute knowledgeably to a specific theme or topic.

7) Check Out the Author's Perspective: No author can be entirely objective. All authors write from a cultural as well as from a personal context. Children's books in the past have traditionally come from authors who were white, non disabled, and who were members of the middle class, with the result being a single ethnocentric perspective dominated children's literature in the United States (Derman-Sparks & the A.B.C. Task Force, 1989). With any book in question, read carefully to determine whether the direction of the author's perspective substantially weakens or strengthens the value of his/her written work.

8) Watch for Loaded Words: A word is loaded when it has offensive overtones. Examples of loaded adjectives specific to children with disabilities are "slow," "retarded," "lazy," "docile," "backwards," "crazy," "feeble-minded," "cripple," "idiot," "deaf," "dumb," and sometimes "special."

9) Look at the Copyright Date and Target Age: There are not many books written about children with disabilities. The limited number that are available are dated and use language that is not "people first" (a child with autism, instead of an autistic child) or may now be considered offensive, such as the current term "retarded." Most newer books use "people first" language, however, make sure to check all books for people first language because some authors may not be as familiar with the importance of its use.

Some books state that they are intended for very young children, but in fact they are not written for children as young as the authors claim. Before reading a book to a class make sure it is developmentally appropriate for the children to whom you are going to read it.

Adapted from:

Council on Interracial Books for Children (1980). Guidelines for selecting bias-free and storybooks.

Derman-Sparks, L., & the ABC Task Force. (1989). Anti-bias curriculum: Tools for empowering young children.

Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.