

# Including All of Us



## Diversity in children's books

**How do you select the books you read with children? Do you simply grab an old favorite off the shelf? Maybe you order titles that sound interesting from a catalog?**

As early childhood programs grow to include children of different cultures, languages, ethnicities, and abilities, the need to examine the books we use has also grown. The words, pictures, and concepts we use with young children are very important. Everyone knows that reading with children can support literacy, build vocabulary and concepts, and introduce new ideas. But the learning that occurs isn't confined to language and literacy skills. The stories and illustrations in children's books can do much, much more. The books we share with children can heighten or deflate a child's self esteem, enhance or belittle a child's heritage, and advance or curtail each child's understanding of the world around them. Books that portray characters of diverse backgrounds and abilities in

negative or thoughtless ways, teach or reinforce stereotypes, belittle home language and culture, and foster prejudice.

What are the books in your classroom teaching children? To affirm the wonderful diversity of our world, make sure the books you're using are appropriate by examining how they reflect culture, language, and ability. And seek new books that provide positive images of diversity.

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### **Here are some things to look for.**

- **Look at the illustrations.** Do the illustrations portray characters realistically or do they perpetuate stereotypes. For example, are Mexican American characters shown as manual laborers? Do the American Indian characters typically wear feathered



headdresses and ride horses? Are elderly characters portrayed as feeble and forgetful? Do the illustrations accurately and respectfully reflect many kinds of diversity (regarding age, socioeconomic status, ability, ethnicity, and so forth)? Look for books that include aspects of diversity that are present among the children in your classroom or center. *Mama Zooms*, by Jane Cowen-Fletcher, for example, illustrates the story of a mother who, while in her wheelchair, does everything any other mother does.

- **Examine the storyline.** Make sure the person who is different is not portrayed as “the problem” or “troublemaker.” Ask yourself if the story could be told the same way with the same effect or meaning even if the main character were not different. Berniece Rabe’s *Where’s Chimpy?* is a good example. It tells the story of a little girl who loses her stuffed toy, then thoughtfully retraces her steps to find it. The fact that Misty, the main character, is a child with Down syndrome is of no importance to the plot.
- **Look at the lifestyles.** Make sure that characters who are diverse and their daily lives are depicted as favorably as other characters. Look for accuracy and situations that do not reflect bias or reinforce stereotypes. For example, *No Mirrors in My Nana’s House*, by Ysaye M. Barnwell, portrays a family that, while short on money, is long on love, positive messages, and joy.
- **Consider the relationships among the characters.** Characters who are

diverse shouldn’t have all the power or make all the decisions. Nor should the reverse be true. Make sure there’s a balance. *I’m the Big Sister Now*, by Michelle Emmert, is a good example of a story that strikes such a balance. In the story, 9-year-old Michelle describes the joys, loving times, difficulties, and other special situations involved in living with her older sister Amy, who was born with cerebral palsy.

- **Look at how the characters treat each other.** Do the characters interact in ways that provide positive models for children? Do they talk, play, eat, and work in ways that show good citizenship? Rochelle Bunnett’s *Friends at School* uses photographs of children with and without disabilities playing in the park to convey these concepts.
- **Look at the adult characters who are diverse.** How are they portrayed? Are they treated like mature, capable individuals? Or are they treated more like children? In *Play Lady/La Señora Juguetona*, Eric Hoffman tells the story of a culturally diverse woman who fosters creative play opportunities for the children in her neighborhood. The Play Lady uses old and broken toys to create new, exciting games. She shares information about her heritage and encourages the children to do the same. Also, the children depicted are diverse and the text is printed in both English and Spanish.
- **Look at the roles of characters who are diverse.** How are they portrayed? Will children perceive these characters as being as capable as any other adult in the story? Are these characters active and positive, or sad and pitiful? Some good examples to look at



are *Nick Joins In*, by Joe Lasker; *The Balancing Girl*, by Berniece Rabe; and *Arnie and the New Kid*, by Nancy L. Carlson. Each story portrays diverse characters who face challenges, solve problems, have adventures, discover new ideas, make new friends — all in that are familiar to all children.

- **Note the heroes.** Make sure there are heroines, too. Read books like Eric Hoffman’s *Heroines and Heroes/Heroínas y Heroes* to appreciate the many things girls and boys can accomplish.
- **Consider the effect the story and its characters will have on a child’s self image.** Ask yourself if any and all of the children in your class will be able to identify with the characters in the story. A good example is *Shades of Black: A Celebration of Our Black Children*, by Sandra L. Pinkney, in which children’s skin, hair, eyes, and other features are described using imaginative and delicious phrases. Or *With the Wind*, by Liz Damrell, in which a boy experiences the power and freedom of an exciting horseback ride. Only after he climbs down from the stallion’s back do readers learn that he uses a wheelchair.
- **Consider the educational value of the story.** Look at the values conveyed in the story. Can they positively expand a child’s world view? Will the story build knowledge of other cultures, traditions, and lifestyles? The book *The River that Gave Gifts*, by Margo Humphrey, for example, tells the story of four children who each make special treasures for a beloved elderly woman whose eyesight is failing. The story →

emphasizes that the greatest gifts are things we make or the time and attention we give to others. It also provides positive images of intergenerational relationships and individuals who are elderly and poor.



• **Watch for “loaded” words.** Make sure the terminology is current, like black or African-American. Remove any books with words that might be hurtful or offensive. Try to find books that use person-first language to refer to

individuals with disabilities (“a child with a disability” rather than “a disabled child”). In *When I Was Young in the Mountains* (which is based on the author’s life), Cynthia Rylant positively and lovingly tells the story of a family that is poor but living a simple, happy life in the Appalachian Mountains. ➡

### Checking for Cultural, Linguistic, and Ability Diversity in Children’s Books

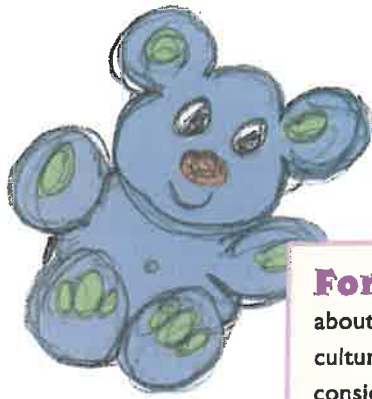
CHARACTERISTICS	YES	NO	N/A	COMMENTS
<b>1. Look at the illustrations.</b> Do you see stereotypes or tokenism?				
<b>2. Check the story line.</b> Are problems resolved with sensitivity?				
<b>3. Look at the lifestyles.</b> Do they reinforce or refute stereotypes?				
<b>4. Look at relationships among the characters.</b> Are families depicted with equal sensitivity?				
<b>5. Look at how the characters treat each other.</b> Do characters model views or actions that you would like children to emulate?				
<b>6. Look at any adult characters who are diverse.</b> Are they treated like mature, capable individuals (as opposed to children)?				
<b>7. Look at the roles of the characters who are diverse.</b> Are these characters shown as active and capable? Or sad and helpless?				
<b>8. Note the heroes.</b> Are there also heroines?				
<b>9. Consider the effect on a child’s self-image.</b> Are there one or more characters with whom a young child can readily identify in positive and constructive ways?				
<b>10. Consider the educational value of the story.</b> Will it help to expand a child’s world view? Will it build knowledge of other cultures and lifestyles?				
<b>11. Watch for loaded words.</b> Is “person-first” language used (for example, “a child with a disability”)? Is current and preferred terminology used? HINT: Look at the copyright date. Sometimes older books have outdated terminology or images.				
<b>12. Consider the author’s or illustrator’s background.</b> What unique perspectives do they bring to their work?				

This checklist was adapted by Camille Catlett and Sue George from the following sources.

Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children, by Louise Derman-Sparks (National Association for the Education of Young Children).

Ten Quick Ways to Analyze Children’s Books for Sexism and Racism from *The Council on Interracial Books for Children* (available online at [www.birchlane.davis.ca.us/library/10quick.htm](http://www.birchlane.davis.ca.us/library/10quick.htm)).

What’s the difference? Ellen Barnes, Carol Berrigan, and Douglas Biklen (Human Policy Press).



- **Consider the author's or illustrator's background.**

This information may give you special insights into their reason for writing. For example, *Rolling Along: The Story of Taylor and His Wheelchair*, by Jamee Riggio Heelan, uses photographs and illustrations to tell the story of twins – one with and one without a disability. The author, a physical therapist, shares her knowledge of children with physical disabilities in ways that help readers appreciate both their capabilities and their challenges.

In addition, look for books in the home languages of the children and families with whom you work. Using books and materials that reflect both a child's home language and English is a powerful way of supporting emergent literacy skills as well as self-esteem.

Use the checklist in this article to help with the process of examining children's books. Ask your colleagues to review the books with you to make sure that many perspectives are taken into consideration. Also ask the families you work with to help review the books or to recommend children's books that reflect their culture, customs, and language. You may want to use upcoming professional meetings or conferences as opportunities to visit vendors and look for books that reflect new aspects of diversity or include the languages of the children you work with.

So take a look at the books on your shelf? Do they reflect all of the children in your class or program? Do they convey positive images of diverse individuals? Will they help prepare children to be good citizens of the world? **CSF**

### For more information

about children's books that reflect cultural, linguistic, and ability diversity, consider downloading some of these online resources.

- *Diversity in Children's Lives: Children's Books & Classroom Helps* at .
- *Examining Multicultural Children's Picture Books for the Early Childhood Classroom: Pitfalls and Possibilities*, by Jean Mendoza and Debbie Reese at <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v3n2/mendoza.html>.
- *A Guide to Children's Literature and Disability* at [www.nichcy.org/pubs/bibliog/bib5.pdf](http://www.nichcy.org/pubs/bibliog/bib5.pdf).
- *Ten Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Sexism and Racism* at [www.birchlane.davis.ca.us/library/l0quick.htm](http://www.birchlane.davis.ca.us/library/l0quick.htm).

### Thoughtfully selected books can...

- Support emergent literacy.
- Support language development.
- Enhance concept development.
- Build self-esteem.
- Provide opportunities for children to talk about their home, family, culture, and community.
- Foster discussions of similarities and differences.
- Help children to see strengths and capabilities in themselves and in children and adults who are diverse in culture, language, and ability.
- Support anti-bias approaches to teaching and learning.
- Help children to appreciate different cultures and lifestyles.



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*The Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute is a multidisciplinary institute at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill whose mission is to cultivate and share the knowledge necessary to enhance child development and family well being. Most of the Institute's work addresses young children ages birth to 8 years. For more information, visit [www.fpg.unc.edu](http://www.fpg.unc.edu).*

*Southwest Missouri State University is a metropolitan university serving a combination of urban and rural environments. SMSU offers programs through more than 40 academic departments organized in eight colleges. For more information, visit [www.smsu.edu](http://www.smsu.edu).*