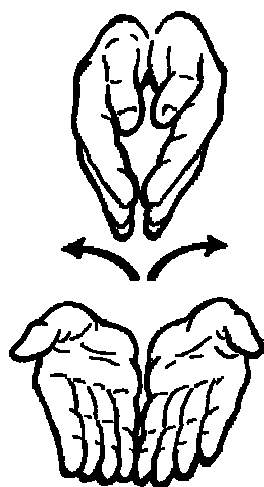


## Picture This: Inclusion in Children's Books



"BOOK"

Early childhood professionals in quality programs provide children's books about a variety of people and situations that reflect diversity of race, culture, and gender. Many providers are adding books that reflect diversity of development and ability as well. They understand that offering children's books that incorporate young children and adults with disabilities in everyday activities presents the crucial message that having a disability is just another part of life in the real world.

As more books include characters who are children or adults with disabilities, it has become increasingly important to look for ways to measure quality. The following guidelines have been developed to help you make your selection wisely.

**Author/Illustrator** - Have the author and/or illustrator accurately portrayed the topic or disability? When the sources are qualified to produce a book that includes a character with disabilities, the content of the book helps children gain an accurate understanding of both the topic and the disability.

**Story/Illustrations** - Would this story embarrass or humiliate a child or adult with a disability? Is the story of interest even if one of the characters has a disability? The story being told

and the accompanying pictures or photographs should represent natural and positive examples of individuals with disabilities meeting challenges, solving problems, and resolving conflicts in the context of family and community activities. The story line and illustrations should not stress the character's differences but describe the disability or the person with the disability realistically. The principle that "disability is natural" suggests that you look for stories that describe a person's profession, talents, and actions without emphasizing the person's disability.

**Relationships Between Characters** - Is this what would happen if this character did not have a disability? Critical decision-making and successful resolution of challenges should frequently be done by the character with the disability not for him or her. While negative as well as positive consequences for an individual's actions may naturally and realistically occur, consequences should not be based on the person's having a disability. The story's resolution should foster the attitude of "one of us" rather than "one of them."

**Language** - Does this story talk about the disability as a trait the character happens to have or as what defines the character? The author should use appropriate language. Avoid books that use words with negative overtones (weak, lazy, victim, suffer); outdated language (retarded, handicapped); or give characters superhuman capacities inconsistent with their roles. Choose books that use person-first language—that means putting the person first and the disability second in a sentence. For example, it should say "child with autism" not "autistic child."

**Presentation** - Is the style of illustrations similar for characters with and without disabilities? Does the portrayal of physical or cognitive limitations promote empathy, not pity, and acceptance, not ridicule? Children's books with Braille or simple sign language paired with words or pictures are worthy additions to any bookshelf.

Standards for books embracing developmental or physical diversity are very similar to standards for books about other types of individual and family diversity. When you ensure that the books you offer represent the diversity in the world, you help young children in your program feel accepted and accept one another as well.

## Putting It Into Practice

The following children's books have been evaluated and assessed as appropriate for use in the early childhood classroom. These books are written primarily for children ages 3 and up.

***A Place for Grace*** by J.D. Okimoto and D. Keith (1993). Seattle, WA: Sasquatch Books. After discovering she's too small to be a seeing-eye dog, Grace meets Charlie, a man who believes Grace would make the ideal hearing-aid dog. Grace provides an inspiring model for any child facing obstacles. It gives readers the opportunity to learn the American Sign Language (ASL) alphabet.

***Be Quiet, Marina*** by K. DeBear (2001). New York: Star Bright Books. The story of two young girls who learn to play together in preschool. Marina has mild cerebral palsy; Moira has Down syndrome. They enjoy many of the same things, playing with dolls, dancing, and dressing up. But Marina gets very noisy when she is upset and this bothers Moira. They become good friends and play happily together as Moira learns to tell Marina when her screaming bothers her, and Marina learns to find other ways to express her frustration.

***Dad and Me in the Morning*** by P. Lakin (1994). Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman Company. In a special morning interlude, a young boy awakens his father, and they go down to the beach to watch the sunrise. Dealt

with simply, as part of the reality of their relationship, the boy's deafness is unobtrusively woven into this story about a father and child sharing a moment in time.

***Friends in the Park*** by R. Bunnett and C. Sahlhoff (1993). New York: Checkerboard Press. In this picture-book, a group of friends, some with disabilities, get together for a wonderful day of playing in the park.

***Mama Zooms*** by J. Cowen-Fletcher (1993). New York: Scholastic Press, INC. A young boy sits in his mother's lap and "zooms" with her into space, across the desert, and through the Wild West . . . all in her wheelchair.

***My Brother, Matthew*** by M. Thompson (1992). Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House. Though David knows frustration and resentment at times, he feels he understands his little brother (who has multiple disabilities) even better than his parents; together the two boys experience a great deal of joy.

***We'll Paint the Octopus Red*** by S. Stuve-Bodeen and P. Devito (1998). Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House. Emma and her father discuss what they will do when the new baby arrives. When the baby is born with Down syndrome, they talk about what new things they might need to do (or not) with the baby. A sequel to this book is called ***The Best Worst Brother***. Emma is learning to get along with her now three-year-old brother, Isaac.

## A Child Care Provider's Question

**QUESTION:** *I am trying to buy books about people with disabilities for my program. I found a few children's books with cute little animals with disabilities but I am unsure whether they are a good investment or not.*

**ANSWER:** Guidelines for assessing quality are really the same whether the book's characters are real people, mythical or cartoon characters, or animals with human characteristics. However, it is generally considered best practice in early childhood education for caregivers/teachers to provide many learning opportunities that build upon the real world experiences children have every day. According to *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs-Revised* (NAEYC, 1997), "children are active learners, drawing on direct physical and social experience as well as culturally transmitted knowledge to construct their own understandings of the world around them" (p. 13). While imagination and creativity are important aspects of children's development, their richness and value are

heightened when they emerge from inside the child and are fostered by caring adults who honor the results. Fantasy characters have their place, and it is evident that children enjoy them. But a steady diet of fantasy will not provide the experiences children need to live in—and learn about—the world around them. With this in mind, the books about animals in an early childhood program should most often be about real animals doing real animal things. And the books about children or adults with disabilities should represent children and adults doing the real things young children and adults do.

