Considerations for Selecting High-Quality Children's Books That Include Disability Experiences

Use the questions below to help you review and analyze titles before sharing them with your students or adding them to your bookshelves.

Keep Readers in Mind

- ❑ Is the title developmentally appropriate?
- ❑ Is the story or subject matter of interest, appeal, and value to students?
- ❑ Will the topics and themes of the book grab and hold their attention?
- ❑ Does the book affirm the identities and experiences of students and/or provide a glimpse into the lives and experiences of people different from themselves?
- ❑ Can you see the title prompting students to think deeply or look at things in a new way?
- ❑ Will the format, text, artwork, design, and story elements of the book suit and/or be accessible to your students?
- ❑ Is the title available in accessible formats (digital talking books, braille, enlarged text, electronic publications, etc.) that will support your students?

Evaluate Literary Quality

- ❑ Does the text support complex interpretations?
- ❑ Are illustrations artful and do they support a complex relationship between text and illustration?
- ❑ Are thematically rich issues present?
- ❑ Are characters multidimensional and complex, developing throughout the story or shown to be dynamic, changing, and responsive?
- ❑ Does the text capture the authentic voice of characters or subjects and bring readers into the book?
- ❑ Is the text tightly constructed, featuring rich words, phrases, and structures that develop meaning and imagery for readers?
- ❑ Is the plot complex, motivating readers to find out what happens next?

Consider Messengers and Messages

- ❑ Does the author and/or illustrator have a background, qualifications, and/or lived experiences with subjects, themes, and topics presented that indicate accurate, inclusive, and affirming representation of disability experiences?
- ❑ Are the book's messages and themes free of ableism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and racism?

- ❏ Do informational books provide accurate, factual information?
- ❏ Is the book free of language that demeans, diminishes, or makes people invisible because of any of their identities?
- ❏ Are the text and/or illustrations featured free of stereotypes and tokenism?
- ❏ Are concepts, celebrations, traditions, cultures, or peoples portrayed in both the text and illustrations authentic representations?
- ❏ Do characters or subjects have agency and are they presented as able changemakers?
- ❏ Are people with disabilities integral to the main storyline and/or is it shared from the point of view of people with disabilities?
- ❏ Are lifestyles that differ from the dominant culture or class presented without value judgments?
- ❏ Does the book promote positive self-image and self-worth for people with disabilities?

Check the Copyright Date

- ❏ Was the book first published more than 10–15 years ago?
- ❏ Does the storyline avoid using a "cure" or "a miracle" for a person with a disability?
- ❏ Are the text, illustrations, and/or photographs, especially in informational books, current and timely?
- ❏ Is there quality non-biased representation of race, ethnicity, religion, women, older people, people with disabilities, members of the LGBTQ+ community, etc.?
- ❏ Does the book reflect the values of the time it was published or values with current relevance?

Avoid Biased Depictions

Please examine the following stereotypes and tropes identified by authors/literary agents Lucy and James Catchpole. It is important to ensure books do not contain these types of depictions of the disability experience.

A parent shown grieving the birth of a child with a disability: Not all births are a time of uncomplicated joy (e.g., many pregnancies are unplanned). But we've never seen this shown in a picture book except when the child is disabled. For a child with a disability who's never considered this possibility, it could be a traumatic revelation.

The message that characters with disabilities have a duty to answer questions and educate non-disabled people: We've written about this extensively, and it's the theme of the picture book What Happened to You? Some people with disabilities may be fine discussing their disability, many are not. But kids with disabilities especially should be allowed to be kids, not living teachable moments.

A non-disabled central character who explains the character with a disability to the reader (e.g., books with titles like "My Sister Has Autism"): If you imagine we were talking about characters of different races, you can probably see why this isn't ideal. Stories told from the perspectives of a character with a disability are preferable.

A child being bullied for their disability, who proves the bullies wrong and changes their minds: The onus shouldn't be on any child to convert somebody bullying them.

Surprise! Disabled!: Disability should not be a punchline, in which, for example, the last spread reveals the character's disability. The intention is to say 'kids with disabilities are real people too, just like you and me.' But the effect is de-humanizing. Can't we set the bar higher?

Characters with disabilities for comic effect: Characters with disabilities have been the butt of jokes for centuries (e.g., D/deaf characters misunderstanding certain words); we think it's best not encouraged.

Children with disabilities being rejected or discriminated against by grown-ups: It may be realistic, but is it appropriate for the youngest readers? Again, if a child hasn't considered their disability might make them unwelcome even with adults, this can be an unnecessary and painful reveal.

Inspirational!: Characters with disabilities often come packaged with a "never give up!" motivational message. Realistically, every person with a disability has things they can't do. And we don't exist to inspire!

Books that catalogue people with disabilities by diagnosis: There are good collected biographies of people with disabilities that start with the individual, like I Am Not a Label. The problem comes when they start not with the individual, but with the diagnosis; the result can feel like a medical textbook with real-life examples.

Books that avoid words like "disabled" and "disability": The broad consensus in the disabled community is that these are simple, neutral words, preferable to terms like "differently abled" or "special needs." Either identity-first or person-first language is fine.

More Help in Choosing High-Quality Books

Choosing Children's Books that Include and Affirm Disability Experiences (KQED Mind/Shift)

Disability Tropes in Children's Picture Books | Some thoughts for teachers (The Catchpoles)

Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books (Social Justice Books)

How to Critically Select Children's Books with Representations of Disability Experiences (Lee & Low Books)

10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Ableism (Zinn Education Project/*Rethinking Schools*)

Resources for Finding Titles That Feature People with Disabilities

The Cooperative Children's Book Center CCBC-Recommended Book Search can filter for books related to cognitive/neurological disability/condition, physical disability/condition, and psychiatric disability/condition from titles recommended in various editions of *CCBC Choices*, its annual best-of-the-year list.

Disability in Kidlit has an archive of middle-grade and YA book reviews from the perspective of individuals with disabilities.

The Dolly Gray Children's Literature Award recognizes authors, illustrators, and publishers of high-quality fictional and biographical books for children and youth that authentically portray individuals with developmental disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorders, intellectual disabilities, and Down syndrome.

The IRIS Center, a national center dedicated to improving education outcomes for all students—especially those with disabilities—provides the searchable database Children's Books: Portrayals of People with Disabilities, curated by author and academic Mary Anne Prater-Doty.

A Novel Mind Database, a project of authors and advocates Sally J. Pla and Merriam Sarcia Saunders, includes more than a thousand traditionally published children's books that touch on neurodiversity and/or mental health.

The Project ENABLE resource database is an organic resource with more than a thousand items, including children's book titles for librarians, teachers, parents, and others who serve and/or support people with disabilities.

The American Library Association's Schneider Family Book Awards annually honor an author or illustrator for a book that embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience for child and adolescent audiences.

Social Justice Books (A Teaching for Change Project) offers a booklist of recommended disability titles for PreK–12 and adults.

Resources for Finding Accessible Alternate-Format Titles

The ASL Stories Directory of the American Society for Deaf Children makes it easy to find hundreds of free videos of ASL retellings of favorite books.

BARD Mobile is an app that allows access to free audio and braille reading materials for eligible users enrolled in the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled (NLS) at the Library of Congress.

Bookshare allows users to customize reading experiences with e-books in audio, audio and highlighted text, braille, large font, and other formats.

Braille Tales provides six free print/braille books a year to blind and low-vision children until the child turns 6 years old as well as to blind and low-vision parents of children under 6 years old.

Recorded Audio Books are human-voice recordings provided to students through Learning Ally (formerly known as RFB&D) with many books in the VOICEtext format, which provides highlighted text that is followed while the audio is played.

The American Printing House for the Blind (APH) maintains the Louis Database of Accessible Materials with information on accessible materials produced by more than 75 organizations throughout the United States and Canada.