



Including Disability in Early Childhood Curricula: Evaluating and Using Children's Books

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LORI ERBREDERIS MEYER

All children—including those with disabilities—need to see themselves and their experiences reflected in the lessons, materials, and surroundings of their learning environments (NAEYC 2019). Such inclusion is not only an ideal for educational settings, but also an imperative to meet legal requirements and ethical standards. When planned, implemented, and individualized to meet children's strengths and needs, inclusive practices can lead to positive outcomes for all children in the form of increased access, membership, participation, friendships, and support (DEC/NAEYC 2009).

One research-based practice for supporting these outcomes is to read texts that positively and accurately depict disabilities and to facilitate conversations that encourage children's acceptance and understanding of human differences (Ostrosky et al. 2015). While reading aloud is a common practice in early childhood settings to promote children's language and literacy skills, it can also provide other learning opportunities for children during the years in which they are forming foundational ideas and beliefs about their own—and others'—identities.

By reading disability literature with children, educators can establish the value of every person, whether they have a disability or not.

In this piece, updated guidance is presented regarding how to evaluate children's texts about disabilities. It also highlights a sampling of high-quality books along with conversation prompts and extension activities that early childhood educators can use in their settings.

Why We Should Talk About Disability

From a young age, children are developing their awareness of disability through direct and indirect experiences and from families, teachers, and society (Favazza, Ostrosky, & Mouzourou 2016). (See "Teaching Young Children About Disability," by Sue Mankiw for a broader discussion.) Exposure to individuals with disabilities can vary greatly. As a result, children may develop misconceptions, including that disabilities are only caused by accidents or that children with disabilities are "babies" who cannot do anything for themselves (Diamond & Huang 2005). When disabilities are not represented or discussed in the classroom environment and curriculum, children without disabilities may maintain their beliefs in these myths. Additionally, they may grow up without recognizing that everyone, including people with disabilities, has worth and a role in the fabric of a community.

Engaging with books about disabilities, or disability literature, is one way to counter this. Teachers can use a variety of texts and connected activities to introduce children to disabilities and to create an appreciation and understanding of them. Texts can shine a light on the misconceptions created by limited or negative exposure. In addition to correcting false perceptions, these texts can present positive portrayals to children with disabilities both within their environments and their learning experiences. This can boost their confidence, create a sense of belonging and friendships, and increase their self-esteem (Favazza et al. 2016). Without these representations, children with disabilities may feel like they are not welcome or do not have a place in their classroom or the larger society.

Evaluating Books About Disability

To foster an inclusive classroom and build upon all children's strengths, the texts that children interact with must contain accurate and positive depictions of disability. Teachers must closely examine and evaluate storylines or information given and the

underlying messages about disabilities to ensure they appropriately scaffold children's knowledge of disability and disability justice.

It has been nearly two decades since Nasatir and Horn (2003) outlined some of the first guidelines for critically evaluating disability representation in children's literature. Since then, others have authored additional recommendations, frameworks, and questions to assist in the selection of high-quality disability literature for children. "Questions to Ask When Evaluating Texts," below, includes a synthesis of suggestions from numerous sources: Nasatir and Horn (2003); Matthew and Clow (2007); Menchetti, Plattos, and Carroll (2011); the Anti-Defamation League (2013); and Artman-Meeker, Grant, and Yang (2016).

In addition to these guidelines, educators looking for appropriate disability literature can peruse awards created to recognize excellence in the genre. These include The Dolly Gray Award, given by the Division of Autism and Developmental Disabilities of the Council for Exceptional Children; and the Schneider Family Book Award, given by the American Library Association. Other sources include social movements that advocate for more literature published by diverse authors who write from their own experiences, such as being a child with a disability (#OwnVoices).

Reading About and Discussing Disability

When choosing disability literature, teachers must consider the ages, contexts, and experiences of their children and how they can intentionally plan and carry out learning experiences to enhance and extend their learning goals.

- For younger children, those with limited disability knowledge, or children with fewer experiences with individuals who have disabilities, researchers recommend that books contain accurate portrayals of disability and emphasize the strengths of characters with disabilities. Teachers can select books that help them emphasize the similarities between these characters and the children in their classes.

- As children advance in their understanding of disability and begin to display pride in and a connection to disability culture, teachers can foster conversations and learning experiences designed to address stereotypes, harmful language, and other injustices and inequalities that continue to marginalize individuals with disabilities. They can select books that explore how environmental factors, policies and laws, and societal views need to change to better support people with disabilities—not the other way around.
- Once children gain a strong foundation of knowledge and self-concept fostered by these positive disability representations, teachers might begin to include texts that lack clear or consistent positive messages—even negative representations. If a text contains negative messages, teachers can discuss it with a critical literacy stance as appropriate for children's ages, prior experiences, and knowledge of disability (Tondreau & Rabinowitz 2021).

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The following are five texts for children from birth to age 8 that exemplify the qualities to look for when choosing books that address disabilities, along with conversation prompts and supplemental activities.



We Are Little Feminists: On-The-Go

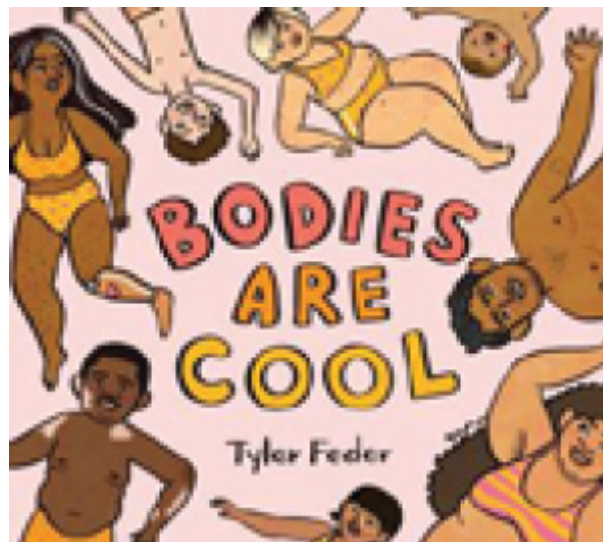
By little feminist. 2020.

Berkeley, CA: Little Feminist LLC. Ages birth–5.

This board book features photographs of a diverse group of families, adults, and children and highlights all types of physical movement. A wide variety of equipment and tools that support mobility for users of all ages is shown (wheelchairs, adapted bicycles, walkers). Teachers can use the photos to teach accurate terminology for the assistive tools and mobility equipment included. Additionally, everyday activities such as climbing at the playground and going for a walk are highlighted, giving educators many opportunities to explore similarities between readers and the individuals featured. (“You like to splash in puddles, and the child who uses a walker likes to splash in puddles too!”)

Older toddlers may ask lots of questions about motion or movement and may wonder why the people in the book need to use different equipment to move. They also may be very interested in the specialized equipment, even insisting on needing it for themselves. Teachers have the opportunity to teach children that everyone gets the tools they need to be successful, but that the tools everyone needs are different. (“Your eyes see very well without glasses, but my eyes need help seeing things far away, so I need to wear glasses.”)

While wheelchairs are only one type of equipment illustrated in the book, teachers may use this text to connect with or extend activities linked to explorations of wheels, motion, and force.



Bodies Are Cool

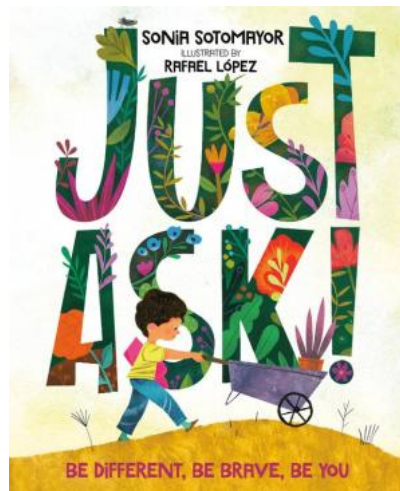
By Tyler Feder. 2021.
New York: Dial Books. Ages 3–5.

Bodies Are Cool is a body-positive book that also incorporates positive disability representation (limb differences, people who are blind and use white canes) intersecting with different identity traits such as gender, age, and race. The book's text focuses on body features (shape, skin, hair, eyes) while its illustrations provide teachers with numerous opportunities to draw attention to the different physical traits represented among the books' characters.

Teachers can focus attention on the characters with disabilities doing everyday things, such as a person who is blind going to the movies. This helps children make connections between themselves and those with disabilities. It also opens up space to discuss themes of all individuals' rights to independence, inclusion, and access to the same activities that others enjoy.

By reading *Bodies Are Cool*, early childhood educators can learn about existing stereotypes, misconceptions, or myths that children have about identity features. (“A person who is blind cannot watch a movie.”) They can also encourage children to ask questions about disabilities. (“How does a blind person watch a movie?”) To address this particular wondering, teachers can introduce children to the technological support of “audio descriptions,” where narrators describe visual elements and what is happening in a movie scene when no one is talking. Teachers could share an example of an audio

description for children to hear (such as the *Frozen* movie trailer available online), then they can encourage children to make their own audio descriptions for their favorite movie clips.



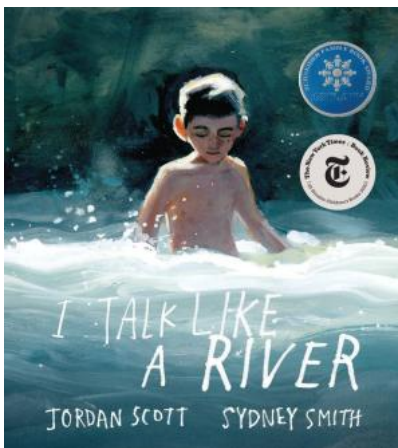
Just Ask! Be Different, Be Brave, Be You

**By Sonia Sotomayor. Illus. by Rafael Lopez. 2019.
New York: Philomel Books. Ages 5–8.**

Diagnosed with diabetes as a child, US Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor was inspired to write this fictional story based on her experiences and to encourage children to be curious. If they have questions about other children, she writes, they need to “just ask.”

Winner of the 2020 Schneider Family Book Award for young children, the book features many different children, including those with Tourette’s syndrome, dyslexia, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. It provides accurate terminology and information along with highlighting tools, technology, medications, and other supports needed and voiced from the children’s perspective. Each character’s narrative ends with a question that offers an opportunity for readers to connect, finding their shared similarities and unique differences. (“Do you ever feel frustrated?” “Are you really good at something?” “What’s helpful to you?”)

This book could be paired with the autobiography *Not So Different: What You REALLY Want to Ask About Having a Disability*, by Shane Burcaw. Burcaw, who has spinal muscular atrophy, shares about his life through stories and photographs. He reveals his daily interactions with friends and family, answering many questions, including “What do they help you with?” Teachers can extend this question to all children and integrate early literacy by creating a classroom story about how and in what ways children’s families help them.



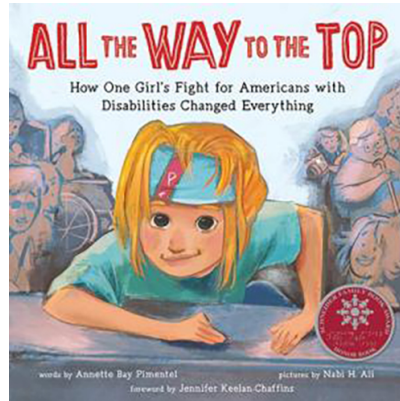
I Talk Like a River

**By Jordan Scott. Illus. by Sydney Smith. 2020.
New York: Neal Porter Books. Ages 5–8.**

Author and poet Jordan Scott wrote this book from his experience as a child who stuttered. The 2021 Schneider Family Book Award winner is rich in simile and metaphor as the main character describes his inner thoughts and feelings about stuttering. For example, when describing the sounds of words, he says, “The C is a crow that sticks in the back of my throat.” In the story, the boy finds great comfort after a challenging day at school by spending time with his dad in nature. Teachers can ask children about the types of activities that help them feel comforted after a difficult time.

This text can also be used to introduce similes and metaphors. Teachers can encourage children to create similes that make comparisons of themselves to natural elements, similar to what the book’s character does. (“When I eat peanut butter, my mouth is like a sappy pine tree.”)

If a child in class stutters, teachers will want to watch for signs that the book makes them uncomfortable and take steps to avoid singling them out or making them feel representative of all people who stutter. Before reading *I Talk Like a River* to the whole class, they may want to preview it with the child.



All the Way to the Top: How One Girl's Fight for Americans with Disabilities Changed Everything

**By Annette Bay Pimentel. Illus. by Nabi Ali. 2020.
Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Explore. Ages 5–8.**

A 2021 Schneider Family Book Award honorary title, this book shares the true story of disability rights activist Jennifer Keelan-Chaffins. It exposes readers to the social construction of disability and the ways in which society creates barriers for individuals with disabilities—in Jennifer's case, inaccessible buildings and the exclusionary behavior of peers. The climax of the story is Jennifer's leadership as a youth advocate during the US Capitol Crawl in 1990, which preceded passage of the historic Americans with Disabilities Act.

Educators can discuss issues of inclusion, barriers that can prevent people from living full lives, and laws designed to increase access. The book's end matter includes information to support conversations with children, a timeline marking milestones in the disability rights movement and Jennifer's life, and a bibliography. To extend learning, teachers can lead children on community trips where they can observe and collect information about accessibility features in the environment (ramps, accessible door switches, tactile paving).

Older children may take the information gathered to design simple maps of accessible entrances and buildings; they also might take on advocacy efforts if their data reveal inaccessible spaces.

Connecting with Families About Books and Related Activities

Families' beliefs, experiences, and contexts may influence their level of comfort when they or others talk about disability, especially with young children. Discomfort may make them want to avoid the topic, both in and out of the classroom. Rather than exclude disability literature from early childhood curricula, educators can strive to understand how families' views or cultural positions differ from their own. Then, through ongoing discussion and collaboration, they can collectively decide how to include disability literature in the classroom in a way that does not compromise a family's beliefs.

Perhaps a family wants to be in the classroom when a teacher first starts reading stories about disabilities. Another family, or their child, may want to be the first to describe a specific disability in their own words and answer classmates' questions based on their own experiences. Still other families might enjoy borrowing books from the classroom along with discussion guides to promote conversations at home about disabilities (Ostrosky et al. 2015). It is important to engage in these conversations with every family, every year: disability literature's contributions to children's understanding, identity, and recognition of disabilities as a natural part of human diversity are too significant to avoid.

Questions to Ask When Evaluating Texts	
Stereotypes, Myths, and Negative Descriptions of Disability	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do the text and illustrations contain stereotypes or words that negatively depict disabilities? 2. Does the text support discussion about a stereotype or myth that the teacher has heard children repeat? 	Notes:
Representations of Self-Determined Individuals	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are individuals with disabilities represented as strong and independent? 2. Does the character(s) with a disability share their point of view in the story (even characters who are nonverbal), or do characters without disabilities primarily talk about, or talk to, the individual with a disability? 3. Does the character(s) with a disability confidently make their own decisions? 4. Does the character(s) with a disability help others, or are they portrayed as helpless and in need of others' support? 5. Is the character(s) with a disability portrayed as having the same rights, opportunities, and experiences as characters who are the same age but do not have a disability? 	Notes:
Celebrating Similarities, Unique Differences, and Relationships	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does the author highlight things a character(s) with a disability both can and cannot do? 2. Do characters with and without disabilities demonstrate respect, friendship, meaningful interactions, acceptance, and inclusion of each other? 3. Is the story relatable to all children? Does it help those without disabilities explore similarities and connect with the character(s) who has a disability? 	Notes:
Accurate Representation and Insight into Disabled Life	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do the text and illustrations offer genuine insight and realistic representations into the everyday life and feelings of the character(s) with a disability? 2. Does the text provide accurate terminology and information about specific disabilities? 3. Does the text include a representation of assistive tools, medication, therapies, or technology that a character(s) with a disability uses or needs? 4. Does the text represent family members (including siblings) having age-appropriate responsibilities in relation to having a family member with a disability? 	Notes:

Positive Representation of Characters with a Disability and Disability Culture	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is a character(s) with a disability defined by more than their disability? Is the disability represented as a positive part of their identity? 2. Does the text include representations of disability that intersect with other aspects of culture and identity (race, gender, religion, age, family structure)? 3. Does a character(s) with a disability display a range of characteristics, qualities, and emotions? 4. Does the text provide opportunities to explore the benefits of having a disability? Are the strengths of the character(s) portrayed along with their unique challenges? 5. Are high expectations held for the character(s) with a disability? 6. Does this book provide pride and connection to disability culture and community? 	Notes:
Problems Presented in the Story/Plot	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Could the same story be told if the character(s) did not have a disability? 2. Does a character(s) with a disability take an active role in solving a story problem or their own problems rather than having others solve it for them? 3. Is the attitude or disability of a character(s) considered a problem in the story? 	Notes:
Social Construction of Disability	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does the setting show a character(s) with a disability fully included in the environments in which they find themselves (work, school, recreation, neighborhood)? 2. Does the story support a discussion about how society creates barriers that can keep individuals with disabilities from living full lives (lack of supports, access, employment, educational opportunities)? 3. Does the story support exploration of public laws and policies that can increase access, participation, and supports for individuals with disabilities? 	Notes:
Noteworthy Considerations	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do the backgrounds and perspectives of the author and illustrator strengthen this text? 2. Has the author written the story based on their experiences as a child with a disability? 3. Has the book received an award for its content, illustrations, or other qualities? 4. What is the copyright, recommended age range, amount and complexity of text and illustrations, and potential interest for this book? 	Notes:

Shaping an Inclusive, Equitable Classroom

By reading and rereading disability literature with the youngest of children, educators can establish the value of every person, whether they have a disability or not. As children's knowledge grows, they will be ready to take a more nuanced and critical stance when reading texts that include disability. Teams across ages and grades can work together to share the disability literature they have evaluated and used. Together, they can examine

the themes previously discussed and which forms of disability are represented to ensure that all facets assessed and associated with high-quality disability literature for children are covered in their curricula.

By evaluating children's books for disability representation and thoughtfully incorporating them into their daily plans, teachers will shape a learning environment in which acceptance, inclusion, belonging, and an understanding of human similarities and differences are explicitly taught and fostered. Ultimately, this creates a space where high expectations and high regard are held for everyone, offering the best chance for inclusive classrooms and equitable communities for people with disabilities to grow and live.

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Audience: *Teacher*

Age: *Kindergarten, Preschool*

Topics: *Other Topics, Equity, Anti Bias, Special Education, Disabilities, Quality Standards, Subject Areas, Literacy, Children's Books, YC*

LORI ERBREDERIS MEYER

Lori Erbrederis Meyer, PhD, is an associate professor who teaches in the early childhood special education program at the University of Vermont. A former preschool teacher, Lori's passion is to cultivate welcoming environments for children with and without disabilities and their families.

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1401 H Street NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20005 | (202)232-8777 | (800)424-2460 |
help@naeyc.org