

A mirror to see ourselves

Children benefit from books and characters that reflect the reality of their own lives in terms of factors such as family structure, ethnicity and disability, explains *Annette Rawstrone*

Think of the books in your nursery's collection. Aside from the cute talking animals and fantasy characters, who are the protagonists? The chances are that they are white and able-bodied children. Taken a step further, they are likely to be living with their mum and a dad in a country cottage with a dog. But how many children in your care can actually identify with these characters?

It is important for early years children to appreciate that there are lots of different ways of being – whether that's ethnicity, gender, family make-up or physical ability – and one of the ways to develop this appreciation is by practitioners ensuring that children have access to a diverse range of high-quality picture books.

'It is important that children in early years settings see their own homes and families represented. If they only see a particular type of family, they may wonder why this is, and why their own family is different,' says Dr Richard Woolley, head of the Centre for Education and Inclusion at the University of Worcester. 'I remember as a child realising that everyone who was represented in stories at school lived in houses, when I lived in a flat. I didn't know what it was like to go upstairs to bed – as we went upstairs to live. It makes me think about how children living with an uncle or grandparent, with two mums or with a foster family, feel.'

Fen Coles, co-director of not-for-profit children's bookseller Letterbox Library, describes books as providing both a mirror and a window for children. 'They are a window because they can show children



other worlds, enabling them to see difference and gain knowledge and understanding of the world. They are good for encouraging empathy, emotions and interests and to bring a sense of cohesion. Books also act as a mirror to see ourselves, but many children find that they are not traditionally represented in books. Seeing yourself in a book is incredibly powerful because it reinforces a sense of self, identity and is fantastic for confidence, self-esteem and self-worth,' she says.

'Having both a window and mirror together in books provides the perfect ingredients to engage as many children as possible in reading. The flip side is what happens if children don't see themselves in books. It can result in them thinking that books are not relevant to

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them, so literacy and reading are also not relevant.'

CONTEMPORARY STORIES

Research suggests that children would be more eager readers if they were given a wider choice of books that had characters, images and stories that reflect their communities (see Further information).

'To help start children on their reading journeys and ensure they benefit from the positive impacts that reading for pleasure can have on their lives, early years settings should try to offer a variety of diverse books to children,' says BookTrust chief executive Diana Gerald.

'Giving children a diverse range of books can also act as a way of promoting the Fundamental British Values as part of the EYFS.'

Instead of selecting books that are specifically chosen only to promote diversity, Ms Gerald recommends that practitioners should look for diversity in all the books they use. This should include books that show a positive representation of race, gender and various gender issues and disability.

To avoid tokenism, Simona Sid-eri, author and editor at publisher Firetree Books, speaks of books celebrating diversity as having 'unself-conscious inclusion'. She explains, 'There is no point only having books highlighting disability or a different ethnicity and the problems around them. Children need to read books where the characters just happen to be like that and they do normal things, as opposed to being conscious of the disability or ethnicity and made to be different and outside the norm. It just happens that in our books the characters are black in very ordinary stories.'

Ms Coles agrees, 'It's about giving children stories that reflect back the world that they are growing up in. It's important to have black and minority ethnic characters not just in traditional tales or only living in other countries – which can set them up as other or different – but in good, contemporary stories. This should just happen in a casually inclusive way

rather than being seen as different. They should be a protagonist of the story, not a sidekick or an apprentice, or in a storyline about racism or war. Books should give disabled characters a voice and allow them to lead their own story, not just discuss that Johnny is blind or "special" in some way. Rather than being a harsh spotlight on their difference, they should be allowed to enjoy everyday life.'

While using 'cutesy animal characters' to tackle difficult subjects can be useful, she warns that children don't necessarily apply them to their own lives. It's also important to have books that use real people who are easier for children to identify with.

'Even if a school or setting feels that their organisation is not particularly diverse, it is important to represent wider society, as that is the world in which children will grow up,' adds Dr Woolley. 'Practitioners need to look at story and illustration to ensure that both are of high quality. Not only should the book be visually appealing, but the illustrations add a great deal to the story; the learning and discussion arising from visual messages must not be underestimated.'

Rather than having these books as an 'add-on', he recommends that practitioners ensure they are integrated into their settings' book boxes and shelves. ■



CASE STUDY: BRIGHT HORIZONS

'We feel it's important for all our children to belong,

connect and have an identity. If they're the only child in the nursery with, for example, a hearing aid or spectacles and they don't see any positive images or stories of children with the same, then they might start to feel different and that they don't belong. Books are very powerful, so our nurseries have books that are representative of the diversity of our children and families,' says director of early years Nicola Amies.

'We look for books that have protagonists who are children who just happen to be in a wheelchair or black, but there is a real dearth of good-quality books with positive images and messages around diversity. We worked with

a family whose son was working through his gender identity and couldn't find any positive story books, so we went to Letterbox Library, which found books for us. They also helped when one of the fathers had a gender change, and when we wanted to have books featuring same-sex couples. Often these are books not available in regular bookshops, and you need to know exactly what you're looking for on Amazon.

'Staff read books and look at the images before sharing them with the children so that they can be prepared for any questions, or plan questions if they want to extend children's thinking or explore a certain issue. We use NAEYC's anti-bias guidance to support with the audit of our books and ensure that children have access to a diverse range.'



FURTHER INFORMATION

- *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards. National Association for the Education of Young Children, www.naeyc.org
- Cleary (2008) as cited in Al-Hazza T.C. (2010) 'Motivating disengaged readers through multicultural children's literature', *New England Reading Association Journal*, 45 (2), 63-68, 102
- *5 Reasons Why Everybody Benefits From More Diverse Children's Books* by Roxana Barillas, www.huffingtonpost.com/roxana-barillas/5-reasons-why-everybody-b_b_5529656.html
- www.letterboxlibrary.com
- www.firetreebooks.co.uk
- www.booktrust.org.uk

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

Family diversity

- *And Tango Makes Three* by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson (Simon & Schuster)
- *Donovan's Big Day* by Leslea Newman (Tricycle Press)
- *The Family Book* by Todd Parr (Megan Tingley Books)
- *The Great Big Book of Families* by Mary Hoffman (F. Lincoln)
- *If I Had a Hundred Mummies* by Vanda Carter (Onlywomen)
- *My Mum Goes to Work* by Kes Gray (Hodder)
- *Picnic in the Park* by Joe Griffiths and Tony Pilgrim (BAAF)
- *Two Dads* by Carolyn Robertson (Sparkypoo Publications)



Multiculturalism

- *Abdi's Day* by Verna Wilkins (Firetree Books)
- 'Let's' series by Firetree Books
- *Lulu Reads to Zeki* by Anna McQuinn (Alanna)
- *The New Small Person* by Lauren Child (Puffin)
- *The Princess and the Pea* by Rachel Isadora (Puffin)
- *So Much* by Trish Cooke (Walker)
- *Sunita's Baby Sister* by Nicola Call and Sally Featherstone (Featherstone)
- *Ten Little Fingers and Ten Little Toes* by Mem Fox and Helen Oxenbury (Walker)



Disability

- *Boots for a Bridesmaid* by Verna Allette Wilkins (Tamarind)
- *Class Three All at Sea* by Julia Jarman (Hodder)
- *Dan and Diesel* by Charlotte Hudson and Lindsey Gardiner (Red Fox)
- *Freddie and the Fairy* by Julia Donaldson (Macmillan)
- *Happy Butterfly* by Pippa Goodhart (Franklin Watts)
- *Max the Champion* by Sean Stockdale (Frances Lincoln)
- *Susan Laughs* by Jeanne Willis (Andersen Press)
- *What the Jackdaw Saw* by Julia Donaldson (Macmillan)

