

Inclusive Children's Literature

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In order for books to better reflect the changing face of the Canadian classroom, they must include a diverse range of characters. While books have come a long way in their depiction of multicultural characters, positive portrayals of those with disabilities are still often overlooked. Inclusive children's books are not stories about disability; nor are the tools to teach others about specific impairments. Rather, they are books with interesting and engaging plot lines and illustrations, which happen to include a character that has a disability.

Inclusive children's literature promotes...



- Casual Acceptance
- Natural Belonging
- Changing Perceptions
- Respect for Diversity
- Concern for Equity

Criteria for Evaluation

When looking at a book, ask yourself the following questions:

√ What is the focus of the book?

Readers shouldn't feel that the moral of the story has anything to do with disability, nor should their description of the book concentrate on impairment. Instead, they should be able to describe an interesting series of events, in which a character with a disability may have been involved.

√ Are all of the settings in the book inclusive?

Everyone should live at home, attending neighbourhood schools, workplaces and recreational sites, along with their peers.

√ Are characters portrayed in valued roles - as active and contributing individuals?

Stereotypes should be avoided; instead everyone should be viewed as individuals with unique gifts and talents, as well as challenges. Those with disabilities should hold culturally valued positions and be engaged in age-appropriate activities.

√ If labels and terminology are used, are they contemporary and empowering?

Labels like *handicapped* or *mentally challenged* are outdated and offensive; look for man, girl, student, or disabled, instead. People aren't *confined to* a wheelchair, but they may use one; they aren't *afflicted with* MS, but they may be living with it.

A Plan of Action for Library Professionals



1. Order books from the recommended list for your school library. If you don't have a lot of money to spend right now, start with the Fab Four selections and build up your collection, as your budget permits.
2. Leave the books out and accessible to all students, without labelling or shelving them in any special way.
3. Occasionally choose these books for story time sessions, and then talk about the real point of the story (which should not be disability). Avoid initiating any discussion on the impairment presented. Instead, let the kids be your guide. If they have questions, answer them truthfully, to the best of your ability.
4. Before you buy any other books involving characters with disabilities, consider them based on the criteria above.

The Fab Four of Inclusive Picture Books

After reading and evaluating over sixty picture books, all which are currently available in Canada and include a character with a disability, here are the ultimate Fab Four. It's no coincidence that they cover a wide range of disabilities.

Dad and Me in the Morning

Written by Patricia Lakin

Illustrated by Robert G. Steele

Illinois: Albert Whitman and Company

(2003) ISBN: 0-8075-1419-5

Far before anyone else in the house is up, a young boy sneaks in to wake his dad and they head out together, to watch the sun come up over the lake by their home. The illustrations in this book are stunning and present American Sign Language beautifully, as a Deaf son and his father communicate their strong bond with one another.

Seal Surfer

Written by Michael Foreman

Illustrated by Michael Foreman

New York: Harcourt Brace and Company

(2001) ISBN: 0-09-972451-0

A boy and a seal pup strike up an extraordinary friendship that spans decades and sees them both through various stages and relationships in their lives. Fun activities like surfing and fishing are explored and present an active and independent depiction of a boy with a physical disability.

Russ and the Firehouse

Written by Janet Elizabeth Rickert

Photography by Pete McGahan

Maryland: Woodbine House

(2002) ISBN: 1-890627-17-8

This is just one in a series of lovely stories about the adventures of Russ. In this one, Russ spends an exciting day at the firehouse with his uncle. Through the book's photographs, we learn that Russ, an energetic and popular young boy, has Down syndrome.

Brian's Bird

Written by Patricia A. Davis

Illustrated by Layne Johnson

Illinois: Albert Whitman & Company

(2003) ISBN: 0-8075-0881-0

Brian is so excited when his parents buy him a pet bird. Everyone is amazed when he teaches it how to talk. When his pesky big brother leaves the door open though, the bird flies out. While Brian's visual impairment plays a big part in the action of the story, it certainly isn't the focus of this charming book.

Further Recommended Inclusive Children's Titles

Are We There Yet?

Written by Verna Wilkins
Illustrated by George McLeod & Lynne Willey
England: Tamarind Ltd.
(1995) ISBN: 1-870516-29-X

Max and Amy are really excited when they learn that their dad has planned a surprise trip to a theme park but it seems that they'll never arrive. The father in this story is an active and much adored man who has a physical disability.

Mandy Sue Day

Written by Roberta Karim
Illustrated by Karen Ritz
New York: Clarion Books
(1994) ISBN: 0-395-66155-2

Mandy's family live on a farm and it's up to the children to help out with the chores. Dad gives them each one day off though and Mandy chooses to spend her day with her horse, Ben. Beautiful descriptions of experiences, as felt through Mandy's other senses, reveal that she is blind. Her independence is wonderful!

Hooray for our Heroes

Written by Sarah Albee
Illustrated by Tom Brannon
New York: Random House
(2002) ISBN: 0-375-82268-2

In this book, disability plays a fairly minor role but that is perfectly acceptable. In this case, heroes are shown. One boy suggests that his big brother is his hero because he is a great baseball player, Through the pictures, we realize that his big brother uses a wheelchair.

Boots for a Bridesmaid

Written by Verna Wilkins
Illustrated by Pamela Venus
England: Tamarind Ltd.
(1995) ISBN: 1-870513-30-3

Nicky, a tomboy, isn't looking forward to being in her Aunt Flora's wedding, until her mother tells her that this bridesmaid can wear boots! The mom, who uses a wheelchair, is a warm, open-minded and involved part of Nicky's life.

Big Brother Dustin

Written by Alden R. Carter
Photography by Dan Young & Carol Carter
Illinois: Albert Whitman and Company
(2003) ISBN: 0-8075-0715-6

Dustin can't wait to be a big brother! He attends big brother classes to get ready and when his baby sister arrives on the scene, there's so much he can do to help out. Dustin's Down syndrome is clearly not something that affects the mutual love that he and his baby sister share.

The Gym Day Winner

Written by Grace Maccarone
Illustrated by Betsy Lewin
New York: Scholastic Incorporated
(2002) ISBN: 0-590-26263-7

Part of the Hello Reader Series, this Level 1 book features a popular and energetic girl, who we see in a typical gym class, playing along with her classmates. Her physical disability is not mentioned and she plays a small part in the book but it shows inclusion very well.

