

Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books

From socialjusticebooks.org



By Louise Derman-Sparks

*Based on "Ten Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism."
Updated in 2013.**

Children's books continue to be an invaluable source of information and values. They reflect the attitudes in our society about diversity, power relationships among different groups of people, and various social identities (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender, economic class, sexual orientation, and disability). The visual and verbal messages young children absorb from books (and other media) heavily influence their ideas about themselves and others. Depending on the quality of the book, they can reinforce (or undermine) children's affirmative self-concept, teach accurate (or misleading) information about people of various identities, and foster positive (or negative) attitudes about diversity. Children's books teach children about who is important, who matters, who is even visible. Consequently, carefully choosing quality children's books is an indispensable educational and child-rearing task.

It is important to offer young children a range of books about people like them and their family—as well as about people who are different from them and their family. All of the books should be accurate and appealing to young children. Fortunately, there are some good anti-bias children's books, which are available as a result of the ongoing activism of many individuals and groups over many years. However, while choices have improved over past decades, the lack of quality multicultural kid's books currently being published has frustrated many communities. The number of children of color in the United States

continues to rise, but the number of books published by or about people of color stays the same or even decreases.

Check the Illustrations

Look for Stereotypes: A stereotype is an oversimplified generalization about a particular identity group (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, ability/disability), which usually carries derogatory, inaccurate messages and applies them to ALL people in the group. Stereotypes dehumanize people. So, too, does misinformation. (See **Box 1 below for a list of common, harmful stereotypes**).

Unfortunately, all of us absorb socially prevailing stereotypes about a range of people, even if we do not consciously subscribe to them. To alert you to stereotypes in children's books, as well as other media, it is useful to list all the stereotypes you know about various groups of people as precondition for critically reviewing children's books. The books you choose should depict people compassionately and as real human beings. Also consider if images depict all people as genuine individuals with distinctive (rather than stereotypical) features. Books containing stereotypes require you to engage children in critical thinking, but should probably be eliminated from your collection.

BOX 1: Common Harmful/Undermining Stereotypes

- Strong, independent girls and women are “manlike”
- Arab and/or Muslim women are voiceless and passive
- Book-loving or nonathletic boys and men are “effeminate”
- All Muslims are Arab
- Latino men talk funny, are lazy, gang members, or wear oversize sombreros,
- American Indians live in teepees, carry bows and arrows, or are half-naked in winter
- Latina women are earth mothers or subservient
- People with disabilities are not independent or are to be pitied
- African American men are gang members,
- LGBTQ people are invisible or sexual predators

- oversexed, or underemployed
- African American women are too independent, oversexed, or “welfare moms”
- Arab and/or Muslim men are terrorists
- Poor people are invisible or depicted as passively needing help from others

Look for Tokenism: This is the “one only” message. Regularly seeing only “one” person of any group in a book teaches young children about who is more or less important. Examples of tokenism include books with only one African American child among many white children or having only one book about children with disabilities among many other books. Tokenism also becomes stereotypical. It only allows children to see one view of a group of people, rather than the diversity that exists among all groups.

Look for Invisibility: What children do not see in their books also teaches them about who matters and who doesn’t in our society. Invisibility in their storybooks—as well as in textbooks as they get older—undermines children’s affirmative sense of themselves and reinforces prejudiced ideas about people who are not seen (*See Box 2 for examples of groups who tend to be invisible*). The **booklists** on this website include a great variety of books with groups who are often excluded. (The titles are vetted by Teaching for Change.)

BOX 2: Examples of Groups of People Who Are Often Invisible in Children’s Books or Mainstream

Media

- Families who live in rural areas
- Blue-collar workers
- Musicians, artists, and writers
- Families with two dads or two moms
- Single mothers or fathers
- Homeless families
- Families with an incarcerated parent
- People of Arab descent
- Families who practice Islam

- Transgender adults and children

Check the Story Line and the Relationships Between People

Even if a book shows visual diversity, the story line may carry biases related to how it handles power relationships among people of various identities. Are whites or male characters the central figures with people of color or female characters in essentially supporting roles? To gain acceptance and/or approval does a child of color, a girl, or child with a disability have to exhibit extraordinary qualities or be the one to understand, forgive, or change? Are the achievements of girls and women based on their own initiative and intelligence, or are they due to their looks or relationship with boys/men?

Are people of color, women, low-income families, or people with disabilities depicted as needing help or in passive roles, while whites, men, and “able-bodied” people are in leadership and action roles? How are problems presented, conceived, and resolved? Who typically causes a problem and who resolves it? Your book collection needs a balance of different people in “doer” roles.

Look at Messages About Different Lifestyles

Do the lives of people of color or people living in poverty in the story contrast unfavorably with the norm of white, middle-class suburban life? Are negative value judgments implied about ways of life that differ from the dominant culture or economic class (e.g., people are to be pitied, or the story is about one person who “gets out” of the less desirable way of life)? Do images and information go beyond oversimplification and offer genuine insights into the lifestyle of the characters in the story? Does the setting reflect current life—or past assumptions about life? Does your book collection depict diversity among people within a specific racial/ethnic group, such as a range of family structures, living environments, socioeconomic conditions and types of work, and male/female roles within the family? (Remember that every racial/ethnic group has diversity, including people who self-identify as white).

Consider the Effects on Children’s Self and Social Identities

In addition to specific books, also examine your book collection. Do your books reinforce or counteract messages that teach children to feel inferior or superior because of their skin color, gender, family income, able-bodiedness, or type of family structure? At school, will all of the children you serve see themselves and their family’s way of life

reflected in your book collection? Will all children of color, including those with mixed heritage, girls, and children from the many types of family structures, children living in poverty, and children with disabilities see one or more characters with whom they can readily and positively identify? If they are visible in your book collection, are the illustrations and information accurate and respectful? Does your overall collection balance the backgrounds of all the children in your program? Does it also show diversity within the social identity groups to which the children belong (e.g., a range of ways to be female and male, families reflecting different kinds of jobs within a racial/ethnic group). Does your book collection also include a balance between diversity within your classroom and beyond your classroom?

At home, does your book collection reflect diversity among the groups to which your family belongs? Does it have stories about people like you who have contributed to creating a more just world? Does it also include a range of books showing diversity beyond your family and neighborhood?

Look for Books About Children and Adults Engaging in Actions for Change

To fully develop a strong sense of self and a disposition toward cooperation and fairness, children need to know how to stand up for themselves and others when faced with unfairness. They also need to know about people from all social identity groups who have—and are currently—working for justice for all. In addition to previous criteria, here are more items to consider: The story line should be about children and adults working together, rather than perpetrating the myth that change happens because of special, individual people who do it by themselves. Does your book collection include a balance of people who have made important and honored contributions to American life as well as the world community—and not just the traditional white, male “heroes?” Do some of your books about important people include struggles for justice? Do they show people who were/are poor or from racial/ethnic groups of color? Are people with disabilities engaged in these struggles for justice?

Consider the Author’s or Illustrator’s Background and Perspective

All authors write from a cultural as well as from a personal context. In the past, most children’s books were by authors and illustrators who were white and members of the middle class. As a result, a single cultural and class perspective dominated children’s literature. There are now excellent books by people of color from a range of backgrounds—although not nearly enough. Consider the biographical material on the jacket flap or back of the book. What qualifies the author or illustrator to deal with the subject? If the book is not about people or events similar to the author or illustrator’s

background, what specifically recommends them as creators of the book? What is the author's attitude toward her/his story characters? Are the images accurate and do the illustrators respectfully render the people in the story? Do you have books reflecting a balanced range of author and illustrator identities and experiences?

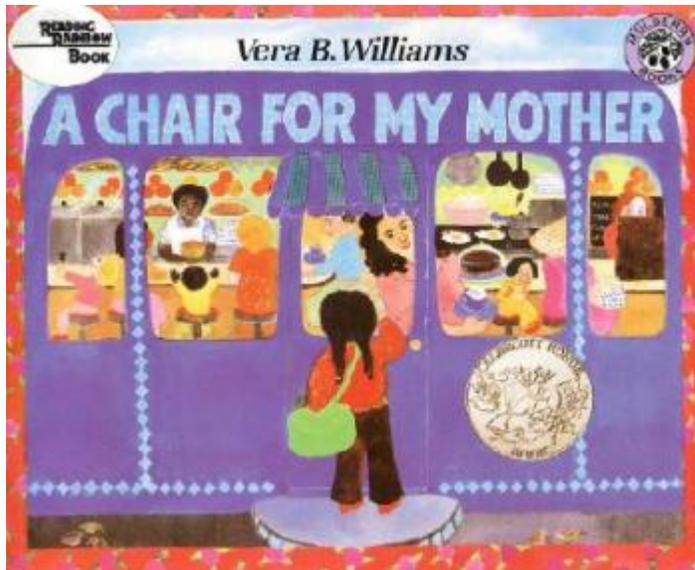
Watch for Loaded Words

A word is loaded when it in any way demeans or makes people invisible because of any of their identities. One example is the generic use of the word "man" to stand for women as well as men (although the opposite never occurs). This traditional terminology is now questioned by many because of its sexist implications. Here are some examples of ways to avoid sexist language: community instead of brotherhood; firefighters instead of firemen; human family instead of family of man; ancestors instead of forefathers; chairperson instead of chairman. Examples of adjectives applied to people of color that carry racist messages include: "savage," "primitive," "superstitious," "backward," "inscrutable" and "treacherous." Always consider the context in which a word is used and to whom it applies.

Look at the Copyright Date

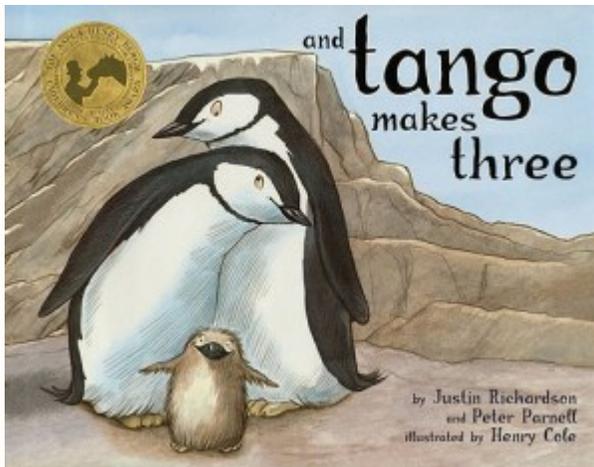
Copyright dates indicate the publication year, not the time of its writing, which might be two to three years before the copyright date. Although a recent copyright date is no guarantee of a book's relevance or sensitivity, copyright dates are useful information. More children's books began to reflect the reality of a pluralistic society and nonsexist and non-ableist perspectives in the 1970s. Since then, the range of accurate, respectful, and caring books reflecting diversity has increased significantly (unfortunately the diversity of books published in the United States still does not accurately reflect the actual diversity of the people living here). When considering new books for your collection, begin with most recently published ones and then continue with descending copyright dates.

Assess the Appeal of the Story and Illustrations to Young Children



Although these guidelines focus on the messages about diversity and equality reflected in children's books, it is also important to take quality into account. Be sure the book is a "good read." If children find the story or illustrations boring, a book will not hold their attention, even if the book adds a specific kind of diversity you need. Check for active, interesting story lines where different kinds of people are integral to the people in the story, not the main topic. For example, in *A Chair for My Mother*, a young child tries to save money to get a comfortable chair for her waitress mother. Although the book shows a single parent, working-class family, and a resourceful girl, it is not didactic. Also look for illustrations that are colorful and recognizable to young children. Although they enjoy a range of styles, illustrations that are too subdued or abstract may not hold their attention.

Check for age appropriateness. Most booksellers list any picture book as appropriate for early childhood even if the story line is really for primary grade children. Sometimes a book for older children will work if you simplify the story or "tell" the story rather than read it. In some cases, this is the only way to get books that present specific groups of children (e.g., stories with Cambodian children or children with learning disabilities). Some additional issues to consider:



- Many children’s books **use animal characters instead of people** and there are some excellent books that explore diversity with animal characters (e.g., *And Tango Makes Three* or *A Coyote Solstice Tale*). Children enjoy these. However, such books are not a substitute for exploring issues of diversity and anti-bias fairness with people as the main characters.
- Some early childhood teachers wonder if it is necessary for every book in their collection to show diversity. Every book needs to be accurate, caring, and respectful. However, you will want individual books about specific kinds of people (e.g., a biracial family or a family with adopted children). **Diversity becomes essential in the balance of your book collection**, where you want to avoid invisibility or tokenism of any group.
- **Folk and fairy tales** have long been a mainstay of children’s literature. In the cultures from which they come, folk and fairy tales were used to teach important lessons and values related to their culture of origin. Children love them in their original versions—not their commercially sanitized adaptations. However, folk and fairy tales also carry messages that convey sexism, classism, and racism and must be used thoughtfully as part of introducing young children to diversity and anti-bias values of quality and fairness.
- **Overuse of folk tales to “teach” about a specific ethnic/cultural group leads to misinformation and confusion.** They are about animals and occasionally people from a mythical past and are designed to teach core values and beliefs in their culture of origin. They are not about how people actually live in contemporary society—and that is what young children need to understand. Information and images about how people really live now is what enables young children to build connections to people who are from different cultures while countering stereotypes that children have already absorbed (e.g., how American Indians really live).
- Finally there is the somewhat sensitive issue of **what to do about “classic” or “well-beloved” children’s books.** Many of these are wonderful as children’s

literature, but unfortunately they often convey values of sexism, racism, ableism, or even colonialism. People who love the books that pose this dilemma argue that it is OK to use them because they “reflect their times,” which they imply somehow excuses their biased messages. For example, I adored the Babar series of books as a young child and was unpleasantly shocked to realize as an adult how much the images and story lines reflected messages of European colonialism in Africa. I chose not to use them with my own children, wanting them to learn accurate information about how people in Africa really live. Not sharing childhood favorites may sadden some, but it is far better than the harm caused by reinforcing messages of racism and colonialism.

In a nutshell—as you choose books or critically examine your current book selection, always keep in mind the power of books—their words and their images—to nurture or, conversely, to undermine a child’s sense of self, positive attitude toward others, and motivation to act for fairness.

Additional Resources

- [Creating an Anti-Bias Library](#)
- [Recommended Booklists for Early Childhood](#)
- [Booklists by Theme](#) for all ages
- *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards
- *From Cover to Cover: Evaluating and Reviewing Children’s Books* by Kathleen Horning
- *Brown Gold: Milestones of African-American Children’s Picture Books, 1845-2002* by Michelle Martin

Louise Derman-Sparks is an internationally respected anti-bias educator and author (along with Julie Olsen Edwards) of *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*. She has co-authored several additional books with Dr. Carol Brunson Day (Teaching/Learning Anti-Racism), the ABC Task Force (*Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*), Dr. Patricia Ramsey (*What If All the Kids Are White?*), and Dr. John Nimmo and Debbie Leekeenan (*Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change*). She speaks throughout the United States and abroad, and served on the NAEYC Governing Board from 1998 to 2001. Louise has a lifelong commitment to building a more just society for all people. Her children Douglass and Holly, now grown, were her inspiration. A Pacific Oaks College faculty member for 33 years—when its mission and pedagogy reflected anti-bias education principles—Louise is now retired.

*In 1980, the **Council on Interracial Books for Children** published the book *Guidelines for Selecting Bias-Free Textbooks and Storybooks*. A shorter version of the book in pamphlet form, “Ten Quick Ways to Analyze Children’s Books for Racism and Sexism,” followed. One of the first guides written for teachers and families, it became an invaluable tool for hundreds of thousands of people. Both the book and pamphlet have been out of print for several years. **Rethinking Schools** published their adaptation of the original Guidelines in 1994.