

Ten Steps for Reviewing Children’s Books

The visual and verbal messages young children absorb from books and other media strongly influence their ideas about themselves and others. Therefore, carefully choosing children’s books is a vital educational task. Here are ten ideas to consider when reviewing children’s books for misinformation and stereotypes.

1. Check the illustrations

Look for stereotypes

A “stereotype” is an oversimplified generalization about a particular group that creates the idea that we know something about an individual person based on the person’s perceived membership in that group.

Stereotypes can objectify or dehumanize, but they usually carry derogatory implications. One good, informative exercise is to quickly list all the stereotypes you know about various groups of people, even if you do not believe them. Doing this helps to call your attention to what the stereotypes look like, and it helps you to think about what the stereotypes mean in your interpretation.

All books should depict people compassionately and as complex human beings. If the books contain stereotypes, either engage the children in critical thinking (e.g., “Do the people in this book look like all the people you know? Who’s missing?”) or eliminate the books from your collection.

Look for tokenism

Regularly seeing only one of any group—either in your book collection (e.g., one story about Mexican Americans among many books about White families) or in a story itself (e.g., one African American child among many White children)—teaches that the token group is less important than the other group(s) featured.

2. Check the story line

Even if a book shows visual diversity, the story line may carry messages of bias that may be obvious or quite subtle. Consider these questions:

- Your book collection needs a balance of different people in “doer” roles. Do the stories typically depict people of color, girls, children from low-income families, and children with disabilities as dependent or passive, while depicting White people, boys, members of the middle-class, and “able-bodied” children in leadership and action roles?
- Who typically causes a problem and who resolves it? Are problems always solved individually, or do some books show a group of children and/or adults working together to solve a problem?
- To gain acceptance and/or approval in the book, does a child of color, a girl, or child with a disability have to exhibit extraordinary qualities? be the one to understand, forgive, or change an injustice?
- Are the achievements of girls and women due to their looks or relationship with boys and men, or are they based on their own initiative and intelligence?

3. Look at the lifestyles

- Do the lives of people of color or people with low income in the story contrast unfavorably with the norm of White, middle-class, suburban life (i.e., the dominant culture in the U.S.)?
- Are negative value judgments implied about cultures different from the dominant culture? Do images and information go beyond the simple and offer genuine insights into the lifestyles of the characters in the story? Does the setting reflect historical assumptions about life but not contemporary life (e.g., multiple books in your collection about Native Americans in the 1800s but none from the present day)?
- Does your book collection depict diversity among people *within* a specific racial/ethnic group (e.g., range of family structures, living environments, socioeconomic conditions, types of work, and gender roles within the family)?

4. Weigh the relationships between people

- In the book, is there a balance of power among the characters? Who are the central figures, and who serve as the supporting characters?
- In your book collection, is there a balance of what kind of characters play central roles and what kind of characters are supporting? Are family relationships shown with great variety?

5. Note the heroes

- Does your book collection include heroes of color, from low-income families, or with disabilities? When they do appear, are they admired because they are a credit to a particular social identity, or are they admired for the same qualities that have made White individuals famous?
- Ask yourself, “Whose interests is a particular hero really serving?”
- Do some of your books about important people include struggles for justice?

6. Consider the potential effects on a child’s self and social identities

Will all of the children you serve see themselves and their families’ ways of life reflected in your book collection? Consider these questions:

- Will children of color, girls, children from each type of family structure, and children from low-income families see one or more characters with whom they can readily and positively identify?
- Do your books reinforce or counteract messages that teach children to feel inferior or superior because of their skin color, culture, gender, economic class, ability or disability, or type of family structure?

7. Consider the author’s or illustrator’s background and perspective

All authors write from a cultural as well as a personal context. In the past, many children’s books were by authors and illustrators who were White and members of the middle or professional class, so a single cultural and class perspective dominated children’s literature. Today, there are many more books by authors from a range of cultural and personal experiences available.

- Consider the biographical material on the jacket flap or back of the book. What qualifies the author or illustrator to deal with that particular subject? If the book is not about people or events similar to the author or illustrator’s background and experiences, what specifically recommends them as creators of this book?

- What is the author’s attitude toward her or his story characters? Do the images reflect respect and accuracy on the part of the illustrator?
- Do you have a balance of books by authors and illustrators that reflect a range of identities and experiences?

8. Watch for loaded words

A word is “loaded” when it has offensive overtones. Always consider the context in which a word is used and to whom it applies (e.g., be wary of terminology that describes children or families as “ordinary” or “normal”).

- Know common examples of loaded words. Loaded adjectives applied to people of color that carry racist overtones include *savage*, *primitive*, *backward*, *inscrutable*, and *treacherous*, among others.
- Look for alternatives. For example, try to avoid the generic use of “man” for humankind or male terms for occupations by using firefighters instead of firemen, ancestors instead of forefathers, chairperson instead of chairman, and so on.

9. Look at 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 multicultural society and nonsexist and nonableist perspectives in the 1970s. Since then, the range of accurate, respectful, and caring books reflecting diversity is increasing. When considering new books for your collection, begin with more recently published materials and then continue with older copyright dates.

10. Always keep in mind the power of books

The words and the images in books have the ability to nurture or undermine children’s sense of self, and they deeply impact children’s attitudes towards others. Keep this in mind as you review books for misinformation and stereotypes.

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