

PositivelyAutism.com Newsletter
January 2011
Topic: Children's Books and Autism

Children's Books Rarely Feature Characters with Disabilities

According to a new study published in the journal, "Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities," characters with disabilities may be underrepresented in children's literature. While a wide range of disabilities (including autism) were reported to be present in the children's books analyzed, the characters with disabilities were frequently supporting characters less likely to experience growth and development "in their own right" (Diament, 2010).

You can read an article (by Michelle Diament for DisabilityScoop) with additional details about the study here: <http://www.disabilityscoop.com/2011/01/04/disabilities-childrens-books/11830/>

Stay tuned to Positively Autism's blog in the next few days for additional articles and resources about positive portrayals of autism in children's books.

Everyone's Included: The Importance of Children's Books about Disability

By Nicole Caldwell, M.Ed.

"When children are not able to find themselves or their lives reflected in classroom literature, they are less engaged and interested in the reading process. Beyond that, the subtle message is that school is for someone else, not people like you."

- Anonymous student quoted in "Heightening Awareness about the Importance of Using Multicultural Literature" by Susan A. Colby and Anna F. Lyon

The above quote is from a research article about the importance of using multicultural literature in school classrooms. However, I think it only makes sense to extend this argument to include children with diverse abilities. If we arrange our classrooms to be welcoming to children from various cultures, we should also arrange them to be welcoming to children with special needs. Children with special needs deserve to have the opportunity to discover themselves and their lives in classroom literature. Classroom literature can also help classmates understand and form true friendships with students with special needs in their classes. For our classroom (and home) libraries to be fully diverse, we should include books about all types of diversity.

As we recognize the importance of providing students with books about children with special needs, we must also examine the messages that these books send. Unfortunately, many children's books about this subject portray children with special needs as pitiful, needy, and incapable. Their goal is not to be offensive, but rather to foster empathy and understanding among peers. However, if you were the student that such a book was chosen to represent, how would that make you feel about yourself? About your abilities? About your future? Would such a book inspire classmates to form a genuine friendship with you, or just try to be your

"helper?" I believe that we want to choose books that will be both empowering and inspiring to the students and their classmates.

This leads to the obvious question, "How should I choose books featuring children with special needs?" The first step is to read the book and consider your first impression about the characters. Did you feel sympathy and sadness for the characters, or did you feel informed and positive? If the book gave you an overall positive feeling, continue to rate the book using the following characteristics.

Illustrations and text are free of stereotypes, such as portraying children with disability labels as "needy" and "incapable."

Illustrations and text show diverse children as unique individuals with distinctive features and valued abilities/characteristics.

Illustrations and text show diverse children in action and leadership positions, not simply observers or in subservient positions.

To receive acceptance from peers, diverse children should not need to confirm to "norms" or lose their cultural characteristics.

The book promotes a sense of empathy/understanding and not pity for children with disability labels.

The book emphasizes individual strengths/abilities, not only challenges and differences.

The text does not include loaded words (words with offensive overtones). Examples include offensive names and terms such as, "slow," "retarded," "lazy," "backwards," "cripple," "handicapped," and sometimes "special."

The text uses "People-First Language" when referring to disability labels. For example, "student with autism," instead of "autistic student." This emphasizes the importance of the child, rather than the label.

The information in the book is accurate and developmentally appropriate for the target age group.

The author and illustrator biographical material indicate a degree of direct experience with the diversity group represented.

Now that you've selected some great books for your classroom, when and how should you use them? If possible, I suggest using these books as a natural part of your current curriculum. This works best with books with a storyline not specifically about the disability represented, but that feature a character with a disability in the story. An example is "Russ and the Firehouse" by Janet Elizabeth Rickert. In this book, Russ, a child with Down Syndrome, tours a fire station with his family. Since this book could be used in a study of community helpers, community service, or jobs, awareness could be raised about Down Syndrome with the class in a natural and positive way. Additionally, children's books about

disability can be used specifically to raise awareness if a new student with a special need will be joining a classroom. A book with a positive portrayal can give students an understanding and positive attitude about their new classmate.

References

Guide For Reviewing Children's Literature That Include People with Disabilities:

<http://www.circleofinclusion.org/english/books/>

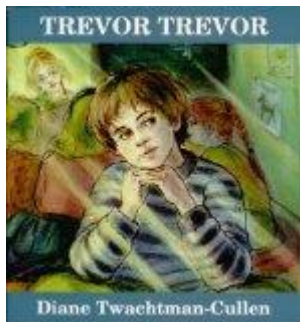
Criteria for Evaluating Multicultural Materials:

<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/content/contareas/reading/li4lk26.htm>

"Heightening Awareness about the Importance of Using Multicultural Literature" by Susan A. Colby and Anna F. Lyon in *Multicultural Education*, Spring 2004.

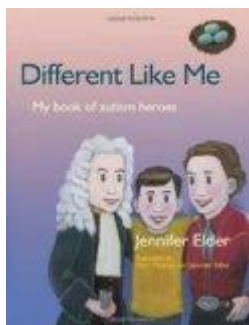
Children's Books about Autism

Continuing our children's literature theme this week, here are a few of my favorite children's books about Autism.



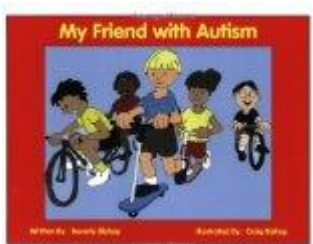
[Trevor Trevor](#)

by Diane Twachtman-Cullen, Ph.D.

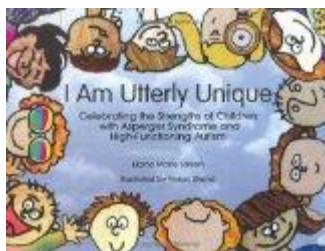


[Different Like Me: My Book of Autism Heroes](#)

by Jennifer Elder



[My Friend with Autism: A Coloring Book for Peers and Siblings](#)
by Beverly Bishop



[I Am Utterly Unique: Celebrating the Strengths of Children with Asperger Syndrome and High-Functioning Autism](#)
by Elaine Marie Larson

New Free Download - Treasure Chest Reward/Reinforcement System



I added a new resource to Positively Autism's free resources page. This is a reward/reinforcement system that I've used with my son. He really likes pirates and treasure chests, so he has fun with it.

You can access the resource here: http://www.positivelyautism.com/free/3free_behavior.html

January Positive Autism News

Temple Grandin Stays True to Herself on Globe Red Carpet
USA Today
1/16/11

<http://content.usatoday.com/communities/entertainment/post/2011/01/temple-grandin-stays-true-to-herself-on-globe-red-carpet/1>

Claire Danes and Temple Grandin Win Golden Globe, Share an Emotional Moment
1/17/11

<http://blogs.babble.com/strollerderby/2011/01/17/claire-danes-and-temple-grandin-share-emotional-moment-at-golden-globes/>

Penfield Teen Rises Above Autism as a Gifted Timpanist
Rochester Democrat and Chronicle
1/24/11

<http://www.democratandchronicle.com/article/20110124/NEWS01/101240326/1002/NEWS>

Scientist Turns Autism into Asset
The Autism News
1/27/11

<http://www.theautismnews.com/2011/01/27/scientist-turns-autism-into-asset/>

Girl Scout with Autism to Become Top Girl Scout Cookie Seller
Wausau Daily Herald
1/28/11

<http://www.wausaudailyherald.com/article/20110128/WDH04/101280347/One-tough-cookie>

News Quote of the Month: “My visual thinking gives me the ability to test run in my head a piece of equipment I’ve designed, just like a virtual reality computer system.”
- Temple Grandin (in 'Scientist Turns Autism into Asset').

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