

Mirrors and Windows: Diversity in Books and Videos

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In early childhood education, there's a concept called "Mirrors and Windows". It emphasizes how important it is that when a child looks around a classroom – at the dolls, the plastic food in the toy kitchen, the dress-up clothes, and the pictures on the wall and in the books – they find *mirrors* that reflect their own identities and life experiences back at them and *windows* that give them a peek into the identities and lives of people who are different from them. When you choose books (and shows) for the children in your life, consider incorporating both mirrors and windows.

The Power of Mirrors

When children see people like themselves in stories, that reflection helps them to feel seen and understood, and feel that *their* story is worth telling. It gives them a powerful sense of belonging, and can shape their perceptions of themselves and their potential. If there is a character in a book who is like them that is doing great things, it helps them to imagine *they* can do great things.

If mirrors are missing, that can leave them feeling unimportant. Historically, it has been very difficult for many people to find mirrors in books, as girls, people of color, disabled people and people of diverse faiths rarely appeared as main characters. There's been a great deal of progress in this area over the past decade or so, but there's still under-representation of many people's stories, and in your local library, it may be hard to find diverse books. Use the resource lists below to aid your search.

Windows to the World

If children just read books about people like themselves, it limits their worldview, and can lead them to believe that their stories are the *only* ones that matter. If the books they read about other identities perpetuate stereotypes, even positive stereotypes, it gives them a one-dimensional view of others. If the media they consume has consistently *negative* portrayals of some types of people, it can lead to ingrained biases they may not even notice, because they feel like truth. But if they encounter rich, meaningful stories about diverse people that are relatable even as they are outside of the child's normal experience, that helps to reduce prejudice and can open the door to crucial conversations about justice, equity, and inclusion. Stories can help children understand that the world we live in is not what it should be, and that they could use their power to change that.

Story is a powerful means by which we can see and experience the world from another's point of view – to "walk a mile in another person's shoes". When children see and hear stories about people not like them, it offers a peek into other people's lives, and expands their horizons and their empathy.

What to Look For in Books about Diversity

- Consider the creators' backgrounds– what qualifies them to tell this particular story?
- Are cultural details accurate? current? Is the culture portrayed multi-dimensionally?
- Check the illustrations – watch for stereotypes (like Latino men in sombreros), and for tokenism (the one kid in a wheelchair who appears on one page)

- Include all the different identities: a broad array of race, culture, religion, ability/disability, gender, orientation, economic class, rural and urban settings, diverse family constellations, home schooled and traditionally schooled, historic and modern.
- Choose some “issue books” where the challenges of an identity are core to the story (e.g. civil rights for Blacks, or coming out for LGBTQ), but also choose some where diverse children have fun adventures, or where children whose identities are different from your child have experiences similar to your child (e.g. a book about a Muslim child starting school).
- Choose appealing books. Sometimes in our aim to expose our kids to diversity, we end up reading boring didactic books with sub-par illustrations, and the children learn to avoid or ignore “those kinds of books.” Above all else, choose good books that kids will like!

Talk it Over

After you read one of these great books with your kids, talk about it.

Ask them questions like: How are we the same as the people in the book? How are we different? Do the characters remind you of someone you know? How are they the same or different from that person? If you don’t know anyone like them, why not? What about their life experience is different from yours? What was easier for them to do than it would be for you? What was harder for them to do than it would be for you? Did they do something that you would like to try yourself?

Resources

Diverse Book Finder. Offers a searchable database of children’s books featuring BIPOC characters, where you can filter to exactly what you’re looking for. They have a library of books available through interlibrary loan. They also have some book lists, including Adoption, Multiracial Families, Skin Tone, Muslim, New Sibling and more. <https://diversebookfinder.org/>

We Need Diverse Books. A huge collection of links to sites with recommendations for diverse titles, grouped by category for each race/culture, religion, ability, LGBTQIA. <https://diversebookfinder.org/>

Books for Littles. Blog posts which talk about a topic, and give guidelines of what to look for or avoid in books about that topic, then recommend a few books. They have some really specific topics like “don’t yuck my yum” on food shaming, diverse family constellations (including foster families, single fathers, step-parents, etc.), and kids’ stories to recognize privilege. <https://booksforlittles.com/>

Early Childhood Anti-Bias Education Booklists. Lists of recommended books on topics like: Culture & Language, Economic Class, Disability & Autism, Activism, Conflict Resolution, Holidays and more. <https://socialjusticebooks.org>

Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children’s Books by Louise Derman-Sparks. Learn more about how to evaluate the media you use. <https://www.teachingforchange.org/selecting-anti-bias-books>

Choosing Books for Your Child addresses where you can find books in online libraries, YouTube read-alouds and more. <https://goooddayswithkids.com/2020/09/29/choosing-books-for-your-child/>

For recommendations for books and movies *for adults* that feature diverse characters by diverse creators, check out my post: <https://janelledurham.com/2021/04/24/seeking-out-diverse-media/>