

# Using inclusive books in the Early Years and key stage 1 – why, what and how? Why are inclusive books important?

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Young children - indeed all children - need and deserve books in which they can find themselves; books they can relate to; books that show them they are not alone; books that validate their experiences; books that build their sense of identity; books that help them feel they belong (so important in our world right now); books that help them understand themselves. Book collections that demonstrate and celebrate equality, diversity and inclusion support personal and emotional development. They build well-being, resilience and self-worth. They present children with role models and options.

Young children - indeed all children - also need and deserve books that broaden their horizons: books that introduce them to different ways of living; books with a diverse range of characters from a diverse range of backgrounds and with a diverse range of experiences; books that highlight our shared humanity. They need books that give them insight into other people's lives. Book collections that demonstrate and celebrate equality, diversity and inclusion also develop empathy, tolerance, respect and social cohesion. We all need books that challenge stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, books that challenge our thinking, books that break down suspicions and fears of otherness.

Sadly, all too often the range of the books in classrooms, libraries and bookshops is not representative of the diversity of society. Take one example: even now a depressingly large majority of easily available children's books feature only white children - an issue that matters just as much in predominantly white communities as in areas of ethnic and cultural diversity. Another example: far more of the chief protagonists in easily available picture books are male than female. Inexplicably, even animal characters are mostly male. Girls need positive female role models, and they are important for boys' development too. Children's publishing has a long way to go on diversity and inclusion, but there are lots of wonderful books available. We need to get them. We need to promote them. We need to exploit them effectively.

## **The characteristics of good inclusive books**

What does a good diverse book collection for young children look like? Above all it looks enticing and exciting. It is full of lovely books that children can't wait to read. There is no need for tokenism. Good inclusive books are great reads. A good inclusive picture book or early chapter book has rounded characters and an imaginative plot. The story and characters come first: the books are not issue-led. The characters and situations are ones today's young children can relate to. The protagonists are agents not victims. Good inclusive books, whether picture books, fiction or information books, are relevant to contemporary children. They have authentic pictures and text. They explore issues sensitively in both text and pictures. They inspire curiosity. They are free of stereotypes. They don't preach. They present positive images and provide a range of role models. Good inclusive books show diversity in a natural, incidental way. (Why is it that children so rarely see characters wearing glasses in their picture books, for example?) Good inclusive books raise questions and create opportunities for reflection and discussion.

## **Building a diverse book collection**

A good diverse book collection will include lots of books with positive messages about gender, gender identity and gender roles. Let me name just a few that I am especially keen on: *Ada Twist Scientist* and *Rosie and Revere Engineer* by Andrea Beaty, *Boys Don't Do Ballet* and *The Worst Princess* by Anna Kemp, *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink* by Jane Yolen and Heidi Stemple, *Super Daisy* by Kes Gray, *Alfie's Angels* by Henriette Barkow (available in several dual language editions), *Made by Raffi* by Craig Pomranz, *I'm a Girl* by Yasmeen Ismail, *It Could Be, You Could Be* by Karen Owen and *What are You Playing At?* by Marie-Sabine Roger and Anne Sol. All of these challenge gender stereotypes. Importantly, all are interesting and highly enjoyable. *10,000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert is great for exploring trans-gender issues.

We need to make sure that children see all types of family composition in our book collections. Too many books still feature only stereotypical white middle class families with a mum and a dad and two children. *The Great Big Book of Families* by Mary Hoffman explores the ways lots of very different families go about things with great humour and compassion. Do look at *We Are Family* by Patricia Hegarty too. I particularly like *Tilly's at Home Holiday* by Gillian Hobbs. *The New Small Person* by Lauren Child is another favourite of mine. *Welcome to the Family*, also by Mary Hoffman, is delightful, with an extremely diverse range of families including foster families, adoptive families, mixed-race families, families with same-sex parents. Other good picture books with same-sex couples include *Stella Brings the Family* by Miriam B Schiffer, *King and King* by Linda De Haan and *Heather has Two Mummies* and *Donovan's Big Day* by Leslea Newman.

A good diverse book collection will of course have lots of picture books, fiction and information books that reflect the ethnic, cultural and religious diversity of our world in positive ways, as many of the books I've listed in other paragraphs do. This is a vast field, and it's impossible to list all of the fabulous books that are available in this short space, but here are a just a few of the picture books and chapter books that I particularly admire, some set in this country, some in other parts of the world. Both are important. I love *Abdi's Day* and *A Visit to City Farm* by Verna Wilkins for their authentic representation of the school experiences of contemporary city children. Take a look at *One World One Day* by Barbara Kerley, *My World Your World* by Melanie Walsh, *Yokki and the Parno Gry* by Richard O'Neill and Katharine Quarmby, *Lulu Reads to Zeki* (and the rest of the Lulu series), *My Friend Amy* and *My Friend Jamal* by Anna McQuinn, *Anna Hibiscus* and *The No 1 Car Spotter* by Atinuke, *My Dad the Hero* and *Kasia's Surprise* by Stella Gurney, *The Swirling Hijab* by Na'ima bint Robert, *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt De La Peña, *Immi* by Karin Littlewood, *To Market! To Market!* by Anushka Ravishankar and *What We Wear* by M. Ajmera, E.H. Derstine and C. Pon. *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman deserves its classic status.

Books about refugees and migration are important both for those children who have experienced them, and for children whose lives have been more settled, so they can understand what it feels like to be uprooted, to come to a new country, to be surrounded by strangers. These books are all excellent: *Ice in the Jungle* by Ariane Hofman-Maniyar, *Frog and the Stranger* by Max Velthuijs, *The Silence Seeker* by Ben Morley, *The New Kid* by Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick, *The Journey Home* by Frann Preston-Gannon, *The Colour of Home* by Mary Hoffman and *Beegu* by Alexis Deacon. Don't forget *Paddington* by Michael Bond. For Year 2 and above I thoroughly recommend *Journey* by Francesca Sanna and *Azzi in Between* by Sarah Garland.

Books translated into English from other languages develop children's cultural understanding and empathy. A couple of examples: *Mr Leon's Paris* by Barroux, translated from French by Sarah Ardizzone is fabulous; I'm very impressed with *When I Coloured in the World* by Ahmadreza Ahmadi, translated from Persian by Azita Rassi. Dual language books can be very useful.

*We Are All Born Free* by Amnesty International is an important and special book: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in picture book format.

An inclusive book collection will include books with positive messages about additional needs, including learning disabilities. Here are just a few: *Susan Laughs* by Jeanne Willis, *Just Because* by Rebecca Elliott, *Freddie and the Fairy* by Julia Donaldson, *Specs for Rex* by Yasmeen Ismail, *Isaac and His Amazing Asperger Superpowers* by Melanie Walsh, *Max the Champion* by Sean Stockdale and Alexandra Strick and *Quiet* by Kate Alizadeh. *The Great Big Body Book* by Mary Hoffman is very inclusive. On the subject of additional needs, don't forget the importance of books that make text accessible for children for whom reading is hard. I'm a big fan of Barrington Stoke's Little Gems books. Do look at *Off to the Park* illustrated by Stephen Cheetham, a lovely, immensely accessible multi-sensory board book.

Children need books that help them understand their own and other people's emotions, that give them an insight into mental health issues and that help them deal with difficult situations. Some examples that I admire: *Rabbityness* by Jo Empson is great on loss; *The Cloud* by Hannah Cumming, *The Colour Thief* by Andrew Fusek Peters and Polly Peters, *Black Dog* by Levi Pinfold and *Everybody Feels Sad!* by Moira Butterfield are all very valuable. So are the other books in the *Everybody Feels...* series. And so is *The Great Big Book of Feelings*, yet another book by Mary Hoffman. *The Girl with a Parrot on Her Head* by Daisy Hirst is about a girl coming to terms with her friend moving away. *Grandma* by Jessica Shepherd is a loving and positive story about a grandmother slipping into dementia. Of course an inclusive book collection also needs books about positive emotions. Try *The Jar of Happiness* by Alisa Burrows for example.

Inclusive books do not all have words. Wordless picture books are accessible to everyone, whatever their abilities, whatever their language. *Mirror* by Jeannie Baker is incredibly thought-provoking about the differences and similarities between the average day lived by a family in the Middle East and a family in Australia. I love *Here I Am* by Patti Kim, about a child in a new country.

A good diverse book collection will have many books in which the inclusion is incidental. The books in this last set of recommendations are first and foremost lots of fun. They also encourage imagination and curiosity. Two of my all-time favourites are *You Choose* and *Just Imagine* by Pippa Goodhart. They guarantee enjoyment and engagement. *Little Drivers Going Places* by Dan Crisp and others in this series are great. Have a look at *15 Things Not to Do with a Baby* by Margaret McAllistair, *The Animal Boogie* by Debbie Harter, *Kangaroo Kisses* by Nandana Dev Sen, *Little Red and the Very Hungry Lion* by Alex T Smith, *Fussy Freya* by Katharine Quarmby, *This is Our House* by Michael Rosen, *Space Song Rocket Ride* by Sunny Scribes, and *How to Find Gold* by Vivianne Schwarz. Children adore *There's a Bear on My Chair* by Ross Collins.

It's well worth mentioning Letterbox Library: a unique children's books supplier, committed to equality, diversity and inclusion.

## Using and promoting inclusive books

If we want children to benefit from all these fabulous books, the most important thing of course is to make sure they are easily accessible. Children should be able to discover a wide range of books in which they can find themselves and books that help them understand others in the kinder boxes and on the shelves in their classrooms and libraries. We must bear these and other wonderful inclusive books in mind when we are recommending books for children to choose and when we talk to parents and carers about good books.

When we choose books to read aloud to children we must pick a diverse range so that we introduce children to new ideas and new ways of thinking about things. And as we read, we need to use the books as a spur for open questions and open discussion, to broaden children's understanding and enhance their social, emotional and personal development.

We must make sure that we give children time - individually and in small groups - to explore the richness of the books: the text, the pictures, the concepts. The best books are multi-layered and children need time to absorb, time to think and, let's not forget, time to enjoy. Reading for pleasure is paramount, and a good range of inclusive titles will most certainly encourage it.

Inclusive books can support teaching and learning in a wide range of curriculum topics. Many are superb for exploring issues in PSHE. Lots are great for history and geography. Think of *Mirror* for example. Books like *Ada Twist Scientist* and *Rosie Revere Engineer* can help break down barriers to STEM subjects among girls. Inclusive books are the perfect starting point for many philosophy for children discussions.

Use drama, role-play and hot-seating to help children get to grips with the complex issues many inclusive books introduce them to.

Use inclusive books as a stimulus for creativity. They pique children's curiosity, and can inspire brilliant and deeply thoughtful art-work and writing.

## Conclusion

Diverse book collections promote equality and celebrate it. Inclusive books widen children's horizons, promote understanding, build tolerance, build bridges and build social cohesion. They provide role models and opportunities. They develop self-esteem and resilience. Children's publishing in this country is still far from representative of society, but let's make sure we track down, acquire, use and promote the very special books that are already out there, and let's continue to press for more.

## Books listed

Ahmadreza Ahmadi, *When I Coloured in the World*, translated by Azita Rassi

M. Ajmera, E.H. Derstine and C. Pon, *What We Wear*

Kate Alizadeh, *Quiet*

Amnesty International, *We Are All Born Free*

Atinuke, *Anna Hibiscus* and *The No 1 Car Spotter*

Jeannie Baker, *Mirror*

Henriette Barkow, *Alfie's Angels*

Barroux, *Mr Leon's Paris*, translated by Sarah Ardizzone

Andrea Beaty, *Ada Twist Scientist* and *Rosie and Revere Engineer*

Michael Bond, *Paddington*

Alisa Burrows, *The Jar of Happiness*

Moira Butterfield, *Everybody Feels Sad!* and other books in the *Everybody Feels* series

Stephen Cheetham, *Off to the Park*

Lauren Child, *The New Small Person*

Ross Collins, *There's a Bear on My Chair*

Dan Crisp, *Little Drivers Going Places* and other books in the series

Hannah Cumming, *The Cloud*

Linda De Haan, *King and King*

Matt De La Peña, *Last Stop on Market Street*

Alexis Deacon, *Beegu*

Nandana Dev Sen, *Kangaroo Kisses*

Julia Donaldson, *Freddie and the Fairy*

Rebecca Elliott, *Just Because*

Jo Empson, *Rabbityness*

Marcus Ewert, *10,000 Dresses*

Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick, *The New Kid*  
Andrew Fusek Peters and Polly Peters, *The Colour Thief*  
Sarah Garland, *Azzi in Between*  
Pippa Goodhart, *You Choose* and *Just Imagine*  
Kes Gray, *Super Daisy*  
Stella Gurney, *Kasia's Surprise* and *My Dad the Hero*  
Debbie Harter, *The Animal Boogie*  
Patricia Hegarty, *We Are Family*  
Daisy Hirst, *The Girl with a Parrot on Her Head*  
Gillian Hobbs, *Tilly's at Home Holiday*  
Mary Hoffman, *Amazing Grace*, *The Colour of Home*, *The Great Big Body Book*, *The Great Big Book of Families*, *The Great Big Book of Feelings* and *Welcome to the Family*  
Ariane Hofman-Maniyar, *Ice in the Jungle*  
Yasmeen Ismail, *I'm a Girl* and *Specs for Rex*  
Anna Kemp, *Boys Don't Do Ballet* and *The Worst Princess*  
Barbara Kerley, *One World One Day*  
Patti Kim, *Here I Am*  
Karin Littlewood, *Immi*  
Margaret McAllistair, *15 Things Not to Do with a Baby*  
Anna McQuinn, *Lulu Reads to Zeki* (and the rest of the Lulu series), *My Friend Amy* and *My Friend Jamal*  
Ben Morley, *The Silence Seeker*  
Leslea Newman, *Heather has Two Mummies* and *Donovan's Big Day*  
Richard O'Neill and Katharine Quarmby, *Yokki and the Parno Gry*  
Karen Owen, *It Could Be*, *You Could Be*  
Levi Pinfold, *Black Dog*  
Craig Pomranz, *Made by Raffi*  
Frann Preston-Gannon, *The Journey Home*  
Katharine Quarmby, *Fussy Freya*  
Anushka Ravishankar, *To Market! To Market!*  
Na'ima bint Robert, *The Swirling Hijab*  
Marie-Sabine Roger and Anne Sol, *What are You Playing At?*  
Michael Rosen, *This is Our House*  
Francesca Sanna, *Journey*  
Miriam B Schiffer, *Stella Brings the Family*  
Vivianne Schwarz, *How to Find Gold*  
Sunny Scribes, *Space Song Rocket Ride*  
Jessica Shepherd, *Grandma*  
Alex T Smith, *Little Red and the Very Hungry Lion*  
Sean Stockdale and Alexandra Strick, *Max the Champion*  
Max Velthuijs, *Frog and the Stranger*  
Melanie Walsh, *Isaac and His Amazing Asperger Superpowers* and *My World Your World*  
Verna Wilkins, *Abdi's Day* and *A Visit to City Farm*  
Jeanne Willis, *Susan Laughs*  
Jane Yolen and Heidi Stemple, *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink*

### **Sources of further information**

Barrington Stoke: [www.barringtonstoke.co.uk](http://www.barringtonstoke.co.uk)  
Booktrust: [www.booktrust.org.uk](http://www.booktrust.org.uk)  
IBBY: [www.ibby.org](http://www.ibby.org)  
Inclusive Minds: [www.inclusiveminds.com](http://www.inclusiveminds.com)  
Letterbox Library: [www.letterboxlibrary.com](http://www.letterboxlibrary.com)  
Outside In World: [www.outsideinworld.org.uk](http://www.outsideinworld.org.uk)  
We Need Diverse Books: <http://weneeddiversebooks.org>

### **Biographical note**

Anne Harding is an independent trainer. She provides courses and inset on engaging children with reading. You can find out about her training at [www.aneharding.net](http://www.aneharding.net).