

TEN STEPS FOR REVIEWING CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Adapted from "Ten Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Sexism and Racism",
Louise Derman-Sparks, 2009

The Council for Interracial Books for Children's pamphlet "Ten Quick Ways" has been an invaluable tool for hundreds of thousands of teachers. Here is a revised version of the original text.

The visual and verbal messages young children absorb from books (and other media) have a strong influence on their ideas about people. They also serve to reinforce or undermine children's positive self-concept. Gradually, misinformation and stereotypes create a reality for children, which also influence their perceptions and attitudes towards others. Therefore, carefully choosing children's books is a vital educational task.

1. 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 messages and applies to ALL people in the group. People are objectified or de-humanized. Some common stereotypes are the strong women as "aggressive" and "hostile", the book-lover man as "girlie" ; the sombrero or funny-talking Latino and passive Latina, the gang member or over-sexed African man or woman, the Arab and/or Muslim man as extremist, the woman as voiceless and focused on clothes and looking "pretty"; the "noble" or "half naked-in-winter" Native American. (It is an informative exercise to quickly list all the stereotypes you know about various groups of people, even if you do not believe them. It helps to alert your attention to what the stereotypes look like.) All books should depict people compassionately and as real human beings. Those that contain stereotypes require your engaging children in critical thinking or should be eliminated 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 most stories (one African American child among many white children) teaches who is more and less important. Also consider if images depict all people as genuine individuals with distinctive (rather than stereotypical) features.

2. Check the Story Line

Even if a book shows more visual diversity, the story line may carry messages of bias which may be obvious or quite subtle. Do the stories typically depict people of color, girls, children from low-income families or with disabilities as needing help or in passive roles, while depicting whites, boys, and "able-bodied" people in leadership and action roles? How are problems presented, conceived and resolved? Who typically causes a

For: Sophia Lyon Fahs Lecture, UUA General Assembly 2012

problem and who resolves it? Your book collection needs a balance of different people in "doer" roles. To gain acceptance and/or approval 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? 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 problems solved individualistically by one person or by a group of children/adults working together?

3. Look at the Lifestyles

Does the life of people of color or poor people in the story contrast unfavorably with the norm of white, middle-class suburban life? Are negative value judgments implied about cultural differences from the dominant culture? Do images and information go beyond over-simplification 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, (e.g., range of family structures, living environments, socio-economic conditions and types of work, male/female roles within the family)?

4. Weigh the Relationships between People

Is there a balance of power among the book's characters? Or, are whites or males the central figures and people of color or females in essentially supporting roles? In your book collection, is there a balance of who is central and who is supporting? Are family relationships shown in their great variety?

5. Note the Heroes/Sheroes

Does your book collection include heroes/sheroes of color, , poor, or with disabilities. When they do appear, are they admired for the same qualities that have made white individuals famous? Ask yourself, "Whose interests is a particular hero/shero really serving? Are the traits and actions of heroes/sheroes reflective of their cultural group? Do some of your books about important people include struggles for justice?

6. Consider the Effects on a Child's Self and Social Identities

Will all of the children you serve see themselves and their family's way of life reflected in your book collection? Will children of color, girls, children from each type of family structure, poor children, see one or more characters with whom they can readily and positively identify? Does your overall collection balance all of their backgrounds? Or, does it consist mainly of books reflecting white, middle/upper-middle class, two-parent, and suburban families, with a few books that bring diversity? Do your books reinforce or counteract messages that teach children to feel inferior or superior because of their skin color, gender, family income, able-bodylines, type of family structure?

7. Consider the Author's or Illustrator's Background & 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. However, many more books from authors reflecting a range of cultural and personal experiences are available now. 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 and experiences, what specifically recommends them as creators of this book? What is the author's attitude toward her/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. Look for sexist language that excludes or in any way demeans girls or women. The generic use of the word "man" is now questioned by many, because of its sexist implications. Here are some examples of ways to avoid this: community instead of brotherhood; fire-fighters instead of firemen; human family instead of family of man; ancestors instead of forefathers; chairperson instead of chairmen. Examples of adjectives applied to people of color that carry racist overtones include: "savage", "primitive", "superstitious", "backward", "inscrutable", "treacherous". Always consider the context in which a word is used and to whom it applies.

9. Look at the Copyright Date

Copyright dates indicate the publication year, not the time of its writing (which might be two-three years previously). 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 pluralistic society and non-sexist and non-ableist perspectives in the 1970's. Since then, the range of accurate, respectful and caring books reflecting diversity are increasing. When considering new books for your collection, begin with most recently published ones and then continue with descending copyright dates.

10. Always keep in mind the power of books -- their words and their images-- to nurture or to undermine children's sense of self and attitudes towards others.