

Including Disabled Children in Picture Books

Beth Cox



Beth Cox was a primary school teacher before deciding on a career move into publishing. For the past six years she has worked at Child's Play (International) Ltd. where she is Editorial Assistant and Education Liaison Co-ordinator. Having always had an interest in the inclusion of disabled children, she jumped at the chance to be involved with the Scope 'In The

Picture' project and continues to advocate the inclusion of disabled children in books, working closely with Booktrust.

Summary

Disabled children are often missing from picture books. At Child's Play, although we wanted to create books which fully reflected our diverse society, we sometimes found it difficult to accurately represent disabled children. This article focuses on how we overcame these obstacles and looks at how we will continue to ensure that inclusion remains a priority in our publishing.

One of the most delightful things about books is their ability to put you, the reader, in the midst of the many exciting worlds they create. But what if you never see people like yourself in books? How could you imagine having the same adventures?

Child's Play has a philosophy of creating books for and representing all children, whatever their background, gender, heritage, religion or ability. Often, this proves difficult, especially when it comes to portraying disabled children. Some impairments are not visually evident; sometimes we do not know enough about an impairment to make an accurate portrayal. Five years ago this changed, when we found out about a forthcoming Scope project aiming to encourage publishers to put disabled children 'In The Picture'. We were lucky enough to be involved with this project from the start, benefiting from the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of the steering committee, and providing in return a publisher's perspective on the issue of including disabled children in picture books.

As a forward-thinking publisher, we wanted to change the focus away from the aids used – such as the often (token) inclusion of a wheelchair – onto the actual character. We wanted to show a fully representative range of disabled children, from those with hearing impairments to those affected by Spina Bifida. With the support of the 'In The Picture' project, the expertise of members of the steering group, and much research, Child's Play has become one of the leading publishers in the field of inclusive books for children from birth to nine years. In the last three years, three Child's Play titles have been shortlisted for the NASEN inclusive children's book award. **These are not specialist books that 'teach' children about a particular disability, but mainstream books featuring incidental images of disabled children as part of a fully representative cross-section of gender, heritage and ability.**

Just like our other characters, disabled children should be portrayed as good and as mischievous, as three-dimensional as any other child. Inclusion should help disabled children to perceive themselves as equal; inclusion in books allows readers who are not disabled become familiar with characters that may look slightly different, or use different equipment to them, but are fundamentally just the same.



Jess Stockham



Anthony Lewis

In terms of research, Child's Play has liaised with many disabled children and their families. We visit schools and nurseries. We ask questions and encourage feedback. Following work with the mother of a child with Talipes (Club Foot) we produced an image of a child wearing 'boots and bar' equipment. Her response says it all:

I showed this picture to my son, who only wears his boots and bar at night now. He said he wanted to wear them in the daytime too like the little girl! This shows the influence that such pictures can have for the good. It's been great to have input and I'm delighted to have helped.

Our contact with families and schools also allows us to build a picture of the whole child. Visiting a school and chatting to a child with Spina Bifida was essential for creating one of the characters in one of our recent books: *First Time: Nursery*. What would the character be able to do in the classroom? What adaptations or aids were used to ensure inclusion in the classroom? These were all questions that our research was able to answer, ensuring our character was realised and credible.



Sanja Rešček

So what next?

Unfortunately, the three-year funding for the 'In The Picture' project has now ended, although the website is still live and full of useful resources – and the members of the steering group still actively promote the project and the philosophy behind it.

The national book charity, Booktrust, have a strong commitment to making children's books truly inclusive and accessible, which is reflected in their resources and packs. One inclusive Child's Play book is in their 'Bookshine' pack for children with hearing impairments, and a number of images from Child's Play books have been reproduced in their leaflets. Furthermore, Booktrust ran a seminar at the London Book Fair in 2009 aiming to encourage publishers to include more incidental images of disabled children in books. Child's Play delivered a part of this seminar which focused on the publisher's perspective. The event was so well received that it will be followed up by a second seminar at the 2010 London Book Fair.

Even without the direct assistance of 'In The Picture', Child's Play's future publishing will continue its policy of creating fully inclusive books across its entire program, and – more importantly – helping to build a readership that will expect and demand the same from every publisher.



Jess Stockham

Contact

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For more information on the In The Picture
project visit: www.childreninthepicture.org.uk

For more information on Booktrust visit:
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Book Fair event contact
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