

Considerations When Writing a Picture Book That Includes a Child with a Disability

By Rebecca Eisenberg, Director of Media

Writing a picture book that features a child with a disability is an opportunity to promote inclusion, empathy, and authentic representation. The goal is not to “teach” disability, but to tell a meaningful story that is respectful, empowering, and relatable to all children. When done thoughtfully, these stories help children see disability as a natural part of human diversity and create a sense of belonging for every reader.

Use respectful current language.

First and foremost, use respectful, current language. Be mindful to avoid outdated, offensive, or ableist terms. Language shapes how children understand the world, so choosing words that are inclusive, positive, and age-appropriate is essential. The child in your story should never be portrayed with pity or as an “inspiration” simply for existing. They are a character first, not a lesson.

Portray the child as a whole person, not their disability.

It is also important to portray the child as a whole person. A disability should be just one part of who they are. Give your character interests, friendships, emotions, strengths, humor, and flaws. Let them be curious, stubborn, playful, or imaginative. When children see a fully developed character, they connect to the story on a human level rather than focusing solely on the disability.

Focus on abilities versus limitations.

Focus on strengths and abilities rather than limitations. Show what the child can do, how they problem-solve, and how they interact with the world in their own way. Avoid making “overcoming” the disability the main storyline. Disability does not need to be fixed or conquered, and it doesn’t define the person either.

Normalize disability within the story.

Include characters using assistive technology, accommodations, or supports (such as AAC, wheelchairs, hearing aids, or visual supports) naturally, just as you would include glasses or backpacks. These tools should be shown as part of daily life and can become familiar and supportive, not as something unusual or burdensome.

Ask individuals with disabilities to review your book. Whenever possible, have people with the lived experience of the specific disability review your work. Their feedback can help ensure accuracy, avoid stereotypes, and strengthen authenticity.

Make your illustrations inclusive.

Illustrations should accurately show disabilities and assistive technology, including diverse bodies, races, and cultures. Focus on reducing exaggeration, marginalizing, or isolation by placing children naturally within group scenes rather than apart.

Diversity should be woven throughout the book. Representation should reflect the real world, with characters of different backgrounds and identities. Avoid stereotypes related to both disability and culture.

Reflect relatable emotions.

Humans don't have one emotion. A child with or without a disability has varied emotions and this makes the character more relatable for the reader.

Make your book accessible.

Consider using simple and clear language, strong visual supports, easy to read text, etc. For example, using a difficult font that is hard to read for children with dyslexia can make the book less accessible.

Avoid "lesson-heavy" storytelling.

Inclusion should emerge naturally through the story. Children learn best when they discover meaning through characters and experiences rather than directly hearing the lesson repeatedly throughout the story.

Keep the story universal.

A picture book should still be about themes all children understand: friendship, belonging, curiosity, adventure, emotions, or growing up. Disability is part of the story, not the entire story.