

How to Build an Anti-Bias Library

by Louise Derman-Sparks & Julie Olsen Edwards

Here are five important steps teachers should follow in building a high-quality collection of children's books that address anti-bias issues.

Analyze the books you already have

1. Do the books accurately reflect the many realities of the children in your program?

Can they find themselves in your books? Look for:

- A variety of family structures, ethnicities, racial identities, economic circumstances, physical and/or mental abilities, and the like.
- Several examples for each of the above (no “tokens”).
- Are *any* aspects of children's families or lives out and therefore made invisible?

2. Do you have books that reflect the diversity of the children's larger community?

3. Are the books free of stereotypes? Check that:

- The illustrations realistically and caringly show all people as complex individuals.
- The story lines don't reinforce common stereotypical attitudes and behaviors (e.g., all people of a particular group look the same, all boys play outside and girls inside, etc.) or tokenism (e.g., all but one of the book characters are White and the child of color plays a “sidekick” role).

4. Decide what to do with books that contain stereotypical images and/or messages.

- Some books have many wonderful qualities but reinforce dominant culture images (in the U.S., the dominant culture is White, middle-class, male, Christian and suburban/urban). Unless you have a good replacement, keep it to use *along* with books that counter the stereotype that the dominant culture image is the “norm.”
- If the book reinforces stereotypes, either throw it out or cut it up to use any valuable images in collage or other projects.

Create a wish list of books for each specific type of diversity you need

Some books will fit in more than one category, so list them in both categories and mark them as particularly useful! For example, *Fred Stays with Me!* (by Nancy Coffelt) has a spunky, outspoken little girl as the main character, and it also shows a loving, thoughtful, divorced family. *Tonio's Cat* (by Mary Calhoun) features a gentle, loving boy who is also an immigrant from Mexico. There are many sources of books and ideas for books to add to your library. You may consult:

1. Local librarians.

2. Local independent booksellers—The big chains tend to carry only the most popular books, whereas the independent bookstores are likely to have a wide range of books and staff who have read the books they sell.

3. Teachers and directors in other programs—Ask people you meet at conference workshops as well as local colleagues for suggestions.

4. Websites—Most websites will refer you to other sites to investigate, as well. For a list of especially helpful websites, see **Useful Links for Anti-Bias Educators** online at www.naeyc.org/publications/books/supplements.

Prioritize your list and find resources for purchase

1. **Make a list**—Thinking about your group of children, their families, and the community, decide which kind of books you need first. Then create a prioritized list of titles and authors.
2. **Calculate your costs**—Figure out what funds you have and what you may need to raise to get at least the books on your priority list.
3. **Consider a fund raising effort**—Books are typically the *easiest* material for which to raise money because almost everyone understands how important books are to young children’s development and long-term school success, and even small donations make an immediate difference. Employers and businesses are also usually looking for simple ways to support their communities. Here are some fundraising possibilities:
 - Create a letter that requests donations for specific books. Give the letter to families to give to grandparents, employers, local merchants, unions, places of worship, and community organizations.
 - Ask families to buy a particular book as a gift to the program in honor of a child’s birthday.
 - Ask directors and boards to build into the budget an ongoing fund for annual book purchases.
 - Ask local booksellers to give a discount to the school and offer to publicize the fact that they have done so.

To recognize the people who have made donations, create a bookplate that says “This book is a gift to [name of program] from _____ in honor of _____.”

Look critically at new books before buying

1. **Check for age appropriateness**—Most booksellers list every picture book as appropriate for early childhood even if the story line is really aimed at primary grade children. Sometimes a book for older children can work if you simplify the story or “tell” the story rather than read it. In some cases this is the only way to get books which present specific groups of children (e.g., stories with Cambodian children or children with learning disabilities).
2. **Check for omissions, stereotyping, and tokenism**—Reject books that will teach children misinformation. (See **Ten Steps for Reviewing Children’s Books** to help you identify these. Available online at www.naeyc.org/publications/books/supplements.)
3. **Be sure the book is a “good read”**—Children will not be interested if it isn’t good literature, even if the book adds a specific kind of diversity you need.
4. **Be willing to return books**—If books you have purchased online do not hold up to anti-bias standards, be prepared to send them back.

Keep it up!

Keep updating your book wish list. The longer you do anti-bias education, the clearer it will be what books you need to support you and the children on your journey.

1. **Have a clipboard**—Hang it in a staff or family area where you can jot down types of books you need as the year goes on and different issues arise.
2. **Create a list of books**—As you plan each curriculum activity and analyze it for anti-bias approaches, note the books you have and those you need to find. Keep the list in a shared place and use it to update your wish list biannually.

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