

- People with disabilities of various backgrounds working, playing, spending time with their families
- Diverse family structures
- People, past and present, who have enhanced the quality of life and worked for social justice in the children's own communities and in the larger society

A useful rule of thumb is that about half of the materials in the environment should reflect the identities of the specific children in that classroom. In programs that serve children whose lives are too often made invisible by the dominant culture, even more plentiful images of themselves, their families, and their communities help to counter the harm of invisibility.

On page 180 you will find the form “Checklist for Assessing the Visual Material Environment” to help you evaluate your classroom environment and determine what you would like to change and expand. In addition to the visual images displayed in your classroom, it encourages you to think about how the following support diversity and inclusivity:

- Dramatic play materials
- Manipulatives
- Language
- Dolls
- Books
- Posters, photos, etc.

Review this list at least once a year, preferably with your colleagues. The checklist is also a useful tool for observing and assessing programs you observe or are considering working in.

Children's Books and Persona Dolls

Children's books and dolls are two important materials in early childhood programs as well in many families' homes. You can use these common materials in new ways to introduce and develop the four core ABE goals in your curriculum.



Children's Picture Books: An Essential Resource

Good stories capture the heart, mind, and imagination. They entrance and engage children and give teachers an opportunity to be their most lively and creative selves. They also provide a wonderful, ongoing way for children to learn about diversity and fairness. As a result, books are one of the most important anti-bias learning materials.

However, books can also convey inaccuracies and perpetuate stereotypes about who people are and how they live. A story from Louise's family illustrates this dynamic:

When our son was 4, his grandparents gave him an alphabet book that depicted a Native American in a stereotypical way, with buckskin pants, feathered headdress, and naked upper torso. About six months later, our family went camping and met a California Native American family, who were camping next to us. One evening we got together around a campfire and the adults shared stories and information about their respective backgrounds. When the father described his family's background, my son looked puzzled and asked, "But where is his feathers?"

Because books are so influential as both mirrors to see ourselves and windows to understand others, a thoughtful, balanced book selection is essential. The majority of children's books tend to show dominant-culture representations of people and how they live. Even stories about animal families usually show the animal characters living with two parents and in isolation from other animal families (which is almost always incorrect!).



As you build your anti-bias library, consider these questions:

- Can all the children in my classroom find themselves and their families in our book collection?
- Do the books I provide support every child's family, racial identity, cultural identity, and home language?
- Are the book's content and images accurate and authentic? Do they depict current life?
- Do the books show diversity within groups and in the community?

Finding and Selecting Children's Books

There are many wonderful books that combine fine storytelling, rich language, and beautiful artwork with a broad representation of human diversity. To find good children's books, start with these sources:

- Your local library: Become friends with the children's librarian, and have the children make thank-you notes for books the librarian selects that they particularly enjoy.
- Your local bookstore: Many give a discount for teachers, so ask.
- The children's families
- Your colleagues
- Your professional networks

- Many blogs and databases examine books with an anti-bias focus. Some organizations and websites offer guidance for selecting books, books to avoid, or books to consider reading to children. Look carefully to be sure that these lists contain books that are age appropriate; many such sites focus on resources for older students. One place to begin is with a post titled "Building a Diverse, Anti-Bias Library for Young Children: A Masterpost" on the blog *Equity in Early Childhood* (Megan Madison, August 12, 2015). This post provides links to resources for building your library and finding diverse, anti-bias books.

Here are some initial criteria for selecting books:

- Remember that any book you choose needs to be well written, age appropriate, and compelling. No matter how important the message is, if it isn't a book that will interest young children, keep looking!
- Look at who is made visible in the book and who is missing. No single book covers everyone and every identity, but your collection of books should show a wide range of people by race, gender identity, family structure, economic class, culture, age, ability, and more.
- Look for stories in which children are kind, make friends across lines of difference, solve problems, and collaborate.
- Include both storybooks and nonfiction books.

Financing an Anti-Bias Library

Children's books are an easy resource to raise money for. Virtually everyone believes that it is important for children to be read to and to become literate. Develop a short request letter and encourage families to ask their employers, their banks, their grocery store managers, their children's grandparents, and others to consider donating funds. The letter can include a copy of a book plate that says "Thank you _____ for donating this book." Social clubs (Lions, Soroptimists, sororities), churches, mosques, synagogues, and local businesses are often delighted to be approached for small donations that will put high-quality books into the hands of children.

Dealing with Stereotypes in Children's Books

A stereotype is any depiction of a group of people—and its individual members—that makes it appear as if all members of the group are the same and, frequently, less than fully complex, interesting people. Stereotypes portray a simplistic, inaccurate image or message about a group of people that reinforces misinformation. Certain stereotypes are part of the dominant culture narrative. For example, boys are portrayed as leaders and girls as followers; White people are in the majority (e.g., if there are five children in the story, four are White and one is Black); children with disabilities rarely appear as main characters in books about anything other than their disabilities.

Even when a book has many great features, it can lead children to form an incorrect idea about a group of people. For example, books by Ezra Jack Keats, such as *The Snowy Day* and *Peter's Chair*, are classics beloved by children, and for good reasons. But unless children are exposed to other books that include different images of African American women, they may be left with stereotypes such as that all African American women are overweight. The less experience children have had with a group of people, the more important it is to offer a variety of stories about that group to prevent children from forming incorrect generalizations.

Occasionally, it is useful to keep a book with stereotypes specifically for engaging children's critical thinking. For example, one kindergarten teacher helped children to think about sexism with a book in which a girl helps her mother cook and clean and a boy helps his father mow the lawn. She asked the children whether they knew any fathers or brothers who cooked or cleaned and any mothers who mowed lawns. The children decided that the book "didn't really tell the truth" and ended up making their own book about all the things that boys and girls do to help at home.

One School Begins: Starting with Children's Books

*by Encian Pastel, head teacher
at a parent cooperative preschool*

In our parent cooperative preschool, families gift a favorite book to the classroom on their child's birthday. It's a lovely tradition. But, as a parent and teacher began to analyze our book collection using the guidelines for selecting anti-bias children's books on SocialJusticeBooks.org, we had to deal with a glitch in the tradition we loved. Many of the books donated by families contained hurtful stereotypes or misinformation about various groups of people. Staff discussed these findings and our concerns about them. We then sent out an email with a book list of what the school needed and requested that families select books from it.

At first, families responded negatively: "Censorship," "Why are you changing our tradition?," "You're just being 'politically correct.'" We took a deep breath and started over. We talked to the families as they arrived or picked up the children. We sent out a new email explaining the full process of how staff came to our decision, with examples of the stereotypes found in our books, and discussed how those messages hurt children. We spelled out our commitment to providing children with books that accurately and respectfully represent the diverse world in which they live. We invited families to participate in thinking about the books with the staff.

To our delight, the families not only came to appreciate the changes, they began recommending wonderful books to us. They told us how much more thoughtful they were being in their choices of videos and books at home.