

In The Picture - 10 guiding principles supporting notes

These notes are designed to clarify points that have been raised about what the ten guiding principles mean in practice.

Signing up to the principles is a gesture of support and encouragement for all those working in the children's book world to reflect disability in children's books in an informed, sensitive and helpful way.

The principles are designed to focus thinking about disability but not to suppress creativity. It is certainly not, as has been suggested, intended to apply to books retrospectively to condemn those books that no longer meet these principles. These books were conceived in and reflect a different climate of opinion and knowledge. None of the principles stand alone; they all inter relate.

The principles are guidelines based on what disabled people in particular have identified as important in reflecting the experience of disability in real life.

They have been further endorsed by many of the comments of the young people who took part in the Quentin Blake Award project on disability in children's books, enshrined in the Booktrust project report "Making Exclusion a Thing of the Past: Children's views on Disability in Books".

http://www.childreninthepicture.org.uk/documents/quentin_blakeaward_project_report.pdf

Much of the thinking behind the principles comes from the historical portrayal of disabled people in literature and the arts. This has been discussed at length in Pat Pinsent's book *Children's Literature and the Politics of Equality* (1997).

1. Books should be created with all children in mind, for all children to share and enjoy.

Books including images of disabled children should not be created only for an "alternative format" market or aimed specifically towards disabled children.

There should not be a separate strand of “disability” fiction but more books in every genre and for all ages with images and stories that include disabled children and disabled adults, more accurately to reflect the variety of people in our communities for all children.

However, whether or not books include disabled children there is a need for more books to be available in alternative formats. In addition to the value of such formats in making more books accessible to children who use alternative formats, access to such formats vastly increases acceptance and awareness of enablement among all children. Consider for example the increase in signing in books which is helping different forms of communication become part of people’s everyday perception.

2. The point is not that disabled children should be the prime focus of stories or pictures: simply they should be there, a natural feature of every child's landscape.

This does not mean that a book with a disabled child as the prime focus would not be worthwhile, but that we are severely lacking in casual images, where disabled children are incidental without necessarily impacting on the plot and where they are “just there” along with other characters. It is important that disabled children should be a natural feature of every child’s world, in all kinds of books. The Quentin Blake Award report “corroborated the belief that there are simply not enough images of disability in books.” The idea that we need casual images has come up time and again in feed back to the project. This links to principle 4.

3. Images of disability should be the norm, in the same way as images of different ethnicities are now the norm.

It is now routine practice for an illustrator to be briefed to include images that include people from different ethnic groups. Disabled characters should also be included in the same routine way, so that disabled children and adults are shown more often and among all ethnicities. It is also important that environmental images of disability such as ramps, tactile paving and hearing loop signs are included, as well as images of people.

4. Images of disabled children should be used casually or incidentally, so that disabled children are portrayed playing and doing things alongside their non disabled peers.

As in principle 2, this is not to be viewed in isolation and does not exclude children being shown in a primary role.

5. Disabled children should be portrayed as ordinary - and as complex - as other children, not one- dimensional.

Disabled children should be portrayed in the same way as other children – just as ordinary, and just as complex – not in a one dimensional way. One dimensional portrayal partly relates to a common tendency to stereotype disabled people. The resources that will be produced about disabled children and their lives by this In The Picture project are designed to give information to prevent this in the future.

6. Disabled children are equals and should be portrayed as equals - giving as well as receiving.

There is a long history of pictures of disabled children being used to promote charitable donations. The absence of more varied images has created a wide perception that disabled people are submissive, inactive and in need of “good works”. This is inaccurate and is not considered conducive to promoting equality.

7. Disabled children should not be portrayed as objects of curiosity, sensationalised or endowed with superhuman attributes.

This is a difficult one for the imaginative children’s book world where the concept of “super hero” is prevalent in all sorts of guises.

Disability should not be the source of curiosity, or used to create sensationalism. Superhuman attributes should not be linked to perceptions of “compensating” ability in disabled characters. Disabled super heroes should be seen using accessories accurately and environmental images should be included in a valid way.

It is however, vital to remember the importance of fantasy and imagination in pictures for children. We can get bogged down in the factual - it is important for the child who uses a wheelchair, for example, to sometimes be the fairy or the witch or the angel, to be mythic or fantastical. The important thing always is to see the child first, rather than the disability.

8. Stories should not have “happy ever after” plots that make the child’s attitude the problem.

When there is conflict between two characters, ensure the disabled child’s point of view is not belittled to achieve a happy resolution to the story.

An example from classic literature we would do well not to repeat is Colin from *The Secret Garden* whose physical impairments disappeared as his psychological state changed.

No connection should be implied between a character’s attitudes and the presence or absence of disability. This links with Principle 9.

9. It is society’s barriers that can keep disabled children from living full lives.

The term “barriers” refers both to society’s attitudes and environmental barriers. This is covered in more detail by the notes on the Social Model of Disability.

http://www.childreninthepicture.org.uk/au_socialmodel.htm

It is important to avoid the assumption that every disabled person would prefer not to be disabled, and that, for example, a wheelchair user cannot be happy to be using a wheelchair. For many, especially children, using wheelchairs gives freedom and empowerment. It is the lack of equal access for wheelchair users, and thus their exclusion, that causes distress.

10. We should always remember that disabled children are children first and like all children have hopes and aspirations just like their peers.