

Quentin Blake Award project: Activities

Children's books and disability

Funded by the Roald Dahl Foundation, Booktrust's Quentin Blake Award project aimed to give children a voice about disability in children's books. It aimed to encourage children to think about whether disabled people are adequately (and appropriately) represented in books, how this could be improved and why this might be important.

Children's views were collected through a series of workshops (and a mailing to UK schools as part of National Children's Book Week).

The initial project indicated that children felt very strongly about this subject, and their views have been collated in a report (downloadable through the Bookmark website).

Booktrust would like to share some of the activities successfully used during the Quentin Blake Award project. We would encourage more schools and groups to use them and feed back any responses they generate (and to share their own activity ideas), to enable us to continue to support the children's book writing, illustrating and publishing world in improving this area.

Why do it?

The project indicated that there were many benefits to introducing an activity on this subject to a group of children. For example:

- improving disability awareness amongst the children (and adults)
- generating creative responses
- promoting an interest in writing and illustrating
- empowering children by feeding back their views to those responsible for creating the books of the future
- supporting writers, illustrators and publishers by providing them with children's views, confidence and practical ideas.

Brainstorms and discussions

There are many different ways of approaching the activity this but the following questions may prove useful in introducing the concept and starting to generate debate:

- How many books can you name which feature a disabled character?
- What do you think about the way disability is shown in the book/s? Is it positive, negative or neutral?
- Do you remember seeing any disabled characters on television, in films or in books and comics when you were younger? What can you remember about them? Was disability part of the 'plot'?
- What sorts of disabled characters might you find in different 'genres' (or types of book/film) – for example, fairy tales, action/horror films, cartoons?
- What reasons can you think of which might explain the absence of disabled people in books?
- What can writers/illustrators/publishers do to change this?
- What do you think the benefits might be of including more disabled characters?
- What does “disability” or “being disabled” actually mean? (this is an ideal opportunity to introduce the 'social model' of disability, to encourage children to recognise that it is environmental and social barriers which disable people, as opposed to their physical condition).
- In what different ways can someone be disabled?
Is it always something you can see? If you cannot see it, how else could it be referred to in a book?
- How many different conditions can you think of which could be included in books?
- Should disabled people be the heroes/heroines, 'ordinary' characters in the background, or both?

Before and after

Children (and adults!) often think of disability in terms of the obvious (for example things you can see, such as wheelchairs and white sticks). Try the following:

- Ask the children whether they know anyone who is disabled. Lead this into a discussion about the social model of disability. Encourage children to think 'beyond' the obvious and to recognise that without the aids we all take for granted (glasses, contact lenses, large enough print, ways of getting around, lifts to get up to the top floor) many of us might be 'disabled'. At the end of the session, ask the children again to think about whether they know anyone who is in some way disabled.
- Ask children to write their own definition of disability at the start of the session and again at the end of the project. Review any differences.

Illustration activities

- Ask children to create a disabled character they would like to see included in a picture book.
- Take a large sheet of paper and create a group scene, by getting each child to draw a different character into the scene – each differently abled/disabled. Remember that some conditions may not be obvious or visible. You may want to use speech bubbles.
- Take a famous illustration (for example, a picture from *James and the Giant Peach*, *Harry Potter* or *Where the Wild Things Are*) and look for ways to include a disabled character in the image. Try to re-draw the illustration with the new character.
- Choose a favourite illustrator (it might be Nick Sharratt or Quentin Blake) and create a disabled character in the illustrative style of the chosen artist.

Writing activities

- Create a profile of the sort of character you would like to see in books. What does s/he look like? What are his/her hobbies? Where does s/he live? What is a typical/favourite day like for him/her? Who are his/her family and friends? Does she/he play a sport? What does s/he want to do for a living?
- Choose a book you know well and write a summary of it, including a new (disabled) character somewhere in the plot.
- Write a playscript, newspaper article or diary entry including a disabled character.
- Take a famous poem or a section/chapter of a book and re-write it.

Other themes and questions

Workshops may look at identity and self-image. They might look at how important children feel it is to find characters in books whom they can really relate to. And what *makes* them relate to a character? They may look specifically at illustrations of disabled people in picture books. They may look at non-fiction, and books *about* disability.

- Who are your favourite characters/role models in books?
- Are they usually/sometimes/never disabled?
- Does it help/matter to you if a character is disabled?
- Would you relate *more* to a character who is disabled?
- If you had a busy scene (in a park or a school playground for example) how do you think an illustrator could 'casually' include disabled children? What other scenes lend themselves to this particularly?
- What might be the difference in showing a disabled adult compared to a disabled child in a picture book?
- Is there any difference between photographs and illustrations to young children? (is one more powerful than the other, for example?)

- What do you think of books which try to explain disability?
- Which do you like/not like?
- If you could ask writers/illustrators/publishers to change/consider anything, what would it be?

Reluctant readers

Linked to this, a workshop on this subject may aim to help understand children's views on what has encouraged (or hindered) their development as a confident reader. It might encourage them to talk about how it feels to be a less confident reader, and what they think of the books that they are given. It might involve looking at a selection of books designed particularly for reluctant readers and discussing their covers, content, etc.

- Do you like books and reading? Why/why not?
- When do you tend to read?
- Do you read more or less than you used to?
- Do you think you read more or less than your friends?
- Did you read much (or get read to) when you were younger?
- Did you ever use books to find answers, seek 'refuge' or to escape?
- What is your favourite book and why?
- If you are a less confident reader, how do you feel about the books created for you?
- Do they make you feel any more (or less) keen on reading?
- What would you change about them?
- What do you think about the size of the print, the colour of the paper, the cover, the theme, the story, the writing style? (You may want to look at a range of examples for this exercise)
- How do you think books and reading are seen by people of your age?

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For more information contact alex@strick.co.uk or visit Booktrust's Bookmark site (www.bookmark.org.uk)

Other resources

www.healthybooks.org.uk
www.childreninthepicture.org.uk
<http://web.ukonline.co.uk/happyeverafters/>

Social model of disability

There are many online resources offering information about the social model of disability, for example:

<http://www.open.ac.uk/inclusiveteaching/pages/understanding-and-awareness/models-of-disability.php>