

## **Annotated Bibliography of Books for Middle Level Learners on Learning Differences and Disabilities**

### **NON-FICTION**

**Facing Down the Tough Stuff** by Karen Dockrey , with Andrew Adams & Beth Matthews

Young authors facing learning disabilities, serious illness, blended families and friendship struggles share their inspiring stories. The book includes teaching ideas, questions, and a "you and me" section for application.

1998, 131 pages, grades 4-8, Cook Communications Ministries

**Learning Disabilities** by Jean McBee Knox

Describes dyslexia, dyscalculia, and attention deficit hyperactive disorder, including the nature, possible causes and treatment of learning disabilities, how they are diagnosed, and whom they affect. There are several passages written by young adults who have conquered their learning disabilities.

1990, 100 pages, grades 7-12, Chelsea House Publishers

**Learning Disabilities: The Ultimate Teen Guide (It Happened to Me Series)** by Penny Hutchins

Paquette , Cheryl Gerson Tuttle

Written for adolescents confronting learning disabilities, this book provides an overview of the most common disabilities and offers advice on overcoming the difficulties associated with them. Medical aspects of the disabilities are covered and celebrities with similar conditions are profiled. Assistive technology is described, and advice is offered concerning advocacy.

2003, 312 pages, grades 7 & up, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

**Learning Disorders** by Jacqueline L. Harris

Discusses how the brain processes information and examines the emotional, biological, and physiological manifestations of various learning disorders. Personalized examples are given and activities and strategies are suggested to help students overcome their problems and improve their skills.

1995, 64 pages, grades 4-8, Lerner Publishing Group

**My Thirteenth Winter: A Memoir** by Samantha Abeel

Samantha Abeel tells her own story of living with and overcoming dyscalculia. She describes in detail how her life was affected by her learning disability before and after she was diagnosed, and the way her peers, her family and her teachers treated her.

2004, 203 pages, grades 7 & up, Scholastic, Inc.

**Reach for the Moon** by Samantha Abeel

This collection of poetry and essays is the work of a youngster with a learning disability. Once lost in the educational maze, writing became her safe haven. Working through diagnosis and special education, the young author, Samantha , created this book to inspire other youngsters to find a way to cope, even to excel.

1994, 48 pages, grades 6 & up, Scholastic, Inc.

**Straight Talk about Learning Disabilities** by Kay Marie Porterfield

Provides information and suggestions of ways to get help for those who think they may have a learning disability or know someone whom they think has a learning disability. The book also provides a list of agencies to contact for help or additional information.

1999, 148 pages, young adult, Facts on File, Inc.

**The Survival Guide for Teenagers with LD: Learning Differences** by Rhoda Woods Cummings , Gary L. Fisher

Provides information and advice to young people who have different learning styles on such topics as dating, driving, getting *a job*, and *planning for the future*.

1993, 190 pages, grades 7 & up, Free Spirit Publishing, Inc.

**What Do You Mean I Have a Learning Disability?** by Kathleen M. Dwyer , Barbara Beirne

A pictorial essay about a boy who feels that he is "dumb" because he is unable to do the things his older brothers do, especially in school. The book clearly expresses all the feelings that most children with learning differences experience: fear, anger, discouragement, and lack of self-worth. A list of people who have succeeded in spite of learning disabilities is appended as well as list of places to write for help.

1991, 48 pages, grades 3-6, Walker & Company

**Why Can't I Learn like Everyone Else?: Youth with Learning Disabilities** by Shirley Brinkerhoff , Laurie Glader , Carolyn Bridgemahon

Young people who struggle with learning disabilities will find guidance and reassurance in this book, which features personal narrative as well as factual material about learning disabilities, including terminology, possible signs, diagnosis, the law, coping strategies and success stories.

2004, 128 pages, grades 4-8, Mason Crest Publishers

## FICTION

**Freak the Mighty** by Rodman R. Philbrick

At the beginning of eighth grade, Max , a student with a learning disability, and his new friend Freak, whose birth defect has affected his body but not his brilliant mind, find that when they combine forces they make a powerful team.

2001, 176 pages, grades 6-9, Scholastic, Inc.

**How Dyslexic Benny Became a Star: A Story of Hope for Dyslexic Children and Their Parents** by Joe Griffith

198, 125 pages, grades 4-7, Yorktown Press

A fifth-grader who is frustrated and humiliated because he can't read as well as his classmates becomes a star on the football field, and when he is diagnosed with dyslexia, he finds that he has a whole team of people ready to help.

**Josh : A Boy with Dyslexia** Caroline D. Janover

Josh struggles to live down the stigma of his learning disability, dyslexia, and receive both respect and friendship from his peers. Includes information on the characteristics of dyslexia and a list of organizations that deal with learning disabilities.

2004, 99 pages, grades 5-7, iUniverse, Incorporated

**My Name Is Brian** by Jeanne Betancourt

The portrayal of a boy who is frustrated by school work and struggles to hide his dyslexia from his friends until one of his teachers helps him to develop a new outlook.

1994, 128 pages, grades 4-6, Scholastic, Inc.

**Probably Still Nick Swanson** by Virginia Euwer Wolff

Nick , a sixteen-year-old with a learning disability, copes with his anger and hurt at being labeled a Special Education student, while also dealing with dating and the troubling memories of his drowned sister.

1988, 160 pages, grades 6-10, Henry Holt & Company, Inc.

**Safe Place** by Tehila Peterseil

The poignant story of a young girl with ADD and dyslexia, who finds daily life an emotional and psychological struggle until a very special teacher enters her life.

1996, 143 pages, grades 5-8, Pitsopany Press

**Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You** by Barthe DeClements

Helen fears that lack of improvement in her reading may leave her stuck in the sixth grade forever, until a good teacher recognizes her reading problem.

1994, 160 pages, grades 5-8, Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers

**Spaceman** by Jane Cutler

Ten-year-old Gary, who is failing the fifth grade and has trouble getting along with the other students, tries to adjust to his learning disability and his assignment to a special education class.

1999, 144 pages, grades 4-6, Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers

**Sparks** by Graham McNamee

Todd is both happy and anxious about trying to fit in with the regular fifth grade class, but feels confused about how to relate to his former friends in the Special Needs class. A school assignment on the exploited pygmy, Ota Benga, helps give him confidence and clarity.

2002, 128 pages, grades 4-6, Random House Books for Young Readers

**Trout and Me** by Susan Richards Shreve

Ben's troubles at school get progressively worse when he starts hanging around Trout, a new boy in his fifth grade class, who also has ADD and is labeled as learning disabled.

2004, 144 pages, grades 5-7, Random House Children's Books

**Unjust Cause** by Tehila Peterseil

David has dysgraphia, and his family cannot come to terms with his learning disability. Like thousands of other children with learning problems, David believes he is worthless and inadequate. His only hope of improvement is blocked by a father who refuses to face reality, until two teachers join forces to try to open the father's mind.

1997, 142 pages, grades 5-8, Pitspopany Press

**The Worst Speller in Jr. High** by Caroline D. Janover, Rosemary Wallner

Starting out in the seventh grade, Katie Kelso finds herself trying to cope with her dyslexia and form a friendship with a very bright boy at school, while she and her family deal with her mother's cancer diagnosis.

2000, 212 pages, grades 5-7, iUniverse, Incorporated

**Zipper: The Kid With ADHD** Caroline Janover

Zach, a fifth-grader who has attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, has trouble concentrating and controlling himself until a *retired jazz musician who believes in him gives him the motivation to start trying to do better.*

1997, 164 pages, grades 4-7, Woodbine House

## **Evaluating Children's Books that Address Disability**

Multicultural literature serves as both a mirror that reflects students' identities and a window to the world beyond their individual experiences and communities. Books can be powerful vehicles for self-affirmation, and for the development of empathy and appreciation for those who are different.

When it comes to books that address disability, educators and families may need to make a special effort to ensure that children are exposed to diverse and positive images of people with physical, mental, emotional, and learning differences. The historical isolation and marginalization of people with disabilities in the U.S. has resulted in book and media portrayals that are frequently negative, outdated, and stereotypical. Too often, people with disabilities are entirely absent from children's literature.

In 2000, a study by Blaska examined 40 early childhood programs in Minnesota for literacy rich environments. A total of 1,677 books were reviewed for the inclusion of disability or illness. Of these books, 24 had some inclusion, representing 1.4% of the literature available for children's independent use. While most of the classrooms had an ample supply of books representing diversity of culture (73% had 1-10 multicultural books available for students), few had books available that had characters with disabilities. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of the classrooms had no books with characters with disabilities or illness. The remaining 42% had one or two books available (Blaska, 2000).

When Blaska conducted an informal survey of parents and professionals about their knowledge and use of children's literature with characters with disabilities, she found they didn't know what books were available or how to use them appropriately. Many professionals indicated they would include literature about a disability only when a child with a disability became a member of their class.

By the time children encounter people with disabilities in their communities, they may already have integrated negative stereotypes and prejudices, and may display fear or uneasiness. Introducing young children to literature with diverse and textured depictions of people with disabilities can help to offset societal prejudices and instill healthy attitudes about a population of people larger than any single ethnic, racial, or cultural group in the U.S. — at 57 million or 19.3% of the population, the number of people with disabilities exceeds the next largest group (Hispanic people) by over 13 million!

The A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE Institute Recommended Multicultural and Anti-Bias Books for Children suggests a number of in positive and age appropriate ways. Educators and parents are encouraged to work with their school and community librarians and local disability organizations to identify additional books that address disability. The following guidelines are offered for reviewing and selecting children's books that address disability.

### **GUIDELINES FOR ASSESSING BOOKS**

Stories often stereotype people with disabilities, not only in negative, but also in overly positive ways. Below are examples of some of the ways people with disabilities could be falsely portrayed or only partially developed. By itself, the occurrence of one of these elements in a story does not necessarily mean that people with disabilities are misrepresented. It is the combination of these characteristics and how the characters function in the story overall that determine the degree to which a character with a disability might have been stereotyped. Following the list of problematic characteristics are some constructive elements to look for in books that address disability.

#### **AVOID BOOKS THAT...**

- Cast people with disabilities as victims and evoke pity, sorrow or sentimentality toward them.
- Include characters with disabilities only in tokenistic ways, or as objects of curiosity, rather than as developed characters with distinct lives and personalities.
- Define characters' personalities by their disabilities and portray them as sad, incomplete, bitter, or angry in disproportionate ways (rather than as distinctive individuals with the full human range of character traits).
- Characterize people with disabilities in stereotypically positive ways that compensate for their "deficiency," such as having unusual emotional or physical characteristics, special spiritual or moral insights, superior intellectual abilities or wisdom, or unnaturally inspirational qualities
- Represent the achievements or ordinary actions of people with disabilities as heroic.
- Never show people with disabilities as independent, but rather depict them as overly helpless and in need of excessive support and assistance from people without disabilities in order to lead a functional life.
- Portray people with disabilities as overly preoccupied with their conditions and consumed with the hope of recovery or cure
- Represent people with disabilities or the disabilities themselves as shameful, unattractive, or something to be hidden.
- Utilize condescending or pejorative language (e.g., special, crazy, sick, slow, cripple, dumb, retarded, idiot).
- Only show people with disabilities in passive roles and never show them in active or teachership positions.

- Show people with disabilities only in “special” settings and programs, and never show them participating in activities considered typical for their age group.
- Dwell on what people with disabilities *can't* do rather than what they *can* do.
- Represent disabilities as deficiencies rather than differences.
- Present disabilities as problems only for the people who have them and not for the broader society (i.e. prejudice, discrimination, inequity, access).
- Depict adolescent and adult people with disabilities as asexual and without the same emotional or sexual needs and attachments as other people their age.
- Portray allies to people with disabilities as inspirations or “saints” for helping them, or as especially wonderful simply for simply being their friends.

### **CHOOSE BOOKS THAT...**

- Use language that stresses the person first and the disability second (people with disabilities, not disabled people).
- Promote empathy and an overall feeling of understanding for people with disabilities, as well as provide accurate information about a specific disability.
- Demonstrate respect for and acceptance of people with disabilities, and depict them as more similar than different from other people (“one of us” rather than “one of them”).
- Emphasize the successes of people with disabilities and show their strengths and abilities along with their disabilities.
- Promote positive images of persons with disabilities and represent them as strong, independent people, who others can look up to or admire.
- Represent people with disabilities from different racial and cultural backgrounds, religions, age groups, and sexual orientations.
- Depict valued occupations for persons with disabilities and show them in diverse and active roles.
- Depict people with disabilities in integrated settings and activities—in school, at work, or in the community among peers with and without disabilities.
- Illustrate characters and adaptive equipment accurately.

*Ideas and language for this article were drawn and adapted from the following sources:*

- *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children* by L. Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force. Washington , D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1989.
- *Books Without Bias: A Guide to Evaluating Children’s Books for Handicapism* by B. Slapin, J. Lessing and E. Belkind . Berkeley , CA: KIDS Project, 1987.
- *Children's Literature That Includes Characters With Disabilities or Illnesses* by Joan K. Blaska. Disability Studies Quarterly: Volume 24, No. 1, Winter 2004 (at [www.dsqsds.org](http://www.dsqsds.org)).
- *Disabled Characters in Children’s Literature* by Marj Schneider and D.J. Moss. CT State Department of Education, 2004
- *Guidelines for Selecting Bias-Free Textbooks and Storybooks*. New York , NY: Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1980.
- *Nine Ways to Evaluate Children's Books that Address Disability as Part of Diversity* . University of Kansas: Circle of Inclusion Project, 2002.
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- *Children's Literature That Includes Characters With Disabilities or Illnesses* by Joan K. Blaska. Disability Studies Quarterly: Volume 24, No. 1, Winter 2004 (at [www.dsqsds.org](http://www.dsqsds.org)).
- Ibid.
- *Disabled Characters in Children's Literature* by Marj Schneider and D.J. Moss. CT State Department of Education, 2004