

CHOOSING DIVERSE BOOKS FOR ALL FAMILIES

What do we mean by diverse books?

Writer Haleema Mirza writes that “diversity means the representation of different ethnicities, genders, socio-economic backgrounds, sexualities and disabilities – both physical and mental” (2018). For us, that means – amongst other things – representing all these things within our Doorstep Library book stock: representing them in the books’ stories, characters, and authors.

This is something we’re committed to at Doorstep Library. Since 2019, we have increased our effort to actively diversify our book stock in line with our equality and diversity policy. We have already begun seeing the positive impact of this work. However, it’s an ongoing process that is nowhere near done. On our side, we’ll continue diversifying our stock. On your side, we want to ensure that you feel comfortable and confident in offering all families a diverse range of books.

Why is it important?

BookTrust's 2019 report stated that "Inclusive children's literature is vital. Children's books can act as mirrors, to reflect the readers' own lives, but also as windows so readers can learn about, understand and appreciate the lives of others" (Bold, 2019).

By offering diverse books to all families, we give every child a chance to gain these benefits. We give them the chance to recognize their lived experiences in the books they read, and to learn about the varied lives of others.

In a nutshell, reading diverse books helps children to:

- (1) See themselves and their peers represented in the stories they read.
- (2) Learn authentically about the world in which we live, not just one tiny slice of it.
- (3) Learn empathy by exploring the world of others, stopping stigma before it starts.

Here is just one example of the impact that sharing diverse books can have on a family, as shared by one of our Team Leaders in 2022:

Today we shared a copy of Blue Broccoli and Nanobots by Bryony Mathew with a little girl that we visit. As we flicked through it she saw one of the characters was wearing a headscarf and her whole demeanour changed. She was so excited and kept pointing at the page saying "she has one [a headscarf] - I have one too."

We continued to look through the book together but every so often she would turn back to that page and just gaze at the picture. We chatted about what a lovely colour the headscarf in the picture was, and what colour headscarves the little girl had.

At the end of the visit mum spoke to us about how grateful she is for Doorstep Library's visits. There's a bit of a language barrier but as we were leaving she put her hands to her heart and simply said "happy, happy, happy."

To find out more about why offering diverse books matters, consider watching these two videos in which authors share their views:



Diversity in books

Meg Medina interviewed by Colorin Colorado (2016)

The gay children's author whose books are rewriting the story for LGBTQ youth

Olly Pike interviewed by Attitude Magazine (2021)

Offering diverse books in practice

In practice, what we ask is that you make a conscious effort to offer a diverse selection of books each week. When you are choosing books, ask yourself whether the books you have chosen reflect only a narrow portion of society or whether they reflect its rich diversity. For example, consider the types of families in the books you have to offer. If they are all two-parent families with heterosexual parents, consider whether you can swap one of the books for a book that shows a different family setup.

It's important to note that diversifying your book selection does not necessitate the removal of well-loved classics. Whether it's *Charlotte's Web* or *Harry Potter*, these books will always have a place in our stock! All we ask is that, in addition to selecting your favourite oldies, you do your best to include other books that represent a wider portion of our society as well.

The need for these books is universal: all children should be offered diverse books with broad-ranging representation. However, please keep in mind our emphasis on the word "offer"; it's not our place to tell families what kind of books they should read. As with everything we do, keep it light touch and let the children lead the way.

Finally, if you're struggling with choosing diverse books, ask your Team Leader for advice. They will be able to point you in the right direction and recommend or even source some titles.

Engaging with diverse books

Diverse books are regular books, so there's no difference in how we should be interacting with them. However, we are aware that people across society hold a range of opinions and beliefs, and not all parents might be comfortable with all books. We know that this possibility can sometimes make it more intimidating to share diverse stories with families.

One thing to note is that most children will already have encountered some kinds of diverse representation in their lessons at school. For example, since relationship education became a mandatory part of the curriculum in 2020 all children are taught that others' families sometimes look different from their family, but that they should respect those differences. Be reassured that it's unlikely that a book you offer will be introducing a topic that children aren't already familiar with.



In our experience, a parent who does not want their child to read a particular book will simply say something like "Not that one, thank you". However, here are some responses should you ever find a parent is unhappy with your book selection:

- Firstly, don't push a book choice and don't be drawn into a debate. Don't try to change a parent's opinion.
- Let a family know they don't have to read a particular book, and you won't offer it again.
- Put it away in your rucksack out of sight, or stop screensharing if reading with a family online. If this resolves things, then continue with the session as usual.

If a parent is particularly unhappy or wants to continue discussing the book/topic after you have tried these steps, you can let them know:

- We have a wide range of books here at Doorstep Library to reflect our society.
- As an organisation we support all people regardless of religion/race/gender/sexuality/ability and believe everyone is equal.
- In some cases, you might feel that it's best to end the session early. If that's the case, you can say:
- We'll leave now but we'd love to read some different books with your children again next week. Would you like our Team Leader to give you a ring to discuss your concerns in the meantime?

Leave to give the parent space and let your Team Leader know what happened. You can discuss together how to proceed and any support you might find helpful.

Supporting you

It is essential to us that our volunteers feel free and comfortable to be themselves no matter the circumstances. If a family's response to a book ever negatively impacts you, please share this with us, and know that this will take priority when planning your weekly visits. In addition, please only take books that you feel confident and comfortable to share with families. If there's ever a book you feel unsure about, chat to your Team Leader or take another book.

References

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