Pick a Book, Any Book: Using Children's Books to Support Positive Attitudes Toward Peers With Disabilities

Michaelene M. Ostrosky, PhD
Chryso Mouzourou, PhD
Emily A. Dorsey, MEd
University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign

Paddy C. Favazza, EdD
Lisa M. Leboeuf, MA/CAGS
Rhode Island College

Following a reading of Susan Laughs (Willis, 2000), Mrs. Biggs asked her kindergarteners, "What are some things you do that Susan did?" Following a discussion of how they all enjoyed singing, swinging, painting, and swimming, the conversation shifted to talking about Susan's feelings, and times when kindergarteners had similar feelings. This discussion included the children sharing experiences of when they were happy, sad, shy, proud, angry, disappointed, scared, and loved. Noah talked about how proud he was to have played the part of Tiny Tim in a recent production of Scrooge, while Sebastian mentioned being angry when his sled broke during the recent holidays, and Skylar shared the impact of a recent nightmare on her sleep. Mrs. Biggs then moved the discussion to focus on the last page of the book, which shows Susan sitting in a wheelchair. The children had questions and opinions about why someone might use a wheelchair, people they knew who used a wheelchair, and the various parts of the wheelchair and their functions. Later that night, as Mrs. Biggs reflected on her day, she was pleased about her students' growing understanding of disabilities and her own increasing comfort in having these open discussions with her students. She believed that she was positively impacting how her students viewed individuals with a range of abilities by using books as the foundation for class dialogue.

The Division for Early Childhood/National Association for the Education of Young Children's (2009) joint position statement on inclusion stresses the importance of (a) developing practices that support young children of diverse abilities in inclusive learning environments, (b) being part of supportive school communities, and (c) engaging in positive social relationships and friendships with peers. Specifically, the statement notes the importance of creating "a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning" (p. 2).

According to Odom (2000), preschoolers with disabilities engage in social interactions with peers less often than typically developing peers. Studies have repeatedly

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shown that preschoolers prefer to include typically developing peers in play as opposed to their peers with disabilities (Diamond, Hong, & Tu, 2008; Diamond, Le Furgy, & Blass, 1993; Guralnick & Groom, 1987; Odom et al., 2006). While positive peer interaction is associated with the social acceptance of children with disabilities, children with special needs are at risk of being socially rejected and marginalized in early childhood inclusive settings without curriculum to support greater acceptance of these children (Favazza, 1998; Favazza & Odom, 1996, 1997; Favazza, Phillipsen, & Kumar, 2000). Considering these facts, the use of classroom materials and resources to counteract the risks of marginalization and rejection is critical.

Along with the development of peer relationships, play, and social skills in early childhood curricula, another important component of most early childhood curricula reflects a focus on literacy and language in the early years. Indeed, starting in infancy and continuing through childhood, children watch and learn through observation and interactions with parents, family members, and early educators as they read books (National Research Council, 2000).

Impact of Reading on Child Development

The routine of reading and discussing books at home and school provides many benefits for young children such as (a) establishing partnerships with families, (b) developing early literacy and vocabulary skills, (c) providing opportunities to learn and hone communication skills, and (d) positively impacting personal, social, and intellectual development.

Reading to children affords a natural literacy activity that engages parents and/or teachers as partners in supporting child development and paves the way for school success (Sheridan, Knoche, Kupzyk, Edwards, & Marvin, 2011). In addition, reading together leads to children's improvement in pre-reading skills such as oral language, phonological awareness, print awareness, and letter knowledge; all of these abilities are associated with early reading success (Duursma, Augustyn, & Zuckerman, 2008; National Research Council, 1999). As children listen and discuss stories with adults, they are exposed to new vocabulary. Reading activities, coupled with opportunities for asking questions and conversing about the story content, contribute to acquisition of new vocabulary (Crowe, Norris, & Hoffman, 2004). However, children need multiple opportunities for shared reading to develop language, literacy, and communication skills. Childers and Tomasello (2002) purport that children need a minimum of 20 exposures to a word to ensure that

the term becomes a part of their vocabulary repertoire. When teachers and parents work together on literacy activities, words and concepts introduced in book-reading and through meaningful discussions are more likely to impact children's literacy development. Through carefully selected books and thoughtfully planned discussions, children also have opportunities to observe and practice conversational turn-taking skills with the guidance of early educators and parents. They also begin to learn how to stay on topic and express themselves with appropriate semantic and syntactic usage (Prutting & Kirchner, 1987).

Finally, Browne (1996) described several other benefits associated with reading books to young children related to their personal development (opportunities to develop and extend imagination, reflect upon experiences, and consider others' perspectives), social development (the exploration of human relationships and cultural differences), and intellectual development (the presentation of new ideas). According to the National Research Council (2000), these reading activities lead to higher scores on tests of general and verbal ability.

Use of Books Featuring Characters With Disabilities

Numerous authors have written children's books featuring characters with a disability. Considering that children with disabilities are being included in general education classrooms at increasingly high rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), the notion of representing children with disabilities in classroom materials (i.e., books, posters, videos) becomes very important to both the children with disabilities and their peers (Nasatir & Horn, 2003). Through book-reading and discussions, teachers can promote disability awareness in a manner that will lead to greater understanding about individuals with disabilities, and provide vocabulary that is current, appropriate, and relevant to all children in the class. This could include providing books depicting pictures and stories of children with disabilities, introducing children to sign language, or using visual supports to increase understanding and participation of all children. However, choosing appropriate books about disabilities and using the books effectively to facilitate understanding of children with special needs can be difficult. As part of a federally funded research study at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign and Rhode Island College (Ostrosky & Favazza, 2008), project-affiliated staff reviewed published books for young children that included characters with disabilities. The books were critiqued to assess their appropriateness for inclusion in the *Special Friends* program, a six-week

intervention aimed at improving the attitudes of typically developing kindergarteners toward their peers with disabilities.

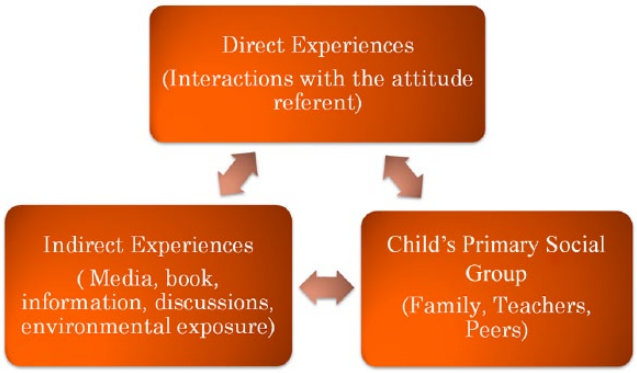
This article aims to share information on 18 books that were selected for use with a curriculum designed to promote greater understanding and acceptance of kindergarten children with disabilities. These books were viewed as providing a springboard for discussion that could positively influence young children's attitude development toward their peers with special needs. The article begins with a brief review of the literature on attitude development, young children's understandings about disabilities, and young children's interactions with peers with disabilities. A discussion of the benefits of including books about individuals with disabilities in early childhood classrooms and how to introduce purposeful book-reading as an effective strategy to support young children's positive attitudes toward peers with disabilities follows. The article concludes with implications for practice.

Attitude Development: Children's Understandings About and Interactions With Peers With Disabilities

Historically, research has shown that young children develop an understanding of and attitudes toward students with disabilities over time (Conant & Budoff, 1983; Diamond, 1993; Favazza & Odom, 1997; Triandis, Adamopoulos, & Brinberg, 1984). For example, children as young as four and five years old are able to identify obvious physical disabilities that their peers might have, such as cerebral palsy (Diamond, 1993; Dyson, 2005) or hearing impairments (Diamond & Hestenes, 1994). According to Conant and Budoff (1983), as children grow older, they become increasingly aware of less visible disabilities. While students in the primary grades can generally identify individuals with intellectual disabilities (Nowiski, 2006), it is not until middle school that they notice and understand less obvious disabilities such as psychological disturbances.

As illustrated in Figure 1, attitudes about individuals with disabilities are complex, multi-component constructs learned from *direct experiences* (encounters with an individual with disabilities) and *indirect experiences* (such as books, media, and conversations about individuals with disabilities), and are highly influenced by the child's *primary social group* (Favazza & Odom, 1997; Triandis, 1971; Triandis et al., 1984). Recognizing this complexity when attempting to promote certain attitudes, educators

Figure 1
Primary influences on attitude development



Source: Triandis, Adamopoulos, and Brinberg (1984).

should consider the fundamental influences on attitude formation and the key role they, as early childhood educators, play in mediating the social acceptance of young children with disabilities.

While research has indicated that typically developing preschoolers prefer to engage in play with other typically developing peers as opposed to children with special needs (Diamond et al., 2008), preschoolers' decisions to include others in play can be influenced by repeated contact with peers who have disabilities (Okagaki, Diamond, Kontos, & Hestenes, 1998). Contact often takes place in inclusive settings, where children with special needs and their typically developing peers are enrolled in the same classroom and have repeated opportunities to interact and develop relationships. Innes and Diamond (1999) reported that preschoolers' attitudes toward children with disabilities were positively related to their frequency of contact with classmates with a range of abilities during free play. Regardless of whether children are in inclusive settings or not, providing exposure to books and discussions can help facilitate the formation of positive attitudes.

Including Books About Disabilities in Early Childhood Classrooms

Storybooks about children with disabilities may be beneficial to the early childhood curriculum for two reasons. First, exposure to information about disabilities increases children's understanding about human differences. Young children often have limited or incorrect understandings about individuals with disabilities and of the adaptive equipment associated with those disabilities (Diamond & Hong, 2010; Diamond & Tu, 2009). For example, when asked about a classmate with a hearing aid, some preschool students reported that the hearing aid *prevented* the student from hearing

> "Through book-reading and discussions, teachers can promote disability awareness in a manner that will lead to greater understanding about individuals with disabilities."

correctly, rather than acting as an aid (Diamond & Hestenes, 1994). Through book-reading and discussions, teachers can provide young children exposure to individuals with disabilities they have not personally encountered, terminology associated with the disabilities, and information about relevant adaptive equipment in a manner that will help clarify these misconceptions. A second reason for early exposure to information about peers with disabilities stems from the fact that such exposure can increase children's acceptance of peers with varying abilities (Okagaki et al., 1998). Reading books about individuals with disabilities constitutes a natural extension of real-life experiences with students who have special needs; this book-reading also provides a vehicle for discussion and reflection. For young children who *do not* have regular contact with students who have special needs, reading books about disabilities at home or at school may provide an important platform for discussing issues of similarity and difference at an early age.

The *Special Friends* program was designed to promote acceptance of disabilities at the classroom level by providing kindergarten students with three types of experiences that address the primary influences on attitude development: direct experiences, indirect experiences, and contact with the child's primary social group (Favazza & Odom, 1997; Triandis, 1971). As part of the *Special Friends* program, *direct experiences* with peers who had special needs were provided through regularly occurring cooperative playgroups; each group included at least one student with special needs. *Indirect experiences* occurred as the classroom teacher read books, shared information, and encouraged discussion about children with special needs. Finally, through a home-literacy component, children had the opportunity to take home books about children who have special needs and read them with their *primary social group*, their families.

To design the indirect experiences associated with the *Special Friends* program, project staff began with a list of more than 140 books that included at least one character with a disability (Ostrosky & Favazza, 2008). The initial list was compiled from a review of library collections, Internet sources, and faculty suggestions, as well as those used in previous *Special Friends* projects. The initial criteria used to narrow the selection of books to 50 were (a) the character with a disability was human (not an animal or an animated cartoon) and preferably a child, (b) the book was appropriate for kindergarteners, (c) the book was current, and (d) the drawings and photographs appeared engaging.

Fifty books were evaluated using Nasatir and Horn's (2003) nine guidelines for choosing books that appropriately represented

people with disabilities in children's literature. This step in the review process reduced the selection of books to 18 (the number needed to conduct the *Special Friends* intervention). The review guidelines focused on the following elements: illustrations, story line, lifestyle, relationships, self-image, author's background, author's perspective, loaded words (i.e., offensive or harmful words such as slow, lazy), and copyright date. When reviewing books using these guidelines, each book element corresponded to an item, which the reviewer scored as true, false, or not applicable. If most or all items were marked true, this indicated that the story appropriately represented the characters with special needs. An illustration of how one book, *All Kinds of Friends, Even Green!* (Senisi, 2002), was evaluated using Nasatir and Horn's disability representation criteria is presented in Table 1. The italicized comment section following each of the nine criteria provides a justification for why the book received a positive or negative rating on each item. The final 18 books were chosen because each book met the nine criteria established by Nasatir and Horn. The titles, authors, and brief descriptions of the books chosen for the *Special Friends* research project are included in Table 2.

When participating teachers in the *Special Friends* program were asked to share their views about the books used in the program, they stated, "The literature was excellent, whoever chose all those books, it was just excellent literature. Almost every book I enjoyed. It generated a lot of discussions with the kids," and "The best part about the program was the literature and the materials that the program provided, because it really was a starting point for them [the children] to explore the issues of children with disabilities and they see a lot of that, but to have the opportunity to really discuss it and see it in print was nice for them."

Purposeful Book-Reading: Using Guided Discussions to Support Young Children's Positive Attitudes About Individuals With Disabilities

As part of the *Special Friends* program, lessons were developed by project staff to facilitate book-reading and discussions. These "discussion guides" provided teachers with sample questions to ask, comments to pose, and ideas for facilitating discussions about the children's books. A guided discussion for *All Kinds of Friends, Even Green!* (Senisi, 2002) is included in Table 3. The discussion guides included four main elements: (1) questions about the content of the story, (2) an explanation of the disability or related vocabulary, (3) a conversation about equipment related to the story, and (4) a discussion of similarities between the main characters in the book and the children who listen to the book. The focus of a guided discussion was to point out similarities between children with and without disabilities rather than to highlight differences. Using the four elements on the discussion guide as a template, teachers can create their

Table 1
Using Nasatir and Horn's Checklist for Evaluating Disability Representation to Evaluate *All Kinds of Friends, Even Green!*

	T	F	N/A
1. Check the Illustrations.	T		
a. Look for stereotypes: There are no stereotypes promoted in this book.			
b. Look for Tokenism: Children are depicted as genuine individuals with distinctive features.	T		
c. Who is Doing What? The children with disabilities have leadership and action roles.	T		
Comment:			
This book includes photographs of children who are not depicted stereotypically. Children are shown as individuals and not as token representatives of certain groups. The main character, who has a disability, is shown leading conversations and activities.			
2. Check the Story Line.	T		
a. Standards for Success: Children with disabilities are accepted for their individual behaviors.			
b. Resolution of Problems: The people with disabilities help resolve the problem.	T		
c. Role of Person with Disability: The story could happen if the character did not have a disability.	T		
Comment:			
The main character, Moses, is accepted for his individual behavior. Moses states that he needs to choose a friend to write about and solves the problem himself after considering several options. This story could have happened in the same way for a main character without a physical disability.			
3. Look at the Lifestyles:	T		
Text and illustrations offer genuine insights into the daily routine and work in the life of a person with a disability			
Comment:			
This book depicts Moses during his daily school routine, showing him both on the playground and in the classroom.			
4. Weigh the Relationships Between People:	T		
Children with disabilities have leadership roles.			
Comment:			
Moses is shown leading activities on the playground as well as conversations in the classroom.			
5. Consider the Effects on a Child's Self-Image:	T		
There is at least one person with whom a child with a disability can identify as a positive and constructive role model.			
Comment:			
Moses and his classmate Jocelyn are positive role models for a child with a disability.			
6. Consider the Author's or Illustrator's Background:	T		
The author's or illustrator's background strengthens the value of his or her work.			
Comment:			
The author has written one other book about children with special needs. She also has a degree in educational media.			
7. Explore the Author's Perspective:	T		
The author's perspective strengthens the value of his or her written work.			
Comment:			
The book jacket mentions that the author's daughter owns the two iguanas featured in the book. Moses is their neighbor.			
8. Watch for Loaded Words:	T		
The book has no loaded words (e.g., "slow," "lazy," "confined to a wheelchair").			
Comment:			
Respectful terms such as special needs are used to describe disabilities. Concrete terms such as spina bifida and sacral agenesis also are included.			
9. **Look at the Copyright Date and Target Age:**	T		
The copyright and target age are appropriate for the intended audience.			
Comment: This book was published in 2002 and is appropriate for grades K-4.			

Source: Senisi (2002) and Nasatir and Horn (2003).
Note: T = statement is true for book; F = statement is false for book; N/A = statement is not applicable for book.

Table 2
Books Used in the Special Friends Program

Title	Author	Summary
All Kinds of Friends, Even Green!	Ellen B. Senisi	A boy in a wheelchair writes about two iguanas. While one iguana has a physical difference, he can do the same things as other iguanas.
Andy and His Yellow Frisbee	Mary Thompson	Andy, a boy with autism, has problems making friends and talking to people. A girl at school realizes she can become friends with Andy.
Be Quiet, Marina!	Kristen DeBear	Two young girls, one with cerebral palsy, and one with Down syndrome, overcome their frustrations with each other and become friends.
Can You Hear a Rainbow?	Jamee Riggio Heelan	Chris is deaf and uses hearing aids. He uses sign language, and reads lips to communicate, while also doing all the things other children do.
Cookie	Linda Kneeland	Molly cannot talk and learns sign language to tell her parents she wants a cookie. Using sign language makes her life much easier.
The Deaf Musicians	P. Seeger, P. Dubois Jacobs	A group of deaf musicians frequently plays in the subway attracting crowds, showing that deaf musicians can make music also.
Don't Call Me Special	Pat Thomas	The author explains things children with disabilities can do, describes adaptive equipment, and discusses when to help or avoid helping.
Extraordinary Friends	Fred Rogers	The author explains that when children meet someone who is different, they should not be afraid to talk to them or to learn more about them.
Friends at School	Rochelle Bunnett	Photographs depict life in an inclusive classroom. Children with varying abilities and characteristics are shown playing together.
Ian's Walk	Laurie Lears	Ian, a boy with autism, gets lost at the park. His sister realizes the best way to find him is to see things through his eyes.
Moses Goes to a Concert	Isaac Millman	Moses, who is deaf, goes to a concert where the percussionist is also deaf. He learns that she plays drums by feeling vibrations.
My Friend Isabelle	Eliza Woloson	Two friends (one with Down syndrome) are very different but still have a lot of fun together and share a great friendship.
Sarah's Surprise	Nan Holcomb	A young girl who cannot speak is upset when she cannot sing happy birthday to her mom. She learns to sing using her communication device.
Someone Special Just Like You	Tricia Brown	The author highlights that children with disabilities such as blindness, deafness, or Down syndrome can do the same things as their peers.
Susan Laughs	Jeanne Willis	A young girl with a physical disability dances, sings, hides, and shows emotions such as happiness and sadness.
The Night Search	Kate Chamberlin	A young girl who is blind does not want to use her cane. After getting lost, she realizes that a cane is a valuable tool for helping her find her way.
We Can Do It!	Laura Dwight	Five young children with varying abilities do things differently while also successfully participating in a variety of activities.
We'll Paint the Octopus Red	Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen	A boy is born with Down syndrome. His sister worries her brother will be different but learns he will be able to do many things she also enjoys doing.

own guides for use with other books. These guides can be used as a catalyst for in-class conversations.

When developing the first element of the discussion guide (questions about the content of the story), teachers should consider a variety of questions that would enable students of all abilities to provide responses and participate in the conversation. When developing explanations of disability or related vocabulary and discussions of equipment related to the story (second and third elements of the discussion guide), teachers should use factual and age-appropriate information about disabilities and/or equipment. As the example in Table 3 demonstrates, when explaining

Table 3
Discussion Guide for All Kinds of Friends, Even Green!

All Kinds of Friends, Even Green!
Author: Ellen B. Senisi
Disability: Physical Impairment

Questions About Content of the Story

- Who is the main character of the story? *(Moses)*
- What is he doing in the story? *(Moses is at school and he's thinking about his friends so he can write a story)*
- Who are some of Moses' friends? *(Katie—his neighbor and baby-sitter, Kaila—the bird, Jimmy, Jocelyn—his friend in a wheelchair, his mom and dad, Ms. Janik, Hashi and Zaki—Kate's iguanas)*
- Which friend did he pick to write about *(Zaki, his neighbor Kate's iguana with special needs)*

Explanation of Disability or Related Vocabulary

- Moses was born with spina bifida (his spine is not completely formed) and he has sacral agenesis. But Moses can do just about anything we can do!
- Moses has problems with certain organs, too. (Organs are what you call some of the things inside your body that make it work. Some examples are your heart, stomach, lungs, and liver).

Note to teacher: If a student asks about a peer with a particular disability, reply with a comment such as, "Thank you for being concerned about your friend. As friends, we don't need to ask a person if he has a certain disability (use the child's word—autism, Down syndrome, etc.). We all need help with certain things, and you can be a good friend by helping all of your classmates when they need it.

***Equipment Related to Story Content*: Wheelchair**

- As you point to the picture of the wheelchair, ask: What is this? Why do we use it? (a wheelchair can help someone move around).
- What are the different parts of the wheelchair and what are the functions of these parts? (handles are for pushing, brakes are for stopping the wheelchair, big wheels are for pushing, etc.)

Highlight Similarities

- What are some of the things that you can do like Moses? (*go to school, see friends, think, read, write stories, etc.*)
- Do you have any friends like Moses? (*teenagers, neighbors, teachers, classmates*)
- Do you think you would have a difficult time thinking of a friend to write about in a story?

disability, teachers should include positive comments emphasizing the strengths of individuals with disabilities. Finally, when it comes to highlighting similarities (fourth element of the discussion guide), teachers should think of questions that explore aspects of life experiences that are shared between children in the classroom and the book characters.

Similarly, when books are sent home with students, discussion guides can support conversations about disabilities with family members. Discussion guides for use at home with family members are simplified versions of the ones used

in the classroom. For example, questions about the content of the story (first element on the classroom discussion guide) can be optional for family members, who, depending on available time, may choose to provide the explanation of disability or related vocabulary (second element on the discussion guide) without previously asking any questions about the story content. Family members also can discuss equipment related to the story (third discussion element) as well as similarities (fourth discussion element) in the same way as teachers, and having the same information as teachers available on the guide.

Planning ahead for such conversations with children by creating discussion guides creates a space for information sharing and honest discussions. In addition, planning ahead helps teachers think through what they want to say and provides teachers with the key words and ideas to explain concepts that may not have been a part of their professional development (e.g., what is spina bifida, how do children learn Braille). During a quality discussion, students have time to reflect upon the content of the story and the disability represented in the character. However, the similarities discussed between the story's character and the children serve as the most essential element. As part of the discussion component of the *Special Friends* project, students were encouraged to identify ways in which they were similar to book characters with special needs.

Conclusion

Reading books about children with special needs provides a meaningful way for early childhood teachers to focus on literacy skills such as vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and communication skills, while also positively influencing young students' attitudes. This article offers teachers a selection of 18 children's books that appropriately address issues of disability. Using Nasatir and Horn's (2003) guidelines, teachers can evaluate additional books and create discussion guides about those books for use at school and at home. Through open discussions about disabilities, early childhood teachers are poised to positively enhance attitudes toward children with disabilities. Feedback from teachers following the completion of the 6-week *Special Friends* intervention indicated that the program enabled teachers to more comfortably discuss disabilities with their students. As Grace, a kindergarten teacher, so eloquently stated,

> I think [the *Special Friends* project] made me a better teacher, too. Before this project, had they [the children] talked about disabilities, I probably would have brushed it [talking about disabilities] off. But now we talk about it [disabilities] more and I'm very honest and they're very honest with their questions and I try to answer them the best that I can.

Feedback from teachers also revealed positive changes and benefits in children's behaviors toward peers with disabilities. As Tracy, another participating teacher pointed out when talking about changes in her students' behaviors toward peers with disabilities, "They [the children] are much, much more in tune with children

with disabilities. They really want to help. They don't make fun of kids."

Through book-reading and discussions across several weeks with a variety of characters from different books, children can be exposed to the idea that we *all* have differences and, more importantly, we are alike in so many ways. Responses from children in post-interviews demonstrated greater understanding of these human differences and similarities. When asked, "What does it mean to have special needs or a disability?", children's responses included comments such as "*They [people with disabilities] can do lots of things like me," "they are the same [as us] even if they have a disability," "you can't do stuff like other people, but you can still walk or roll in a wheelchair and still take a walk and play and you can still ride your bike," "if someone is in a wheelchair you can play catch," "they might use a wheelchair or hearing aid," "they do a lot of other things like you do and some not,"* and *"he likes ice cream like me."*

Having opportunities to talk about similarities signifies an important and early step in social and emotional development related to the formation of children's perceptions about differences. As a result, discussions should be carefully planned with a focus on similarities thoughtfully emphasized.

The careful selection of children's books and thoughtfully structured discussions provide a direct path for supporting acceptance of children with disabilities, which is consistent with the attitude construct. At the very time when young children are forming early perceptions about peers and adults in the community, children are provided *indirect experiences* to disabilities through the use of high-quality books and guided discussions, with an emphasis on similarities. As more early childhood classes become inclusive, strategies such as purposeful book-reading and discussion guides will become essential to creating a positive social climate and sense of belonging for all children.

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