

Children with disabilities not accurately portrayed in top children's books

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Despite an increasingly positive portrayal of disabilities in Newbery Award-winning books, they are not representative of the nearly 7 million children with disabilities attending U.S. public schools, say Brigham Young University special education researchers.

They published their study in the December issue of *Education and Training in [Autism](#) and Developmental Disabilities*.

“We are hoping that this will be a call to authors,” said special education professor Tina Dyches, one of the co-authors. “We’ve got so many wonderful authors in the world, and we would love to see more inclusive characterizations in high-quality [books](#), where kids with disabilities are being recognized for who they are and not just for the limitations of

their disabilities.”

Among the concerning themes the researchers found are:

- The representation of characters with disabilities in Newbery books is not proportionate to the current school population of students with disabilities.
- White school-age characters with disabilities were overrepresented, black and Hispanic characters with disabilities were underrepresented, and Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaskan Native characters were not present at all.
- In some of these books, authors eliminated characters with disabilities through death, being sent away or discovery of miraculous cures.

“We know that children learn a lot from models who are like them,” Dyches said. “We’d like to see children with disabilities more accurately depicted and representative for what is found in schools. This includes portraying more individuals with learning and speech/language disabilities.”

Then-graduate student Melissa Leininger is the study’s lead author. [Special education](#) faculty Mary Anne Prater and Melissa Heath are also co-authors.

The American Library Association annually awards the Newbery Medal for the most distinguished American children's book. The researchers identified 31 Newbery Award and Honor books from 1975–2009 that portrayed 41 main or supporting characters with disabilities. They rated each book on the quality of its characterization of individuals with disabilities.

The team chose 1975 as the opening of the period they studied because that's when the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act passed. This legislation awarded free and appropriate education for children with disabilities. The researchers found that most Newbery books with characters with disabilities were published after 1990 when this law was reauthorized. They, along with another graduate student, have now started researching Newbery books from before 1975.

Prater and Dyches both have an interest and concern with the messages that are being sent to children through books.

In 2006 they published a similar study about the portrayal of disabilities in Caldecott books. This study indicated that many Caldecott Medal and Honor books can give children an inaccurate view of what it's like to have a disability, reinforce negative stereotypes and underrepresent more prevalent disabilities.

“Students will be able to more fully understand disabilities and their classmates with disabilities through having characters with [disabilities](#) portrayed accurately in the best of [children](#)'s literature,” Dyches said.

Provided by Brigham Young University

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