Culture and Children’s Literature

Sometimes bias sneaks into our programs unnoticed. Take some time to look through the books, toys, and materials in your program. For this activity, you will analyze the children’s books in your family child care program. Then you will use this guide to decide whether a particular book has any common stereotypes or biases. Finally, you will brainstorm how you can counter these issues in your program.

1. **Tour your Program Library.** *Omission* occurs when a particular group of people are not represented at all in your library or program. Look at your collection of books as a whole and answer these questions:

   - Do you see images of people from a variety of racial and ethnic groups? List the racial and ethnic groups you see:
   - Do you see different cultures or traditions portrayed? List the cultures or traditions you see:
   - Are any of the books in a language other than English? Do any characters in the books speak a language other than English? List how many books you found:
   - Do you see images of different social or economic classes (i.e., range of occupations, incomes, lifestyles)? Describe the evidence you see:
   - Do you see different family structures? Check the structures you see:
     - Grandparents as primary guardians
     - Single parents
     - Same sex families
     - Extended families (aunts, uncles, cousins)
     - Divorced parents
     - Blended families (remarriage, step parents)
     - Multi-racial families
2. Choose a Children's Book

Choose one children's book that has human or human-like characters. Fairy tales are especially good for this activity.

Title of the Book: __________________________________________________________

Author: __________________________________________________________________

Year Published: __________

Look at the illustrations:

- Do you see any over-simplified pictures of a particular group? For example, are overweight people shown on a couch with food? Are Asian people drawn with slanted eyes and traditional clothing? Are teachers or librarians drawn with a stern look (or with eye glasses and their hair in a bun)? Are boys rowdy and getting into trouble?
- Are all people drawn the same (i.e., are people of color just shaded-in versions of white people)? Do all people of a certain race or group look the same?
- Are women or people of color subservient or passive?
- Are males in all leadership roles?
- Are people of color shown in places other than urban areas (i.e., outside the “barrio” or inner city)?

Notes:
Look at the story line:
- Do people of color or female characters have to be extraordinary to succeed?
- Do white people solve the problems?
- Are minorities considered to be the problem?
- Are female characters’ achievements based on their looks (i.e., the princess “wins” the prince because she is so beautiful)? Are positive female characters “beautiful” while negative female characters are “ugly”? Are females afraid of mice, spiders, snakes, etc.? Are females rescued by males?
- Are the family structures usually traditional (mom, dad, children)?
- Are depictions of lifestyles authentic?

Notes:

Think about the heroine and/or heroes:
- What characteristics are the heroes or heroines admired for? Is it beauty, bravery, brains?
- Do the heroines or heroes avoid conflict (especially with whites or males)?

Notes:
Think about children’s self-images:

- Does the book limit a child’s dreams or expression? For example, are Asian children shown only as quiet and bookish? Are overweight people shown as lazy or dull? Are athletes shown as “dumb jocks”? Are poor people shown as dirty?
- Does the book associate the color white with purity, cleanliness, etc. and the color black with evil, dirtiness, etc.?

Notes:

Look at the language:

- Are there offensive words in the book? Look for words like “savage” or “lazy.” Look for gendered words like fireman (firefighter could be used instead).

Notes:
When critically examining your current book selection or even choosing new books, always keep in mind the power of books, their words and their images, to nurture or to undermine a child's sense of self, positive attitude toward others, and motivation to act for fairness.

Review your notes in this activity. Reflect on the books that may have some of these common stereotypes or biases and brainstorm how you can counter these issues in your program.

**Notes:**

Guidelines Adapted from: