

Encouraging Children's Use of Appropriate Books in Early Childhood

Helping young children develop a close and enjoyable relationship with books is an essential part of early literacy. This process is supported by how staff use books with children, and is also influenced by how books are presented to children as a material for them to use independently.

While most books can be stored in a designated Reading Center or Library, related books may be located in interest centers that support the activity/theme (e.g., animal books in the Science/Nature Center; *Mouse Paint* in the Art Center). The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale, Third Edition (ECERS-3) recommends at least 35 appropriate books from a variety of genres be easily visible and accessible in a classroom of 20 children. Books are considered inappropriate if they are not at children's literacy level, have frightening content, and/or convey a negative social message. Children should not have access to books that are considered inappropriate for them. This resource offers information and considerations for using books with children, such as during a read aloud. For more suggestions on appropriate books please see the updated [Explorations Book List](#) and [Unit Book List](#).

Book Considerations:

Developmentally Appropriate

Developmentally appropriate books represent the literacy level of the children enrolled. Since the literacy level of preschoolers will vary, it is important to include a range of books for the different reading levels of children in the group. This may include simple books with pictures, a few words, sentences, or short paragraphs on each page that capture classroom topics and the interest of children. Staff should be sensitive to children's different learning needs, and intentionally select and make books available that reflect those needs. For example, a classroom with emergent multilingual learners may have more books in other languages; a classroom in September may have more board books and simple stories than that same classroom in May. Chapter books and text-dense encyclopedias are too difficult for preschoolers. However, an encyclopedia with large, colorful pictures could enhance the current classroom theme or could be a good opportunity for staff to model use of a book to find an answer to a question. Developmentally appropriate books include:

- Picture books
- Books with a few words, sentences, or short paragraphs (e.g., books by authors such as Ezra Jack Keats, Eric Carle, Donald Crews, and Dr. Seuss)
- Books in children's home language

Frightening Content

Books are considered frightening and inappropriate for preschoolers if they contain violent pictures and/or words, such as those related to guns, war, and killing (not just dying). As noted by the ECERS-3, children of this age often cannot distinguish between imaginary and real occurrences, and may find violence in books very upsetting. In addition, young children may empathize with imaginary people, animals, or other creatures that are depicted as the victims of violence and may become concerned for their own safety when they see violent pictures and/or listen to the scary story.

Frightening Images and Recorded Books

Books with violent images should not be accessible to children and should not be displayed in the classroom, in the Library, or anywhere else where a child can freely look at the images and experience the content. When children have access to these books, there is very little staff can do to mitigate their effect. Similarly, books on tape may contain inappropriate images and words, which, since children can access independently, staff cannot prevent exposure. However, if books have frightening images, but the words are appropriate, staff could buffer against the images by only sharing the book with children when a staff member is present and by avoiding the pages with frightening pictures.

Frightening Words

Since many children of this age cannot read, when a book describes a frightening or violent image, staff can change the words, or not read them, without altering the overall story. For example, in *Jack and the Beanstalk* the words “Fee-fi-fo-fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman. Be he alive or be he dead, I’ll have his bones to make my bread.” could become “Fee-fi-fo-fum, I smell an Englishman.”

The following are considerations (not a checklist) to use when choosing books for an Early Childhood classroom. To decide if a particular book is appropriate and/or how to introduce it to children, consider:

- The pictures to see if there is any violence, such as weapons, killing, and/or visible blood (e.g., a woodsman swinging an ax to kill the big bad wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*; two dinosaurs fighting with ripped and bleeding flesh; Hansel and Gretel pushing the old woman into the fire).
- Characters’ faces to see if they show intense fear or anger (e.g., deeply furrowed brows or clenched jaws)?
- The tone of voice used when reading it out loud to children, for example, do you naturally give certain characters a deep menacing voice (e.g., “Little pig, little pig, let me in!)?
- Descriptions that may create a very dark image (e.g., “Children and families fleeing for their lives”)

If a book is identified as having frightening content it may not be appropriate to use with young children. Consider:

- Finding an alternative version of the story (e.g., the version of *The Three Little Pigs* where the wolf runs away and the pigs celebrate the victory),
- Avoid showing scary images
- Omit reading and/or alter scary parts as the story is told
- Not making the book accessible to children in the library or reading center to avoid them encountering these images independently.

Books Depicting Negative Social Messages/ Stereotypes

Negative Social Message

Appropriate books for children should provide a positive message about how to behave. When children see characters solving problems with physical aggression, as seen in some traditional tales such as *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, they get a negative social message that works against our need to teach children to solve problems with discussion and problem solving methods.

Stereotypes

Developmentally appropriate books should not promote stereotypes. According to ECERS, a stereotype is a standardized mental picture that is held by any group which represents an oversimplified view of individuals within that group. Books accessible to children should show diversity within groups. Showing individuals in their traditional clothing may represent a valued cultural tradition, but this depiction should be balanced by having current representations in books as well.

For example, if people in traditional tribal wear from an African culture are pictured in a book (e.g., people wearing Kente cloth), there should also be books with black people in suits or career-specific clothing available. Furthermore, instead of reading *The Five Chinese Brothers* or *Tikki Tikki Tembo* where stereotypical and inaccurate cultural perceptions are depicted, select books like *Round is a Mooncake* or *The Ugly Vegetables* where more modern depictions of children celebrating their unique culture are portrayed.

Similar to the considerations above, to decide if a particular book has a negative social message or stereotypical content consider if:

- Characters solve problems with verbal and/or physical aggression;
- Pictures and/or words show a negative or stereotypical message about a particular group (e.g., varying gender identities, culture, differing abilities);
- Cultural pictures and/words are balanced with more modern representations.

Books that have images portraying a negative social message and/or stereotype should not be accessible to children and/or displayed in the classroom. If the story includes characters demonstrating verbal or physical aggression, the content should be altered when reading it to children. Further, books that advance long-standing stereotypes should be avoided.