

Representation of Hair in Children's Books Guide



Guide created by Cierra Kaler-Jones and Rosalie Reyes © 2021

The Cooperative Children's Book Center, a research library at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education, found that only 10% of books the library received in 2018 featured significant African or African American content/characters, only 5% featured Latinx characters, and only 1% featured Indigenous characters. Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop noted that books offer a window into the lived experiences of those who may come from different backgrounds, but also a mirror for students to be able to see themselves reflected and affirmed in the content. Carefully selecting children's books can play a significant and powerful role in helping shape young children's perspectives about themselves and the world around them.

Through read-alouds, role play, discussion, and other activities, children begin to build empathy and also a sense of confidence in their ability to understand and honor others' experiences. Interacting with children's books helps students comprehend and celebrate all dimensions of human difference, while also creating opportunities for critical reflection. Children's books can help young people see the power of the collective, as well as see themselves as activists for social change.

It is important to note that incorporating diverse books at school, at home, and in other educational spaces is critical; however, solely diversifying characters is not enough. When selecting children's books, one must also consider if the book includes accurate and asset-based narratives, moves beyond singular narratives that solely highlight heroes in isolation, and thoughtfully examines issues of power.

This resource document includes guiding questions for selecting children's books on hair, tips for talking to students about hair, hair definitions, and suggestions for book lists. We hope this document will continue to grow over time and be a helpful and effective tool for educators and families.

Guiding Questions

*adapted from Louise Derman-Sparks' Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books

Check the illustrations

- Do they accurately represent different styles, textures, and colors of hair?
- Are they stereotypical or portray characters in stereotypical ways?
- What hair textures and styles are missing or not present? How are you able to supplement those conversations when reading books with children?
- Even if the book doesn't directly talk about hair, do the illustrations show examples of natural hair that can help children see themselves and their hair represented in the book?

Analyze the storyline

- Whose perspective is most prominent?
- Is there a villain? If so, who or what is it, and why are they/why is it "bad"?
- Is there a hero? How do we know this person is the hero?
- Does the story feel real/true to life? Are important elements or considerations included?
- Do characters speak to each other? If so, are the interactions positive?
- Does the plot affirm some and discredit others?

Examine the language

- Are terms like *nappy* used in ways that are positive and affirming?
- If the book uses a term, such as *pelo malo*, does it describe the context of that term, as well as push back against the negative term?
- Does the book appropriate a hairstyle that has a historical grounding in another culture or community without recognizing or discussing the history?
- Does the text refer to hair in comparison to animals or other dehumanizing metaphors? Is the language celebratory and affirming of hair?
- Does the text refer to an aspect of community or history?

Consider how it affects children's self and social identity

- When selecting children's books on hair, does your collection incorporate or include different ethnicities? For example, are Afro-Latinx communities, Indigenous communities, or communities that cover their hair represented in the text?
- Are there discussions about the different hair textures? It is important to highlight the diversity of textures and styles (i.e. there are different types of natural hair, such as 3a or 4c) and one person can have more than one texture.

Tips for talking to children about hair

- Make sure to stay away from language about all hair being the same. This takes away from the rich diversity of many types of hair. Highlight the beauty and uniqueness of different types of hair.
- Do share facts about the similarities of hair, such as hair comes in different colors and textures, hair has a root and shaft, and hair is something that can be styled in many ways to look different.
- Don't use language that fetishizes hair or describes hair as being "exotic."
- Ask young children questions about what they love about their own hair and affirm the positive qualities of their hair.
- Answer questions with honesty and genuineness. By preschool, children notice differences among others such as skin color, hair texture, and eye color. Young children may hide questions and may believe that talking about difference is wrong if you shy away from answering.

Hair Definitions

- **Protective style** - A hairstyle that puts the ends of hair away from being exposed to natural elements, such as sun and heat, and also constant manipulation through styling. Different protective styles include, but are not limited to, twists, braids, wigs, cornrows, and locs.
- **Braids** - There are many types of braids, including, but not limited to micro braids, two-strand, and box braids. Braids can be individual and free-flowing. They can also be braided close to the scalp.
- **Waves** - A close-to-the-scalp style that protects and arranges short, wavy-to-coily hair in a spiral wave pattern.
- **Locs** - A hairstyle in which the hair is coiled into itself and remains that way, thus “locking” and creating rope-like strands. When creating locs, people don’t uncoil their hair. Locs can be made by braiding and twisting the hair into a specific style. They can be styled in many ways including updos, braids, and twists.
- **Freeforms/Free-formed locs** - A style that is created by allowing locs to form on their own, with little or no direction or styling. Because some people have naturally coily hair, locs will form organically over time if their hair is not deliberately untangled.
- **Dreads** - Often used interchangeably with locs, this term can carry a connotation that separates the style of locked hair from its cultural significance across the African diaspora.
- **Hair texture** - Texture refers to how thick each individual strand of hair is. Today’s products describe textures on a scale of “fine” to “coarse.”
- **Curl type or pattern** - The curl type is determined by the shape of the follicle of the hair. Most people with curlier hair have more than one type of pattern. There are sub-categories from A to C, which are based on the width of the curl, where A has the widest pattern and C is the smallest pattern.
- **Hair type** - Type 1 is straight, Type 2 is wavy, Type 3 is curly, and Type 4 is coily.
- **Hairstyle** - A hairstyle refers to a particular way that hair is cut, colored, or arranged to achieve a desired look.
- **Relaxer** - A relaxer is a chemical processing treatment that straightens and takes away the curls in hair.
- **Perm** - A perm is a chemical processing treatment that adds curls to straight hair. Perm is often incorrectly used interchangeably with relaxer.
- **Detangle** - The process of separating curls and coils from one another to prevent them from locking or getting tangled. The process involves combs, brushes, water, fingers, oils, and hair products.
- **Edges** - The hairs along a person’s front-facing hairline.
- **Baby Hair** - Short, fine, straight-to-wavy hairs along a person’s hairline. African American communities created the trend of styling these hairs into appealing swirls using small brushes.

Book Lists/Resources

