

BOOKS

9 Children's Books that Celebrate Disability

Children can be introduced to the ideas of inclusion, empathy and diversity early on through these fun books that celebrate disability without being judgmental, discriminatory or overly sympathetic.

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Growing up in Guwahati with a severe form of visual disability, [I have faced](#) a fair share of insensitive and over-sympathetic comments and jeers. As a young child, I wasn't very good at sports and would often come last in school races.

However, during my middle school years, I loved watching international test cricket matches on TV. In those early years of the millennium, our family would spend hours cheering for the Indian cricket team. But although I was fond of watching sports and liked playing some games, I didn't like competing because I wasn't interested in racing and wasn't fast. However, both other people and I felt that my slow pace was because of my inability to see clearly from a distance.

I believed this until 2014, when I heard of cricket for the blind for the first time. It fascinated me when I learnt how a visually challenged group of people could play international cricket as professionals.

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An Indian named [George Abraham](#) is credited as being the torchbearer of the blind cricket world cup and India's national blind cricket team captain [Padma Shri Shekhar Naik](#) has led India to win the World cup twice. Soon after, I wrote a children's book for Pratham titled [Ready? Yes! Play!](#) about a girl with low vision who plays cricket, which is free to read online.

Disability, whether mental, physical or intellectual, is just one more form of diversity in the world around us. If we can teach our children to be sensible, caring, understanding and empathic towards their peers who might not be like them in some way, we will not only make children with disabilities feel more included and happy, this will also lead to a better world with lesser discrimination, hatred and conflict. You can start right away by adding these fun and interesting books with disabled protagonists to your child's and your own reading list:

1. [Susie Will Not Speak](#) by Shruthi Rao: This is a cute and fun story about little Susie who is often laughed at and made fun of by her peers and an adult because she speaks with a lisp. The illustrations by Lavanya Naidu add beauty to this charming tale of fun, friendship, disappointment, bullying and resolve. The author got the inspiration for this book from her own childhood. "When I stammered, people laughed at me, or kept asking me to speak properly, and so I wondered what it would be like if I completely stopped speaking. Then nobody would bother me any longer," Shruthi says.

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2. [*My Brother's Wheeeelchair*](#) written by Salil

Chaturvedi and illustrated by Tanvi Bhat: This picture book from Pratham tells the story of a child in a wheelchair and his sister, both of whom have a gala time with their little adventures. The book reads like a fun poem in rhyme and shows how the kids go around town and have different experiences in a positive, light-hearted way. This book can be read online and downloaded for free from Storyweaver.

3. [*Flute in the Forest*](#) by **Leela Gour Broome:** This children's novel is a Ruskin Bond-recommended title from Puffin and tells the story of thirteen-year-old Atiya and her many fascinating outdoor adventures. Afflicted by polio, which makes her limp as she walks with her wooden walking stick, Atiya is independent and no one can stop her from exploring the depths of the forest and making amazing discoveries along the way. Reading this book gave me a calming sense of peace and tranquility. The scenes and sounds from the book lingered on in my mind as if I had just watched a beautiful movie.

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4. ***Against All Odds*** by **Ramendra Kumar**: This book about 12-year-old Kartik resonated with me in many ways. While many children with disabilities in urban, upper-middle-class families might have family support despite a disability, they would often have anxiety and stress when changing cities, schools and meeting new teachers and classmates or travelling to unfamiliar places. Kartik is a big football fan and enthusiast and loves the sport dearly. His left arm is not fully formed, but he is independent and his friends at his school in Kolkata are friendly and they have a lot of fun playing for hours in the football field. However, life takes a difficult turn for Kartik when the family moves to Rourkela due to his father's transfer. His classmates at the new school think he's a freak and even the football coach feels he wouldn't be capable of playing the game! Speaking of his book, the author Ramendra Kumar says, "I had seen a footballer who was differently-abled play in my hometown of Hyderabad. Kartik's passion and performance is a trifle inspired by him."

5. ***Dhanak-Rainbow*** by **Nagesh Kukunoor and Anushka Ravishankar**: This book is a novelization of the multiple international and national award-winning children's Hindi drama film, *Dhanak*, directed by Nagesh Kukunoor. Ten-year-old Pari and her eight-year-old blind brother, Chotu go on a challenging but fun adventure to try and meet Shah Rukh Khan whom, they hear, is shooting for a film in Rajasthan. The plan to meet Pari's hero stems from a promise she had made to her brother: that she would restore his eyesight before he turned nine. Just before starting on the trip, Pari had seen her hero in a poster saying, 'Donate your eyes.' She then immediately writes a letter to Shah

Rukh, asking if he could help Chotu in getting his eyesight back. The book has vivid imagery that transports the reader to the orphaned children's uncle's home from where they stealthily start their quest towards Jaisalmer on foot through the hot, sandy desert. On their journey on foot towards Jaisalmer, the children go hungry and thirsty, have silly squabbles, get invited to be guests at a wedding in Bilara where they eat piles of hot jalebis, meet a guitar-playing foreign tourist named Douglas and have many other adventures.



6. ***A Helping Hand*** written by Payal Dhar and illustrated by Vartika Sharma: In this book, the story is told through the diary entries of a girl who is asked to be the mentor of a new girl in school who happens to have a prosthetic hand. It is interesting to note how the perspective of the girl narrating her experiences as a classmate and mentor of the new girl changes as we read through the book and arrive at the end. On being asked about how she feels disability should be portrayed in children's literature, Payal says,

“What we have right now in Indian children’s books is visibility, but we are yet to achieve representation. While visibility is about being seen, representation is about being given the stage and the choice of story to tell. At the moment, almost all of the storytelling is coming from able-bodied authors and from ableist perspectives. And I am part of the problem. Why didn’t I write *A Helping Hand* from the disabled child’s point of view? I just didn’t think of it.”

7. ***Fish in A Tree* by Lynda Mullaly Hunt:** This multiple award-winning, *New York Times* bestselling book tells the story of the struggles of a dyslexic but clever schoolgirl named Ally. Once, she faces a lot of embarrassment when she mistakenly hands over a sympathy card to her new teacher who is expecting a baby. Since Ally couldn’t read properly owing to dyslexia, she didn’t know that it was a card meant to be given to the bereaved and not to someone expecting good news. It is a relatable and remarkable story that tries to portray that even if a child is different from his or her peers or family, they shouldn’t be labelled a loser.

8. ***Machher Jhol (Fish Curry)* written by Richa Jha and illustrated by Sumanta Dey:** When I think of this book, I hardly remember that Gopu, the gritty, determined and independent protagonist of this brilliantly illustrated book is blind. *Machher Jhol* traces the journey Gopu goes on to meet his grandmother and back home through the bustling city of Kolkata, with its many sounds, smells and scenes such as the Durga *Pujo* pandals, fish markets, slow-moving heritage trams and hand-pulled cycle rickshaws. On being asked about the creation of this award-winning book, publisher and author Richa Jha says, “The

story is meant to be read for the love that Gopu has for his father. That is why we have made the reader's stumbling upon Gopu's blindness a blink-of-an-eye revelation right at the end of the book. A reader who reads the book in a hurry may miss it which is okay because it's the father-son bonding that shoulders the weight of creating a lingering, lasting memory in the reader's mind."

9. ***Chuskit Goes to School*** written by **Sujatha Padmanabhan** and illustrated by **Madhuvanti**

Anantharajan: This picture book from Pratham was written and published in collaboration with the Leh-based non-profit organization, Namgyal Institute for People with Disabilities. The story opens at the scene where a nine-year-old girl, Chuskit, is excited because it's her first day at school. She is in a wheelchair owing to a disability and the path to her school is 'uneven and pebbly.' Also, she will need to cross a stream to reach school and return home each day. However, the efforts of Abdul, the other schoolchildren and teachers make it possible for Chuskit to go to school. They happily come together, level the street and build a strong wooden bridge so that Chuskit can go to school and enjoy her right to education like other children. This book goes a long way in teaching empathy and the values of selfless service, teamwork, genuine friendship and community effort. And best of all, it's a story based on real-life events in villages in the Ladakh region of Kashmir!



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