



Diverse Books and Bullying

by Deborah Pope, Executive Director, Ezra Jack Keats Foundation

Discussion focused on the problem of bullying is everywhere. This is a good thing. Getting it out in the open, identifying it, and addressing the origin and effects are important steps toward dealing with it. It may not be possible to eliminate bullying, but by calling it out and creating strategies to avoid and confront it, we can contain the damage it causes, especially to our children.

Happily, something as simple as reading picture books to your child can help address the problem. Reading books about different kinds of people and cultures, as well as different everyday problems, diffuses the differences that can cause fear or dislike, turning what was foreign and

threatening into something familiar and friendly, and at the very least opening up thought-provoking conversations. Hearing stories that include aspects of bullying can be eye-openers for children inclined to bully, and those often targeted. Ironically, what we can do to make our children stronger than a bully is much the same we would do to make sure our child does not become a bully: to instill in them self-confidence, empathy, and compassion. Being bullied and bullying are two sides of the same coin and to be guarded against equally.

Trying to explain why some children are targets and others bullies is very difficult unless you know that child very well.

This is one of the first ways in which reading to your child, and choosing diverse literature, can help. Reading time is quiet, together time when your child or your students can get to know one another better. This is when they can share their thoughts, without calling attention to themselves. It is when a targeted child, identifying with a character in the book, can take pride in overcoming a bully and a bully can reconsider their actions.

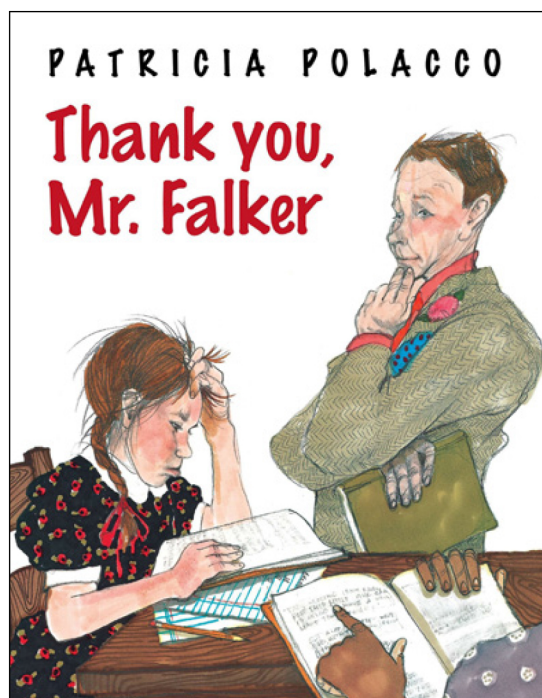
We know that seeing a character similar to yourself as the heroine or hero of a popular book builds self-esteem and a sense of belonging. Being featured in a popular book—one that many people are reading—is validation that you are embraced by the culture. We also know that seeing a character different than yourself as the heroine or hero of a popular book is essential to building admiration, empathy, and acceptance for all children. The challenge is for parents, caregivers and teachers to take this understanding a step further and use it to counteract the impulse to bully and augment the internal resistance to being bullied. Here are thoughts on how to meet these challenges.

In order for diverse children's literature to have an impact, it has to be on the shelves readily accessible to our kids. It has to be there in quantity and quality. The books should have beautiful pictures, interesting stories, and comprise as close to 50 percent of the collection as possible. There should be books about people with different skin colors, from different cultures, with different abilities, featuring as many girls as boys as strong protagonists and touching on shared issues, like bullying.

You and your children's teachers don't have to be held back by the fact that publishers still put out too few diverse children's books each year. You can balance your home and classroom libraries by doing web searches to find the wonderful books with diverse characters that have been published over the past five decades. There are many lists of diverse books available online, published by institutions like the New York Public Library, the Children's Book Council, and We Need Diverse Books. Be sure to buy books that you enjoy reading, because hopefully, you'll be reading each one a few hundred times.

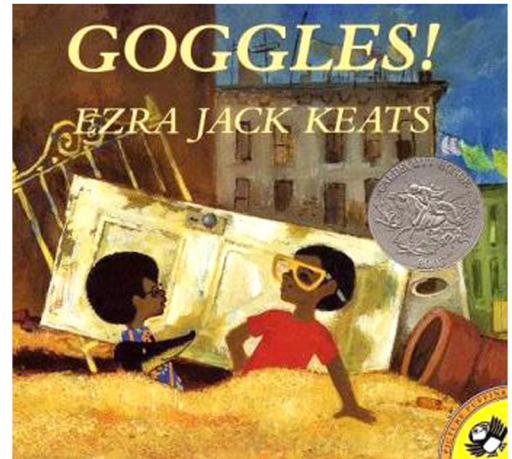
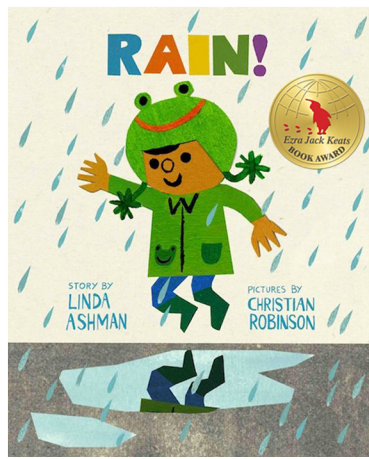
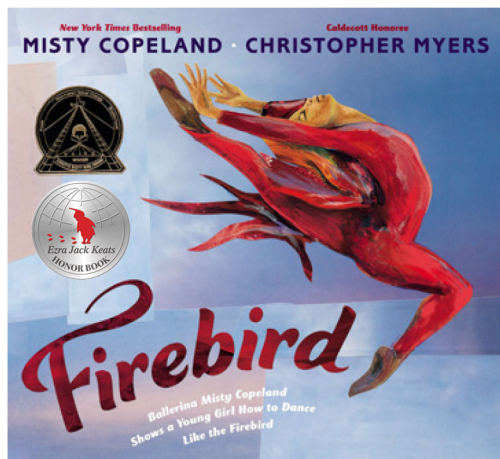
Also important is to make sure these books are not all about historical figures, events, or causes. Your children's libraries should be full of stories of everyday kid experiences and problems, like bullying, trouble with sharing, or playing in the snow. It is in these stories that children see themselves, recognize their friends as having similar problems and feelings, and can build their self-esteem and empathy. Being immersed in this kind of literature makes it harder, but not impossible, for children to use race, class, disability, gender, or nationality to exclude another child.

Thank you Mr. Falker by Patricia Polacco is the story of a young girl whose immigrant family values education highly but for whom learning to read has been too difficult. This youngster has been able to fool her teachers, but the other students taunt her for her slowness. She feels frightened, alone, and stupid, until Mr. Falker, her new teacher, figures out what is happening. This book was created to tell a compelling story in a captivating way and it succeeds, making it a book any child would want to read just for entertainment. That is what makes it a perfect book to use when discussing taunting or bullying someone different and about extending compassion and understanding to someone who is vulnerable. From reading this book, a child with learning problems would gain strength and pride; and a child who might have been the one taunting gains insight into the effects of their actions, as well as how their actions affect how others see them.



Stories that are compelling and/or fun, and that can as a side benefit, inspire the reader to think differently about their world are the books to look for. *A Friend Like Ed* by Karen Wagner, *A Best Friend for Frances* by Russell and Lillian Hoban, *My Best Friend* by Mary Ann Rodman, *Rain!* by Linda Ashman, *Firebird* by Misty Copeland and *Goggles!* by Ezra Jack Keats are only the tip of the iceberg of book suggestions for bringing up the subjects of peer pressure, dishonesty, shunning, racism, and self-confidence in the face of prejudice and bullies.

Exposure alone is not enough. These books provide an opportunity for you to interact with your child. It is in the



interaction that a child really learns. Every book needs to be discussed, not just at the end, but throughout the reading experience. The teacher, parent, or caregiver has to stop to examine the illustrations with the child, to discuss the story, solicit opinions and questions, and to offer their own. This will encourage the child to think about what they've read, learning the lesson of the story, and also learning that reading is not just about consuming the words. It is about analyzing the meaning of the words and the story; that the world of the story carries weight and importance.

It is crucial that children learn that the stories they read are important because books can model appropriate behavior and provide solace and respite when a child is unhappy or feeling alone. It is from books that children can be reminded that there is a world and a way of being beyond the one they are in. Books are a window into a way of feeling better and learning that whatever is happening to them is not their fault. While there are movies and electronic media designed to provide the same kind of comfort and escape, books remain of primary importance because they require the active participation of the child to animate the imagery and world of the story. When the child's imagination is triggered to form the world of the story, it triggers their sense of power over their own reality.

The discussions children have with adults while being read to are especially effective at teaching empathy, compassion, and a sense of belonging because the very nature of the interaction makes the child feel they are receiving empathy, compassion, and a sense that they belong, from the adult. The child learns that the adult is interested in their thinking and they are safe discussing their thoughts, fears and feelings. This makes the adult a trusted ally from whom they can get advice as they face external adversity of any kind, including bullying. An adult with this connection can also be

instrumental in steering a child away from bullying.

Spending time with a child and hearing them talk about the book is golden time for getting to know the strengths and vulnerabilities of that child. It is a time to find out what is happening to them at home, at school, or on the Internet because they are not the central subject of the conversation. Very often it is easier for children to deliver information when the child is not in the hot seat. That conversation should be continued in the sharing of information between parents and teachers in the community surrounding your child. This communication is critical to knowing about and dealing with situations, like bullying, before they become toxic.

As parents, we sometimes believe we have more control over our children's lives and who they will become than we really do. Knowing and accepting our children's strengths and challenges is fundamental to helping them cope in the world. Some children are resilient, some can achieve resilience with effort, and some are more vulnerable. Children are, after all, people. We need to know our children and, accepting their limitations, help them be the strongest they can be. We can celebrate who they are, give them a safe harbor, advisors they can trust, and with the help of books, access to understanding that their world and their strength is much larger than it might appear.

Deborah Pope is Executive Director of the Ezra Jack Keats Foundation. The EJK Foundation is dedicated to supporting and enriching public education through the EJK Mini-Grant and Bookmaking programs; and to promoting quality and diverse literature for children through the Ezra Jack Keats Award, given annually to a writer and illustrator whose work celebrates our multicultural population. The EJK Award list is a great place to start when looking for wonderful and diverse books for your library. For more information visit ezra-jack-keats.org. ●