

Why Books Matter: Using Inclusive Literature to Build Empathy and Belonging in the Early Years

By Chloe Storr

About Chloe Storr

Chloe has worked in the early years sector for 17 years and is passionate about creating inclusive spaces for all children and families. In this blog, she shares why LGBT inclusion matters in the early years and how it can be embedded in everyday practice.



Books do much more than support language development and early literacy. They help children make sense of themselves, understand others, and explore the diverse world around them. For Early Years practitioners, carefully chosen books can be one of the most powerful tools for promoting inclusion, empathy, and positive attitudes towards difference.

Why Inclusion Matters

Research suggests that attitudes towards diversity begin to form at a young age. Children notice differences early and actively construct ideas about identity, families, and relationships. Without opportunities to discuss and explore diversity in positive ways, children can develop misconceptions, stereotypes, or biases. This makes the Early Years a crucial period for fostering understanding and respect.

A practitioner research study exploring LGBT inclusion in Early Years settings highlighted an important gap between practitioners' intentions and their practice. While participants consistently described themselves as inclusive and recognised the benefits of representing LGBT families and identities, many reported having few or no LGBT-inclusive resources available in their settings. This finding raises an important question: if practitioners value inclusion, why are inclusive books often absent from classroom environments?

One explanation may be confidence and knowledge. Many practitioners in the study reported limited training on LGBT inclusion and uncertainty about how to approach the topic. Others expressed concerns about potential parental objections or community resistance. These barriers can result in practitioners avoiding the topic altogether, even when they understand its importance.

The Importance of Empathy

Yet the evidence suggests that avoiding conversations about diversity may do more harm than good.

Research has consistently linked empathy with positive social behaviours such as helping, sharing, and comforting others. Children who develop stronger empathic responses are less likely to engage in bullying behaviours and more likely to demonstrate understanding towards people whose experiences differ from their own. Importantly, empathy is not something children simply acquire naturally; it can be nurtured through meaningful experiences and interactions.

Books as Windows into Other People's Experiences

This is where books become particularly valuable. Children's literature provides a safe and accessible way to explore different perspectives. Through stories, children encounter characters who may look different, live in different family structures, experience different challenges, or hold different beliefs. Literature allows children to step into another person's world, helping them understand feelings, experiences, and viewpoints beyond their own.

Research by Cress and Holm (2000) suggests that literature can support the development of empathy by helping children understand both themselves and others. Similarly, Ghosn (2002) describes literature as a powerful agent for reducing prejudice because it fosters emotional understanding and connection. Stories create opportunities for discussion, questioning, and reflection, all of which deepen children's understanding of diversity.

Representation Matters

Inclusive books that represent LGBT families are particularly important because they reflect the reality of many children's lives. Some children come from families with two mums, two dads, or other family structures that may not always be visible in mainstream resources. When these experiences are represented in books, children see their own families validated and celebrated. At the same time, children from different family backgrounds learn that families can be diverse while still sharing the same foundations of love, care, and belonging.

For practitioners, the goal is not to make LGBT topics a special or separate area of learning. Instead, inclusion can be woven naturally into everyday practice through story times, book corners, and conversations. Just as we routinely share books featuring different cultures, abilities, and family experiences, LGBT-inclusive literature can become part of a diverse and representative collection.

Books Matter

The message from the evidence is clear: books matter. They are not simply teaching tools; they are windows into other people's experiences and mirrors that reflect children's own identities. By providing access to diverse and inclusive literature, Early Years practitioners can help children develop empathy, challenge prejudice, and build a stronger sense of belonging for everyone in their community.

In a sector committed to valuing every child and family, inclusive books are not an optional extra. They are a vital resource for creating environments where all children can see themselves, understand others, and thrive. Ask yourself: does your book area genuinely enable all children to see themselves?

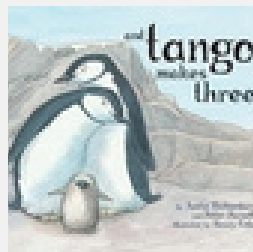
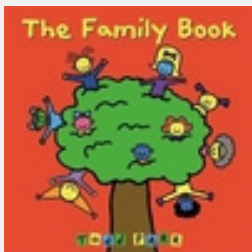
Find inclusive book ideas here!

www.booktrust.org.uk/book-recommendations/booklists/picture-books-that-celebrate-lgbtq-families/

References

Cress, S.W. and Holm, D.T. (2000) 'Developing Empathy through Children's Literature', *Education*, 120(3), pp. 593-597.

Ghosn, I.K. (2002) 'Four good reasons to use literature in primary school ELT', *ELT Journal*, 56(2), pp. 172-179.



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