

# Qualities to look for in Gender Expansive Children's Literature<sup>1</sup>

## Look for books that...

- ❑ *meaningfully* portray characters with gender identities, expressions and bodies that expand, cross, or transcend male & female boxes (that is, characters with some complexity and agency within the story who are not just added in as tokens)
- ❑ *meaningfully* portray characters of diverse body sizes, skin tones, abilities, and neurologies, from diverse cultural backgrounds, family structures, ethnicities, religions, class cultures and economic circumstances, (that is, characters with some complexity and agency within the story who are not just added in as tokens)

## and which...

- ❑ portray these characters within plots that revolve around all the possible things that children's stories can be about (e.g.: friendship, school, a lost pet, a sick parent, an adventure in the woods, an imaginary world, saying good night, having a bad day, waiting for Mom to get off work, etc.); that is, a plot that does NOT revolve around the gender transgressions of these characters, (or other social identities and attributes) that mark them as "other"
- ❑ focus on the positive aspects, not negative repercussions, of children expressing themselves
- ❑ break/resist stereotypes
- ❑ may use a variety of pronouns or no pronouns

## And, finally,

- ❑ that have other attributes of quality children's literature including: *richness of language, illustrations that children respond to, compelling plots*. Books that feel like a story and not like a lesson.

## Changes you can make that will have a impact on children's healthy gender development:

- ❑ Review your current book collection using the Qualities to Look For list (above) and modify your recommended reading lists.

- ❑ Change what you're reading with pre-K audiences, particularly.
- ❑ Be creative when reading problematic books: and not only the ones in gender-expansive literature but the ones in dominant / the traditional canon. Fairytales! Award winners! Change and omit pronouns, names, and gendered language. (What happens to Goldilocks and the Three Bears if you use male pronouns for Goldilocks—or make Mama Bear the biggest? Or make two papa bears? Change the gender of the trucks in “Goodnight, Goodnight Construction Site” so that they are not all male.)
- ❑ When you are reading books to kids, actively notice and question stereotypes you encounter in books.
- ❑ Create the time to support children's discussion and critical thinking by slowing down and asking them questions that help them engage with the text.
- ❑ Uplift excellent books! Read them. Recommend them. Write reviews of them. Place them on display shelves. Invite the authors to come talk.
- ❑ Write new books! Tell new stories!

### Recommended Articles & Links:

Louise Derman-Sparks, “Guide for Selecting Anti-bias Children's Books” (updated in 2013)

<http://www.teachingforchange.org/selecting-anti-bias-books>

Rudine Sims Bishop, “Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors” (1990)

<https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>

Julie Olsen Edwards, “Children's Peace Education Library” Website- with 6 areas of peace education

<http://www.childpeacebooks.org/cpb/Protect/teachPeace.php>

Isaac Prestwich, “And All Were Welcome: An Analysis of the Transgender Child in Contemporary Picture Books” (2020) -- a senior thesis available to download here:

[https://scholarship.claremont.edu/pomona\\_theses/235/](https://scholarship.claremont.edu/pomona_theses/235/).

*<sup>1</sup>This handout was developed with a pre-K audience in mind, for the workshop “Promising Practices and Troubling Tropes in the Emerging Field of Gender Expansive Children's Literature,” given at the Association of Children's Librarians Institute at SF Public Library on 4/13/2018. For updates to this article and more information, visit [genderjusticeinearlychildhood.com](http://genderjusticeinearlychildhood.com) or contact [genderjusticeinearlychildhood@gmail.com](mailto:genderjusticeinearlychildhood@gmail.com).*

