



## **Intellectually challenged - do they need books?**

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We all know and agree that young people need books! This presentation will concentrate on books for young people with mental disabilities, because I think that most people understand that visually impaired children or children with hearing problems need books specially made for them. But do children with for instance Down Syndrome or Autism or multiple disabilities need books? I state that children with disabilities need specially adapted books because their disability stops them from reading, and that these children even more than others need the cultural stimulation, the colours, the warmth, the emotions, the adventures, joy and thrills that we find in books.

Young people with disabilities are above all, children, with children's needs, reactions and individual differences. They are of course as different from one another as anybody else with regard to intellectual power, age, experiences and interests. The nature and impact of their disabilities may vary, as well as the ability to cope with them. For some people it is totally unheard of that persons with mental disabilities can enjoy and actually benefit from books. The ability to enjoy books and reading utilises skills that are generally assumed to be lacking in mentally impaired people. Today we know that different disabilities demand different types of adapted books, and these books ought to have the same artistic qualities and be as plentiful as general children's books.

Specially adapted books can include fiction with a simple text and a simple story, non-fiction books or leaflets with clear photographs such as information about the society we live in, newspapers, books and non-book materials. The layout of the printed text has to obey certain rules about size, boldness, etc. Artistic qualities may sometimes have to give way to readability. Specially adapted books are in great demand. They need to be richly illustrated, which usually means that the production is very costly, and from a publisher's point of view their demand is rather limited.

Usually children develop language by playing with words, such as nonsense words, nursery rhymes and jingles. Basically children with mental disabilities do the

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same, but they find many words and concepts difficult to understand, to use and not the least, to read. Some have deficiency in visual perception ability, making it difficult to discriminate between shapes, which complicate picture reading and letter recognition skills. Their selective attention is often limited. They often focus on details; have trouble cutting out unimportant items, which makes it hard to grasp the central idea told by pictures and text. In addition, a short memory span and attention deficit makes it difficult to understand the sequence of events in a story. Delayed intellectual development limits abstract thinking and consequently, the ability to comprehend texts and pictures representing phenomena that the reader is unfamiliar with.

Many mentally disabled persons learn to read as young adults or even later. It's important that illustrations in books designated to young adults have sufficient references to the reader's own experiences and background, (e.g. familiar objects and situations). The overall important feature must be an age-relevant topic appealing to the curiosity, feelings and interests of the reader. One must treat the reader with respect and avoid books that are aimed at or showing smaller children and their activities when dealing with a teenager, even though his or her mental capacity may be that of a three year old.

Experiences from library services for mentally disabled people show that they can derive great pleasure from books. Like the rest of us they use books for many reasons, but pleasure, joy and excitement certainly are derived from them.

A tactile picture book or a cloth book can provide a different experience to that of paper picture books, and can be enjoyed by all children. Such books can encourage children with mental disabilities or multiple handicaps to play with the tactile elements and thus take an interest in books. Unfortunately tactile books are very expensive, as many such books need to be hand made.

A person who doesn't read must be given the opportunity to experience literature in a way that makes reading meaningful. Some children need a guide to get admission to the wonderful adventures that are hidden in books. The guidance consists of finding the right book to awaken the child's interest and inclination to read. Often they will make comments that are not related to the stories they hear. Perhaps the story has sparked off a flash of thought or an association of ideas – the overall effect is



communication and the use of language. The "interruption" is in fact reaction and participation – part of the teaching and learning process.

All literature, be it fiction or non-fiction, has the potential to reflect human experience, expand knowledge, promote understanding, and heighten sensitivity. Poetry, drama or fiction can mirror the real world as powerfully and truthfully as biography or exposition. Literature can be used to explain various aspects of life and how to act in different situations. Through reading or being read to, fantasy and empathy will be developed. It helps interpreting and understanding one's own life and others' predicament, promotes identification, dreams and reflection. Reading helps promote and encourage speaking by increasing the vocabulary. This is true for a "normal" child and even more so for children with disabilities. Through reading or being read to, words and concepts of abstract ideas will be picked up, thus helping the child pick up the language and make it his or her own, and finding a personal way of expressing him-/herself, which is fundamental to develop a personality.

