



## **New approaches to making children's books accessible and inclusive**

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**Abstract:** Booktrust is an independent charity dedicated to encouraging people of all ages and cultures to engage with books. The written word underpins all our activity and enables us to fulfil our vision of inspiring a lifelong love of books for all. Booktrust runs a range of book-related projects, campaigns, online resources and bookgifting programmes. The organisation is committed to equality and diversity, and strives to make all its services as accessible and inclusive as possible. This paper shares some key learning points from this work to date. It outlines a range of ways in which books and book projects can cater for children with additional needs, using practical examples from its bookgifting programmes, Bookstart, Booktime and Booked Up. The paper suggests the importance of addressing issues of accessibility and inclusivity from the outset, identifying where further interventions and targeted materials are required, ensuring in-house expertise, involving specialist organisations and consulting disabled service users. The paper explores the term 'additional needs' and what forms of support might be required to support such different needs, including sensory or physical impairments, cognitive difficulties, communication difficulties, and behavioural, emotional and social development issues. It considers the meaning of the terms 'accessible' and 'inclusive' within the context of book-related projects. The paper concludes by recognising the risks of making assumptions about a group or individual's needs. Support offered by book-related projects needs to be diverse, user-led, regularly updated and flexible. Finally, and crucially, children's books themselves need to be designed with the needs of all children in mind.

**Keywords:** books, inclusive, accessible, disability, additional needs.

### **Paper purpose**

"Children and young people with disabilities or special needs usually encounter many obstacles with regards to access to books or the pleasure of reading. We must find solutions to help combat these difficulties" (IBBY Congress website, 2010).

This paper aims to propose such solutions, focusing on practical and innovative ways in which book-related projects can – and should – include children with diverse needs. This paper is not intended to be academic in approach, it rather aims to share 'hands on' experiences of developing inclusive and accessible projects and services.

### **Booktrust**

Booktrust is a national organisation at the heart of the UK book world.

An independent charity, it exists to encourage people of all ages, cultures and backgrounds to discover and enjoy reading. Activity includes administering literary prizes (such as the Orange Prize for Fiction), running campaigns (such as Get London Reading), managing a calendar of promotions (such as National Children's Book Week), providing substantial online material, and delivering bookgifting programmes, such as Bookstart.



Booktrust takes an inclusive approach to all its activity, however, for the purposes of this paper, we focus primarily on our bookgifting programmes.

### **Bookgifting programmes**

Booktrust delivers a portfolio of bookgifting programmes, the first of which, Bookstart, was piloted in 1992. Bookstart aims to encourage parents/carers to enjoy sharing books with their children from a very early age, by providing a pack containing free baby books, booklists and advice. The pack is gifted by local library and health professionals across the UK, to children up to the age of three.

Following the success of Bookstart, Booktrust developed further bookgifting programmes. For example, Booktime offers a free book pack when children have started primary school (aged five) and Booked Up offers every eleven-year-old the chance to pick a book of their choice from a list of options after they start secondary school.

### **The Social Model of Disability**

Traditionally, disability has been seen in terms of something being ‘wrong’ with an individual. However Booktrust aims to work within the Social Model of Disability. This starts from the perspective that everyone is equal, and an individual who may happen to have some form of impairment is only ‘disabled’ if society does not provide what s/he needs to play a full and active role in the community.

The Social Model provides Booktrust with a framework for organisational activity and appropriate terminology. For example, the Social Model would generally condone the use of ‘disabled people’ over ‘people with disabilities’, as the former recognises that it is society which disables the individual.

### **Additional needs and the enjoyment of reading**

Booktrust often uses the term ‘additional needs’. The term is increasingly used in the UK, in lieu of phrases such as ‘special needs’.

Broad terms such as ‘additional needs’ group together what are in fact extremely diverse and varied forms of impairment. In order to help all audiences to enjoy books,



Booktrust has found it can be helpful to refer to the following four categories of disability and to consider the possible implications of each, in relation to books:

### **Sensory and/or physical impairments**

There are different types and levels of visual impairment, and different ways in which a visually impaired child may learn to read. A child may be able to read large or giant print, may read Braille, or may prefer audio options. Projects should therefore offer different alternatives. Deafness can also have a marked effect on reading. Letters represent the sounds of words, but a deaf child may lack experience of sound. Books can also help deaf children explore their other senses, for example through touch-and-feel books. Physical disability (such as impaired fine motor skills) can mean it may be helpful to seek out books which are easier for children to hold and turn the pages.

### **Cognitive or learning difficulties**

A child with a specific learning disability such as Dyslexia, or indeed a non-specific learning difficulty, is likely to have trouble ‘decoding’ words. It can be helpful to look at ways of supporting a written word or sentence with visual images, prompts, signs, symbols and audio options. A variety of approaches helps allow for difficulties with language development, visual perception and auditory discrimination. Children with Dyslexia often need direct instruction in the relationship between letter and sound, so combining the written word with audio can often help. Offering flexibility over colours, backgrounds, fonts and levels of contrast can help improve an individual’s ability to access material.

### **Communication and interaction difficulties**

Children may have problems with communication, including understanding, speaking and forming sounds. They may use non-verbal communication methods. Where children have difficulty identifying words, visual stimulus can be key, as can audio tools, to help in hearing the sounds within words. Children may be on the autistic spectrum, and may have difficulties in concentrating, motivational issues or problems decoding.



### **Behavioural, emotional and social development issues**

Children may be withdrawn and isolated or they may be demanding and disruptive, either of which can affect their ability to learn to read and to enjoy reading. Difficulty maintaining attention can also represent a substantial barrier to the enjoyment of books. Methods may need to be employed to help the child focus, and to avoid unnecessary distraction or visual clutter.

The above groupings represents just one way of considering different impairments. Such classification is by no means definitive but can provide a starting point in considering how diverse such additional needs may be and the possible impact on a child's enjoyment of books.

### **What do we mean by 'accessible'?**

For Booktrust, ensuring a project or publication is 'accessible' to different audiences means using language which is clear, concise and meaningful to the broadest possible audience, and avoiding slang or jargon. Material is presented in a clear way with high contrast between text and background. Text is not be printed over patterned backgrounds. Simple fonts are used as opposed to stylised or handwriting fonts. Where possible, materials are made available in alternative formats, such as large print, audio, British Sign Language and subtitles.

It is not enough to create an accessible service, if that service does not actually reach certain audiences. The parent of a disabled child may assume that services are inaccessible, may have too many other priorities or pressures on their time or may not have considered the value of sharing stories and rhymes. A pro-active approach to promotion is therefore key.

Finally, venues and events also need to be genuinely accessible to children with a diverse range of needs. This might include ensuring that a venue is wheelchair accessible or making hearing loops or sign language available.

### **What do we mean by 'inclusive'?**

Booktrust also aims to identify books which are 'inclusive', in that they include disabled characters naturally and positively.



Historically, disability has often played a negative role in books and storytelling. Disabled characters might be villains, their impairments representing a physical manifestation of their evil nature. Disability might be seen as a punishment for wrongdoings and the character might be miraculously ‘cured’ when they change their ways. Or they might be depicted as objects of pity, exacerbating the idea that disabled people are weak and sickly. Thus, there is the risk that disability is associated with one of these stereotyped extremes, and disability used as a form of shorthand to describe a person’s character.

Disabled characters need to be three-dimensional, and must appear both as protagonists but also in situations where the impairment is not referred to, forming a natural part of the landscape of books and storytelling.

### **Putting it all into practice**

This paper will now share some of our many key learning points, using specific examples from our bookgifting programmes.

### **Considering additional needs from the outset**

Booktrust has found value in aiming to make the ‘core’ content of any new project as accessible and inclusive as possible and including a range of different options for people to choose from. For example, in the case of Bookstart, the basic pack is designed to suit the vast majority of families. Books are selected with the widest range of needs in mind. Accompanying materials are easy to read, use accessible typefaces, often feature positive images and are available in different formats such as large print. The Booktime programme offers an online interactive storybook, accessible games and activities, signed and subtitled versions of the Booktime book and a signed and subtitled CD-Rom. Booked Up also offers a choice of books which cater for a very wide range of needs and abilities, including a picture book, a book for very low reading ages, and audio books. This approach dramatically reduces the risk of needing to rework projects and create ‘add-ons’ at a later date. It helps to ensure that such audiences are not treated differently but rather included naturally and cohesively in core activity. It also allows individuals the opportunity to choose the books (or services) which they feel suit their needs, as opposed to labelling such individuals with ‘special’ services.



### **Identifying need for targeted materials**

Where core activity has been made as accessible and inclusive as possible, but there are believed to be audiences who might still have difficulties accessing it, further support is developed. For example, in addition to the basic Bookstart pack, two further packs have been created – ‘Booktouch’ for blind or partially sighted children (containing touch-and-feel books, a CD of nursery rhymes, advice for parents and a booklist) and ‘Bookshine’ for deaf children (books featuring British Sign Language, a touch-and-feel book, guidance for parents, a booklist and a placemat featuring nursery rhymes with signs). Booktime books have been transcribed into interleaved Grade 1 Braille and adapted to include positive images of disability. Booked Up offers further options in addition to the core list, including books which might appeal to children with sensory impairments and books suited to children with multiple and complex needs.

### **Ensuring in-house expertise**

Booktrust has a designated disability consultant who works with the teams across all the bookgifting programmes, ensuring consistency and shared information. Training sessions help staff with some basic understanding of disability equality issues and keep them abreast of current terminology and legislation. Booktrust also shares this training material with local libraries to help ensure that families of disabled children are actively encouraged to continue using their services and that such services are fully accessible.

### **Drawing on external expertise**

Our disability consultant liaises continuously with appropriate partner organisations with specialist knowledge in the many different fields of disability. This ensures valuable input and guidance, user consultation opportunities, promotion to key audiences and ongoing feedback. For example, Booktrust works with specialists such as the Royal National Institute for the Blind and National Deaf Children’s Society and with local sensory impairment services to gift the packs to families of sensory-impaired children.



### **Consulting disabled people**

Booktrust works closely with the parents/carers of children with additional needs and encourages disabled writers and illustrators to enter the children's book industry.

### **Influencing the children's book industry**

Bookgifting programmes such as those detailed in this paper can go a long way towards supporting children with additional needs, however this is of little use if books which suit their needs simply do not exist.

For example, children with little or no sight will benefit from a tactile book. However, most touch-and-feel books are created for pre-school audiences, making any 'story' or text inappropriate for most older children. Likewise, many such books do not offer a suitable range of diverse textures and meaningful shapes for visually impaired readers.

Very few books are produced in Braille, meaning Braille-reading children are still left very much 'behind' their peers, especially since it can often be years before a popular current title is translated into Braille.

A third example is that of children who have a very low reading age and/or a specific reading disability. Thankfully this is an area of growth in UK publishing, with several publishers offering books printed on cream paper and using an accessible font suitable for those with reading difficulties. There are some excellent graphic books with powerful, well-written narratives but written in a simple, accessible style. However, many more such books are needed.

There are many other audiences (for example children with multiple and severe learning disabilities) whose needs are barely catered for at all by the UK children's book industry. This needs to change if we are to make children's books accessible to all.

Likewise, as stated previously, there are still very few children's books which present disability in a completely natural and positive way. Booktrust is therefore also working with writers, illustrators and publishers to help them rectify this, as many more are needed.

### **Conclusion**



It is hoped that some of Booktrust's learning points described in this paper may be helpful to other agencies.

'Disability' is not a simple definition but rather a collective description of a very diverse range of different impairments which can involve very different needs. Researching all the possible needs of one's target audience, involving specialist organisations, consulting potential users themselves and endeavouring to provide a range of options and alternatives can be helpful. Proactive promotion is also crucial.

Finally, children's books themselves need to continue to evolve to become more accessible and more inclusive. As those with an interest in helping children to enjoy books, it is our responsibility to help the children's book publishing industry to ensure that children's books genuinely reflect the needs of all children.

For more information about Booktrust's work in this field, or for examples of accessible and inclusive books, please contact Alexandra Strick ([alex.strick@booktrust.org.uk](mailto:alex.strick@booktrust.org.uk) or [alex@strick.co.uk](mailto:alex@strick.co.uk)).



