

What to look for—and avoid—in picture books with older characters
Advice for parents, grandparents, teachers, librarians and writers
from A is for Aging, B is for Books

The way we feel about growing older is shaped in childhood by the attitudes of adults and the media. Children quickly take in negative attitudes and begin stereotyping older people—believing they’re all the same. This stereotyping, and then discrimination on the basis of age is *ageism*. Ageism affects people’s health, wellbeing and longevity.

“Children today are expected to live longer than any other generation of Americans. Let’s rise to the challenge of...combating ageism—it benefits everyone.” Sandra L. McGuire RN, Ed.D.

Picture books can be an important tool in counteracting ageism—in both children and adults.

First, look to avoid:

- Stories that equate disease, decline, dementia or death with aging.
- Illustrations that make older characters look freaky or foolish.
- The much too common negative stereotypes of witchy, grumpy, lonely, sad and forgetful.
- Characters portrayed as generically “old”—conflating multiple generations.

Search out picture books that:

- Acknowledge abilities, interests and talents that *increase* with age and experience.
- Show later life as a time of happiness, satisfaction and growth. (Remember the U-shaped curve of greater happiness in early and later life.)
- Portray inter-generational relationships in which the child benefits from knowing the older adult.
- Share interesting life experiences and accomplishments in later life stages.
- Show older characters empowered to affect their own lives and those of others.

Talk about the text and images around aging and older adults that children encounter in picture books:

- Point out stereotypes—both negative and positive (of *all* ages).
- Remind kids that everyone is different no matter their age. (In fact, older adults are *more* different from each other than children—because of their many life experiences.)

Please remember these important truths:

“Students often believe that what they read in books is true and right...a book may be sensitive and caring, may provide a wonderful lesson, and may be very enjoyable and still contain ageism or stereotyping.” (Barbara M. Friedman, author *Connecting Generations*)

Much of what we think we *know* about aging and older adults is myth. We *all* have a responsibility to look beyond age stereotypes. Writers note—it’s far too easy to empower a child protagonist by reaching for problems with older characters based on myths.

The A is for Aging, B is for Books site is full of examples of picture books that depict aging in all its complexity, beauty and diversity.