

How to use picture books to counter ageism in children
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.

Let’s nip ageism in the bud. Picture books are an important tool.

Search out picture books that:

- Acknowledge abilities, interests and talents that *increase* with age and experience.
- Actually discuss the aging process over a *lifetime* in accurate and positive ways. (A rarity.)
- 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.)

Be aware:

- Aging is normal, but many picture books equate it with disease, decline, dementia or death.
- Illustrations that make older characters look freaky or foolish reinforce ageism.
- Many picture books contain age stereotypes like witchy, grumpy, lonely, sad, sick & forgetful.
- Even heartwarming, empathetic picture books can be entirely based on age stereotypes.

“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 take note—it’s far too easy to empower a child protagonist by reaching for problems with older characters based on aging myths or stereotypes.

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.