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Citation	McGrail, E., & Rieger, A. (2013). Increasing Disability Awareness through Comics Literature, <i>Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education</i> , 3 (1). https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/ejie/vol3/iss1/5/
Download date	2026-04-18 00:21:34
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/11020

INCREASING DISABILITY AWARENESS THROUGH COMICS

Increasing Disability Awareness through Comics Literature

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Abstract

When faced with negative attitudes and experiences in communication and interaction in general education classrooms, students with disabilities can exhibit high levels of stress and frustration or even depression, low self-esteem and impaired self-acceptance. These undesirable and destructive feelings, in turn, may affect these students' social and cognitive development skills and well-being, as well as their academic performance in such environments. The recent scholarship on empathy supports the effectiveness of comics for identifying and fighting negative and stereotypical attitudes towards those with disabilities. This article discusses strategies for educating students about disability and disability issues with the help of comics literature.

Key Words: disability awareness, comics literature, teacher preparation, inclusion

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The Need for Disability Awareness Activities in the Classrooms

As a growing number of children and youth with disabilities are integrated into general education classrooms and curricula under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, -- the National Center for Education Statistics (The Conditions of Education, 2010) reported an increase from 32 percent to 57 percent in 2007-08 in comparison to 1989-90, -- it is critical for teachers to create in their classrooms multiple opportunities for students with and without disabilities to academically and socially interact with one another and to have access to meaningful and reciprocal friendships that will promote inclusive behaviors in the classrooms and communities (Norman, 2007).

Even though learners with disabilities desire to fit in and be accepted in school environments, they experience daily social rejection and struggle to make and maintain friendships with students in general education classes (Prunty, Dupont, & McDaid, 2012).

Furthermore, there is often confusion among students without disabilities about disabilities and the learning capabilities of children with disabilities. A limited knowledge of disabilities and disability issues (Altieri, 2008) leads to feelings of discomfort, awkwardness (Litvack, Ritchie, & Shore, 2011), or even fear by peers without disabilities around their classmates with disabilities (Andrews, 1998; Kolucki & Duncan, 1994). It also results in stereotypes and misperceptions of individuals with disabilities, as well as of their condition(s) and their lives (Smith & Sapon-Shevin, 2008-2009).

When faced with such negative attitudes and experiences in communication and interaction in general education classrooms, students with disabilities can exhibit high levels of stress and frustration or even depression, low self-esteem and impaired self-acceptance (Humphrey, 2008; Soulis & Floridis, 2010). These undesirable and destructive feelings, in turn,

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may affect these students' social and cognitive development skills and well-being, as well as their academic performance in such environments (Prunty, Dupont, & McDaid, 2012; Humphrey, 2008).

Comics Literature, Children, and Disability

One approach to support the development of positive attitudes towards individuals with disabilities is through the use of comics (Norton, 2003). Children often choose comics literature over traditional texts, because comic-based texts offer visuals, drawings, and other art along with words and dialogue, all of which make these texts “not only something one reads but something one *sees* as well, like reading and watching a movie at the same time” (Weiner, 2004, p. 115).

Beyond motivating students to read, comics literature offers other benefits. Children connect with characters in cartoons, comic books, comic strips, and more recently graphic novels, both inside and outside school (Norton, 2003). In recent scholarship on empathy, comics have been found to be particularly effective in communicating depictions of disabilities (Birge, 2010; Seidler 2011, November, Squire, 2008) in ways that represent the complex emotional, physical, and social aspects of disability that “texts alone cannot, such as the crucial importance of embodiment in the lived experiences of people with disabilities” (Birge, 2010, para. 2). In her analysis of two comics, *Circling Normal* (Montague-Reyes, 2007) and *the Ride Together* (Karasik & Karasik, 2004), Birge (2010) explored specific embodiment and alternative forms of communication used by their authors to tell intense visual and emotional stories about characters with disability and the perspectives of family members close to them, as they learned about the main character Seth's diagnosis of autism. Birge (2010) observed that embodiment and other forms of communication within these comics allowed the reader to experience and relate to the emotional tension associated with learning about Seth's autism, and his family members'

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responses to this diagnosis. The situation resulted in a roller coaster of emotion and tension, despair, anger, frustration and fear for them. The researcher maintained that the format and other features of the comic strips reflected the lived experience of the disability by the characters with autism.

Squier (2008), who studied disability representations in the comic books *the Ride Together* (Karasik & Karasik, 2004) and *Epileptic* (B., 2005), argued that “portraying embodiment through gesture, posture, and design choice; through choice of panel, frame and character; and through the conventions of character creation” enabled the reader to experience “how disability feels and what an impairment means socially for the disabled person and his family members” (p.4).

The vividness of comics helps convey impactful messages, especially with strong storytelling. When educators select comics with strong pro-social messages, the effect may be similarly strong. Of course, in an inclusive classroom, the comics chosen for students without disabilities would likely be the same as those chosen for students with disabilities. In such a case, it would be important for those with a disability to “see themselves” in the portrayals in the comics literature. Just as earlier classrooms struggled with finding a common literature to be read by students of different racial backgrounds (e.g. Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun*), so today’s comics need to be beneficial both to students with and without disabilities.

Reading Comics Literature in the Classroom

In this article, we borrow the concept of bibliotherapy from Pardeck (2005), an approach to reading literature that “can promote the growth and development of children in the area of cultural diversity and their understanding of disability” (p.79). The approach involves “reading

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the literature, or listening to it being read aloud, and then participating in a discussion led by a facilitator” (Gavigan & Kurtts, 2011, p.13).The method recommended in this work also focuses on conversations about disability and disability issues as a way to promote understanding and social acceptance. However, rather than applying this to any genre, this work explores comics literature that includes characters with a disability. Such an approach can be introduced at different points in the curriculum. One possibility is to present this topic to students at the beginning of the academic year when the teacher attempts to attend to the psychological climate and the physical environment in the classroom. This is the time and space for the teacher and the students together to define guidelines for classroom community behavior. These expectations will support a community of learners who get to know and appreciate, respect, and support each member’s presence and his or her unique condition and contribution to the learning community.

These conversations can take place in any classroom, elementary or secondary, and should use literature that is age- and developmentally appropriate. Utilizing comics literature for conversations in support of a classroom climate of acceptance and appreciation will in turn encourage positive relationships, friendships, and interactions between students with and without disabilities. Such climate will influence positively academic achievement as well (Flook, Repetti, & Ullman, 2005).

Alternatively, teachers may choose to embed such conversations in the larger topics within the curriculum they teach in middle and high school language arts and social studies classrooms. This can include themes such as *Diversity and Sameness; Human Rights and Social Justice, Human Relationships and Forces that Foster/Disrupt Them*. School counselors, librarians, and other paraprofessionals may choose to weave comics literature into advising activities and extracurricular sessions, centering on topics such as interpersonal communication

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and intergroup cooperation, social acceptance and inclusion, or conflict resolution in both individual and group settings. Examples of ways to explore comics literature using the approach promoted in this work follow. The activities featured are organized around themes associated with disability and disability issues. A list of children's and young adolescent comic books and educator resources to teach about various disabilities and disability issues is provided in Table 1.

Insert here Table 1

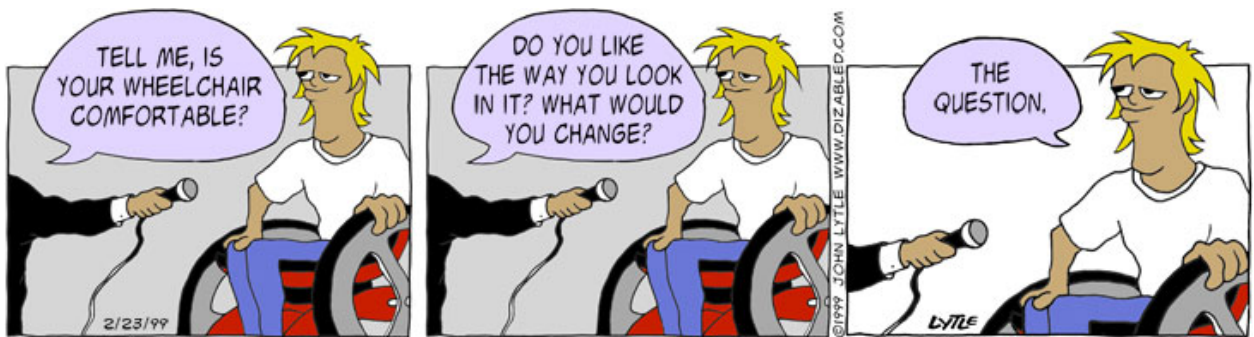
Deconstructing Stereotypical Images of Individuals with Disabilities

Stereotypical perceptions of people with disabilities among children and youth are a reproduction of the images that are part of collective reality, the world, and culture (Titchkosky, 2009) that exist at school and home, in the classroom and within the society at large. Teachers can design activities that will help students to examine values and social norms about individuals with disabilities using comics literature. Critical to this analysis is a guided discussion of why some images are stereotypical and unfair to those with disabilities (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2010). Though it may not be easy to define concepts such as stereotype or prejudice, it is essential that teachers define these concepts for students before they ask their students to think critically about stereotypical and prejudicial incidences in the comics literature. To facilitate this conversation, teachers may ask students to answer this question, "Who am I as an American?", and to provide five answers to this question, beginning each answer with "I am_____." Then the teacher can use these prompts to help students define the concepts of stereotype and prejudice: Are all American children _____? (Select two or three "I am(s)" from students). Is it a true statement? Is it a fair statement? How does such a statement make the person or group of people feel, and why? [Prompts adapted from Ehrlich (n.d.)]. Using such prompts will help to clarify

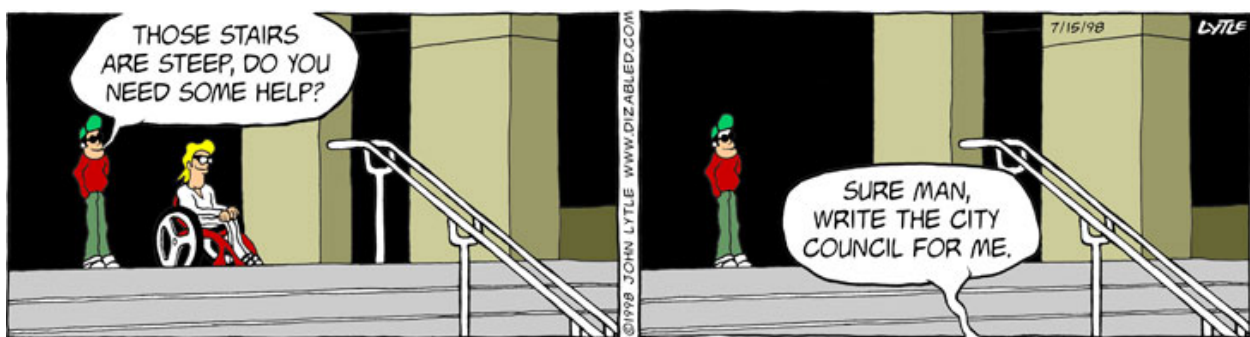
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that such broad statements may be stereotypes, because they purport to make everyone in the group look the same, think the same, and do the same things.

Another point that teachers will want to make is that when such statements present individuals or members of certain groups of people in unfair or distorted ways, they hurt people's feelings, and thus such statements may be examples of prejudice. Next, teachers may provide examples of the comics from the web comic *dizABLED* (<http://www.dizabled.com>) by John and Claire Lytle and have their students view them. This comic series was selected, because it “questions stereotypical views of the disability community in a clear, accessible, and humorous way” (Seidler 2011, November, p. 20).



<http://dizabled.com/comics/small-talk-interview/>



<http://dizabled.com/comics/stairs/>

After viewing the comic strips teachers may want to invite their students to discuss and critique each of the strips by answering these prompts adapted from Derman-Sparks (1989):

What is the stereotype about characters with disabilities that you viewed?

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Why is the image stereotypical and unfair?

How would the image make someone with a disability feel, and why?

Bringing Change in Attitude and Conduct

Students need to be taught not only how to identify stereotypes and prejudice, but also how to stand up for themselves and others against prejudicial and stereotypical behaviors. Only then can they help build full-fledged inclusive classrooms and communities. Role play is an ideal activity that can aid students in developing the necessary social and communication skills for assuming such activist roles. Role play will also help students muster the courage to confront those who hold negative attitudes towards individuals with a disability. The role play activity we recommend is *Disability Awareness: Do It Right Comedy Show*. The activity asks students to enact the stereotyping cartoon scenario, then to discuss it with the audience and to solicit appropriate behaviors, and then again to perform the same scenario, but this time doing it right. The book, *Disability Etiquette: Tips on Interacting with People with Disabilities* (2008) provides numerous examples of cartoon scenarios that teachers can adapt for this role play activity.

Alternatively, teachers can appoint students to create their own cartoon strips or graphic novels, that is, “longer comic books” (Schwarz, 2010, Summer, p. 71) in which they will take a stand on some stereotypical portrayals of those with disabilities. In terms of the content, teachers can provide students with previously generated lists of stereotypes of people with disabilities from the literature, such as the list identified below or make their own lists with other types of stereotypes about people with disabilities to scaffold this experience for their students.

Ten main stereotypes of people with disabilities include:

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1. Pitiable and pathetic; sweet and innocent; a miracle cure
2. Victim or an object of violence
3. Sinister or evil
4. Atmosphere – curios or exotica in ‘freak shows’, and in comics, horror movies and science fiction
5. ‘Super-crip’/ triumph over tragedy/noble warrior
6. Laughable or the butt of jokes
7. Having a chip on their shoulder/ aggressive avenger
8. A burden/ outcast
9. Non-sexual or incapable of a worthwhile relationship
10. Incapable of fully participating in everyday life (*Stereotypes*, 2007, February 27)

In terms of the production process, teachers can adopt *The Comic Book Project* format, which can be accessed at <http://comicbookproject.org/>. This project promotes the development of humor, creativity, literacy, and social issues awareness. Since negative attitudes towards disability are socially constructed and a barrier to a full inclusion of those with disabilities in society (Biklen, 1987; Bogdan & Biklen, 1977), the aforementioned comic book project’s focus on social issues fits well our purpose too, which is to increase disability awareness and to promote positive attitudes toward disability among children with and without disability. Additionally, combining visual arts and written literacy are other built-in advantages that may be helpful to both struggling learners and gifted students. *The Comic Book Project* we reference here is hosted by the Center for Educational Pathways and directed by Dr. Michael Bitz (<http://www.meetmeatthecorner.org/episodes/the-comic-book-project-interview-with-michael-bitz>). To scaffold disability awareness discussions and the design of the comic books in the

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classroom, we provide teachers with an adapted version of the steps that were developed by the Center for Educational Pathways (see Table 2)

Teachers should invite the families for the Comic Books Show and Tell and make arrangements for having their students' mini-comic books published and distributed within and outside their school community in order to fight against stereotyping individuals with disabilities, and in this way to increase disability awareness among children and the general public.

Evaluation

Student awareness and sensitivity to disability and disability issues, their perceptions of prejudice and negative stereotypes, and the effectiveness of their communication and interaction with individuals with disability can be evaluated using the checklist provided in Table 3. This checklist also allows assessing humor use around and with individuals with disabilities. The checklist encourages self-assessment, peer-assessment, and teacher-assessment, and is meant to provide feedback and material for conversation about disability and disability issues in the classroom. We do not intend for it to be used to grade students on their dispositions and knowledge concerning disability issues. We recommend that teachers use the checklist with middle and high school students before and after engaging students in activities that we discuss in this article. With younger children, teachers might administer prompts from the checklist in Table 4 in oral or written form before and after the disability awareness activity. This will allow tracking and identifying the areas of growth as well. Insert Here Tables 3 and 4 Disability Awareness Checklists

Conclusion

Comics literature analysis is an excellent strategy for educating students about disability and disability issues that individuals with disability face in their lives daily. Such critical

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explorations also encourage students to examine and to alter, when necessary, their own attitudes and interaction with individuals with disabilities. In addition, the activities discussed in this article foster advocacy for students with disabilities among peers without disabilities, leading to developing caring, respectful, and inclusive communities within, and ultimately beyond the classroom. For these reasons, we believe activities centered on comics literature deserve more attention from teachers, teacher educators, school counselors, and parents of students with and without disabilities.

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Table 1

Comics literature and Resources about Disability and Disability Issues

<i>Book/ Cartoon/Comics</i>	<i>Disability/ Disability Issues</i>	<i>Other Resources</i>
<p><i>Out of this World # 3</i>(2004) (Action comics) by Jon Filitti; Publisher Youthlight.</p> <p>Chilman-Blair, K., & Taddeo, J. (2010). <i>What's up with Astra? Medikidz explain ADHD</i>. London, UK: Medikidz.</p>	ADHD	<p>Hughes, L., Cooper, P. (2007). <i>Understanding and supporting children with ADHD: Strategies for teachers, parents, and other professionals</i>. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Note: The book explores cases of students with ADHD and offers strategies to support children with ADHD and ways to deal with problem behavior.</p>
<p>Sumerak, M. (2006). <i>Teen Titans: Introducing Sara Hunter</i>. DC Comics & Sparktop. Online Preview: http://www.sparktop.org/sparkcomics/home.html</p>	Dyslexia, Learning Disabilities	<p>Berninger, V., W., & Wolf, B. J. (2009). <i>Teaching students with dyslexia and dysgraphia: Lessons from teaching and science</i>. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.</p> <p>Brockvich-Ellis, E. (Actor), Connor, D. J. (Actor), & Raymond, S. (Director). (2011). [Documentary DVD]. Los Angeles, CA: HBO Studio. Note: The video brings experiences and voices of individuals with dyslexia and provides a scientific explanation of dyslexia.</p>
<p>Owens, L.L. (2006). <i>The hunchback of Notre Dame</i>. [Graphic novel]: Stone Arch Books.</p>	Physical Disability	<p><i>Disability etiquette: Tips on interacting with people with disabilities</i>. (2008). Jackson Heights, NY: United Spinal Association. Retrieved from http://www.unitedspinal.org/pdf/Disability Etiquette.pdf Note: The guide offers strategies for effective communication and interpersonal relationships.</p>
<i>Book/ Cartoon/Comics</i>	<i>Disability/ Disability Issues</i>	<i>Other Resources</i>

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<p>Brown, D. (2005). <i>Epileptic</i>. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.</p>	<p>Brain Disorder</p>	<p>Understanding seizures and epilepsy. [DVD]. (2003). Epilepsy Foundation. Note: The video explains the condition in simple language, shows how to identify the symptoms and what to do when they occur.</p>
<p>Sharad D. (2011). <i>Silver Scorpion</i> [Graphic Novel]. Liquid Comics. Online Preview: http://www.magcloud.com/browse/issue/178024</p> <p>Carey, M., Liew, S., & Hampel, M. (2007). <i>Re-Gifters</i>. DC/Minx. New York: DC Comics.</p>	<p>Physical Disability</p>	<p>Barg, C.J, Armstrong, B.D., Hetz, S. P., & Latimer, A. E. (2010): Physical disability, stigma, and physical activity in children, <i>International Journal of Disability, Development and Education</i>, 57(4), 371-382. Note: The article recommends promoting images of children with a disability involved in physical activity to reduce the stigma that individuals without disabilities have towards children with a physical disability.</p>
<p>Kouno, F. (2007). <i>Town of Evening Calm</i>. San Francisco, CA: Last Gasp.</p>	<p>Health Impairment due to exposure to radiation</p>	<p>Explaining destructive effects of atomic bomb radiation. [Atomic Bomb Museum Record]. Retrieved from http://atomicbombmuseum.org/3_health.shtml</p> <p>Nuclear physics, past, present, and future. [ThinkQuest Project by Students for Students]. Retrieved from http://library.thinkquest.org/3471/index.html</p>

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Table 2 *Steps for Creating Mini-Comic Books*

Adopted from *The Comic Book Project* (<http://comicbookproject.org/>)

Steps	Directions
<i>Step 1: Getting Started</i>	Identify one (or two stereotypes) of individuals with disabilities and design a mini comic-book around the issues the stereotype leads to.
<i>Step 2: Brainstorming Ideas for and Writing the Draft of the Mini-Comic Book</i>	Brainstorm the plot, identify and sketch characters, and draft the dialogue for your mini-comic book. Use the following web resources to access blank comic book panels or comic strip layouts: the <i>Comic Creator</i> at http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/games-tools/comic-creator-a-30237.html ; <i>Comic Strip Templates, Printables</i> and <i>Comic Strip Layouts</i> http://www.donnayoung.org/art/comics.htm , to help organize your ideas and prepare a draft of your mini-comic book. Review and proof-read the draft of your mini-comic book for accuracy and grammar.
<i>Step 3: Completing the Mini-Comic Book</i>	Finalize your work on your mini-comic book. That is, put final touches to your drawings of the characters, color the backgrounds, and re-write the dialogue, if necessary. Design a cover for the mini-comic book and provide a ‘catchy’ title.
<i>Step 4: Displaying the Work</i>	Display and share your mini-comic book with your class peers during the <i>Comic Books Show and Tell</i> . Be ready to explain what you have learned about stereotypes about individuals with disabilities and how to reduce such negative attitudes.

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Table 3

Disability Awareness Checklist

Check with an X the characteristics that are **the most** typical of you or of the person that you evaluate. Be ready to justify your evaluation (provide examples, illustration, facts).

Category/Characteristics	I am... (Checked by You)	He/She is... (Checked by Peer)	He/She is... (Checked by the Teacher)
Disability Knowledge/Awareness			
Exposed to information about various disabilities			
Familiar with characteristics about various disabilities			
Aware of challenges associated with various disabilities			
Aware of the access issues associated with various disabilities			
Evidence (examples, illustration, facts):			
Perception and Interaction			
Not awkward around people with disability			
Aware of the real person beneath the disability			
Usually mindful of interests of people with disabilities			
Eager to study & play with people with disabilities			
Effective in communication with people with disabilities			
Evidence (examples, illustration, facts):			
Humor Appreciation			
Used to laughing with people with disabilities			
Used to sharing humor with people with disabilities			
Used to sharing humorous adventures with people with disabilities			
Evidence (examples, illustration, facts):			
Inclusion and Agency			
Respectful of the people with disabilities			
Respectful of personal space of the people with disabilities			
Willing to challenge negative images of the people with disabilities			
Willing to challenge negative language against people with disabilities			
Eager to stand up for the people with disabilities			
Evidence (examples, illustration, facts):			

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Table 4

Disability Awareness Checklist for Young Children

Students should respond “Yes” or “No” to the prompts below.

Disability Knowledge/Awareness

Kids who are blind can go swimming or dancing.

Kids who have autism have difficulty with talking to other kids or transitioning to new places.

Kids with learning disabilities have difficulty with learning to read, write, or do math.

Kids who have physical disabilities may need help with accessing buildings or using equipment or other products.

Perception and Interaction

Kids with disabilities have interests, abilities, and talents like everyone else.

Kids with disabilities are fun to study and play with.

Kids with disabilities make great friends.

Humor Appreciation

Kids with disabilities like to have fun.

Kids with disabilities are good at making up funny stories.

Kids with disabilities and I have a lot of fun together.

Inclusion and Agency

I like to play and study with kids with disabilities.

I am kind to kids with disabilities.

I am respectful of kids with disabilities.

I am mindful of the personal space of kids with disabilities.

I stand up for friends with disabilities when other kids tease or make fun of them.

I stand up for friends with disabilities when other kids punch them.
