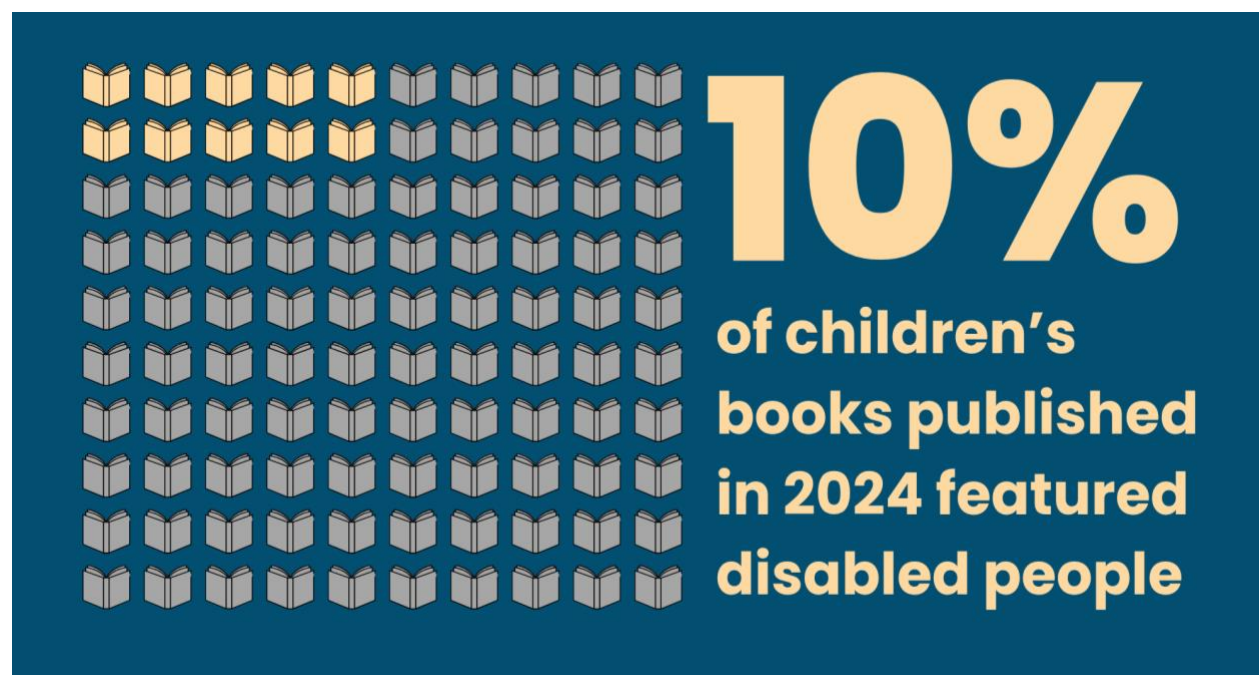


Encouraging numbers, narrow range: The Reflecting Disability study shows that 10% of children's books include disabled characters, but only a narrow range of conditions are represented.

Reflecting Disability announces the long-awaited results of its study of the representation of disabled people in children's books showing that **10% of children's books feature disabled people in some way.**

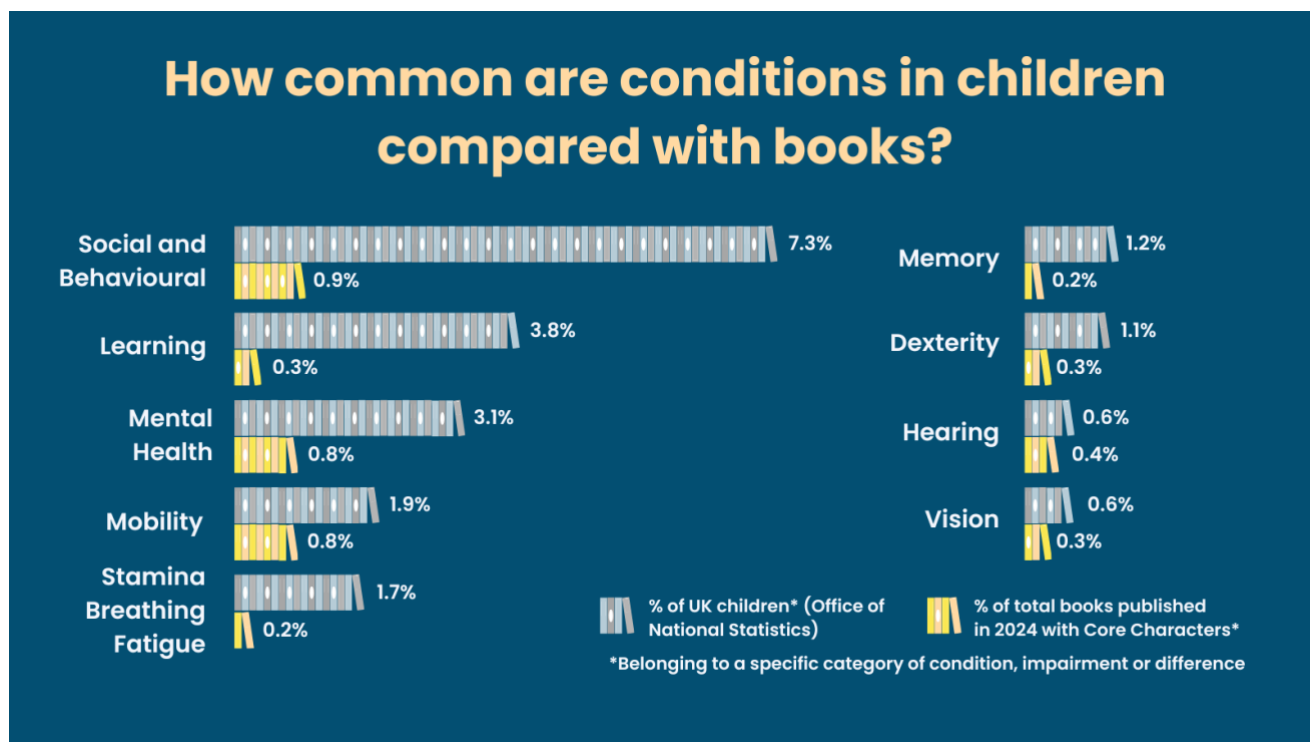
This study was funded by Arts Council England, and analysis was carried out by The Reading Agency. It is the first project of its kind to offer a comprehensive and robust exploration of the extent and quality of disabled characters in picture books, fiction and non-fiction across a full year (2024) of UK children's publishing for 3–11-year-olds.



Representation: What we found

With 90% of children's books not yet appearing to feature disabled people in any way, the findings highlight valuable opportunities for publishers and creators to build on the promising initial picture.

The study found that books rarely reflected the specific conditions, impairments and differences¹ that children most commonly experience (social/behavioural, mental health and learning/learning disabilities). Books depicted characters with mobility conditions (for example, wheelchair users), deaf characters and those with vision impairments more often but usually placed them in the background.



¹ We use 'conditions, impairments and differences' or 'conditions' rather than 'disabilities'. This reflects the social model of disability: the impairment, condition or difference belongs to the person, but disability is created by societal barriers.

How central are disabled characters with the most common conditions?



The Reflecting Disability team also noticed that many representations of disabled people and the equipment they use lacked accuracy and/or consistency. In many cases, small, simple changes would have made a huge difference to authenticity.

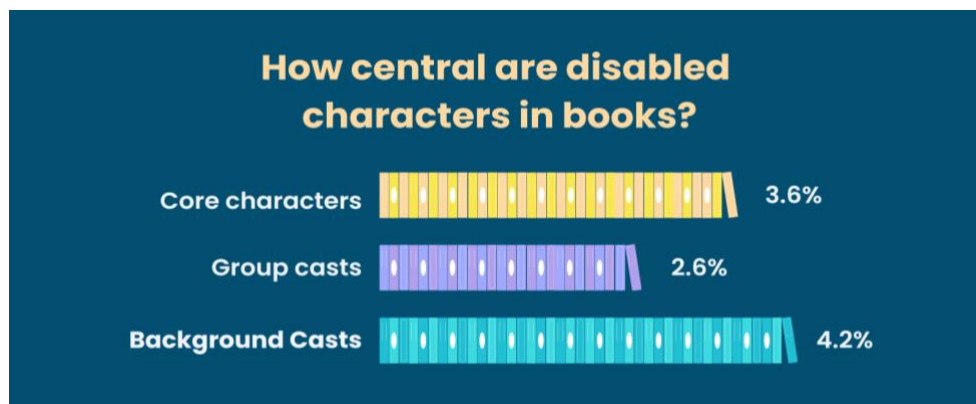
This points to a broader observation from our review. Representation is only part of the picture. How someone actually navigates the world day to day matters just as much. Publishers and creators who understand context add a layer of accuracy that representation alone misses.

In summary, publishers and creators have real opportunities to broaden the range and deepen the authenticity of representation.

The forthcoming Reflecting Disability toolkit will offer practical advice on how to do just this.

Key figures:

- There were 4009 children's picture books, fiction and non-fiction books for 3–11-year-olds published in 2024.
- Of these, 398 feature a disabled character in some way.
- This indicates that 10% of the children's picture books, fiction and non-fiction published in 2024 feature disabled characters.
- This suggests that 90% (over 3500) did not feature any disabled people.
- 3.6% included at least one disabled person as a core character² (This equates to 145 books).
- 2.6% featured a group cast including disabled characters (103 books)³.
- 4.2% only featured disabled people in the background (167 books).



² In the study, core characters included those who were sole or joint leads, secondary characters, antagonists, and prominent background characters (those appearing at various points throughout the book and who were connected to the main character in some way).

³ Some of these books may also be counted in the core-character figure above.

Accessibility

The study also analysed potential barriers to reading across the list of titles, including inaccessible design and layout, hard to read text and language that makes the book unnecessarily hard to understand.

- **67% of books reviewed had at least one barrier to reading.**
 - 57% had occasional barriers to reading
 - 18% featured consistent barriers

This is a significant gap that leaves many disabled people, including children and the adults reading to them, struggling to access books that reflect their own experiences.

The bigger picture

Of 4009 books published in 2024 for 3–11-year-olds, 398 (10%) included some form or representation of disabled people, across core characters, group casts and background characters. This seems encouraging given that 12% of children (1 in 8) and 25% of the population (1 in 4) in the UK is disabled according to national statistics⁴.

However, this 10% figure reflects the number of books published, not the total number of characters in those books. It does not mean 10% of characters in children's books are disabled.

It's also important to remember that this is a snapshot of books published in one year, not all the books that are readily available to children in libraries, bookshops and schools.

⁴ The Family Resources Survey 2024/25

This means that the overall proportion of disabled characters that children are likely to come across when engaging with books, is much smaller – and smaller still for characters with a prominent role.

Of the 398 books, 167 (42%) featured disabled characters only in the background, this equates to more than 2 in 5. These fleeting appearances leave little room for nuanced or fully rounded characters, limiting the opportunity to reflect children's real-life experiences of disability.

Voice and agency of disabled characters

Overall, just under half of the books in the sample (46%) featured at least one disabled character who was positioned as actively influencing what happens. This equates to 4.6% of all children's books published in 2024.

Core disabled characters often have an active influence.

Out of 183 core disabled characters identified in children's books:

- 57% consistently impacted what happened in the book through their actions, words or ideas.
- 32% of core characters sometimes influenced what happened but at other times took a passive role.
- Only 9% of core disabled characters were passive, with little or no influence over what happened in the story.

This is an encouraging picture that challenges longstanding tropes of disabled people as passive or dependent, suggesting a positive shift towards more active and empowered representation.

Moving forwards

Publishers and creators have clearly focused on including disabled people in children's books in recent years, but these headlines shouldn't make the industry complacent. As the data shows, there's a clear need to build on the quantity of representation but also the range and quality.

Reflecting Disability will launch a toolkit later this year which will provide in-depth analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data and, most importantly, practical guidance to support publishers and creators.

"We want to encourage book publishers and creators to level up, not down, the numbers of portrayals of different disabled people. We urge you to continue to portray many more disabled people, carefully and authentically. We still need to see more wheelchair users and people with hearing devices, but we also encourage you to increase the range of disabled characters, so that children see themselves, their families and their communities reflected in the books they read."

June Eaton, Steering Group

The Steering Group also stress that while authenticity is vital, the pursuit of "perfect" portrayals shouldn't deter book creators from including disabled characters. "Good enough" portrayals should be celebrated as a positive step in the right direction.

We have designed the toolkit to help publishers, editors, authors and illustrators to make positive changes and additions to their books. To stimulate, not stifle, creativity and imagination. Reflecting Disability does not endorse either censoring or prescribing content.

Background information

Our sample and their position in the market:

We used multiple ways to contact children's publishers, with repeated approaches to invite them to register for the study and submit all eligible books for 3–11-year-olds. Publishers registered with the study published 2,929 books between them. This is 73% of the 4,009 titles eligible for consideration in the study in 2024.

Publishers with the highest share of the market were all part of the study. The biggest eight children's publishers in 2024 had a 63.2% share of the TCM (Total Consumer Market). The top 20 children's publishers were responsible for 84.5% of their sector in 2024 (the year of the study). The top 15 of these were all registered and submitted titles (excluding CGP whose titles wouldn't have been eligible for the study).

Robust methodology

Facilitated by Beth Cox and Alexandra Strick, Reflecting Disability was developed through a disabled-led process. It was guided by a Steering Group of authors, illustrators and experts and alongside advice and guidance from The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) who have carried out the Reflecting Realities research since 2017. The Steering Group researched and agreed category labels to describe d/Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent characters in children's books, with the aim of allowing comparative analysis against UK population statistics. The team then rigorously tested and refined the framework, with input from publishers.

A fully trained and supported team of publishing students from Oxford Brookes University, Bath Spa University and the University of Derby then analysed these books using the framework.

The Reading Agency cleaned and processed the review data and standardised the variables for cross-analysis. The Reading Agency aligned the disability categories created by the Steering Group with the categories listed in the Office of National Statistics' [Impairment Harmonised Standard](#). This let them compare representation in the book sample directly against disabled children in the population. The Reading Agency also carried out further analysis to identify trends and patterns and create population-wide estimates.

The resulting data and exploration shows how disabled people are represented in UK children's books published in one full year, helping publishers and creators improve representation over time.

About Arts Council England

Arts Council England is the national development agency for creativity and culture. Between 2023 and 2026 we will have invested over £467 million of public money from Government, alongside an estimated £250 million each year from The National Lottery, to support individual practitioners, arts organisations, museums and libraries, and to help ensure that people in every part of the country have access to culture and creativity in the places where they live. Visit [our website](#) to learn more about our work.