

Reflecting Disability Findings:

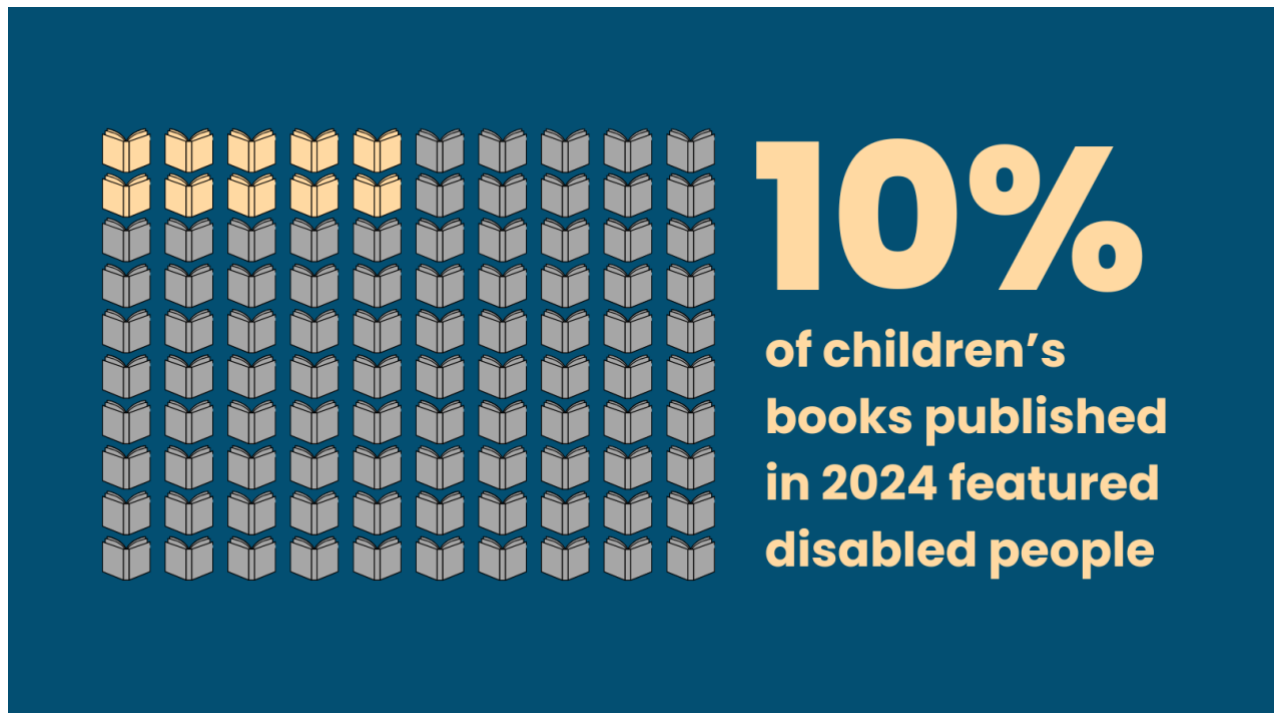
- **10% of children's books include disabled characters.**
- **Only a narrow range of conditions are represented in books.**

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

The study was funded by Arts Council England. Analysis was carried out by The Reading Agency.

This is the first project looking at how often and how well disabled people are represented in UK children's books for 3–11-year-olds.

The study looked at picture books, fiction and non-fiction published in the UK in 2024.

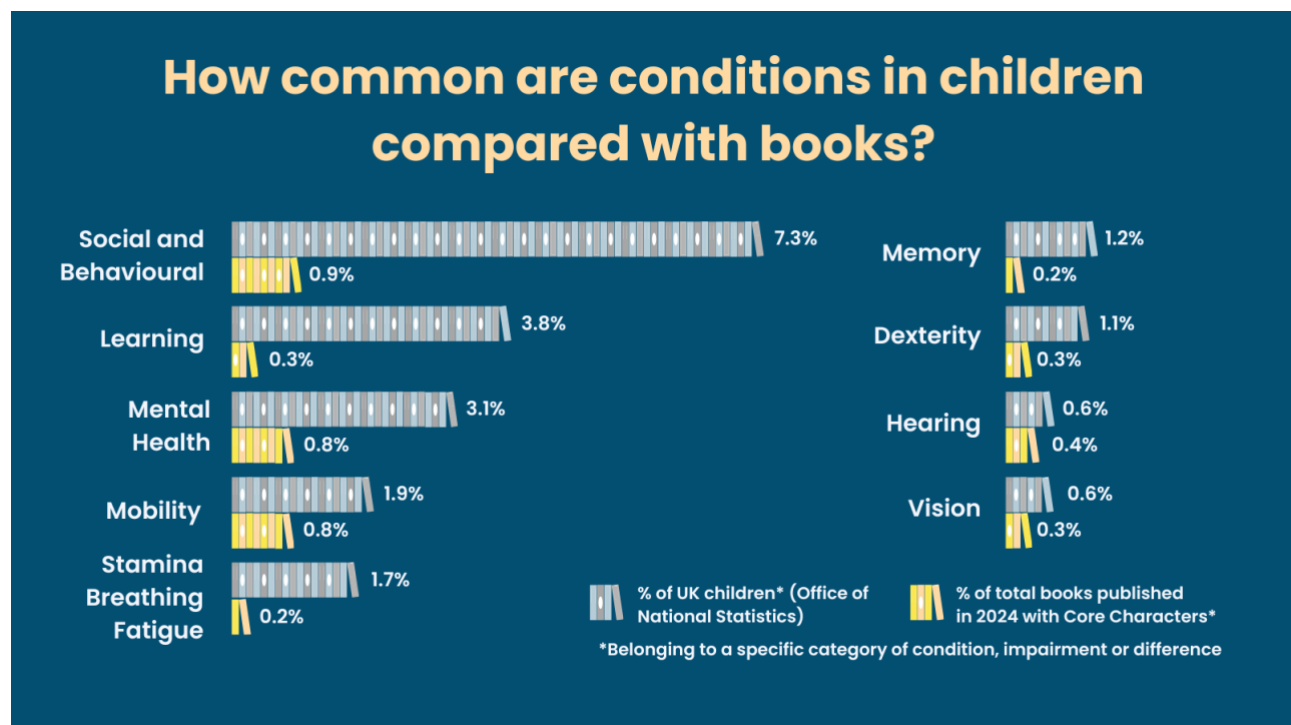


Representation: What we found

90% of children's books do not yet feature disabled people in any way.

This means there are valuable opportunities for publishers and creators to build on the current representation.

- The conditions, impairments and differences that most disabled children experience are social/behavioural, mental health and learning/learning disabilities. ¹ These weren't often shown in books.
- Books showed characters with mobility conditions (for example, wheelchair users), deaf characters and those with vision impairments more often. However, these characters were usually only 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 noticed that many representations weren't accurate or consistent.

- This was true for disabled people and the equipment they used.
- In many cases, small, simple changes would have made the representation more authentic.

The team reflected that disability inclusion needs to go beyond representation.

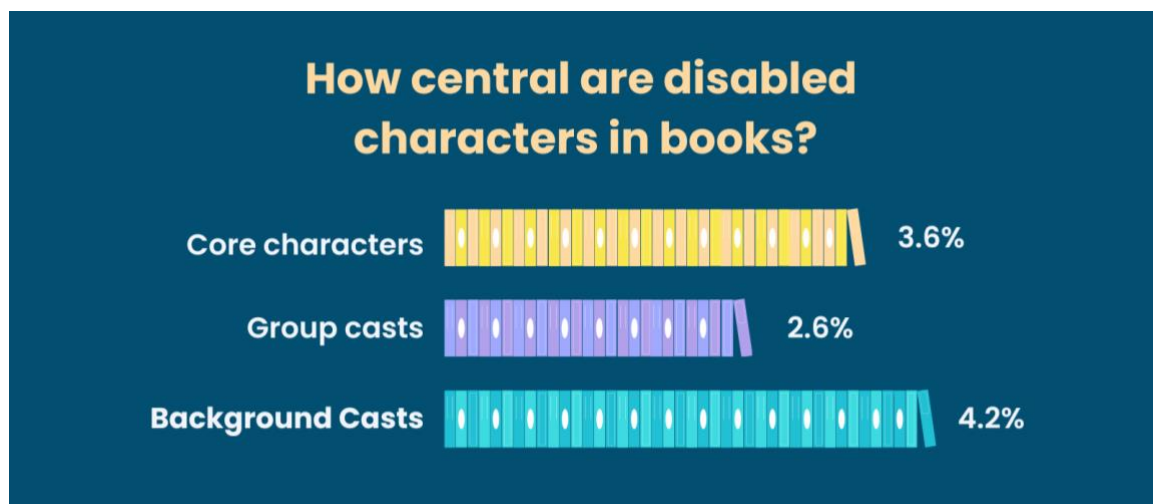
- Considering and understanding the day-to-day experience of a disabled person leads to more authentic and fully rounded characters.

In summary, publishers and creators have real opportunities to show a wider range of disabled people and to show them more authentically.

The forthcoming Reflecting Disability toolkit will offer practical advice on how to do 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 featured a disabled character in some way.
- This indicates that 10% of the children's picture books, fiction and non-fiction published in 2024 featured 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 (145 of the books reviewed).
- 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 are sole or joint leads, secondary characters, antagonists, and prominent background characters.

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

Accessibility

The study also looked at possible barriers to reading in the books reviewed.

Barriers to reading include inaccessible design and layout, hard to read text and language that makes the book overly 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 impacts both children and the adults reading to them.

This is a real gap that leaves many disabled people struggling to access books that reflect disabled people.

The bigger picture

10% of books published including some form of representation of disabled people seems encouraging. 12% of children (1 in 8) and 25% of the population (1 in 4) in the UK is disabled according to national statistics⁴.

- This 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.
- These are also just books published in one year, not all the books that are available to children.
- This means that the number of disabled characters that children are likely to come across when engaging with books is much smaller.

⁴ The Family Resources Survey 2024/25

- It's even less likely that they'll come across a book with a disabled core character.

Of the 398 books reviewed, 167 featured disabled characters only in the background (42% or 2 in 5).

Background representation means there isn't a chance to show a fully rounded character or their experiences. This means that the opportunity to reflect children's real-life experiences of disability is missed.

Voice and agency of disabled characters

Just under half of the books reviewed had at least one disabled character who influenced what happened (46%). This 4.6% of all children's books published in 2024.

Core disabled characters often have an active influence on the book.

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

- 57% regularly influenced what happened in the book through their actions, words or ideas.
- 32% of core characters sometimes influenced what happened but at other times were more passive or dependent.
- Only 9% of core disabled characters had little or no influence over what happened in the story.

This is encouraging. It challenges longstanding ideas of disabled people as passive or dependent. It suggests a positive move 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.

- However, these headlines shouldn't make them complacent.
- 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.

- It will provide in-depth analysis of the data on the quantity and quality of representation.
- Most importantly it will offer 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 key messages from the Steering Group are clear:

- We want many more disabled people portrayed in children's books, so that the books reflect the real world.
- We want authentic portrayals of disabled people.
- We don't want the pursuit of "perfect" portrayals to deter book creators from including disabled characters.

- Representation that is "Good enough" will still be celebrated as a positive step in the right direction.

With the toolkit, we aim:

- To help publishers and creators 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:

Publishers were invited to register for the study and submit all eligible books for 3–11-year-olds.

- We contacted children's publishers in multiple ways to invite them to be part of the study. We made repeated approaches.
- 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 sales in the children's 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

Reflecting Disability was developed through a disabled-led process and facilitated by Beth Cox and Alexandra Strick.

It was guided by a Steering Group of authors, illustrators and experts. The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) who have carried out the Reflecting Realities research since 2017 gave guidance and shared insights.

The Steering Group researched and agreed category labels to describe d/Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent characters in children's books. This was so that they could be compared to UK population statistics.

The team then developed, tested and refined a framework for review, 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 analysed the submitted books using the framework.

The Reading Agency cleaned and processed the review data.

They 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 discussion 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.

This helps ensure that people in every part of the country have access to culture and creativity in the places where they live.

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