

Inclusive Culture Begins at Home How to Dialogue with your Children about Books and Screen Time

By Lance Rushton

In most families of yore and now, reading books and watching TV shows was for amusement alone. An ample curriculum of lessons lost. I know, I know, “Should we ruin the ease of the moment, the art of a good story by digging into an artist’s other intentions?” We all just want to spend pleasurable and easy time with our kids as they are growing up. Right?

Yes, and most folk I know also want to see our society transform into one where conflict fades away and we all see and treat each other as equal in every way possible. Most of us want everyone to be included as human equals within our families, communities and across our nation: every gender, every gender identity, color of skin, cultural identity, religious belief, world view, age, body type, bodily ability, mental ability, family structure, economic status, etc.

If you’re a parent wanting a more inclusive society, you have the opportunity *and* responsibility to work toward this goal within your own family. I really doubt if my parents noted the social critique in the Wizard of Oz. So, our efforts as parents must often start with re-educating ourselves. Don’t fret, we get to do this while reading and watching highly impressionable, yet entertaining material!

How impressionable is it? Social lessons start being entrenched before preschool even begins. And we all know how bright our toddlers can be. Yes, in the books read and the shows watched they already pick up on the subjects’ skin color, the number and gender of parents, the things a normal family has, which kids are accepted and not, accepted foods, accepted beliefs, etc., They also pick up on our responses and lack thereof. Arghh! What should we do?

First Steps:

- A great first step is to find the many great books that really help each child see the beauty in their unique self and situation.
- Next, have a general rule to find books that thematically interest your child, but that have highlighted subjects who are diverse in their roles: both female and male, diverse body types, multiple skin colors, etc. This alone cues them to more inclusive possibilities, and into seeing both the similar and different experiences they have with people who look different from them.

Son: “Dad, you said that truck driver was a she.”

Dad: “She is a she.”

Son: “Truck drivers are hes!”

Dad: "Well, it might seem that way. But, she is a she, and my cousin, Loretta, is a truck driver, and there are actually lots of women truck drivers now. What do you think about that?"

- Find books with character forms most kids will embrace, like dogs or other animals (fantastical or not), but that deal with an inclusive moral lesson. There are so many classics and sure to be classics (Bug in a Rug) that are full of dialogue opportunities.

Mom: "Wow, I wonder why Horton is making such an effort to save these little Whos. I'm so busy in my day, I don't know if I would have taken the time to listen."

Son: (silence)

Mom: "Didn't Horton have other important things to do, AND he is being made fun of."

Son: "someone HAD to save them."

Mom: "But they were so little..."

Son: "But they were still people..."

Mom: "Right ...but sometimes some people don't get listened to. Do you ever not get listened to?"

Son: "...yeah..."

Mom: "I'm sure it seems like I don't listen to you sometimes. Right? How do you feel when you aren't heard?"

Son: "Not good. I get sad."

Mom: "Are there ever any kiddos that aren't listened to as much in your class?"

Son: "Yeah . . . Tony doesn't get listened to a lot, and no one can understand Mary very much so . . ."

Mom: "After hearing this story, how do you feel about that? What do you think should happen in your class?"

Take it Further:

- Begin to Embrace the Unknown. Look for books that are very different from your own family and personal experience, but that you know are the experiences of other families in your school or neighborhood or other circles of connection. As you approach this area, realize we don't know everything and we have to be humble by saying as much. On the other hand, if we don't educate ourselves in literature and experience beyond our comfort zones, we will falter in these dialogues and cue our kids in unpredictable ways. I believe that most of our fear and conflict rests in our lack of effort in trying to understand where another is coming from. Seek to understand.
- Pick books that focus on different family structures, belief systems, cultural values and understandings, social position, historical trauma or economic circumstances. Yes, all of these examples can be found in children's literature.

Daughter: "Dad, why do those kids have two moms?"

Dad: "The two moms are the parents of Claudia and Enrique. Some families have a mom and a dad like you have, and some have two dads or two moms. Some kids have one parent, a mom or a dad. Families come together in many different ways for many different reasons that I don't even know.

Daughter: "I don't know of any families that don't have a mom and a dad.

Dad: "Actually you do. Drew has two dads, and Sonia from your class last year, has two moms. Oh, and Daren and his mom, and grandma are his family!

Daughter, "hmm, I didn't know that."

Dad: "Yep. Sometimes it's hard to know what other families are like or who is in them when you only see one adult come to pick them up. Right? But they are all families who love each other just like we do.

- Put On Your Inclusiveness Lenses. Read the classics! Try out new books! And as you become more aware through your own re-education you will inevitably be shocked with some of the unintentional or neglected yet impressionable cues being laid down.

-

Mother: "So, what would you have done if that Cat in the Hat and Thing One and Thing Two would have done what they had done? Would you have told me?"

Daughter: "I don't know..., maybe."

Mother: "Well, it might make sense that you don't know after that whirlwind of action. Sally's brother did all the talking. Did we hear once from Sally?"

Daughter: "No."

Mother: "What do you think about that?"

Mother: "If you were Sally, how would you have handled all of this? What would you have said when the Cat did ...?"

Papa: "Hey, just wondering...you know all of these superheroes we've been reading about, like Batman, here?"

Son: "Uh, huh..."

Papa: "What do you notice about them that is similar?"

Son: "They all fly. They all have tight suits on and are muscly."

Papa: "Right...what else?"

Son: "They are all guys..."

Papa, "Ya, you are right there. What about their skin color, what do you notice?"

Son: "Uh. . . they are all white guys?"

Papa: "They are, aren't they? What do you think about that?"

Son: "I dunno... not sure..."

Papa: “Right. It’s hard to know what to think. Most of these super heroes in your books and in movies are white guys. But you and I know a lot of girls and guys who aren’t white who do great and cool things. Right? I wonder what we should do about this.

Growing up, I can’t remember one time where my parents talked in any depth to me and my older brother and sister about the subjects or subject matter of a book, TV show or movie; never a link to social situations we were bound to navigate. I have to work hard every day to unlearn all those unfiltered messages that seeped in.

We are an increasingly diverse society in every area of our lives, including our immediate families. Preparing ourselves for more dialogue about this at home will widen the lenses through which our children see their world. It will stimulate their curiosity, support them in living and working in a diverse society and set them up to expect inclusion in their world - and when they don’t see it, to do something about it!

Montview Footnote:

- *See the Inclusion bulletin board across from the kindergarten classroom. The current topic is Gender Roles. Find information and recommended books to support you in conversations with your children about roles of boys and girls. There is also a place for you to add your own experiences or questions.*
- *A list of recommended books focusing on different aspects of diversity and inclusion can be found on the Montview Newsstand – the wooden rack on the wall across from the office. This list was compiled at the Book Share event that focused on this topic last year. (For more on Book Shares, see the notice in this newsletter.)*

Lance Rushton and Jamie Morgan are parents to Montview student Soren Rushton. Lance is a member of the Montview Inclusion Committee. He is also a founding principal/partner of Morgan & Rushton Consulting and was an educator/director at a community non-profit school: PS1 Charter School, where he taught and lead for 11 years. He specialized in curriculum development and now consults in areas of inclusion and diversity.
