

# **Sizeism and Weight Diversity in Popular and Award-Winning/Recommended Picture Books for Children**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Scholarly research has demonstrated that sizeism (also called fatphobia or weight stigma) negatively impacts fat people across a range of major life activities. Even young children exhibit sizeist beliefs, and fat children are negatively impacted in school and personal relationships. LIS scholars have recently begun to address sizeism, but serious gaps persist in the literature, particularly in the realm of children and information. However, both research and theory demonstrate the positive impact that diverse literature can have in regards to addressing other types of bias among children. Thus, this study employs a convergent mixed methods design to examine weight diversity in recent award-winning/recommended and popular children's picture books in the United States. The findings suggest that diverse, positive weight representation is currently limited in both librarian-recommended/award-winning and popular picture books. The study includes recommendations for librarians, educators, and researchers interested in supporting diverse, inclusive information environments for children.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS**

Children's services; Social justice; Specific populations.

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

Fatphobia; Sizeism; Diversity; Children's literature.

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# INTRODUCTION

Sizeism (also called fatphobia or weight stigma) is prejudice against people due to their weight. Extensive scholarly research has shown that sizeism negatively impacts fat people across a diverse range of life activities, from education (Kenney et al., 2015; Finn et al., 2020; Cruz da Silva Souza & Peres Gonçalves, 2022; Langford et al., 2022; Stewart et al., 2023), to employment (Puhl & Brownell, 2001; Puhl & Heuer, 2009), to physical and mental health (Puhl & Heuer, 2010; Chrisler & Barney, 2017; Christian et al., 2023), to personal relationships (Puhl & Brownell, 2001; Puhl & Heuer, 2009), and religious practice (Griffith, 2004; Kidd, 2023). Sizeist beliefs manifest early. Studies have found that toddlers and preschoolers already demonstrate anti-fat bias (Cramer & Steinwert, 1998; Harrison et al., 2016; Bensley et al., 2023). These attitudes continue as children age, with schoolchildren preferring non-fat peers when forming friendships (Puhl and Brownell, 2001). Fat schoolchildren also experience bullying, which negatively impacts learning (Cruz da Silva Souza & Peres Gonçalves, 2022).

Despite sizeism's impacts, library and information science (LIS) scholars have only recently begun to address sizeism in information institutions. Early research efforts in this area include exposing anti-fat bias in book classification (Angell & Price, 2012); the extra effort required from doubly-marginalized fat, female library employees at work (Versluis et al., 2020); and the impact of non-inclusive furniture on fat library workers (Chabot, 2021). Most recently, Rutledge et al. (2024) called on libraries to include weight stigma in diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, and Shelton et al. (2024) explored fatphobia in library health programming. However, gaps persist, particularly in the realm of children and information. Thus, this study aims to build on prior work by examining sizeism and weight diversity in award-winning/recommended and popular picture books for children.

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Reading multicultural books helps children develop empathy, tolerance, acceptance, cultural awareness, and understanding of others (Evans, 2010; Coon, 2012; Long, 2012). As Harper and Brand (2012, p. 224) explain, "high-quality multicultural literature [also] has the capacity to foster children's understanding of and respect for their own cultures." This ties to education scholar Rudine Sims Bishop (1990)'s influential concept of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. Put simply, Bishop explains that diverse books offer children a way to see themselves and their own world (mirrors), see other/different worlds (windows), and participate in other/different worlds via imagination (doors). Thus, children's books with positive depictions of diverse groups can help both minority and majority groups. Similarly, Gerbner (1969)'s cultivation theory helps explain the importance of diverse books. Gerbner's theory emphasizes the importance of pervasive media messaging on individuals' conception of reality (Shrum, 2017).

# LITERATURE REVIEW

Most diversity-in-literature scholarship come from outside LIS. However, recent LIS studies have explored anti-Blackness in award-winning books (Kaaba, 2024), critical race theory

and diverse books (Mabbott, 2017), and the use of diverse books in library programming for children (Cahill et al., 2021). LIS scholars have also moved with the technological times. For example, Lear and Pritt (2021) examined the availability of diverse children's books via electronic book platforms. Campbell (2017) discussed the use of online blogging to promote diverse literature. Finally, Salem (2021) discussed many technologically-savvy ways to promote diversity, including through websites and social media, data mining, and metadata enhancement. However, as Jaeger et al. (2011; 2013; 2015) note, diversity issues still require LIS attention.

Scholars outside LIS have looked at weight diversity in children's picture books. These studies have addressed diverse body sizes in Caldecott Medal-winning picture books (Wedwick & Lathan, 2013); award-winning/recommended and popular picture books in New Zealand (Pugmire, 2023); picture books from Europe (Warnqvist & Österlund, 2021), and fairy tale depictions in children's media including picture books (Bosc, 2018). Recent studies have examined picture books that specifically focus on body image (Coyne et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2023; Faragó et al., 2023).

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

Unfortunately, these studies related to weight diversity are out of date, focused on literature outside North America, and/or limited in focus. The studies are separate from LIS, specifically existing LIS sizeism research. Thus, the researcher conducted a study focused around the following question: What is the current state of weight diversity in award-winning/recommended and popular children's picture books in the United States?

## **METHOD**

The researcher employed a convergent mixed methods design with simultaneous quantitative and qualitative data collection from picture books (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

To locate award-winning/recommended books, the researcher referred to the Younger Readers category of the Notable Books for Children list, which is created by the U.S.-based Association for Library Service for Children (ALSC, n.d.). The researcher reviewed all books listed in 2023 or 2024 available through the Montgomery City-County (AL) Public Library (print or digital). To avoid skewing the sample, the author also purchased one book, as none of the 2023 Belpré (Latinx) award winners were available at the library. See Appendix A for the reviewed award-winning/recommended (notable) items. To locate popular books, the researcher utilized Amazon bestselling lists from 2023 and through July 2024. The researcher located available titles through the Montgomery City-County (AL) Public Library. Activity and reference books were excluded. See Appendix B for the reviewed popular items.

To analyze the data, the researcher used content analysis (White & Marsh, 2006; Rose, 2012). The researcher reviewed both text and illustrations and performed iterative coding. The author integrated the findings to numerically and contextually understand the issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

# RESULTS

## Award-Winning/Recommended Books - 2023

Only 35% of 2023’s award-winning/recommended books included a fat character. Of the books that included a fat character, they were often relegated to the background of a group. In this group, the fat person was an “extra” of sorts who did not speak or affect the plot in any way.

Fat people were included as minor characters in four books. In these examples, the fat person performed some action related to the plot but did not drive the action. Portrayals were mixed. For example, *Endlessly Ever After* positively depicted a fat grandmother offering food to others but also negatively depicted a fat mother sending her child out into the forest alone.

Fat people were included as principal characters in five books on the 2023 list. Portrayals were mixed. For example, in *Everything in Its Place: A Story of Books and Belonging*, a fat character named Maggie is stereotypically (negatively) depicted as eating pie and wearing “scruffy” clothes. However, Maggie is also positively depicted, as she kindly offers her book to someone. The book also provides a rare example of an explicit body-related message. Maggie’s friends are “all different colors, shapes, [and] sizes,” but they are “sisters” who wear the same patch on their jackets. The author says that they are “happy,” “alive,” and “free.”

For 2023 award-winning/recommended books containing a fat character or explicit body message, see Table 1. For a breakdown by character type, see Table 2.

**Table 1**

*Presence of Fat Character or Body Message in Award-Winning/Recommended Books, 2023*

	Fat Character	Body Message
Yes	12	2
No	22	32
Total	34	34

**Table 2**

*Fat Character Type in Award-Winning/Recommended Books, 2023*

Fat Character Type	Number of Books
Principal	5
Minor	4
Background	7

*Note.* One book may have more than one type of fat character.

## Award-Winning/Recommended Books - 2024

In 2024, 40% of award-winning/recommended books included a fat character. Fat characters often played minor roles or simply existed in the background. Portrayals varied, but more negative and/or stereotypical portrayals appeared in 2024 than 2023. For example, seven of the ten books with fat characters stereotypically depicted those characters with food. Only one book contained a fat child character.

Mixed positive and negative portrayals and messages often appeared in the same book. For example, in *Worm and Caterpillar Are Friends*, a non-fat worm character looks in horror at his caterpillar friend, who is eating food and growing fat. However, the end of the book (after the caterpillar becomes a butterfly) shows the worm coming to understand that friends do not need to look the same.

There were several positive portrayals, including a fat background character being active and riding a horse (*Tomfoolery!*), a fat minor character lovingly showing his granddaughter how to write Chinese characters (*Scroll*), and a fat principal character who performs rock and roll (*Little Rosetta and the Talking Guitar*). In *Big*, the child protagonist specifically experiences and overcomes size-related criticism.

2024 books also included neutral body messages. For example, *Cicada Symphony* described the lifecycle and body development of cicadas without using fat-shaming or other body-critical language. For 2024 award-winning/recommended books containing a fat character or explicit body message, see Table 3. For a breakdown by character type, see Table 4.

**Table 3**

*Presence of Fat Character or Body Message in Award-Winning/Recommended Books, 2024*

	Fat Character	Body Message
Yes	10	5
No	15	20
Total	25	25

**Table 4**

*Fat Character Type in Award-Winning/Recommended Books, 2024*

Fat Character Type	Number of Books
Principal	4
Minor	3
Background	4

*Note.* One book may have more than one type of fat character.

## Popular Books - 2023

In 2023, only 20% of popular books included a fat character. In the one book that included a fat principal character (*The Very Hungry Caterpillar*), the protagonist is stereotypically shown eating lots of food. The character becomes fat, which is called out in an explicit body-related message. However, the protagonist's weight is a transient state on the way becoming a beautiful (and non-fat) butterfly.

In the other two books that included a fat character, the character was relegated to the background of an illustrated group scene. For example, in *Taylor Swift: A Little Golden Book Biography*, a fat person is depicted sitting on a couch.

For 2023 popular books containing a fat character or explicit body message, see Table 5. For a breakdown by character type, see Table 6.

**Table 5**

*Presence of Fat Character or Body Message in Popular Books, 2023*

	Fat Character	Explicit Body Message
Yes	3	1
No	12	14
Total	15	15

**Table 6**

*Fat Character Type in Popular Books, 2023*

Fat Character Type	Number of Books
Principal	1
Minor	0
Background	2

## Popular Books - 2024

In 2024, 36% of popular books included a fat character. This represents an increase in fat representation from 2023. However, four out of the five examples were background characters. The one fat principal character was depicted negatively (*The Very Hungry Caterpillar*).

Although not about weight, positive body-related messages appeared in two books. In *It's Not Easy Being a Bunny*, the protagonist says that having big ears is ok. *Why a Daughter Needs a Dad* says that it is good to be open to differences, including different appearances. For 2024 popular books containing a fat character or explicit body message, see Table 7. For a breakdown by character type, see Table 8.

**Table 7***Presence of Fat Character or Body Message in Popular Books, 2024*

	Fat Character	Explicit Body Message
Yes	5	4
No	9	10
Total	14	14

**Table 8***Fat Character Type in Popular Books, 2024*

Fat Character Type	Number of Books
Principal	1
Minor	0
Background	4

## DISCUSSION

Over one third of American children and nearly three quarters of American adults are fat (NIH, 2021), yet the analysis revealed that fat characters are vastly underrepresented in the most popular children’s books today. When fat characters are present, they are often represented in negative, stereotypical ways or relegated to the background. In 2024, some positive messages related to diverse bodies appeared, but only one positive message addressed weight specifically. In short, the current state of weight diversity in popular picture books in the United States can be described as extremely limited.

Fat characters were also under-represented in award-winning/recommended (notable) books. In these books, fat characters were often relegated to background or minor roles or portrayed in a negative and/or stereotypical way. For example, four of the fat principle or minor characters in 2023 notable books were depicted interacting with food, and another fat principle character was depicted wearing “scruffy” clothes. Both gluttony (Puhl & Heuer, 2009) and poor appearance (Puhl & Brownell, 2001) are societal stereotypes associated with sizeism. Moreover, there were only two examples of fat child characters, suggesting that fat children have limited opportunities to see representation of their lived experiences in recommended books.

Some notable books offered positive examples in which fat characters went against sizeist stereotypes. In *Bathe the Cat*, a fat character is cleaning and chasing, in *Also*, a fat character is gardening, and in *Yellow Dog Blues*, a character is dancing. As society often stereotypes fat people as sedentary and lazy (Puhl & Heuer, 2009), these depictions of active characters break the stereotypical mold. Explicit body messages were rare in notable books, with a positive exception in *Everything in Its Place* (people of all sizes can be happy and friends) and a negative exception in *The Talk* (grandmother commenting on grandson’s body). These results suggest that current award-winning/recommended books offer some pushback to sizeism, but there is considerable room for progress on this issue of (weight) diversity, equity, and inclusion.

## LIMITATIONS

Due to financial constraints, data collection was primarily limited to books available through the local public library. In future, replication of this study with all applicable titles would be beneficial.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

All children benefit when exposed to diverse books. As Bishop (1990) explains, marginalized children benefit when they see themselves positively represented in print, and non-marginalized children benefit when they learn to respect and empathize with situations different from their own. Sizeism's impacts are pervasive in society, making it important for children to see positive, non-stereotyped representations of fat people in media. Unfortunately, this study demonstrates that such representation is currently limited in both librarian-recommended/award-winning and popular picture books in the United States.

To help address sizeism moving forward, librarians can build on long-standing professional diversity efforts by considering both weight diversity and body-related messages when recommending picture books for award and honor lists. Librarians can also combat sizeism through thoughtful decision-making in regards to collection management, programming (such as book choices for story time), and readers' advisory activities. In addition, librarians can familiarize themselves with LIS literature on sizeism and how this issue affects library users of all ages. For example, librarians can consider how furniture and other elements of the physical library space accommodate children and caregivers with larger bodies (consistent with Chabot, 2021). Libraries can also incorporate sizeism and weight diversity in training efforts for staff (consistent with Rutledge et al., 2024). Per LIS scholarship on other types of diversity (Lear & Pritt, 2021; Salem, 2021), librarians can consider these issues in regards to e-resources and digital information spaces that institutions make available. LIS educators can incorporate weight diversity and anti-sizeist messaging within relevant courses, with particular opportunities in coursework on children's services and diverse literature. Finally, LIS researchers can contribute to the evidence base for anti-sizeist practice and teaching.

Clearly, considerable work remains. But small steps and studies like these can help move dialogue forward within LIS education and practice—for the benefit of library users of all sizes.

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# APPENDIX A

## Reviewed 2023 Award-Winning/Recommended (ALSC Notable List) Books

*Also.* E. B. Goodale

*Bathe the Cat.* Alice B. McGinty & David Roberts

*Berry Song.* Michaela Goade

*Endlessly Ever After: Pick Your Path to Countless Fairy Tale Endings.* Laurel Snyder & Dan Santat

*Every Dog in the Neighborhood.* Philip C. Stead & Matthew Cordell

*Everything in Its Place: A Story of Books and Belonging.* Pauline David-Sax & Charnelle Pinkney Barlow

*Fish and Wave.* Sergio Ruzzier

*The Flamingo.* Guojing

*Gigi and Ojiji.* Melissa Iwai

*H Is for Harlem.* Dinah Johnson & April Harrison

*A History of Me.* Adrea Theodore & Erin K. Robinson

*Honeybee Rescue: A Backyard Drama.* Loree Griffin Burns & Ellen Harasimowicz

*Hot Dog.* Doug Salati

*How to Say Hello to a Worm: A First Guide to the Outside.* Kari Percival

*I Did It!* Michael Emberley

*João by a Thread.* Roger Mello. Trans. By Daniel Hahn

*John's Turn.* Mac Barnett & Kate Berube

*Knight Owl.* Christopher Denise

*A Land of Books: Dreams of Young Mexihcah Word Painters.* Duncan Tonatiuh

*Listen: How Evelyn Glennie, a Deaf Girl, Changed Percussion.* Shannon Stocker & Devon Holzwarth

*Me and the Boss: A Story about Mending and Love.* Michelle Edwards & April Harrison

*The Notebook Keeper: A Story of Kindness from the Border.* Stephen Briseño & Magdalena Mora

*Out of a Jar.* Deborah Marcero

*Powwow Day.* Traci Sorell & Madelyn Goodnight

*A Seed Grows.* Antoinette Portis

*Sweet Justice: Georgia Gilmore and the Montgomery Bus Boycott.* Mara Rockliff & R. Gregory Christie

*The Talk.* Alicia D. Williams & Briana Mukodiri Uchendu

*The Three Billy Goats Gruff.* Mac Barnett & Jon Klassen

*Too Early.* Nora Ericson & Elly MacKay

*The Tower of Life: How Yaffa Eliach Rebuilt Her Town in Stories and Photographs.* Chana Stiefel & Susan Gal

*The World Belonged to Us.* Jacqueline Woodson & Leo Espinosa

*Where Wonder Grows.* Xelena Gonzalez & Adriana M. Garcia.

*Yellow Dog Blues.* Alice Faye Duncan & Chris Raschka

*Yes We Will: Asian Americans Who Shaped This Country.* Kelly Yang. Illus. by various.

**Reviewed 2024 Award-Winning/Recommended (ALSC Notable List) Books**

*The Artist.* Nikkolas Smith

*Benita Y Las Criaturas Nocturnas.* Mariana Llanos & Cocoretto

*Big.* Vashti Harrison

*Cicada Symphony.* Sue Fliess & Gareth Lucas

*Dim Sum Palace.* X. Fang

*Fox Has a Problem.* Corey R. Tabor

*Henry, Like Always.* Jenn Bailey & Mika Song

*I'm Going to Build a Snowman.* Jashar Awan

*In Every Life.* Marla Frazee

*In the Night Garden.* Carin Berger

*The Indestructible Tom Crean: Heroic Explorer of the Antarctic.* Jennifer Thermes

*Later, When I'm Big.* Bette Westera & Mattias De Leeuw (Translated by Laura Watkinson)

*Little Rosetta and the Talking Guitar: The Musical Story of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the Woman Who Invented Rock and Roll.* Charnelle Pinkney Barlow

*Maribel's Year.* Michelle Sterling & Sarah Gonzales

*Nat the Cat Takes a Nap.* Jarrett Lerner

*Nell Plants a Tree.* Anne Wynter & Daniel Miyares

*Okra Stew: A Gullah Geechee Family Celebration.* Natalie Daise

*The Only Way to Make Bread.* Cristina Quintero & Sarah Gonzales

*A River of Dust: The Life-Giving Link Between North Africa and the Amazon.*

Jilanne Hoffmann & Eugenia Mello

*Scroll.* Hui Li

*They Hold the Line: Wildfires, Wildlands, and the Firefighters Who Brave Them.*

Dan Paley & Molly Mendoza

*Tomfoolery!: Randolph Caldecott and the Rambunctious Coming-of-Age of Children's Books.* Michelle Markel & Barbara McClintock

*The Truth About Dragons.* Julie Leung & Hanna Cha

*What a Map Can Do.* Gabrielle Balkan & Alberto Lot

*Worm and Caterpillar Are Friends.* Kaz Windness

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Reviewed 2023 Popular (Amazon Bestseller List) Books**

*The Very Hungry Caterpillar.* Eric Carle

*Taylor Swift: A Little Golden Book Biography.* Wendy Loggia

*I Love You to the Moon and Back.* Amelia Hepworth & Tim Warnes

*Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* Bill Martin, Jr. & Eric Carle

*I Love You Like No Otter.* Rose Rossner & Sydney Hanson

*Oh! The Places You'll Go!* Dr Seuss

*Goodnight Moon.* Margaret Wise Brown & Clement Hurd

*The Wonderful Things You Will Be.* Emily Winfield Martin

*How to Catch a Dinosaur.* Adam Wallace & Andy Elkerton

*If Animals Kissed Good Night.* Ann Whitford Paul & David Walker

*Chicka Chicka Boom Boom.* Bill Martin, Jr., John Archambault, & Lois Ehlert

*Dragons Love Tacos.* Adam Rubin & Daniel Salmieri

*Love You Forever.* Robert Munsch & Sheila McGraw

*How to Catch a Unicorn.* Adam Wallace & Andy Elkerton

*How to Catch a Mermaid.* Adam Wallace & Andy Elkerton

### **Reviewed 2024 Popular (Amazon Bestseller List) Books**

*Oh! The Places You'll Go!* Dr. Seuss

*I Love You to the Moon and Back.* Amelia Hepworth & Tim Warnes

*Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* Bill Martin, Jr. & Eric Carle

*The Very Hungry Caterpillar.* Eric Carle

*Chicka Chicka Boom Boom.* Bill Martin, Jr., John Archambault, & Lois Ehlert

*Happy Birthday to You!* Dr. Seuss

*I Love You Like No Otter.* Rose Rossner & Sydney Hanson

*The Wonderful Things You Will Be.* Emily Winfield Martin

*Taylor Swift: A Little Golden Book Biography.* Wendy Loggia

*Goodnight Moon.* Margaret Wise Brown & Clement Hurd

*Why a Daughter Needs a Dad.* Gregory E. Lang, Susanna Leonard Hill, & Sydney Hanson

*It's Not Easy Being a Bunny.* Marilyn Sadler & Roger Bollen

*Love You Forever.* Robert Munsch & Sheila McGraw

*How to Catch the Easter Bunny.* Adam Wallace & Andy Elkerton