

Toy Box Tales Exhibition and Research Study

Talking about Disability

Scotland Summary Report – July 2022.

This project is a collaboration between researchers at Queen Margaret University and Toy Like Me. There is growing evidence that toys and resources depicting disability help non-disabled children to think about making friends with disabled children¹. This project explored this evidence base, using images of adapted toy prototypes (such as Barbie with a missing limb, or Olaf the snowman with a cochlear implant) developed by Toy Like Me alongside commercially available toys representing a range of disabilities, as part of a pop-up “Toy Box Tales” exhibition. Our research question was: Does engaging in this form of imagined contact have any impact on responses to disability?

Toy Like Me approached Queen Margaret University researchers to collaborate on the project with the aim of creating evidence of the impact of the Toy Box Tales exhibition on the attitudes of children towards disability. Toy Like Me wanted robust evidence that the intervention can be used as an early intervention tool against the types of negative attitudes in children towards disability, which may lead to potential hate crime.

During the collaborative study, two hundred and ninety-five children aged 8-11 years, from five schools in Edinburgh participated. Children were invited to complete a story completion task, before and after taking part in the exhibition at their school. Resources were provided by researchers at QMU and Toy Like Me and were developed for teachers to be able to deliver the project independently (if Covid-19 restrictions limited access to schools). Ultimately, all Exhibition days were able to be carried out by the QMU research team. Each school was sent a complete research pack containing parent and child consent forms, information sheets, story writing tasks, and the pop-up exhibition consisting of twelve 80x80cm poster boards, and an exhibition resource pack.

Children were asked to write a story about one of the characters in the exhibition, from a choice of four, before and after the pop-up exhibition visits. Children were given the beginning of a story and asked to complete it as follows: *Imagine you are going on a really fun day out with them* (the character). *Write a story about the adventure that you have...* (see image 1).

Story Completion is a relatively novel method of exploring attitudes and perceptions and have been used in a variety of settings, but this study used this method on a much larger and younger sample of children than has been previously conducted. This method allows us to compare the stories

written before and after taking part in the exhibition and explore the language used and the attitudes and perceptions regarding disability that are present in these stories.

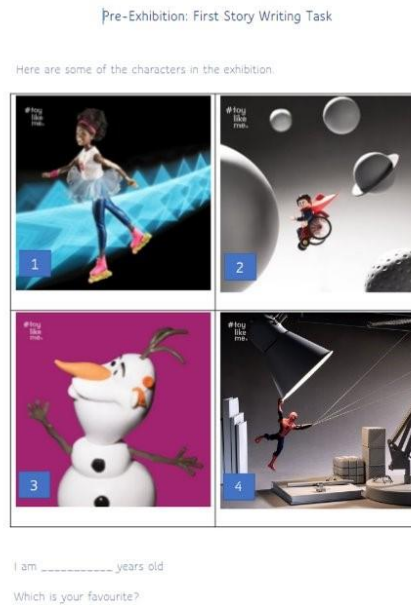


Image 1: Example of images from exhibition used in the Story Writing Task.

The stories were all transcribed and coded thematically. Preliminary results show the development of a variety of sub themes within the data. These include:

- Positive and Negative Relationships between story characters
- Positive and Negative Responses to Disability
- Paternalism
- Medical Model of Disability
- Social Model of Disability
- Positive and Negative Affect.

These themes represent the range of attitudes and perceptions expressed in the children's stories. For example, we found a variety of stories representing a medical understanding of disability; that there is "something broken", or "that needs to be fixed", and with a reliance on a medical professional to help:

“why are you in a wheelchair?” then he looked around to see if anybody was watching and he put his hand to his mouth and said, *“it’s a disguise”*. *“why”* I said in surprised voice *“well”* he explained *“you know how I lost my powers?”* *“yeah”* I said, *“well this wheelchair can fly”,* *“but how?”* I asked *“that’s a secret”* he said ***“OK”*** I said ***very annoyed of course then I said “hop out of the wheelchair”*** he said ***“why”*** ***“just do it”*** ***“OK”*** ***so he did and he toppled to the floor like a blob of Jelly “are you OK”*** I said ***“no”*** ***“I should take you to the hospital”*** so I did and they said they need to take him to a ***scientist. the end*** (Aged 7 and ¾, pre-exhibition)

“Once there was an Olaf on the path, I met him but he did not hear me so I called a doctor to help Olaf and the doctor gave Olaf something that helps him hear people and it was orange and then he could hear everyone” (Pre-exhibition)

In contrast, other examples showed a more positive attitude towards disability, an assertion that this should not lead to limitation, although with added suggestion that this was a potential cause for sadness and potential exclusion. There is a tendency for the use of language that leads to an assertion that these characters are achieving goals “despite” their disability:

*Alice was a professional swimmer **And sadly she does not have an arm but that does not stop her from following her dream.** Anyway it’s now Monday and Alice is coming to my school and I’m going to sit next to her. Alice is a kind and helpful amazing swimmer / bff. She said her favourite lesson is art pe and English. Later I bumped into my other friends at playtime. **They said I should not be friends with her because of her arm but I don’t care what they think of her because I think she is amazing so I’m gonna be BFF with her forever.*** (Aged 8, post exhibition)

*My best friend is barbie, **even though she only has one arm she’s increadibal** [sic] she’s got so many hobbies she does swimming, football, and coaches trampaleaning [sic] and I do all this with her but I don’t swim I coach swimming.* (Post-exhibition)

In addition to these examples, we found a heightened discussion and awareness of disability in the post exhibition stories as compared to those written prior to the exhibition. Engagement in the exhibition and surrounding discussion and activities serves to highlight disability and bring it to the fore of children’s attention. There were positive reflections on what disability means, and crucially in recognition that it should not lead to limitations. Positive relationships with the disabled characters were also prominently evident (with the most positive being enthusiastically described as “cool!”). A focus on friendship and fun was centrally important to these children:

*“One day I went into school and noticed there was a new girl in the class straight away **I went up to here and asked her if she wanted to be my friend.** She said “of corse [sic] you can be my friend. She also said do you want to come diving with me at break time. We both agreed then went we saw dolphins and lots of fish and had such a good time together. When we got **out I was curios [sic] to see what was up with her arm she told me she was born like that and chose not to put a prosthetic arm on it.** (Post exhibition)*

With regards to the analysis of the questionnaires, we saw interesting results. Even in schools not visited by a disabled researcher, children were significantly more likely to say that they knew someone with a disability after viewing the exhibition. Non-disabled children who said they knew someone with a disability had significantly higher friendship intention scores than those who did not know someone with a disability - and even more so when they had higher SHANARRI wellbeing indicator scores (see graph 1). Average friendship intentions are higher in the darker bars (when children also know someone with a disability) than the lighter bars (when they don't know anyone). The scores were found to be significantly higher between the light and dark bars when SHANARRI (wellbeing) scores were high. The difference when SHANARRI [Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurturing, Active, Respected, Responsible, Included] scores were low did not show to be significant.

We have developed this project from a previous pilot study, adding a quantitative element to directly measure children's attitudes to disability both before and after the exhibition, in addition to the qualitative element of the story completion task to allow us a more nuanced understanding of their perceptions. This allowed for further development of the teacher resource pack and provide further evidence for the effectiveness of these resources in positively impacting children's attitudes towards disability. These resources were originally developed to fit the English curriculum, and so we have we have now mapped the chatty pack to the areas of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, at first and second level. beyond the chatty pack to a whole suite of resources which will be co-created

This study shows that the Toy Box Tales images and activities positively influence children's perceptions of disability. This has implications for inclusive education in terms of the ways in which disability may be helpfully represented in children's media, and in their classrooms, and through suggested activities for talking about disability in primary schools.