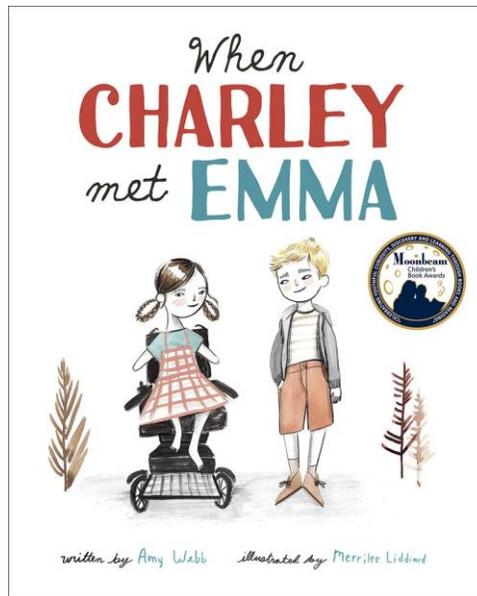


Second Reaction: Different Is Okay

Webb, Amy. *When Charley Met Emma*. Illustrated by Merilee Liddiard.
Minneapolis: Beaming Books, 2019. Print.

Tara Uliasz



Amy Webb's book, *When Charley met Emma*, explores the meeting and potential friendship of two kids at a playground. We are first introduced to Charley, a boy who is sometimes marked as different from his peers, as a quiet boy, but who is also given the complexity of being more than one thing. He is sometimes loud, sometimes quiet. In the book, his mom explicitly discusses with him that being different is okay, both for himself and for others. It is an introduction that is then paralleled in Emma, a girl he meets at a playground. Emma has limb differences and uses a wheelchair, and at first, Charley is surprised at and rude about her differences. He stares at her, and loudly asks, "Why does she look so weird?" He notices that she looks sad; and, when reminded by what his mother said that "different is okay," Charley decides to introduce himself to Emma. He apologizes for being rude and Emma stands up for herself, "I don't like it when people point, stare, laugh, or whisper about me" *and* gracefully says, "But it's okay if you

have questions” (Webb unpagged). From there, they start a conversation about their differences and their similarities.

I shared this book with my 8-year-old son, who is familiar with both the over simplistic gendered stereotypes of boys and some of the vast array of the types of disabilities in the world. He is both the son of an Inclusion teacher, and he has had students with different disabilities in his classes since kindergarten.

The basic discussion you’d expect regarding disability, difference and friendship took place. I asked him what he thought along the way: he stated that staring or talking about someone’s disability rudely is not okay; but, this is a discussion we have had lots of times. I asked what he might do if he encountered someone he wanted to be friends with who had a disability like Emma’s. He is shy, but he said he would say hi and find things they had in common such as swings, imaginary games and talking about Pokémon. He thought a minute, and then wondered aloud what it was like to have people not understand or make things up about your body. Emma’s initial response to Charley allowed for a conversation with my son around what it means to have to field questions at the start of relationships, or to always have to be the mature one. I think this is an issue a lot of people feel to some level—immigrants, people of color, English language learners—and he specifically is in a queer family and has a best friend who is transgender, so he feels some of this mildly also. However, it is a significant issue within disability around relationships. I imagine as he gets older and we revisit the book and topic, we will be able to have more complicated discussions about it, but it was a nice opening to it.

While there are not currently many students at my school with visible physical disabilities, I shared the book with a few students with disabilities that I work with. It was a good teaching tool to discuss being different and the joy in making a friend and learning new things from friends. One student said that Emma should be “treated just like everyone else” and that she “probably wants friends to understand her.” This to me speaks to the way that kids both want to be seen for the wholeness of who they are, but also do want the parts of them that are different to be seen and understood. We don’t have to be the same as everyone to be valued or treated fairly. One thing doesn’t have to define all of who we are and simultaneously doesn’t have to be ignored for us to be whole. To me, this is an important part of the discussion of this book, but could easily be lost if the parent/caregiver/teacher oversimplifies the lessons here. Children can handle complexity, and I think this book warrants revisits to get at it.

About the Author

Tara Uliasz is a mom, aunt, and Inclusion teacher in a K-6 bilingual school. She lives in West Sacramento, California.