

Embracing Our Future in Early Childhood: All Are Welcome Here

By Lynn Mendelsohn

All Are Welcome is a cheerfully upbeat children's book, exploring the possibilities of learning successfully with each other in America's diverse, inclusive, community-based schools. The repeated "mantra" throughout the story, "All are welcome here," is powerful because it is what most of us, as parents, hope for when we deliver our unique children to school. We want our children to have loving teachers, who, through their own competent relationship-building and social-emotional skills, can nurture our individual children's hearts, brains and talents. The concepts in All Are Welcome clearly represent what the gold standard could and should be in early childhood education in America—teachers and administrators setting the bar high—modeling loving behavior and appropriate social-emotional skills like inclusiveness, respect, perspective-taking and ultimately, empathy. Although the burden for creating loving, all-inclusive classrooms falls to all teachers in our society, it is an especially important burden for those who teach our youngest children. Without a strong, consistent, high quality early childhood education system throughout our country, our early learners will have only marginal future success as highlighted in the documentary *No Small Matter*. Although the flaws in America's early education system cannot be addressed here, All Are Welcome, written by Alexandra Penfold, is a positive, uplifting story, which promotes the ideal for all early childhood programs. Penfold, a parent inspired by the teachers in her Brooklyn, New York neighborhood, has created a story, which is as relevant

for early childhood teachers as it is for their students and our society. This story and its simple message of "how to be" with each other could and should become the basis for a caring community of learners in any preschool program.

Suzanne Kaufman's artwork represents our diverse society; it is a colorful montage of children engaged in their classrooms, capturing the rich and distinctive "flavors" of America's "melting pot." Coupled with the author's clever text, readers feel connected to the excitement of going to a school where everyone is valued, their stories shared and their multicultures embraced—high expectations for an intercultural meeting of the minds in a safe, nurturing place. We feel confident, after reading this story, that we, as early childhood educators, might play a significant role in promoting the development of the skills of inclusiveness and empathy—skills desperately needed in our society of the twenty-first century as spotlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement. These multicultural children are our children and represent our future brain trust! In the middle of her story, Ms. Penfold writes:

"We're part of a community.
Our strength is our diversity.
A shelter from adversity.
All are welcome here."

The children in this story are a microcosm of society. Their collectively developing skills, through close sharing and deep interaction with each other, represent our ability to move forward as a country with an even stronger foundation and fabric. There can be no doubt that safe, inclusive early learning affects our preparedness as individuals and collectively as a nation.

Even America's military high command in the documentary, *No Small Matter*, recognizes and expresses how safe, collaborative, high quality early learning experiences are the key to growing and shaping a strong, fit, competent American military and American workforce, which will then produce a positive, creative global leadership approach for the 21st century. They have committed to this model on military bases around the country; what can the early childhood community learn from this initiative?

Ms. Penfold writes in a bright, staccato style, emphasizing middle vowel sound rhyme and traditional end-word rhyme as the cadence of her poetry falls at the end of each phrase and finishes with, "All are welcome here." Her intentional word choice, coupled with her lively cadence, creates the image of a school environment where hope thrives, possibilities seem endless, collaboration produces creativity and all dreams are set in motion. Although written as a reflection of positive, teacher-inspired classrooms in one inner city school in America, All Are Welcome could set the tone and be the model with

regard to teacher-child interactions in schools throughout the nation—urban and rural. Ms. Pembroke's poem is inspiring and uplifting—a gift for teachers to be read and enjoyed at the beginning of each school year to set the bar. Harder questions about early childhood remain and need to be examined more closely going forward.

How do we standardize our early childhood education system across the country, incorporating the ideals represented in this story? How do we learn from our military leadership who already recognize our need to develop foundational empathy, cohesiveness, cooperation and creativity among our earliest learners? While one read-through of this excellent book will not solve our systemic inconsistencies in early childhood education in America, it might start the conversation and be a positive spark for an industry tasked with and striving for the development of a "more perfect union" in 2020 and beyond. Ultimately, all should be welcome here, there and everywhere if we are all to succeed!

Reference:

Alpert, Daniel, et al., directors. *No Small Matter*, Kindling Group & Siskel/Jacobs Productions, 2019, www.nosmallmatter.com/.

Alexandra Penfold ✨ Suzanne Kaufman



Quality
Early Education
System
www.qees.org

Funded by The Children's Board of Hillsborough County, in partnership with CALM, ELM, HCC & Child Care Licensing

