

A Parent's Guide to Helping Children: Using Bibliotherapy at Home

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There were nights when it seemed impossible to get Tara into bed. It was hard to distinguish what set her off, but the outcome was always the same; getting out of bed, asking questions, wanting a glass of water, all until her mother was quite annoyed. Then, quite accidentally, Tara and her mom came up with a new bedtime routine. On those hard to get to bed nights, Tara was allowed to pick two books to be read to her. The second book was always *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Brown. This was a book that had a calming effect for Tara and the routine of the story reading helped her get ready to go to sleep.

This is just one way for parents to incorporate bibliotherapy into the everyday interactions with children. Bibliotherapy is the use of literature that addresses problems or issues current in the lives of children. For some children like Tara, a favorite story, poem, or song can be a comfort in a trying time. Introducing a new story or book can be equally as helpful for children because it helps to clarify feelings and validate emotions. Making up their own stories or modifying a favorite also can get children to talk and think about issues at hand.

Definitions

Bibliotherapy as a technique has proven effective in both the classroom and in child therapy (Borders & Paisley, 1992; Lenkowsky, 1987). Through reading, or being read to, a story similar to their own lives, children are able to experience and deal with an issue objectively which can then be applied to their own problems/issues. The stories should show the child there is a way out, others have the same issues, you are not alone. Bibliotherapy sends the message to the child that it is acceptable to talk about this and together we can work out a solution. Hébert (1991) cautions that the simple act of reading a story is not bibliotherapy. Follow-up discussions must be incorporated in order to reinforce the issue at hand. Added outcomes of such discussion include fostering interpersonal relationships and problem solving skills. Discussions provide a forum for the child to better understand what is being said in the story and to apply it to her/his situation. It is important to note that the ramifications of this technique are greater for high ability children because of their ability to empathize, which allows them to identify with the characters, to understand metaphor, and to become absorbed in the story with a meta-understanding of the issue.

Bibliotherapy is useful because it allows the child to step back from her/his problem and experience it from an objective viewpoint. It offers the child a safe avenue to investigate feelings. For an adult having to deal with a child in distress, it can also provide a nonthreatening way to broach a sensitive subject. Always remember, bibliotherapy is a conversation starter, not ender. It should be used to open up communication. Handing a book to a child in the hopes that she/he will understand your intention is not helpful. Connections need to be facilitated and open expression should be encouraged.

Who, What, When

Who should use bibliotherapy? Anyone who has contact with a child who is experiencing emotional turmoil or confronting a new issue that is confusing can use a technique like bibliotherapy. Counselors have used this technique quite successfully since the 1950s and 1960s. Lenkowsky (1987) points to its use as a planned therapy with three components: identification, catharsis, and insight. The use of bibliotherapy in the classroom seems to have its roots in the 1970s with the use of picture books with children (Jalongo, 1983). The popular trend in children's literature to include more emotionally laden and real-life subject matter has increased the use of bibliotherapy today. The quality of available literature is outstanding. There seems to be a greater awareness of real life issues and multicultural sensitivity among book authors and publishers. Not only are bibliotherapy approaches useful within the context of a classroom or therapy session, but more and more parents are finding it beneficial in helping their children deal with the stress of modern life. Taking the time to read a story with a child, if done in an empathetic, understanding atmosphere, can reinforce a positive sense of worth and increase the parent/child bond.

Schlichter and Burke (1994) point to two forms of bibliotherapy: developmental and clinical. Clinical bibliotherapy is employed by trained personnel, for use with children in therapy situations and is just one aspect of the treatment process that deals with deep problems. Developmental bibliotherapy is used to anticipate issues before they become a problem. For instance, reading a story about a child who is frightened about going to first grade with your kindergartner is developmentally appropriate and can prove to be helpful in allaying some of their fears. This type of bibliotherapy is useful with children who are progressing through the normal stages of growing up and who may benefit from an exploration into issues relevant to their age or experiences, e.g., bedwetting, nightmares, or fights between friends. It is when the issue becomes problematic for the child and/or family that professional help is required. If you find yourself asking questions such as the following, then maybe you need to consult with a professional. "Is this an issue I feel comfortable dealing with alone? I have tried everything I know, now what do I do?" A therapist may ask you to become part of the therapy by recommending to you certain books to read at home, but this will be in addition to the work being done in the office. The most important thing to remember is that your child is getting the help with the issue before it becomes a major life trauma.

Selection

For those parents who are looking for ways to use literature with their children, there are several sources for appropriate books for and about children. Some authors include bibliographies at the end of their works (see Hébert, 1991; Kerr, 1991; Silverman, 1993). One suggestion by Silverman is to consult a librarian who in addition to her/his own expertise, can point you to the resources like *Bookfinder 5: When Kids Need Books* (Spredemann-Dreyer, 1994). This work allows you to find books by subject, author, or title and includes items for children from 2-18 years. It is a helpful resource that is continually updated but just one example of many guides available to you. It is worth the trouble to explore

the shelves of local libraries and bookstores; don't be timid about asking for help.

Using annotated bibliographies and suggestions by others is a good source for ideas on materials. The best way to select a story is to read the story. It may take time to find an appropriate book for use with your child. You want it to be closely related to the issue at hand, offer suggestions for coping strategies, and include a protagonist your child can relate to. Characters in stories are either humans or animals, ask yourself which will be more appropriate for your child? Can they make the leap from an animal character to their own life, or will they see such a book as babyish? The storyline and characters do not have to match your situation exactly, but be sure there is some commonality. There are many good stories available so don't compromise. Choosing a story that a child cannot relate to will negate your good intentions. Take your time, visit libraries and bookstores. Chances are you will find many more adults in the children's section than you anticipate!

There are also more formal criterion put forth by authors regarding the selection of books. Generally, selecting quality literature is of the utmost importance (Halsted, 1988). Choose books that are well written, clearly printed, and include artwork that is both relevant to the story and pleasing to the eye. Jalongo (1983) suggests there are three advantages for using literature: information, relevance, and acceptance. These three can also be used as criteria to select materials. Ask yourself if the book or story a) promotes the exchange of information between adult and child, b) enables the child to make the connection to her/his life, and finally c) validates the child's feelings and responses to the crisis or issue at hand. Any book or story that incorporates any or all of these ideas would be appropriate to use within the context of bibliotherapy.

Taking Action

Jane's dog ran off his leash and was hit by a car. Her father did not know how to explain to Jane that it was an accident and that sometimes these things happen. She was inconsolable; Riddles had been the family dog since Jane was a baby. A neighbor gave Jane a book called *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst. Jane and her mom read this book about a little boy whose cat died. She was able to relate to how the boy in the story felt and tried to name ten good things about Riddles. Jane came up with 14 things and she and her mom drew pictures about each one. Now, whenever she feels sad about Riddles, Jane reads the book she made. Ziegler (1992) suggests that allowing the child to write his/her own story will help the healing process.

This example shows how one family dealt with the death of their pet. The bibliotherapy exercise was just one way the family helped Jane deal with Riddles' death. There were many tearfilled nights and lackluster days. Eventually, Jane got over the death of her friend, as would be expected, and the book was just one thing that helped her on her way. Immediate results cannot be expected. In fact, with some resistant children, this method will seem to fail miserably. Time is the critical factor. For some children it will take time for them to incorporate the ideas or even want to deal with the issue. Talking about emotions may be difficult and the child may be resistant but with the help from a caring adult, she/he can learn to deal with issues and not ignore them. Not attending to an issue can often lead to more problems down the line. Giving your child the space to explore issues in an open and trusting environment will further validate her/his feelings both about her/himself and you.

Reference

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- Ziegler, R. G. (1992). *Homemade books to help kids cope*. New York, NY: Magination Press.

Resources

Barrett, J. D. (1989). *Willie's not the hugging kind*. New York, NY: HarperTrophy.
[When Willie's best friend tells him hugs are silly, Willie thinks hugs are silly, too. So no one in Willie's family hugs him anymore. But Willie knows deep down, in spite of what Jo-Jo thinks, that he is the hugging kind.](#)

Baynton, M. (1988). *Jane and the dragon*. Martinez, CA: Discovery Toys.
[Jane wants to be a knight but everyone laughs at her, saying that girls can't be knights. The court jester is the only person who takes Jane seriously. He lends her a small suit of armor—which turns out to be just what she needs.](#)

Bradman, T., & Ross, T. (1990). *Michael*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
[Michael was quite simply the worst boy in school. He was always late, usually scruffy, and never did what he was told. His teachers had just about given up on him when one day they discovered that even the most hapless student can blossom.](#)

Brown, M. (1989). *Goodnight moon*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
[A little bunny says goodnight to each of the familiar things in his world.](#)

Cohen, M. (1980). *First grade takes a test*. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books.
[The first grade is distressed by an intelligence test which fails to measure true aptitude.](#)

Cole, B. (1986). *Princess smartypants*. New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
[Not wishing to marry any of her royal suitors, Princess Smartypants devises difficult tasks at which they all fail, until the multi-talented Prince Swashbuckle appears.](#)

Hess, D. (1994). *Wilson sat alone*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
[A little boy always does everything alone and never with his classmates, until a new girl comes to school.](#)

Hill, E. S. (1991). *Evan's corner*. New York, NY: Viking.

Needing a place to call his own, Evan is thrilled when his mother points out that their crowded apartment has eight corners, one for each family member.

Jahn-Clough, L. (1994). *Alicia has a bad day*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

When Alicia can't seem to cheer herself up, she tries going back to bed.

Martin, B., Jr., & Archambault, J. (1987). *Knots on a counting rope*. New York, NY: The Trumpet Club.

A boy learns about strength by listening to his grandfather and his own inner voice.

Most, B. (1990). *The cow that went oink*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.

A cow that oinks and a pig that moos are ridiculed by the other barnyard animals until each teaches the other a new sound.

Ross, T. (1989). *I want a cat*. New York, NY: Farrar Straus Giroux.

Jessy must be the only girl in the world without a pet. And she wants a cat. Unfortunately, her parents think cats are crawly, creepy, yowly things. But Jessy isn't going to let that stand in her way, and she comes up with a wonderful plan.

Simon, N. (1991). *I am not a crybaby*. New York, NY: Puffin Books.

Children describe a variety of situations that make them want to cry, emphasizing that crying is a normal reaction.

Smith, L. (1991). *Glasses, who needs 'em?* New York, NY: Puffin Books.

A boy is unhappy about having to wear glasses, until his doctor provides an imaginative list of well-adjusted eyeglass wearers.

Viorst, J. (1972). *Alexander and the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day*. New York, NY: Aladdin Books.

One day when everything goes wrong for him, Alexander is consoled by the thought that other people have bad days, too.

Viorst, J. (1971). *The tenth good thing about Barney*. New York, NY: Aladdin Books.

In an attempt to overcome his grief, a boy tries to think of the ten best things about his dead cat.

Waber, B. (1972). *Ira sleeps over*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Ira has to decide whether to bring his teddy bear with him when he sleeps over at Reggie's house. His dilemma is solved by a surprising revelation.

Willis, J., & Varley, S. (1986). *The monster bed*. New York, NY: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books.

A little monster is afraid to go to bed because he thinks humans will get him while he is asleep.

Zolotow, C. (1972). *William's doll*. New York, NY: HarperTrophy.

More than anything, Williams wants a doll. "Don't be a creep," says his brother. "Sissy, sissy," chants the boy next door. Then one day someone really understands his wish, and makes it easy for others to understand, too.

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HELP. My child has a problem around an important issue and I cannot afford to go to a child therapist to get professional advice. Does this cry for help sound familiar? Here's a free tip: use books as an immediate resource and problem solve around the issue. In the previous article on using junior fiction as a virtual therapist, we looked at how to use a specifically chosen story to assist your child to problem solve, release their emotions and deal with the problem. Leah Davies, M.Ed. Bibliotherapy can assist children in overcoming their own problems and stories about characters who have successfully resolved a dilemma similar to their own. Identification with a literary model can foster thought and possible resolution to a problem such as dealing with a separation, illness, death, poverty, disability, alienation, disaster, war, etc. The underlying premise of bibliotherapy is that interpreting stories is an ever-changing process to which children bring their own needs and experiences. Since students often have had This is just one way for parents to incorporate bibliotherapy into the everyday interactions with children. Bibliotherapy is the use of literature to address problems or issues current in the lives of children. For some children like Tara, a favorite story, poem, or song can be a comfort in a trying time. A new story or book can be equally as helpful for children because it helps to clarify feelings and validate emotions. Making up their own stories and favorite also can get children to talk and think about issues at hand. Definitions. Bibliotherapy as a technique has

Currently, many children are unable to access emotional support services, and other members of a child's support network are required to provide this emotional guidance and support. This resource book has been written to support children when they have experienced a loss or bereavement. It is intended to be used as a guide by families and friends, school staff, and all other adults supporting children through their grief, to help them to provide this emotional guidance. *Guide to Supporting Children through Bereavement and Loss*. It is specifically written to be as accessible and as user-friendly as possible to help, rather than hinder, the user. It can be used alone, or alongside the storybook *When the Sun Fell Out of the Sky*. [Read more](#). *Collapse*. Parent involvement is essential. It reinforces learning and offers parents a chance to forge stronger bonds with their children, according to Curtis. "Parents can learn to be completely present in the moment with their children while reading a story, rather than being distracted with worrying about other everyday stresses," she says. *Helping older students with stress*. Anecdotal evidence from schools and online student forums suggest that the IB Diploma Programme (DP) workload might be too demanding. [Want to start a bibliotherapy and mindfulness workshop at your school?](#) Marie Curtis recommends the following resources to help you get started; *Sitting still like a frog* by Eline Snel.