

## **Helping Children Cope through Literature**

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### **Abstract**

As a primary educator, I have witnessed the impact literature can have on a child's life. Unfortunately, in our society children are exposed to a much higher level of violence, instability, and death than in previous years. To assist children through these difficult times, it is best to provide them with an outlet of expression. *Bibliotherapy*, or therapeutic reading, helps children relate to characters and therefore cope with their emotions. Most readers are looking for a solution to their own personal life situation and feel more at ease when they learn that they are not the "only ones" dealing with this particular life crisis. Until recently, children's books did not address sensitive topics such as death, divorce, and bullying. In the past few decades and due to societal changes, there have been more books published dealing with these non-traditional issues. Well written credited children's literature is a wonderful avenue of expression, as well as an outlet where children can activate prior knowledge and relate to the feelings of characters in a book. When I began analyzing appropriate children's books to assist children dealing with sensitive issues, I found some wonderful resources to share with other educators, parents, and caregivers, upon request. Adults cannot take away the pain and anguish a child will feel when dealing with sensitive situations. However, it is our responsibility to offer outlets to pave the road to healing and coping for the new generation.

### **Introduction**

In our society children are exposed to violence, instability, and other stressful factors. As a primary school educator, I have witnessed the impact literature can have on a child's life. On September 12, 2001, three children in my class sobbed, explaining that a parent never came home the night before. As these three first grade students cried, others discussed how "cool" the planes looked as they flew into our World Trade Center. To discontinue the morning "chatter" immediately I announced that it was "morning carpet time." One of the children handed me a book and asked me to please read it to them, as the rest of the students voiced their approval. During this traumatic time in our history, a book instantly and uniformly bought tranquility back into my classroom. It was at this moment that I knew the bridge between coping, expression, and healing for my students would be through children's literature. Individuals of all ages appear to lose themselves in stories. I have read picture books to five year olds, as well as Master's degree candidates. Both groups of students will display disapproval if I discontinue reading in the middle of an interesting book. Story-telling is a timeless teaching tool. Expression through text offers readers of all ages the opportunity to find solutions through the characters and conflicts within a story, and thus within themselves. As educators we can utilize this avenue of expression to provide the guidance and resources required by our students to securely pave the road to coping and healing, consequently enabling academic and emotional progression.

Over the past few decades, there have been significant shifts in our society. More families in our communities live in poverty, speak languages other than English, and are culturally diverse. Divorce, child abuse, military deployment, relocation, and school violence are some issues on the rise that are having a major effect on our students (Pratier, Johnstun, Dyches, and Johnstun, 2006). Various students in crisis might exhibit symptoms observable in the classroom such as; laziness, carelessness, lack of motivation and engagement, and resistance to authority (Sitler, 2008). Maslow (1987) states that an individual's basic needs, such as food, shelter, and safety, must be attained to lay the foundation for future educational opportunities. Therefore, if children are concerned about where the next meal is coming from or personal security, logically they will have great difficulty concentrating on classroom instruction. According to Horseman and Naparstek, children cannot conceptualize beyond daily survival and getting through each day might be all the student can endure. It is essential for children to learn the coping skills needed to successfully handle the distress, frustration, and anger that are a part of their daily life and to emerge with a sense of self-control, hope, and resilience (Oddone 2002; Beslin 2005; Kersey & Malley 2005). Children's literature is the tool necessary to assist children through personal tribulations.

Real life does indeed call for real books: books that provide information, comfort, and models for coping with life's difficult times (Roberts and Crawford, 2008). Bibliotherapy, or therapeutic reading, (Galen and Johns, 1979) helps children relate to characters and cope with their own emotions. Often the reader is looking for a solution to his/her own personal life situation and feel more at ease when learning that he/she is not the "only one" dealing with a life crisis. Dreyer (1984) identifies three characteristics concerning the use of literature to assist children through trying times (Kramer and Smith, 2004). *Universalization* reinforces that other children have experienced similar anguish. *Catharsis* connects the reader and the characters in the story. Empathy and problem solving are exhibited during this stage. Finally, *insight* helps the reader to self-reflect and apply their knowledge to others and society. Through the use of bibliotherapy, unknowingly readers encompass all of these characteristics. It is natural for readers to analyze, empathize, and internalize story attributes. Bibliotherapy defines the importance of reading during times of crisis.

Until recently, children's books did not address sensitive topics such as loss, divorce, and bullying. In the past few decades there have been more books published dealing with non-traditional issues. Young children are extremely susceptible to the environment in which they live. According to Schwiebert (2003) when dealing with sensitive issues, such as death, even with very small children it is not helpful to pretend that nothing is wrong. They will sense your anguish. Your willingness to discuss this with them reassures them that 'we can talk about anything' (1) and that it is okay to share thoughts and emotions. Children's literature is an avenue of expression and an outlet where children can activate prior knowledge and relate with the feelings of characters in a book.

In my classroom, journal writing allows the children to independently free-write about a topic of choice. In the drama center, children utilize their imaginations to create scenarios such as; a kitchen setting, a pizzeria, or a doctor's office. It is during these two occasions that I observe the children as they interact with one another and discuss self-selected issues. This is when I have the ability to gain insight into the fears, concerns, and experiences of my students. Often I will intervene when I hear them talking about situations with false pretenses. An example that comes to mind occurred when two children were playing and one stated that "Daddy is moving out because I didn't clean my room." When children are not informed, or misinformed about the changes surrounding them, they are left to draw their own conclusions (Kastenbaum, 2006). This could be detrimental to their self-esteem. Roberts and Crawford (2008) convey the importance of utilizing books to increase children's knowledge when dealing with life changing events. Through this avenue of enlightenment, adults can offer children the tools they require to assist them through difficult and life changing times.

While I do not advocate for utilizing life crisis books routinely in a whole class setting, I have learned that many books are especially beneficial during individual counseling or intervention sessions. They are also excellent resources for parents requesting assistance during hardships. I believe adults cannot take away the pain and anguish a child feels when dealing with a crisis. However, we can offer outlets to pave the road to healing and coping. "Although teachers are not qualified to conduct psychotherapy with students, they are qualified to discuss student's feelings about being in school and consider classroom problems the students might be

experiencing” (Pratner, M.A., Johnstun, M.L., Dyches, T.T.& Johnstun, 2006). Books dealing with bullying and test taking anxiety can be shared with all of the children in class. However, if a child has just witnessed a shooting in his/her neighborhood, the adult might choose to share a book directly with that specific child to ensure privacy and security.

Children are exposed to death regularly as a result of media coverage of the war and violent depictions through television and video games. In American society, it is taboo to discuss death with children. As a result, there is limited information and research regarding the topic of children’s insight and death. Maria Nagy, a Hungarian psychologist, conducted a study approximately 45 years ago to interpret children’s perception of death (1948). Through Nagy’s limited research, professionals have learned that young children are unable to conceptualize and internalize death. She worked with 378 children between the ages of three and ten. She asked the three and four year old children verbally about death. Children, five and six years old, drew pictures of their perceptions. The oldest group of children wrote essays about what they understood of death. From this study Nagy concluded that the youngest group of children believed that death is reversible and avoidable. Often they depicted the dead as “sleeping.” The second group of children personalized death as often portrayed by the Grimm Reaper. They feel that death can be outwitted or escaped. The eldest group of children were developmentally able to internalize the finality of death as irreversible and inevitable.

According to Branch and Bison (2007), since children cannot cognitively process death, the impact of separation is invariable despite the circumstances. When a loved one is absent due to incarceration, death, or substance abuse, it is a “loss” (41). Research shows that children with secure attachments demonstrate higher levels of confidence and are less dependent (Reinert, 2005). This is important for teachers to acknowledge since they could also provide a secure attachment relationship. At times, the routine and structure in the classroom might be the only structure in a child’s life. Since children are unable to comprehend the loss of a loved one, they will often look to adults for guidance. According to Moller, (1996) if conversations regarding death are avoided in the home, the child will formulate their own hypothesis and coping mechanisms (148). Knowing what might happen in situations surrounding deployment, separation or divorce, moving, illness, or death demystifies children’s fears associated with these

difficult times (Roberts & Crawford, 2008). As a result of cognitive development, children do not grieve the same way that adults do. Their emotions might be overpowering. As a result, the child might reveal intense grieving one minute and appear to be happily playing the next (Schwiebert, 2003). Some children might act out their anger aggressively or become reclusive. Since these are behaviors observable in classroom settings, educators should document and share information to best assist the child.

Often children are exposed to death through the loss of a pet or grandparent. However, research demonstrates that homicide is the second leading cause of death for individuals between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. Almost a half million children between the ages of ten and nineteen were injured as a result of neighborhood violence (Crockett, 2003). These statistics indicate that many of the students in our classroom will be affected either directly or indirectly by acts of violence. Appropriate books encourage readers to forget, to escape from the pressures of daily life, and lose themselves within the pages of a story. Literature invites us to remember personal tribulations, encourage importance of hope, offer avenues of practical support, and teach life lessons to assist us through our own obstacles (Roberts and Crawford, 2008). Children's books can help the child to escape the chaos of his/her own life, in addition to providing the opportunity of discussion of text and perceptions.

Divorce and separation is another life changing event for individuals. In the past thirty years, the rate of divorce has increased to above 50% in America. In the United Kingdom, 28% of the children experience parental divorce by the age of 16 (Whitehead, 1996; Butler et. Al 2003). Research reveals that children of divorce have less self-confidence, higher documentation of misbehavior, and can be academically challenged (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Children may also feel angry that the divorce has altered their structured life (Strong, et. Al. 1998). Since most divorces tend to occur during the first decade of marriage (Clarke, 1995), many children of divorce are in elementary school during this traumatic event. Butler (2003) states that it is critical to maintain some kind of cognitive control during this crisis time period. Since young children tend to lack the emotional vocabulary to express themselves, picture books can offer them an opportunity to communicate (Butler, 2003).

Parental incarceration is another issue that haunts some of the children in classrooms today. In 2007, it was estimated that almost 1.5 million American children had a parent in prison (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008). Many transformations contribute to the trauma of parental incarceration. Often children will feel helpless, ashamed, sad, and angry. It is common that children will have to relocate and consequently feel displaced from family and/or their neighborhood. The remaining caregiver might be forced to work an additional job to meet the needs of financial obligations. The children are then either left alone or possibly in unfamiliar territory. At times, familiar relationships with grandparents might be strained, resulting from required relocation. The trauma that children endure might begin with the exposure of criminal activity within their environment or with the parental arrest (Newby, 2006). Johnston (1995) identifies childhood behaviors that might be evident as a result of this trauma. Some behaviors might include; hypervigilance, aggression, attention/concentration problems, and withdrawal from others, including peers. Since educators are in daily direct contact with students, they can closely monitor changes in the child's behavior and provide support when required.

Of incoming prisoners, research demonstrates 6% of female prisoners were pregnant. This statistic translates to signify hundreds of children born and separated from their mothers at a very young age, lacking that required intimate relationship for both individuals. Within a 13 year period, the number of incarcerated women tripled (Seymore, 1998). According to Snell (2004) half of all imprisoned parents do not receive visits from their children and the rest receive infrequent visits making it difficult to maintain ongoing relationships. This leads many young children to wonder why their parent left and if they will ever come back. Visitations generally occur on the weekends; therefore, the children might miss the opportunity to partake in other family or social occurrences. There are many issues that children might be haunted by as a result of parental incarceration. Often the children worry about parental safety and fear the remaining caregiver might also be taken from them, they mourn the loss of the family they once had, and the loss of their own childhood (Newby, 2006). Children will generally hide their parent's incarceration and demonstrate learning difficulties, as well as acting out (Branch and Brinson, 2007). Statistics demonstrate that 57% of inmates grew up with only one parent in the household (U. S. Department of Justice, 1994). This demonstrates the importance of intervening

and providing support to children that are currently in single person households. Children's literature can demonstrate that the characters in the book have also endured similar heartache and can offer hope into the lives of the readers.

In the past few years, an increasing amount of children had an absent parent as a result of military deployment. In 2001, the number of single fathers exceeded 64,000 and the number of single mothers in uniform exceeded 23,000 (Military Family Resource Center, 2002). Many American children are aching for a loved one who has been called to active duty in Afghanistan, Iraq, or elsewhere. As a result, teachers are educating emotionally distracted children and need to assist them with coping mechanisms (Allen & Staley, 2007). Fassler (2005) validates that children may experience a slight decline in classroom performance while a parent is on active military duty. Children may have difficulty studying due to the consumptions of worry regarding status of parental health and well being. According to Waddell & Thomas (2004) it is important that adults are honest and not offer false hope. It is acceptable and appropriate to admit if you "don't know" something. Specialist Kevin Rose, 138<sup>th</sup> Signal Battalion, defines his job as a soldier to "fight and protect," a teacher's job during deployment is to "educate and support" (Hayes, 2004).

Today's children need tangible support as they face a range of challenges that extend far beyond the cognitive domain (Roberts & Crawford, 2008). Bibliotherapy is a strategy utilized in classrooms to teach pupils about individual differences (Iaquinta & Hipsky, 2006). From my experience, young children appear to be most empathetic to individual situations. They are curious and are not afraid to inquire about differences. Allowing them the prior exposure through books will answer many of their questions to pave the way for acceptance. According to Roberts and Crawford (2008) reading a book in which the characters deal with stress can be timely and helpful, providing a number of literature alternatives allows children to choose what they want to read. Through exposure to non-traditional books, children can produce a positive change in self-concept, reading readiness, and achievement (Afolyan, 1992; Lauren, 1995; Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000). Educators and caregivers can provide annotated bibliographies of appropriate books on a variety of topics to support families in difficult times and to help them identify books that might fit the needs of specific situations. Life does not give us dress rehearsals to deal with difficult

times, but through books and discussion children get that opportunity (Roberts & Crawford, 2008).

Bullying is another societal predicament which can be addressed through bibliotherapy. Children in our society are also exposed to bullying at a very young age and it can have a life long impact. The Committee of Children (2003) survey, 78% of children stated they had been bullied within a one month period. According to Olweus (1999) one in six Swedish children is exposed to bullying regularly. This can have detrimental effects on the child emotionally and psychologically. Beran (2005) reiterates that there are numerous people involved when bullying occurs: the bully, the victim, and the bystanders. Stereotypically, the bully usually lacks relationships with peers, the victims isolates themselves and lacks confidence, and the bystander is left feeling helpless and vulnerable (Beran, 2005, Mash and Wolfe, 2007, Rigby, 1999). In Crockett's study (2003), although many victims reported self-isolation in response to bullying, one-third reported plans for getting back at their intimidators. Unfortunately, in the past few years our society has witnessed numerous school shootings as a result of this internal rage.

Brooks Brown was a personal friend of Dylan Klebold, one of the Columbine executioners. He revealed that he and Klebold were "skinny, geeky kids who were interested in computers and weren't any good at sports" (Cook, 2004). Brown claims that he was also following the same path as Klebold, but a teacher changed his life. Brown reveals that "all it takes is one butterfly, flapping it's wings to change a child's life by making life a little easier" (Cook, 2004). When a child is an outcast, they feel unaccepted and tormented. When analyzing the role gender has on bullying, Bjorkqist (1992) and Crick (1997) claim that females are prone to partake in relational bullying, indirect "gossip," while males engage in direct bullying, verbal and physical. Baldry and Farrington (2004) focus on an approach that identifies components enhancing empathy, building perspective-taking skills, and encouraging peers to support victims to reduce bullying in schools. Appropriate books dealing with bullying, offers the reader beneficial problem solving options, as well as offering the emotional support required to overcome personal distress.

Bullying appears to be revolutionizing with technology. Belsey (2004) defines Cyberbullying as involving the use of information and communication technologies such as e-mails, cell phone, and pager text messages, instant messaging (IM), defamatory personal Web sites, and defamatory online personal polling Websites, to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others. Research demonstrates that in general, females impose virtual abuse through instant messaging, online conversations, and e-mails. Whereas males are more likely to partake in online threats and build websites to target others (Keith & Martin, 2005). Brooks Brown (2004) reveals that some of the bullying victims of Columbine often turned to technology, as they were not “into sports.” As a result Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, the Columbine killers, created a horrific website detailing the events that would unfold on April 20<sup>th</sup> 1999. These children used the computer as their outlet, and what transpired was monumentally catastrophic. Technology enables opportunities that were inexistent in the past. If utilized correctly, the opportunities created for our students are endless. However, if children have full accessibility to technology without guidance or boundaries, the results can be devastating. To prevent cyber bullying, Keith and Martin (2005) recommend advising children to never share personal information on the computer, share concerning emails with trusted adults, and never open emails from potential cyber bullies or unknown individuals.

As a result of violence and instability in our education system, new teachers today have a different perspective than veteran teachers regarding school safety. In the past, schools were a place of security and protection. We have learned that in current times schools can be targets of school violence and terrorism. Younger teachers grew up in a different time where they were exposed to high profile school shootings through media (Dunn-Kenney, 2007). As an educator at a state university, I have had numerous teaching candidates approach me with questions regarding school violence. They are well aware of the dangers that could possibly occur in an educational setting. However, they still have the passion to pursue their dreams of teaching. In the days following September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, my school experienced a “lock down,” which lasted approximately 40 minutes. It was immediately necessary to keep the children as quiet as possible while sitting on the floor of the closet area. Not knowing what was happening outside the walls of my classroom or the building itself was agonizing. It was not another terrorist attack as feared, but a safety precaution within my school building that was managed

successfully. However, it was a moment in which my preparation for disaster changed forever. During the Northern Illinois University shooting on February 14, 2008, elementary teachers revealed that they took the children into their interior bathrooms with play-dough and books and were too busy to be frightened (Kenney, 2007). It is important that we educate future teachers of all possible situations that might arise so that they are best prepared personally. This preparation will benefit future teachers, as well as providing assistance to the students in their classrooms.

Teaching in an inner city school district has given me the opportunity to observe how immigration can affect children. Often when teaching English Second Language learners, I learn that the children go home to teach their parents the English language and what they learned in school. According to Jensen (2001), there were “14.2 million first and second generation immigrant children in the United States translating to 5% of all Americans and 20% of all children”(44). Many immigrant children experience difficulties in language, culture, and education causing them discomfort and anxiety (Midobuche, 1999). Lamme, Fu, & Lowery (2004) believe that if children read books about children’s life experiences that may differ from their own, they may develop an understanding of children from other cultures. Through exposure of picture books, students in the classroom will develop an appreciation and understanding of various cultures (124). The United States Census Bureau (2002) reports the number of foreign-born and first generation citizens to be 56 million, which translates to 20% of the United States population. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) supports high-quality and comprehensive educational programs for migratory children to help reduce the educational disruptions and other problems that result from repeated relocations. Although this benefit lies within the formal documentation, standardized testing is also an essential component of NCLB. This can cause high anxiety within the academic lives of our students. As a result, numerous books have been published dealing with test-taking anxiety, as well as homework apprehension. These books help children to overcome the fear of educational institution mandates and offer humor into stressful situations.

Ungar (1995) identifies the necessity of providing school-aged immigrant children with an outlet of expression and the importance of making connections to other children. Often the migrant children will be the “first to make the cultural and linguistic adjustments to their adopted

country. They strive to be accepted by their peers” (Crocco, 434). Children of all ethnic backgrounds want to be accepted and are less resistant to new traditions. According to the United States Bureau of the Census data (2002), over 500,000 illegal immigrants settle in America each year. As a result of the undisclosed information, teachers might be unaware of the child’s heritage and circumstances. The United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (2006) reveals that there are currently about 12 million refugees or asylum seekers world wide, and more than half are children. Many refugee children come to American schools after experiencing the murder of family members, war, starvation, and loss of home (Strekalova and Hoot, 2008). Immigrant literature “depicts the experiences of all races, cultures, and creeds and can promote positive attitudes in readers, elimination common prejudices and stereotypes” (Lamme, Fu, & Lowery, 123). As teachers in our society, we need to lay the foundation for tolerance and acceptance, in hopes of eradicating discrimination.

Children can be displaced from their home for a number of reasons. To protect children from physical and sexual abuse, neglect, and in a dangerous environment, children are often placed in the foster care system or in Emergency Housing facilities. According to the Children’s Defense Fund (2003), an American child is reported abused or neglected every 11 seconds. In 2003, there were 581,000 children in foster care, while an additional 127,000 children were waitlisted. Emerson and Lovitt (2003) reveal that 15-20% of children in foster care score lower than their peers on statewide achievement tests in reading and mathematics. This only produces additional stress in the lives of already frightened and emotionally exhausted children. Research demonstrates that foster children had twice the rate of absenteeism, disciplinary referrals, and remaining in the same grad for an additional year compared to their peers not in foster care (Parrish, Graczewski, Stewart-Tietelbaum, & Van Dyke, 2002). It is important for educators and caregivers to provide the desperately needed support to foster care children to offer them coping mechanisms to ease their emotional burden. Swick (2007) emphasizes the necessity for the sake of society’s future, since currently research demonstrates that many America’s foster children are unable to function as healthy adults. Former foster children are three times more likely of ending up homeless (Toth, 1997). It is our responsibility, as human beings and members of society, to intervene and transform the likelihood of former statistics.

## Conclusion

To assist children through trying times, it is best to provide them with opportunities to express themselves. According to Smith-D'Arezzo & Thompson (2006), "there has been an explosion of books on the market that depict children from a variety of backgrounds and in numerous life situations, challenges, and conflicts"(335). Through *universalization* and *catharsis* (Dreyer, 1984) children can gain a sense of self through bibliotherapy. Even when children are not directly affected by a difficult situation, the exposure of life crisis literature helps them to gain a greater understanding of the world and to empathize with others in our society. According to D'Arezzo & Thompson (2006), many "teachers are often too preoccupied with other duties to notice when a child is silently crying out for help." Appropriate books will enable a conversation, giving teachers insight into a student's lives providing the opportunity for teachers to actually hear those "cries for help" (Topics of Stress and Abuse in Picture Books for Children, 345). It is best for educators to realize that if the children want to talk, an adult should be there to listen to them. Alternatively, students might prefer to express themselves through drawings or writings. According to Branch and Brinson (2007) it is important to reassure them that they will be secure and protected. Demonstrating proper expression of personal emotion is important for the child to observe because they tend to mimic adult reactions. If the adult is demonstrating a stoic unemotional status, it might avert the child from grieving or reaching out to others, and/or developing skills to cope. Olson (2003) also recommends designating the first two weeks of the school year to establishing a safe and accepting classroom community.

As educators we can utilize bibliotherapy as an avenue of expression to provide the guidance and resources required by our students to securely pave the road to coping and healing, consequently enabling academic and emotional progression. Although we cannot eliminate the anguish that our students are exposed to when they leave our school, our profession requires that we educate and support them when they are in our care. Sitler (2008) validates that teachers who teach with awareness can provide pathways to healing. Students need attention in individual and caring ways so that learning can occur. Through exposure to life crisis books, we are creating an open communication within the walls of our classroom that supports expression and protection. It is our responsibility as human beings to create a solid foundation for the future of our society. As teachers, we need to educate the whole child, and provide guidance intellectually, socially,

and emotionally (Garrett, 2006). The forthcoming of our existence rests within the lives of our children. We need to offer them problem-solving skills, as well as unlimited possibilities. *Bibliotherapy* is a tool we can utilize to introduce hope into the lives of our students.

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Published by the Forum on Public Policy

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