

# Book Therapy (Bibliotherapy)

*A collection of articles and extracts*



Good Ships is an initiative of  
Relationships Australia Victoria

## Foreword

*“Bibliotherapy is the process of using books to help children think about, understand, and work through social and emotional concerns. Reading with children can be therapeutic.... Adults can use reading to help children come to grips with issues that create emotional turmoil for them. Reading can also be...very effective in preventing and resolving behaviour problems.”*

- Darla Ferris Miller

Bibliotherapy can assist children in overcoming problems by having them read 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 difficulty identifying and communicating their feelings, stories can serve to facilitate open discussion and self-understanding. If children become emotionally involved with literary characters, they are more able to verbalise, act out, or draw pictures describing their innermost thoughts. (Leah Davies, M.Ed.)



## Contents

Children's Books for Use in Bibliotherapy.....	4
From: Michael Delaney Cantor, "The Use of Story Telling In Therapy With Children".....	6
A Parent's Guide to Helping Children: Using Bibliotherapy at Home .....	9



## Children's Books for Use in Bibliotherapy

Anna Tielsch Goddard, MSN, RN, CPNP-PC

[http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/734236\\_3](http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/734236_3)

J Pediatr Health Care. 2011;25(11):57-61.

Reading to children is central to their development. Books provide a safe medium for children to explore different concepts, feelings, and attitudes while allowing them to better understand their environment, community, and societal expectations. Reading to children increases self-esteem, gives comfort, and may aid children in coping with difficult situations.

Briggs and Pehrsson (2008) reported that librarians in the 1930s compiled lists of books to assist clients with concerns similar to the bibliotherapy lists used today. Thibault (2004) emphasises that the key to bibliotherapy is using the story as a way to begin a discussion of issues and should be used as a substitute for dealing with problems.

For bibliotherapy to be successful, the child first needs to identify with the characters in the story who are coping with similar issues (Gregory and Vessey, 2004, Thibault, 2004). The reader then must become emotionally involved in the story and finally have insight or a realisation that the characters in the book worked through solutions to their problems. The child then may begin to understand that his or her issues can be solved using a similar solution (Gregory & Vessey; Thibault, 2004, Tu, 1999).

Books also provide structured communication between two individuals, which is particularly helpful when dealing with difficult subject matter. Bibliotherapy has been used to open communication between children, parents, and teachers (Amer, 1999, Gregory and Vessey, 2004). The use of bibliotherapy in clinical domains has increased in recent years in order to promote therapeutic gain (Amer, 1999, Gregory and Vessey, 2004, Mazza, 2003, Pehrsson et al., 2007). Narratives outside the child's individual situation provide story lines that aid in the understanding of his or her own personal feelings and help children realise that they are not alone in their situation (Heath et al., 2005, Pehrsson et al., 2007). With the correctly chosen book, story characters can provide an exemplar to guide the child through distress or challenges (Pehrsson et al., 2007).

Research also has shown that the use of story characters as models for the child can foster self-efficacy and coping skills (Early, 1993, Jasmine-DeVias, 1995). Gregory and Vessey (2004) explored the use of children's books as a successful intervention strategy for school nurses to help students with bullying. They found that through the use of bibliotherapy, children began to communicate their own experience with bullying and have been able to develop coping strategies to deal with teasing and harassment (Gregory & Vessey, 2004).



## References

- Amer, K. (1999). Practice applications of research. *Bibliotherapy: Using fiction to help children in two populations discuss feelings*. *Pediatric Nursing*, 25, 91–95.
- Briggs, C. A., & Pehrsson, D. E. (2008). Use of bibliotherapy in the treatment of grief and loss: A guide to current counseling practices. *AdultSpan Journal*, 7, 32–42.
- Early, B. P. (1993). The healing magic of myth: Allegorical tales and the treatment of youngsters of divorce. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 10, 97–106.
- Gregory, K. W., & Vessey, J. A. (2004). Bibliotherapy: A strategy to help students with bullying. *The Journal of School Nursing*, 20, 127–133.
- Heath, M. A., Sheen, D., Leavy, D., Young, E., & Money, K. (2005). Bibliotherapy: A resource to facilitate emotional healing and growth. *School Psychology International*, 26, 563–580.
- Jasmine-DeVias, A. (1995). Bibliotherapy: Books that can play a role in helping children work through some of the effects of abuse and neglect. *New England Reading Association Journal*, 31, 2–17.
- Mazza, N. (2003). *Poetry therapy: Theory and practice*. New York: Brunner Routledge.
- Pehrsson, D. E., Allen, V., Folger, A., McMillen, P., & Lowe, I. (2007). Bibliotherapy with preadolescents experiencing divorce. *The Family Journal*, 15, 409.
- Thibault, M. (2004). *Children's literature promotes understanding* (The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, School of Education). Retrieved from [www.learnnc.org/lp/pages635?style=print](http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages635?style=print)
- Tu, W. (1999). *Using literature to help children cope with problems*. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse.



## Article 2

**From: Michael Delaney Cantor, “The Use of Story Telling In Therapy With Children”***Bibliotherapy*

Another form of storytelling is bibliotherapy defined by Tussing and Valentine (2001) as, “The usage of literature to assist individuals in understanding and treating their problems, generally through the aid of a social worker or therapist” (p.457). Literature is defined rather broadly including self-help, fiction and non-fiction books and poetry. Many clinicians believe that through the use of bibliotherapy, clients are able to address therapeutic issues by noting how characters in the book experience and resolve similar problems. For example, the clinician may read and then discuss stories with a child and therefore help the child to gain empathy for the feelings and issues experience by another person as well as gain insight into their own feelings and issues (Jackson, 2001). As Kramer (1999) reports, bibliotherapy allows people to “walk in the shoes” of another person and to see themselves from the outside.

In 1916, the term bibliotherapy was coined by Samuel Crothers to refer to the therapeutic use of books (Pardeck, 1994). Seventy years after its conception, Lenkowsky (1987) comments on the paucity of research on bibliotherapy, stating, “The absence of systematic, objective, comparative research, however, suggests that while many believe in bibliotherapy and are using it, sufficient substantiated evidence of how it works, why it works, or if it works, is not yet available” (p. 128).

Hynes and Hynes-Berry (1986) recognise four major goals that a clinician can assist a client to achieve with the utilisation of books. These goals are:

1. To improve the capacity to respond by stimulating and enriching mental images and concepts, and by helping the feelings about these images to surface.
2. To increase self-understanding by helping individuals value their own personhood and become more knowledgeable and more accurate about self-perceptions.
3. To increase awareness of interpersonal relationships.
4. To improve reality orientation. (p. 24)

Books may also provide the reader with illustrations to assist the child in handling certain situations the child encounters. The use of books enables the reader to assume new roles and identities and try out different lifestyles vicariously (Coleman & Ganong, 1990). The client may also be able to better understand his or her own reactions or feelings by reading about character’s conflicts, emotional responses, and cognitions (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986). As Coleman and Ganong (1990) note, “The advantage of adolescent or children’s fiction for shared family reading experience is its clarity and brevity. More books can be shared in a short time” (p. 330). Clinicians are able to utilize books with subject matters pertaining to presenting problems in an effort to convey acceptance of the client and concern for them (Jackson, 2001). Jackson (2001) further suggests:



The therapist can use bibliotherapy to encourage clients to examine personal perceptions within the supportive social context of counseling. Clients can understand their actions and put themselves in a better position to identify and consider alternative points of view and behaviors needed to grow and develop. Using bibliotherapy, the therapist can help clients gain insight into their lives (p. 293).

McDaniel (2001) argues that children's literature may be used to help prevent child sexual abuse if the literature is selected carefully. McDaniel believes that, "The best literature speaks to us individually yet holds universal appeal, connects without lives, remains fresh and alive with subsequent reading – it delights and informs us" (p. 203). Many people are not able to identify specifically why a book impacted them as it did; rather they are able to remember how they felt when they read the literature (McDaniel, 2001).

McDaniel (2001) recognizes that literature can assist children in identifying dangerous circumstances, to recognize their own unfair treatment, to help validate that they are not strange or so different from others, and to ask for support as needed. McDaniel further believes that literature can be a powerful tool in decreasing children's feelings about being "the only one". Children can read about examples of others coping with similar issues and situations. McDaniel (2001) notes, "More modern literature reflects current norms and gender roles, providing children with relatively accurate depictions of every day life" (p.204).

McDaniel (2001) recognizes, however, that in using literature to instill healthy attitudes in children toward themselves and others, it is pertinent to be mindful that literature often contains stereotypical or negative messages. Topics relevant to a child's everyday life must be presented in order to assist children to comprehend their world and empower them to take care of themselves.

McDaniel (2001) also discusses ways in which children's books may be utilized in an effective manner. She believes that in utilizing rhyme in conjunction with a serious topic, children will want to read or have books read to them. A rhythmic style enables children to more easily remember the words and they will be more likely to participate. Another method that she believes to be effective is literature that enables the child to engage in an interactive manner. One example of this would be having the author interact with the reader within the text of the story. McDaniel (2001) also mentions the importance and use of pictures in children's books, therefore recognizing that "visual depictions can invoke emotional responses, which may or may not coincided with the text, and illustrations can introduce ideas that are seemingly unrelated to the story" (p.220).

### *Bettelheim*

Bruno Bettelheim (1976) was an Austrian born writer and Freudian psychologist originally known for his studies of autism and for his discussions of the therapeutic use of fairy tales. Bettelheim was the author of *The Uses of Enchantment*, published in 1976, in which he discussed the meaning and importance of fairy tales, such as those collected and published by the Brothers Grimm. He suggested that if children were allowed to read and interpret these fairy tales in their own way, they would gain a greater sense of meaning and understanding about the issues in their lives (Bettelheim, 1976).



The fairy tale is therapeutic because the patient finds his own solutions, through contemplating what the story seems to imply about him and his inner conflicts at this moment in his life. The content of the chosen tale usually has nothing to do with the patient's external life, but much to do with his inner problems, which seem incomprehensible and hence unsolvable (Bettelheim, 1976, p.25).

Bettelheim (1976) posits that if children are allowed to read about the trials, tribulations, successes and failures encountered by the heroes of fairy tales, this will better prepare them for the trials, tribulations, successes and failures that they will encounter in their own lives.

Bettelheim (1977) maintained that fairy tales inform us about life's struggles, hardships and the reality of death. From Bettelheim's point of view, the fairy tale is a "manifold form" that communicates to the child, educates them about life's vagaries and realities, which are the unavoidable aspects of our existence. More specifically the fairy tale is an educational tool to help children grow and develop into adults as well as instruct children how to behave cooperatively within a social context. He goes on to say that the child needs to be given suggestions in symbolic form about how he may deal with these issues and, via this therapeutic exposure, develop safely into maturity. Only through exposure to images that speak directly to the unconscious will the child's unconscious processes become clarified (Bettelheim, 1976).





## Article 3

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

Mary Rizza

University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT

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.



## References

- Borders, S., & Paisley, P. O. (1992). Children's literature as a resource for classroom guidance. *Elementary School Guidance & Counseling, 27*, 131-139.
- Halsted, J. (1988). *Guiding gifted readers*. Columbus, OH: Ohio Psychology Publishing.
- Hébert, T. P. (1991). Meeting the affective needs of bright boys through bibliotherapy. *Roeper Review, 13*(4), 207-212.
- Jalongo, M. R. (1983, July). Using crisis-oriented books with young children. *Young Children*, pp. 29-35.
- Kerr, B. A. (1991). *A handbook for counseling the gifted and talented*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Lenkowsky, R. S. (1987). Bibliotherapy: A review and analysis of the literature. *The Journal of Special Education, 21*, 123-132.
- Silverman, L. K. (1993). *Counseling the gifted and talented*. Denver, CO: Love Publishing.
- Spredemann-Dreyer, S. S. (1994). *Bookfinder 5: When kids need books*. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.
- Ziegler, R. G. (1992). *Homemade books to help kids cope*. New York: Magination Press.

