

Zoe's Choice

Zoe's Choice is a story about dealing with conflict in relationships, and coping with and overcoming fears and worries. Zoe is pushed by her friend and becomes too scared to sleep, afraid that a monster named Scarolena is going to hurt her. With the help of her family, Zoe discovers her own strengths and learns to overcome her fears.

Using Zoe's Choice in therapy

Sharing a book is a non-threatening, developmentally-sensitive way of opening up a conversation. It helps to build rapport and can help in the development of a warm friendly relationship between therapist and child.

A book like *Zoe's Choice* can be used to help children:

- identify and validate their feelings
- talk about their fears
- realise that other children have problems similar to their own
- stimulate dialogue about seeking support when in need
- foster self-awareness
- discover ways of coping with fears
- learn ways of being assertive and saying no to violence
- decide on a constructive course of action.

In particular Zoe can be used to do the following.

- Help externalise anxiety and invite the child to find their own ways of managing it.

- Discuss violence in relationships, in particular, being frightened, saying no to violence, safety rules, seeking help, getting family support and using coping skills.
- Explore the set of feelings, experiences, or narratives that accompany the themes in the previous dot point: inner-strength, resilience, staying true to yourself while being respectful to others, and the value of imagination and friendship.
- Talk about rifts and repair in relationships.
- Explore a child's view of their relationships with their family, including how they can support and help each other in times of trouble, and how they can manage problems such as fear and violence.
- As a visual tool to assist children to find the words to describe their experiences and fears in a non-threatening way.
- Explore how to manage peer relationships using Zoe as an example. Zoe holds a solid position on safety in relationships and shows forgiveness when amends are made.
- Think about ways of managing fears, difficult friendships and strengths.



Bibliotherapy

The key to bibliotherapy is to use the story as a way to begin a discussion of issues and as a substitute for dealing with problems head on.

It allows the child to step back from his or her problem and experience it from an objective viewpoint. It offers the child a safe avenue to investigate feelings. Bibliotherapy helps you gain insight into how the child experiences the world through his or her responses to the story.

The story can be used to trigger a series of activities or be incorporated into play therapy, helping free the child up to verbalise, act out, or draw pictures describing their thoughts and feelings in their own way.

Follow-up activities can include asking open-ended questions, retelling the story, acting out roles, using puppets, writing reactions, recording thoughts, and/or using various art materials to help a child explore themes and feelings triggered by the story.

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Ways you could use the book in session

There are no rules or set instructions for using *Zoe's Choice* in a therapeutic setting. However, examples of the sorts of questions you could use to start and structure a conversation after reading *Zoe's Choice* are provided below. These questions can help to explore specific themes or therapeutic goals, depending on the focus of your work with a particular child. Ways of responding and some activities are also provided.

The "what happened" story

This concept helps to check a child's understanding of the story, how much they were engaged by it and what they took from it. It helps to share the experience of the story.

- Is this a good book?
- What was your favourite bit?
- What happened to Zoe and Lena at the beginning of the story?
- Why was Zoe frightened?
- What did Zoe's family do to help her?
- Do you think Zoe's family were helpful?
- Did Zoe change at the end of the book?
- Why do you think she changed?
- Why did Zoe and Scarolena dance together at the end?
- What happened to Zoe and Lena at the end? What changed?

Ways of responding

- Listen to and reflect on the thoughts and feelings of the child.
- Share and reflect on the child's enjoyment of the story.
- Ask "What happened next?"

- Show appreciation for the child's contributions.
- Reflect on the child's statements.
- Return to a picture and ask: "What's happening here?" or, "If you saw someone pushing someone else what would you do?"
- What is something you enjoy doing with a friend?
- What is something you don't enjoy doing with a friend?

The "feelings" story

Themes or therapeutic goals that can be explored include identifying, understanding and managing feelings, empathy, coping and sharing experience.

- After reading *Zoe's Choice*, do you feel happy, sad, scared or something else? Why do you feel that way?
- When Lena pushed Zoe, how do you think Zoe felt?
- Has anyone ever pushed you? How did that make you feel? What did you do? What did you tell yourself? Who helped? How did they help?
- Have you ever pushed anyone? How do you think they felt? How did you feel?
- Do you find Scarolena scary?
- How do you manage feeling bad or angry?
- Can you pick a picture where Zoe felt sad/good/bad/scared/strong/frightened? What is different about the pictures?
- What makes you worried or scared?
- If you were going to tell a story about your fears what would you call it?
- Can you draw a picture of what your worry or fear looks like?

Ways of responding

- Reflect and acknowledge the child's feelings.
- Explore how the child copes with these feelings, incorporating their words and thoughts.
- Focus on coping and ask: who and what helps the child cope with these feelings?
- Ask if the child would do anything different next time this happens.
- If the child's coping skills are unproductive, suggest that asking a responsible adult for help is a productive way of coping.

The "identity/relationships" story

Themes or therapeutic goals that can be explored include being pushed, being scared, seeking help, ways of coping, finding creative solutions, making friends, being assertive and saying no to violence.

- Do you think Zoe was weak or strong? Why?
- Were the family members helpful to Zoe?
- What are good ways of helping a scared child?
- Were Lena and Scarolena weak or strong?
- Tell me about a time you had an argument or fight with a friend. Did you become friends again? How did you do that?
- What do you think would happen if Lena kept pushing Zoe?
- What do you think Zoe should do if Lena kept pushing her?
- Is it good to get family members to help? Why or why not?
- Tell me about a time when you were frightened and got help to solve the problem.

Counsellors' resource

- Tell me about a time when others learned from you.
- Tell me about a time you learned something from a friend or family member.
- Explore a time when you felt like Zoe or one of the other family members.

Ways of responding

- Reflect on the ways the child responded.
- Congratulate the child for their creativity and strength.
- Ask where and how they learned to be strong and creative.
- If the child says they have not been able to triumph over fear, ask who they know that has triumphed over a fear in real life, in a movie or book. Celebrate the child's awareness of resilience.
- If the child is not aware of a person's triumph over fear and anxiety, tell a story of a child's triumph over fear.

The "strengths" story

Zoe's *strengths*, found at the back of the book, can be used to celebrate strengths and ways of coping with fear and relationships.

Exercises and questions to ask

- Which images show your strengths?
- Choose an image that you like and tell a story about it and you.
- Choose a strength you'd like to develop.
- Choose an image that celebrates something about your friend, sibling or parent.
- Choose a random image. What does it mean to you? Who does it remind you of? Does it bring up a memory of a particular time or event?

- Choose an image that is about something that you have never experienced.
- Look at the skills Zoe's family used to help her overcome her fears. What skills do your family members use to help you? What skills do you use to help your family members?
- Draw a picture of a time when someone in your family helped you.
- Draw a picture of a time you helped someone in your family.
- Look at the page on Zoe's strengths. What strengths do you use to cope with being hurt or frightened, or to develop good friendships?
- What do you really admire or love about yourself? How are you clever? Can you tell me about a time when you thought or did something that was really creative? What's one thing that you love or admire about your family members?
- Tell me about a time when someone else wanted you to act in a way that didn't suit you.
- Invite the child to share an experience of triumphing over adversity, of being strong and resilient.
- Have you ever been really strong?
- Have you ever been clever?

The aim of Relationships Australia Victoria's Good Ships project is to produce a series of engaging, beautifully illustrated story-books, with accompanying resources for parents, teachers and counsellors. The books can be read simply for pleasure, but each is focused on a challenge or difficulty children commonly face. The idea behind the series is a simple one: stories help us connect, grow, learn, and heal.

