

Using Bibliotherapy with Children

By Leah Davies, M.Ed.

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 verbalize, act out, or draw pictures describing their innermost thoughts.

Use of bibliotherapy is not limited to crisis situations, nor is it a cure for severe psychological difficulties. It may not meet the needs of some children, especially those who are not ready to face their specific issue. Other students may be unable to transfer insights gained from reading into their own life, or may use literature as a form of escape. Yet, these experiences with literary characters have been shown to be beneficial to many children.

The goals of bibliotherapy are to help children:

- identify and validate their feelings;
- realize that other children have problems similar to their own;
- stimulate discussion;
- foster thought and self-awareness;
- discover possible coping skills and solutions; and
- decide on a constructive course of action.

How can counselors, librarians and teachers use bibliotherapy?

1. Identify the needs of individuals or groups of students.
2. Locate literature that deals with emotional and developmental difficulties or unfortunate situations your student or students may be experiencing. Read the material prior to using it or recommending it. If you choose to read aloud or to refer a child to a particular story or book, be sure it is appropriate for the child's age, gender, maturity and background. The characters and plot should be realistic and include honest problem-solving. If literature is not available on a particular subject, consider books on tape or videos to assist children in learning ways to cope with their problems. Seek administrator approval if you plan to use bibliotherapy on topics that may be controversial in your community.
3. Choose a method to involve a child or children with the literature. Read a story aloud to one child or to small or large groups of children. Also, students may read assigned stories or books on their own. Those children with similar concerns could meet in small groups.
4. Design follow-up activities such as asking open-ended questions, retelling the story, acting out roles, using puppets, writing reactions, tape recording thoughts, and/or using various art

materials to help children discover that:

- other children have similar feelings when confronted with comparable circumstances;
- they are not the only ones who experience dilemmas; all children encounter some difficulties in their lives;
- everyone has strengths and weaknesses and through self-appraisal children can learn to persevere;
- facing a problem is the first step to solving it;
- there are a variety of ways to deal with a dilemma and that they can decide on a course of action; and
- it takes time to remedy a problem; if they are unsuccessful at first, they need to think of something else to try.

5. When deemed necessary, involve children's parents in the process. Offer suggestions for additional reading selections and/or activities to assist the students in dealing with their emotions and specific difficulties.