

**Bibliotherapy, Adverse Childhood Experiences and Early Childhood Education**

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October 28th, 2022

**Abstract**

Bibliotherapy is the practice of using books that relate to a particular life event or circumstance to process emotions and build coping skills ( Eisenman & Harper, 2016; Iaquina & Hipsky, 2006; Vetri, Piche & Villatte, 2006; Devries & Sunden, 2019; Weaver et al., 2022; Mehdizaden & Khosravi, 2019). This paper will explore the various areas of concern that can be addressed using bibliotherapy. Children live and experience many different challenges in life including: living with people who are experiencing mental and physical health challenges, being diagnosed with a life altering illness or disability and children who experiencing trauma or abuse. This paper will then demonstrate how this information relates to early childhood educators and how we can use it to aid in classroom management and further the development of the children in our care.

## **Introduction**

Children in today's society are facing increases in stress and challenges both in family and community life (Mendoza & Bradley, 2021). Bibliotherapy is a strategy that can be used to help children and their families navigate a wide variety of concerns through the use of books that directly relate to their particular life circumstances (Eisenman & Harper, 2016). This form of intervention is useful because it is versatile and can be utilized by parents and professionals. Children Experiencing adverse life events are at a higher risk of negative developmental outcomes (Vetri, Piche & Villatte, 2006; Devries & Sunden, 2019; Weaver et al., 2022; Mehdizaden & Khosravi, 2019; Mendoza & Bradley, 2021) and as early childhood educators who work directly with a wide variety of children from various backgrounds it is important to be aware of interventions that can help children understand themselves and the people around them. Bibliotherapy is a versatile intervention that can be applied to a variety of childhood adversities including life circumstance, medical diagnosis and trauma or abuse, and we can use this information to support the development of children in our classrooms.

### **What is Bibliotherapy?**

Bibliotherapy refers to the therapeutic use of books to address problems or issues that may occur in a person's life (Eisenman & Harper, 2016). Bibliotherapy can be utilized by both adults and children however this paper will focus on using this technique with young children.

Bibliotherapy can be dated back to the 1930's when librarians began gathering books on specific subjects with the intent for people to use them for self-help or to aid in changing

behaviours (Eisenman & Harper, 2016). Research has shown that books help us understand ourselves better when we identify with characteristics and circumstances presented in literature that allow us a safe space to explore the meaning behind thoughts, beliefs and behaviours of characters that align with our own thoughts, beliefs and behaviours (Eisenman & Harper, 2016).

Eiseman & Harper (2016) describe four stages of bibliotherapy that include: “identification, catharsis, insight and universality” (p. 11). Identification occurs when a child can identify with a character in the book (Eisenman & Harper, 2016). Catharsis involves a release of emotions experienced by the reader as they follow the characters journey and insight happens once the reader connects their experiences with the characters experiences (Eisenman & Harper, 2016). The last step, universality, occurs when children realize that their problems are experienced by many people and creates a sense of community and belonging (Eisenman & Harper, 2016).

Bibliotherapy involves more than simply reading a book. The first step is essential as the book chosen must be developmentally appropriate, relevant and engaging (Weaver et al., 2022; Iaquina & Hipsky, 2006). It requires thoughtful questions and discussions regarding the problem that is being addressed and then followed up with corresponding activities to practice concrete skills learned during reading and reflecting (Iaquina & Hipsky, 2006).

### **Life Circumstances**

Children live in a variety of life circumstances that include outside influences that can effect their social and emotional development. Living with parents or siblings who struggle with

medical conditions and diagnosis can have negative effects on the feelings they experience and their ability to cope with these feelings (Vetri, Piche & Villatte, 2006; Devries & Sunden, 2019).

Vetri, Piche & Villatte (2022) state that one in five children live in a home with a parent who is dealing with a mental illness. Children who have parents struggling with mental illness are at a higher risk of negative life experiences and often report poor parent-child relationships with many children experiencing parentification, leaving the child feeling responsible for their parents wellbeing (Vetri, Piche & Villatte, 2006). Several factors contribute to children experiencing negative effects of parental mental illness such as the parent symptoms, a lack of information about the parents mental illness, a fear of developing the same condition or a fear of being held responsible for the parents illness (Vetri, Piche & Villatte, 2006). This can lead to a child feeling an excess of negative emotions including: “fear, anxiety, sadness, guilt, shame, [and] confusion” (Vetri, Piche & Villatte, 2006, p. 2)

In Vetri, Piche & Villatte’s (2022) study, they explored how appropriate and useful bibliotherapy is when addressing the challenges that school aged children face when living with parents with mental illness. Their research confirmed this strategy was both appropriate and useful from several perspectives including parents, children and psychosocial professionals (Vetri, Piche & Villatte, 2022). They found that both parents and children were able to understand and identify with the everyday life situations the characters in the book experience and through this understanding were able to learn concrete strategies to cope with these challenges (Vetri, Piche & Villatte, 2022). Reading the book together allowed for a safe space to start difficult conversations about mental health and provided corresponding activities that encouraged concrete coping skills in self regulation and problem solving (Vetri, Piche & Villatte,

2022). Both parents and professionals recognized the potential for developing stronger familial bonds, allowing for better social support and well being (Vetri, Piche & Villatte, 2022).

Another life circumstance that children face is living with a sibling who has a disability. Research has documented that this social and emotional experience can build strengths as well as provide challenges that could affect a child's development (Devries & Sunden, 2019). "Most children who have a sibling with a disability struggle with feelings such as guilt, embarrassment, anger and over-identification" as well as feelings of loneliness and a pressure to succeed (Devries & Sunden, 2019, p. 137). These are complicated feelings to process and bibliotherapy provides an opportunity for both parents and children to identify, express and cope with uncomfortable topics (Devries & Sunden, 2019).

Devries & Sunden (2019) were able to identify the needs of the participants through discussions had after reading the book that related to having siblings with a disability. Three themes came from these discussion including the need for quality time away from the siblings, preferably with parents, the ability to express their feelings in a safe space, even if they are uncomfortable to say and hear and to have access and friendships with children who are in similar circumstances (Devries & Sunden, 2019). This supports our understanding of bibliotherapy as the value is derived from the conversations and meaning we have around the story.

### **Medical Diagnosis**

As the previous section demonstrated, living with family members who have medical diagnosis can affect a child's social and emotional well-being, however, children who are

diagnosed with medical conditions themselves are also at risk for negative health outcomes that range from an inability to focus to death ( Weaver et al., 2022; Mehdizaden & Khosravi, 2019).

When children are diagnosed with serious illness like cancer or a blood disease it can be hard to explain the complex nature of the disease as well as the treatment plan to young children and their families (Weaver et al., 2022). Cancer is a traumatic experience for anyone however for children there are many concepts such as physical changes, life adjustments and impending death that can be hard for children to understand and process (Weaver et al., 2022). Weaver et al. (2022) explains the bibliotherapy can “provide a practical, tangible format to help children understand a new diagnosis; address physical changes; communicate their fears, worries, hopes; and find safe ways to process complex emotions” (p. 1).

Children with physical, mental and intellectual disabilities are also at risk of experiencing social, emotional and physical challenges (Mehdizaden & Khosravi, 2019). Intellectual disability is not only characterized by the child's intelligence but also the child's ability to function (Mehdizaden & Khosravi, 2019). Taft et al. (2016) found that using bibliotherapy has been shown to be effective in reducing aggressive behaviours and improving self-concept (as cited in Mehdizaden & Khosravi, 2019, p. 286) and since we know that children with disabilities are at risk of developing negative self concepts and behaviours we can use bibliotherapy to address these concerns as they happens well as a preventive measure (Mehdizaden & Khosravi, 2019).

### **Trauma / Abuse**

The last category we will explore is children who have experienced trauma. Mendoza & Bradley (2021) state that in the U.S. one in three children experience trauma or abuse. This is an

important statistic as childhood trauma is particularly impactful because of the rapid development children experience in the early years of life (Mendoza & Bradley, 2021). This is relevant to the early childhood field because we are likely to have children in our classrooms who have experienced trauma or abuse. Trauma or abuse place these children in a position of increased risk for social, cognitive and physical delays (Mendoza & Bradley, 2021). Another aspect of trauma and abuse that Mendoza & Bradley (2021) state is attachment and how children who have these experience require stable and compassionate adults to help them navigate the negative effects of their experiences. They explain that bibliotherapy provides a safe space for children to explore feelings surrounding traumatic events by allowing them to separate themselves from the story to have more control over the feelings they are feeling (Mendoza & Bradley, 2021). It is over time and thought discussion that children are able to then relate, and feel comfortable expressing their own feelings about their real life trauma (Mendoza & Bradley, 2021).

Regehr et al. (2021) studied how children who experience parental suicide can use bibliotherapy to deal with increased feelings of grief. Children who are dealing with a parental suicide may seem to go through the same grief stages as children who lose a parent to a natural death, however the impact of suicide on children is much more complex and they can feel the effects of loss more intensely (Regehr et al., 2021). Surviving parents may not be able to recognize this, in part, due to their own grief. In an effort to protect the child, surviving parents often avoid the topic of the way in which the parent died (Regehr et al., 2021). However, this approach only solidifies communication barriers because it fosters “environment of secrecy, confusion and distrust” (Regehr et al., 2021, p. 795). Bibliotherapy is a form of intervention that



can be used to provide developmentally appropriate, accurate information for children to begin processing and overcoming the adversities they experience due to suicide (Regehr et al., 2021).

### **Early Childhood Education**

Bibliotherapy is an effective tool to address the many challenges children face throughout their lives. This is important information for early childhood educators as our job is to facilitate and further the development of the children in our care. Bibliotherapy is versatile and can be applied to a variety of life challenges that can come from outside sources such as living with family members who struggle or personal experiences with mental or physical disabilities, medical diagnoses and experiences of trauma and or abuse (Vetri, Piche & Villatte, 2006; Devries & Sunden, 2019; Weaver et al., 2022; Mehdizaden & Khosravi, 2019).

We can use this information to help the children in our care understand their peers, themselves and their experiences ( Eisenman & Harper, 2016; Iaquina & Hipsky, 2006; Vetri, Piche & Villatte, 2006; Devries & Sunden, 2019; Weaver et al., 2022; Mehdizaden & Khosravi, 2019). As we have learned, bibliotherapy it is not simply the act of reading a book, it requires us to be thoughtful and to create space for uncomfortable conversations, to ask appropriate questions and follow through with relevant activities that support the concepts and coping skills related to the book ( Eisenman & Harper, 2016; Iaquina & Hipsky, 2006). We can use bibliotherapy to educate children about disabilities, mental health and what other children may be going through or feeling. These experiences require us to be knowledgeable about facilitating conversations that are meaningful and posing questions to help guide children to self awareness, mindfulness, empathy, compassion, ingenuity and kindness with themselves and others.

## **Limitations**

Several studies indicated that small sample sizes were a concern or limitation of the research (Vetri, Piche & Villatte, 2022; Devries & Sunden, 2019). They indicate that more research with larger sample sizes would help confirm the results of their findings (Vetri, Piche & Villatte, 2022; Devries & Sunden, 2019). However, many research studies confirm that bibliotherapy is a valid form of intervention that is successful in helping children identify, relate and cope with a variety of childhood adversities (Eisenman & Harper, 2016; Mehdizaden & Khosravi, 2019; Weaver et al., 2022; Mehdizaden & Khosravi, 2019).

The second limitation that was discussed are the skills of the reader as they are critical to the effectiveness of bibliotherapy (Eisenman & Harper, 2016; Mehdizaden & Khosravi, 2019). As we have discussed bibliotherapy requires more than just the reading of a book. It requires the ability to choose appropriate books that are relevant to a particular child's circumstances and also requires adults to make space for processing emotions and difficult conversations by asking relevant questions and following through with activities related to bibliotherapy (Vetri, Piche & Villatte, 2006; Devries & Sunden, 2019; Weaver et al., 2022; Mehdizaden & Khosravi, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Research has shown that bibliotherapy is a versatile and effective intervention for a variety of developmental concerns stemming from many life circumstances and complications (Vetri, Piche & Villatte, 2006; Devries & Sunden, 2019; Weaver et al., 2022; Mehdizaden & Khosravi, 2019). Bibliotherapy creates a safe space for both children and adults to: approach difficult conversations, create a sense of belonging and acceptance through the realization that

many people are dealing with similar issues and it creates an opportunity to learn coping skills needed to overcome life challenges such as, problem solving or emotional regulation, in a meaningful and appropriate way ( Eisenman & Harper, 2016; Iaquina & Hipsky, 2006; Vetri, Piche & Villatte, 2006; Devries & Sunden, 2019; Weaver et al., 2022; Mehdizaden & Khosravi, 2019). We can use this information about bibliotherapy as early childhood educators to help the children in our care feel welcome, included and cared for while also supporting their development (Eisenman & Harper, 2016; Iaquina & Hipsky, 2006).

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