

## **What is Bibliotherapy?**

Last night after dinner Debbie's parents told her and her sisters that they were getting a divorce. The children will continue to live in the house and go to visit their father on the weekends and in the summer in his new home.

Jack and his grandfather went fishing together almost every Saturday. Last fall his grandfather was diagnosed with cancer and is now in hospice care.

Mollie's brother has just been diagnosed with juvenile diabetes. Mollie wonders if she will ever be able to eat candy again.

What do Debbie, Jack, and Mollie have in common? Each of these children is facing a difficult situation in their life. They are probably experiencing a variety of feelings such as sadness, anger, and fear. These children may have lots of questions that they don't know how to or are afraid to ask. The adults in their lives may not know how to talk with them about what is happening.

How can pastors and educators support help children and their families who are in the midst of a difficult situation such as death, divorce, or chronic illness? One way is to use bibliotherapy which is "the process of using books to help children think about, understand, and work through social and emotional concerns."<sup>1</sup> For centuries it has been evident that reading can be a powerful tool for discovery and understanding. The specific term "bibliotherapy" was first used by Samuel Crothers in a 1916 issue of Atlantic Monthly and defined as "a technique of prescribing books to patients who needed help understanding their problems."<sup>2</sup> The use of bibliotherapy was at first limited to hospitals where it was used with World War I soldiers who

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<sup>1</sup> Darla Ferris Miller, Positive Child Guidance, Sixth Edition. (Florence, KY: Wadsworth Publishing, 2009), 260.

<sup>2</sup> S.M. Crothers, "A Literary Clinic," Atlantic Monthly: 118, 1916: 295.

were recovering from injuries. Within 20 years its use had spread to a variety of different settings and it was first utilized with children in 1946.<sup>3</sup>

The use of bibliotherapy with children in the midst of a difficult situation in their lives has several positive benefits. Children who are struggling with issues such as death, divorce, and chronic illness will find themselves being able to relate to literary characters in books that face the same issues. Identifying with a book character can give children the opportunity to begin to think about and express their own feelings about a particular situation. Children are not “mini adults” and cannot be expected to sit down with a pastor or an educator and have a thoughtful conversation about a difficult situation because in many cases they simply do not have the words to say how they feel. Reading a book with a caring adult is also less threatening for a child than a face to face conversation that takes the form of an adult asking a child a series of questions. As a child reads about a character that is experiencing a similar situation, s/he begins to be more able to act out, draw pictures, or have the words to talk about and describe their innermost feelings. A book can provide the building blocks to stimulate a discussion between an adult and a child about a difficult situation.

Pastors and educators need to engage in several tasks before any books are used to engage a child in the process of bibliotherapy. ***It is critical to read a book before using it.*** Do not rely on a summary that may be posted on a web site or reviews that have been written by other people. Read the book for yourself so that you can judge the text and illustrations for yourself. This will also give you the opportunity to ascertain whether or not the beliefs expressed by the author are in line with the theology of the Reformed tradition. After reading the book, take the time to ***locate scripture passages that would be helpful to talk about*** as you share

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<sup>3</sup> S.M. Agnes, “Bibliotherapy for Socially Maladjusted Children,” Catholic Educational Review :44, 1946: 10.

the book with a child. Finally *develop a list of questions or talking points that you could use to help stimulate a discussion about the story*. The faith reviews posted on this web site are a great guideline to use when developing these talking points.

Bibliotherapy is one tool that pastors and educators can use when they are trying to help a child deal with a difficult situation. Reading a book and discussing it will not “fix” the child or make the problem go away. It will open the lines of communication between children and adults who care about them so that the process of healing can begin.

### **Bibliography**

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