
Using Bibliotherapy to Help Children Cope with the Changing Family

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Bibliotherapy is discussed with an emphasis on how the school social worker can use the technique to help children cope with the changing family. The authors present useful books for helping children cope with the family in transition and present guidelines for using bibliotherapy with children.

■ Bibliotherapy has been used by the helping professions as a treatment technique since the turn of the century. In the 1930s, Drs. Karl Menninger and William Menninger advocated the use of bibliotherapy not only by professionals but also by laypersons.¹ Many articles on the subject of bibliotherapy appeared in the professional literature in the 1940s; these articles examined the psychological validity of this emerging approach to treatment.² During the 1950s, the seminal work of Shrodes and others examined the state of the art of bibliotherapy, thus influencing the field greatly from a philosophical point of view.³ Hannigan and Henderson did extensive on-site research in a prison concerning the impact of bibliotherapy on young drug abusers who were close to the time of parole. Their case studies, conducted during the 1960s, indicated the success of bibliotherapy.⁴ Since the 1960s, numerous studies have been conducted on bibliotherapy suggesting that it can be an effective treatment tool.⁵

Most simply defined, the term *bibliotherapy* means helping with books. A more detailed definition from the *Dictionary of Education* states that bibliotherapy is the

use of books to influence total development, a process of interaction between the reader and literature which is used for

personality assessment, adjustment, growth, clinical and mental hygiene purposes; a concept that ideas inherent in selected reading material can have a therapeutic effect upon the mental or physical ills of the reader.⁶

In essence, this detailed definition suggests that bibliotherapy can be used as a treatment technique not only for addressing clinical problems but also for meeting the growth and adjustment needs of clients. Lindeman and Kling suggested a similar distinction for the uses of bibliotherapy, viewing it as an approach that can help emotionally troubled people, people with minor adjustment problems, and children who need help meeting developmental needs.⁷

For children who are experiencing difficulties, treatment through bibliotherapy can be useful. The children read about others who have solved similar problems, and with this information and the guidance of a skilled helper, they can gain new insight into alternative solutions for themselves. Through books, children also can see how others have encountered anxieties and frustrations, hopes and disappointments, failures and successes, and they can apply this insight toward meeting real-life situations. Some therapists also suggest that literature can be a tool in preventing some difficult situations from becoming full-blown problems.⁸ In other words, bibliotherapy can be used as an effective tool for helping children deal with various problems related to childhood. In this article, the focus is on using bibliotherapy to help children cope with the changing family patterns in American society.

Is It Effective?

A major question of those not familiar with the bibliotherapeutic technique concerns the effectiveness of the approach. In *Young People with Problems: A Guide to Bibliotherapy*, the present authors discussed 24 studies that have found bibliotherapy to be effective as a treatment tool.⁹ Two of the core journals for school counselors in the United States, *Elementary School Guidance and Counseling* and *School Counselor*, continuously publish papers on the effectiveness of bibliotherapy. In contrast, little has appeared in the social work literature on this technique. For the years 1980 to 1983, a content analysis of articles dealing with bibliotherapy in two school counseling journals

Table 1. Number of Articles Published in Four Major School Counseling and Social Work Journals That Include Bibliotherapy among Therapeutic Techniques (1980–1983)

| Journal | Number of Articles That Include Bibliotherapy |
|--|---|
| <i>Elementary School Guidance and Counseling</i> ^a | 15 |
| <i>School Counselor</i> ^b | 26 |
| <i>Social Casework: The Journal of Contemporary Social Work</i> ^c | 5 |
| <i>Social Work</i> ^d | 2 |

^aPublished 4 times a year, each issue includes approximately 10 articles.

^bPublished 5 times a year, each issue includes approximately 10 articles.

^cPublished 10 times a year, each issue includes approximately 8 articles.

^dPublished 6 times a year, each issue includes approximately 10 articles.

and the two major social work journals is presented in Table 1.¹⁰ The results of the analysis illustrate that, as a treatment technique, bibliotherapy is well-grounded among school counselors but not among social workers.

The Changing Family

Demographic studies conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census in 1983 clearly showed that an increasing number of families are in a state of transition.¹¹ The number of children living with their biological parents has decreased from 79 percent in 1960 to 65 percent in 1982. (See Table 2.) A major shift in family structure has occurred since 1960, at which time, 9 percent of children lived with one parent; as of 1982, 22 percent of children lived in households headed by one parent. Although this figure did not represent a dramatic increase since 1960, in 1982, 10 percent of all children lived in blended, or remarried, families.

Divorce is a major factor contributing to change in the structure of the American family. Bumpass projected that if present trends continue, in the 1990s, 41 percent of children born to married couples in the United States will have experienced family disruption.¹² When children of unmarried mothers are included in this projection, a child born in 1983 has a 49 percent chance of living in a single-parent family—for a period of time that is unlikely to be brief.¹³

Table 2. Trends in Family Structures for Children under 18 Years of Age (percentage)

| Family Structure | 1960 | 1970 | 1982 |
|--------------------|------|------|------|
| Biological parents | 79 | 73.7 | 65 |
| Blended family | 9 | 9.4 | 10 |
| One parent | 9 | 13.4 | 22 |
| Other | 3 | 3.5 | 3 |

Adapted from P. C. Glick, "Children of Divorced Parents in Demographic Perspective," *Journal of Social Issues*, 35, No. 4 (1979), pp. 170-182; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Marital Status and Living Arrangements," *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, No. 380 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983).

These changing family structures have presented unique problems for some children. Several problem areas for children identified as experiencing disruption in family structure include the following:

1. The fostering of guilt, anger, and hostility because of changes in family structure.
2. A diminished sense of belonging, which results from confusion, a divided sense of allegiance, and a sense of being pushed and pulled by parental problems.
3. The loss of security, inducing real and imaginary fears related to family breakdown.
4. The family's loss of income, which may adversely affect the children's physical needs.

Often such problems of children are neglected in single-parent families because of the high level of poverty associated with this family system.¹⁴

Helping professionals need to be sensitive to the problems created by family transitions. In particular, professionals working with children must have insight into three major family trends that have an impact on many children: (1) the increasing number of divorces, (2) the growing number of single-parent families, and (3) the significant percentage of children living in blended, or remarried, family systems.

Divorce. Wallerstein and Kelly and others have identified several major issues that often confront children who are working through problems related to their parents' divorce.¹⁵ It should be noted that these problems are not always associated with children of divorce and that, when present, the problems may vary in intensity. The children's

reaction to their parents' divorce often concerns such issues as the following:

- Some children have difficulty acknowledging the divorce.
- Many children feel a great loss because of the absent parent.
- Often children are angry at the parents for breaking up, and some children may even blame themselves for the breakup.
- Some children have problems realizing that the divorce is permanent and that their parents will not reunite.

Single-Parent Families. Much has been written about the single-parent family in terms of poverty, probably the number one problem of this family system. However, there are other issues that children of single parents must deal with that are not necessarily present in the two-parent family system.¹⁶ Among these are the following types of issues:

- Children of single-parent systems often experience the negative effects of the financial stress associated with this family system.
- Children of single-parent systems may have to assume increased responsibility at home because of their parent's employment.
- Single parents often attempt to assume the roles of both parents, which may affect their children's emotional and intellectual development.
- Children may have negative reactions to their single parent's dating.
- When children visit their noncustodial parent, problems may arise related to visitation.

Blended, or Remarried, Families. Although the increase in the number of blended, or remarried, families has not significantly risen over the past two decades, approximately 1 in 10 children under 18 years of age lives in this kind of family system.¹⁷ Visher and Visher identified the following core points as unique sources of tension and stress in the blended family:

- The lack of clear roles and rules is often a problem.
- There may be an unrealistic expectation that the stepparent should instantly love the child, and vice versa.
- The loyalty of the child for the noncustodial biological parent may be a source of difficulty.
- Conflict and rivalry among stepsiblings may be present.¹⁸

Bibliotherapy

The value of literature as a means of coping with various situations has long been recognized.¹⁹ Although bibliotherapy has been used for several decades by allied helping professionals, social workers appear to be relatively unfamiliar with this unique approach to treatment. According to Cionciolo, "books can provide a source of psychological relief from the various pressures and concerns that stem from the things that happen to children."²⁰ By providing books for children dealing with certain problems, the school social worker can help them to (1) gain greater insight into their problem, (2) focus attention outside of the self,²¹ (3) realize that they are not alone in having this problem, and (4) share their problem with others.²² Whether the school social worker uses bibliotherapy with an individual child or with a group of children, books can aid in exploring problems and discussing solutions.

The changing family structure as evidenced by the increase in divorce rates, single-parent homes, and blended, or remarried, families has created unique problems that children must cope with. Currently, there are many excellent children's books available that deal with one or more of these changing family situations.²³ (See Fig. 1.)

Although selecting a book for children that reflects their problem is an integral part of bibliotherapy, other factors must also be considered. To make the best use of bibliotherapy in helping children cope with the changing family, the social worker should observe the following guidelines:

1. Bibliotherapy should be used as an adjunct to other forms of counseling.²⁴
2. An adequate working relationship based on rapport, trust, confidence, and mutual understanding must exist between the social worker and the child before bibliotherapy is introduced.²⁵
3. The child's chronological age and reading level should be considered in selecting books. Talking books, braille, or large-type books may be needed for handicapped children.
4. Bibliotherapy is most effective for children with reading abilities that are average or above average.
5. Familiarity with plot, characters, and so on, of the book is required before the social worker suggests it to the child. It is best to have several appropriate books for the child to choose from.

6. The reading of the book should be followed by activities such as guided discussion, role-playing, creative writing, or art projects. Follow-up activities should be based on the age of the child, his or her likes and dislikes, and so on.²⁶

Identifying Children in Need

Bibliotherapy cannot be used with all children, in all settings, or for all purposes.²⁷ Therefore, school social workers need to use good judgment in the application of bibliotherapy. Few professionals can deny, however, that the reading of problem-centered literature has considerable value in helping some individuals deal with growth and adjustment needs.²⁸ By identifying those children who would benefit most from bibliotherapy, school social workers can help them face transitions in family life.

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Accepted April 2, 1986

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