

Dynamic Duo: Combining Bibliotherapy with Play Therapy Techniques

By

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"Oh the Places You Will Go" (Seuss, 1990) when utilizing bibliotherapy combined with other play therapy techniques! What is bibliotherapy? Simply stated, bibliotherapy is the use of books as a therapeutic intervention. Reading is a healing experience. The power of the written word is not a new discovery. In fact, the early Egyptians called libraries the "drugstores for the soul". In ancient Greece the inscription over a library entrance reads, "The Healing Place of the Soul".

Definition and History

Bibliotherapy is defined as the use of literature to help people cope with emotional problems, mental illness, or changes in their lives (Pardeck, 1994); Lenkowsky (1987) adds that it is used to produce affective change and promote personality growth and development. The definition, concept and use of bibliotherapy has expanded and evolved over time. The term bibliotherapy was first coined in 1916 by Samuel Crothers, who wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly* about a technique of bringing troubled persons together with books. It was used in WWI with recuperating soldiers. In 1937, at the Menninger Clinic, bibliotherapy was used to treat mental illness. In 1950, Carolyn Shrodes developed the first theoretical model suggesting that bibliotherapy is effective because readers can identify with characters and can work through a problem along with a character, achieving insight about their own situations (Shrodes, 1955). This model included three stages of bibliotherapy: identification (client aligns with story), catharsis (client able to release emotions), and insight (client experiences integration of thoughts, emotions and own processes). By 1970, came the work of Rhea Rubin and the classification of two types: Developmental Bibliotherapy (in educational settings) and Therapeutic Bibliotherapy (in mental health setting). Currently,

research shows that bibliotherapy has been employed by nearly every helping profession with all age groups, in multiple populations and with a wide range of benefits (Pehrsson and McMillen, 2006).

Benefits

Children naturally enjoy stories and having books read to them. They relate to and learn from repetition as Dr. Seuss and Mem Fox have shown in their many beloved stories with distinct rhythm and rhyme. When reading to my own children, I would barely finish the last line before they would exclaim, "do it again". Yet bibliotherapy involves more than pleasure reading, as the client experiences Shrode's stages of identification, catharsis and insight. Memorable characters and ideas can unblock emotions and provide opportunity for the client to recognize and understand themselves and others as guided by a well-trained therapist. Children do not have to "own" their problems as books provide some psychological distance and safety. Well-selected books can promote healing and social development and encourage self-efficacy. Books can enhance insight, identity, and foster empathy and responsibility. Bibliotherapy stimulates discussion, clarifies values, and identifies, validates, and normalizes feelings. In addition, bibliotherapy can present coping and problem solving skills. Bibliotherapy can be used with individuals, families or groups with a wide array of issues.

A therapist can "tailor" a book to a child's needs or age. One needs to inform the child that the story is being abbreviated or changed slightly. Often when I select *NoNo and the Secret Touch* (1993) by Sherri Patterson and Judith Feldman to use with an active preschooler, I will have to make adjustments as the story has more length than they can handle. Sometimes I summarize some pages or use two sessions to complete the book. A helpful resource guide, music tape, and coloring sheet are provided with this book. In addition I often combine it with the "OK to Say No" game from *Paper Dolls and Paper Airplanes* (1998) by Crisci, Lay and Lowenstein.

What about the child that is "too old or too cool" for books? Acknowledge age limitation but show your own love for the book –

enthusiasm is contagious. You might make the child “your consultant” on behalf of someone else. With children, one size does not fit all. Children connect or learn in one or more of four distinct ways: visually, auditory/language, kinestically/tactile, and logical/analytical. Thought provoking, beautifully illustrated books combined with hands on activities can address each of these styles. An example of this is seen in Jeanie Ransom’s book (1994), *I Don’t Want to Talk About It*, combined with “What Would You Be?”, an activity designed by Paris Goodyear Brown (2002). This activity provides the child a hands-on opportunity to express emotions about parents getting divorced. On each page of the book, the child becomes a different animal with a different feeling: a porcupine so no one can touch her, a bird so she can fly away, etc. The child uses clay or paint to create the animal they would be. Goodyear-Brown provides processing questions as well.

Bibliotherapy can be utilized in engagement, assessment, treatment, and termination. On the initial visit children sometimes arrive with anxiety as their families have not explained to them about therapy. In some of these cases, I will select *A Child’s First Book about Play Therapy* (1994). A thorough assessment involves obtaining information from more than just the parents. Bibliotherapy combined with play techniques can be especially helpful in soliciting assessment information from the child’s perspective. The book, *A Terrible Thing Happened* by Holmes (2000) provides opportunity for a child to open up about a traumatic event they may have witnessed or experienced. Sometimes what is bothering the child the most is not what is perceived by the parents to be the problem. Sueann Kenney-Noziska (2008) developed a technique, “*How Big Is the Problem?*” that assesses distress and difficulty from the child’s perspective and allows the child the means to identify and quantify the problem.

Controversies and Cautions

Some have questioned whether bibliotherapy qualifies as play therapy. Pehrsson (2006) points out that bibliotherapy definitions and benefits are aligned with those of play therapy as defined by the Association of Play Therapy on the website: www.a4pt.org. Just as toys, sandtray and other play interventions are utilized to aid expression and communication, when a child connects with a story or character, that

child is better able to understand, to verbalize, and play out their innermost thoughts, concerns and feelings.

Some have also argued that there needs to be certification and training requirements for those practicing bibliotherapy. At the least there is a clear need for the therapist to be well prepared and knowledgeable. Hynes and Hynes-Berry (1994) suggest preparation include both relationship building and assessment of client interests and needs. The assessment guides the therapist in selection which involves matching the story and the client. The application can vary from directive to non-directive and more-facilitated to less-facilitated.

Malchiodi and Ginns-Gruenberg (2008) suggest the following six guidelines for using bibliotherapy effectively with traumatized children:

1. Preview all books
2. Consider the relevance of the story to the child's current situation
3. Introduce why the book is relevant
4. Consider developmental needs
5. Engage the imagination and senses
6. Choose books that provide comfort and reassurance

This list is not necessarily all inclusive. An additional guideline that I would add would be to have a solid theoretical foundation. Best practice would suggest that books, like any play interventions, should support the theoretical base of the therapist. Because of the extensive and varied benefits that bibliotherapy provides, it is a good fit for most theoretical frameworks.

McMillen states "All the things that make bibliotherapy powerful in a positive way can make it powerful in a negative way". Let me provide a hypothetical situation. Upon entering the lobby to pick up a client, the mother remarks to the therapist that the child is upset about her dog dying. The therapist remembers that she has a tender book written by Hans Wilhelm, *I'll Always Love You* about a little boy who is grieving the death of his dog. He takes solace in the fact that he told his dog every day, "I'll always love you". Without thoughtful consideration of guidelines and solid familiarity with this story, what

damage and distress could be heaped on this child who loved her pet but may not have said "I'll always love you" each day!

Another caution that others have argued is that bibliotherapy should not stand alone but be used as an adjunct to other therapy modalities. After a review of the literature on the effects of bibliotherapy, Riordan and Wilson (1989) concluded the efficacy of bibliotherapy was increased when combined with other play therapy activities. Pehrsson (2006) finds bibliotherapy and play therapy a perfect companion set, stating the emphasis in bibliotherapy is on reception while the emphasis in play therapy is on expression.

Dynamic Duo: Bibliotherapy with play therapy activities

From my practice experience, I find most books lend themselves to being matched with other play therapy activities—some very easily while some require more creativity. In the book, *Ish*, (2004) Ramon loses his joy for drawing when his older brother makes fun of his art. When Ramon complains that his vase does not look like a vase, his little sister declares it looks "vase-ish". Ramon gets his confidence back and begins to make "ish" drawings and even "ish" poems. A natural follow-up activity includes the client drawing or painting their own "ish" art or poetry. *Sailing Through the Storm*, (2004) by Edie Julik is about a sailboat on the water of life, facing violent storms and scary feelings before finding the "Ocean of Peace". It is designed to be interactive with several suggested activities as follow-up. Additional helpful activities might be for the client to make or decorate their own sailboat. The child and therapist might "launch" the boat or the boat could go home with the child at termination as a symbol of the trauma work that was accomplished.

There are a plethora of books containing activities for assessment, treatment and termination on most all issues bothering children. The therapist can also create their own activities. One of my favorite books to use for self-esteem, dealing with bullies and put-downs is *Simon's Hook* by Karen Burnett (2000). Simon is taught by his Grandma Rose how to refuse to "take the hook" when he is the target of teasing and put-downs. This book is delightfully illustrated, and "hooks" the reader

with its vivid characters and humor. I match it up with the following activity that I designed to be used specifically with this book:

The therapist and client first read the book, *Simon's Hook*. Then, for each fish the client catches, the client states one of the five solutions (or one of their own) offered in the book to handle put-downs. The child continues to fish but now states an attribute that makes them a "strong fish". The therapist can fish as well and provide attributes and solutions for the child. The activity is then repeated but this time the therapist provides a put-down or "hook"/scenario and the child responds with a solution. Discussion questions can be added which might include: Did someone throw a hook at you today? Did you bite? How can you avoid that hook? What makes you a strong fish? Homework would be to practice solutions throughout the week.

I match it up with an activity called *Strong Fish*© I designed to be used with this book. It requires a large container as the fishing pond, half filled with water, and plastic magnetic fishing rods and magnetic fish. After reading *Simon's Hook*, the therapist first catches a fish and provides a putdown or "hook"/scenario. It is then the client's turn to catch a fish and to provide one of the five solutions (or one of their own) offered in the book to handle the putdown the therapist gave. This is repeated five or six times or until all the fish are caught. Discussion can be added which might include: Did someone throw a hook at you this week? Did you bite? What makes you a strong fish?

Like *Simon's Hook*, this activity seeks to improve coping skills, empowerment, and self-esteem and can be used in individual, family or group therapy.

Conclusion

Bibliotherapy combined with other play therapy techniques maximizes the potential for reaching your client, unlocking hidden feelings and providing engaging ways for expression and understanding of these feelings. As you assess and learn about your client, you can carefully select books and activities to aid them through their therapy journey. In the words of Dr. Seuss: "And will you succeed? Yes! You will, indeed! (98 and $\frac{3}{4}$ percent guaranteed.) Kid, you'll move mountains!"

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