



Supporting Early Literacy in Natural Environments

The Child with Special Needs and Books that Promote Emotional Development

Does a preschooler in your inclusive classroom have IEP objectives for social/emotional development? Your itinerant special education teacher can talk to you about how these objectives might be addressed during story times using a technique called “bibliotherapy.” Objectives such as labeling feelings, making friends, or learning to share can easily be addressed while also learning about books and print.



Bibliotherapy: Crisis Oriented

Initially the term bibliotherapy referred to the therapeutic use of books with patients in hospital settings. Over the years, this definition has become increasingly general and now includes the educator’s use of books to facilitate student’s emotional growth (Jalongo & Renck, 1983). One type of bibliotherapy is the use of crisis oriented stories. These stories cover emotionally charged topics such as a falling-out between two friends, a new baby in a family, or a child’s fear about starting kindergarten.

Jalongo & Renck (1983) offer the following list of criteria for choosing crisis-oriented books for young children:

- The book should present the crisis in an optimistic and surmountable fashion.
- Children should be able to relate to the plot, setting, dialogue, and characters.
- The book should use correct terminology and offer psychologically sound explanations.
- Emotional reactions to events should be revealed and examined within the story.
- The characters in the story should model good coping strategies that are developmentally appropriate.
- The story should reflect an appreciation for individual differences.

These authors recommend that teachers take the following steps when preparing to use bibliotherapy.

1. Carefully select a book and then prepare questions based upon children’s background, the concepts developed and the different levels of questioning.
2. Design your introductory remarks to focus the children’s attention on how the story relates to their personal experiences. Help them identify with the story’s characters.
3. Read the book and interject your prepared questions. Respond to children’s comments and concerns.
4. Afterwards, review the concepts presented, answer children’s questions and recognize their contributions. Be sure to communicate an acceptance of any emotional responses.



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Bibliotherapy: Skill Oriented

Another type of bibliotherapy is the use of books to teach social skills. These are skills such as sharing one's toys, using good manners, or expressing anger appropriately. Cartledge & Kiarie (2001) offer the following guidelines for choosing books to teach specific social skills:

- There should be a good match between the social skill you want to teach and the lesson embedded within the story.
- Avoid stories that are dominated by violence.
- Choose a book with a simple story line so that it's easy to discern the main idea.
- Select a story that is brief and easy to comprehend.
- Select literature that is culturally diverse, and that portrays both genders in empowered, non-stereotypical ways.

These authors also propose the following model for presenting stories in social skill instruction:

1. Read the story to the children.
2. Lead the children in a discussion of the story's concepts.
3. Clarify the specific social skill you want them to learn.
4. Enact the skill with puppets or in a role play.
5. Provide opportunities for your students to practice the skill.
6. Plan for ways to maintain the skill.

Whether you read crisis oriented books or teach specific social skills by reading a story, bibliotherapy is a useful technique. This technique can stimulate adult-child discussions around sensitive issues, legitimize a child's emotional response to a situation and model appropriate social skills. Think now about the child with special needs in your classroom and his or her objectives in the area of social/emotional development. Which approach would be most appropriate: crisis-oriented or skill-oriented? Do any books come to mind?

Notes and Plans:

Cartledge, G. & Kiarie, M. (2001). Learning social skills through literature for children and adolescents. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 34(2), 40-47.

Jalongo, Mary Renck. (1983). Using crisis-oriented books with young children. *Young Children*, July, 29-36.