

BOOKS TO GROW WITH NEWSLETTER FOR AUGUST 2004

Hello! This month we talk with Claire Austin, a practicing bibliotherapist in California, about her work.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

It's been an exciting time as *Books to Grow With: A Guide to Using the Best Children's Fiction for Everyday Issues and Tough Challenges* (Lutra Press; ISBN 0-9748025-7-3), was officially released last month. It's now available online (www.lutrapress.com), by fax (503-292-5697), by phone (1-866-311-0265) and at your bookstore.

It was a delight to present with Peggy Sharp at her "What's New in Children's Literature" workshops in Tacoma, Washington and in Vancouver, Washington in June and July. My presentations focused on using children's fiction for everyday issues and more difficult challenges. At one point, I asked the 100 attending teachers and librarians to share the issues on which they most needed. Their answers, which I collated and share with you below, were very interesting. (The number shown in parentheses represents the number of participants who listed the particular issue):

- Abandonment by a parent
- Abuse (8)
- Alcoholism (6)
- Anger
- Attitude
- Balancing friendships
- Being different
- Blended families (5)
- Boredom
- Bullying (12)
- Childhood disabilities (2)
- Cliques
 - Racial
 - Economic
 - gender
- Death of a classmate
- Death of a family member (8)
- Death of a pet (3)
- Different belief systems
- Divorce (10)
- Drugs (3)
- Empathy (2)
- Fears
- Foster care
- Gifted kids
- Going to the hospital
- Grandparents as parents (2)
- Homelessness (2)
- Jailed family member (2)
- Job loss
- Juveniles in legal trouble
- Mental illness
- Moody
- Moving
- Neglect

- No friends (3)
- Personal responsibility (3)
- Pouting
- Poverty (2)
- Respect (2)
- Self esteem (2)
- Shared custody
- Sibling rivalry
- Single parent families (2)
- Special needs family member
- Starting a new school
- Starting kindergarten
- Stealing
- Tattling (2)
- Teasing
- Traveling alone
- Worrying (2)

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AN INTERVIEW WITH CLAIRE AUSTIN

Background

Claire Austin, M.Phil., Founder of *Imaginative Resources for Children*(SM) offers institutional and individual consultation. Her services include creating customized Therapeutic Libraries, tailoring unique recommendations to any child's age, circumstances and caregiver concerns, and arranging for purchase and priority shipping of these self-help books for children. Claire Austin was educated at the London School of Economics and Cambridge University, in the United Kingdom. She conducted research for the British Government and lectured for London University before specializing in the design of literature programs and Therapeutic Libraries. You can learn more about Claire and her work at her website: <http://www.childhelper.com>.

Interview

Cheryl: Hello Claire. Please tell us about your work as a bibliotherapist - specifically, how you use or recommend books for particular issues?

Claire: During my 10 years as a children's bibliotherapist, I have built a very specialized database of critically evaluated books that 'speak directly to children' to help them better understand, and master challenging times. It comprises over 1,000 titles, which in turn address over 100 challenging times -- personal events in a child's life that are confusing, overwhelming or painful. Drawing from the database, I suggest age-appropriate titles that target a given caregiver's concern about a given child. Since most of my clients have urgent needs, the database only features books currently in print which make for faster and more reliable access to copies.

My work requires very intimate knowledge of the range of available bibliotherapeutic books, and, of how each book is distinctively different from others addressing the same topic. I find I can best serve my clients by drawing from this intimate knowledge to both recommend specific titles and to recommend specific pages within relevant titles. This maximizes the focus that clients can pass on in their work with the child.

Each title in the database is, as mentioned, critically evaluated, specifically, by numerical rankings from coding tools I have developed. Numerical ranking is particularly valuable when a bibliotherapist is asked to provide just one recommendation - the best of all contenders. For example, a client asked me to help her source a book on 'breast cancer in mothers' since she wanted to gift this to her neighbor (who had just been diagnosed with advanced breast cancer and had 3 and 6 year old daughters). The client was unsure how

receptive the mom would be and wanted to make sure that what she offered was the very best available. Also she realized that bibliotherapy was a new modality for the children, and the book needed to be good if it was to win their trust. I consider numerical ranking very important, since clients do not have unlimited time, resources and finances for bibliotherapy

Cheryl: Who are your clients?

Claire: Individually, my clients include psychiatrists, psychologists, MFTS, LCSWs, clergy, school principals, teachers, librarians, caregivers, family members, family friends and parents. Organizationally, my clients include School Districts, Educational Associations, Educational Associations, Youth at Risk Centers, Bereavement Services, Children's Agencies, Children's Hospitals and Children's Television. My true clients are the children I serve.

Cheryl: Do you have any special focus or special interest?

Claire: My focus is to help children who have unusually hard struggles in life. For example children with chronic and/or critical illness, children of abuse, children waiting for death; and, children with significantly low hope for a meaningful life.

I also develop 'individualized reading programs' – tailored bibliotherapy reading programs to address problems that present in a child simultaneously or sequentially. For example, the Principal of an Elementary School consulted with me over a class bully and his key victim – both of whom had come from homes with a single parent as head of household. Unexpectedly, the single dad of the bully met the single mom of the victim in car pool line and they ended up getting married. Both children needed help when they found themselves sharing a small bedroom; negotiating family variety issues; needing to learn communication skills; and giving to cope with a host of related, yet unfamiliar, feelings.

Interestingly, during the last three years, I've been developing a program, called *Literally Healing*, at Children's Hospital Los Angeles. The program offers a highly specialized library, of over 800 children's books, that address the wide range of needs experienced by hospitalized children, and their families, giving them new understanding and hope. The program was very well received and, in consequence, a number of other clients have requested *Therapeutic Libraries* tailored to their own service populations. I find this very encouraging. Such collections allow for more and more access by children in need to these specialized books. Service delivery grows from an individual to a group basis. Such a trend could transform this little-known genre of children's publishing into a field that is more lucrative for publishing houses. In turn, this could expand the availability of even more and better book choices for children in need.

Cheryl: Is there a particular age group you work with?

Claire: The age group that can be supported is determined by the age range for which publishers create these books. While material is published for children from 3 to 18 years old, the widest choice of titles is for the 3 to 8 year old market. However, over the 10 years I've been doing this work I've see huge growth in resources for the "tween" market (9 to 12 year olds) which is very encouraging and needed.

Cheryl: Do you also teach or offer workshops?

Claire: Yes, I do offer workshops, as well as lectures, personal consultation, training, and, ongoing assistance in book selection and use.

Cheryl: Can you share with us a specific case or example and tell us how you used books to help this particular child?

Claire: Prior to the start of her chemotherapy, an 8-year-old cancer patient, with hair the length of her back, was resisting having her hair cut off. A Pediatric Social Worker contacted me to ask for a book recommendation and I advised her to read *Kathy's Hats*, by Trudy Krisher. This is the story of Kathy, who as a child loved to wear hats. However, when she develops cancer and must wear hats, she complains that she feels different from all her classmates who have bangs, barrettes, and curls. The story continues, showing how Kathy makes a mental shift to better cope with her challenge and then follows her after she goes into remission with her hair re-grown. After the reading, the patient understood that eventually her hair would grow back. She had simply not known this would happen, nor whether (and how) to ask

questions about this secret fear. As soon as the Social Worker closed the book, she announced, "I'm ready to have my hair cut off now."

I am constantly touched as I watch children's 'light bulbs' go on again and again and again after bibliotherapy sessions.

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If you have received this newsletter in error or do not wish to continue to receive it, please let me know at cherylcoon@lutrapress.com.