

An Interview with Cheryl Coon

Q: What inspired you to write *Books to Grow With*?

A: During the years in which I volunteered to work in the classroom with individual children and groups of children, I had many opportunities to talk with them about things that worried them, baffled them, challenged them and inspired them. More than any other resource, I noticed that when a child was having trouble with a particular skill, such as making friends, or when he or she was struggling with a bully or coping with divorce, sharing a good book that featured a character facing the same issue was a tremendous help. For some children, just reading the book together seemed to help. Other children wanted to talk about it, write about it, do art projects related to it. But one way or another, it was both empowering and educational for children to see how fictional characters had handled the same issue.

Q: What's the idea behind *Books to Grow With*?

A: Simply put, it's common sense. If you can find a book dealing with a situation similar to your child's issue, you can accomplish two very important things. First, you can offer your child the reassurance that he isn't alone, that other children have faced the same problem and found ways to deal with it. Second, with books, you can reach your child without preaching or lecturing. A child who might not be willing to talk about his own fears or anxieties may be very willing to talk about a fictional character.

Q: What is 'bibliotherapy'?

A: Bibliotherapy is the use of books to help people.

Q: Is bibliotherapy something that anyone can do? Do you need a special degree?

A: While bibliotherapy about serious emotional issues may best be handled by a professional (note: there are no specific degrees in bibliotherapy), for normal life stages and development, there's no reason that a teacher, a librarian or a parent should shy away from finding an appropriate fiction book for a child.

Q: How did you research the titles you recommend?

A: When I began to write *Books to Grow With*, my goal was to make it easy for all of us to find the very best children's fiction on the many issues children encounter while growing up. It was easy to decide what topics to include. But selection of the best books was, naturally, more challenging. I decided early on not to include nonfiction. Nonfiction can be helpful, but the crucial aspect of

fiction for bibliotherapy is the child's ability to identify with a fictional protagonist. This is what subtly reassures him that he isn't alone and presents constructive options in a way less likely to cause him to be resistant.

I also decided to be open to any book that was readily available, whether that meant in a library or a bookstore, even if it is out of print.

It's not easy to pick great books. We all know what leaves us cold and what makes us catch our breath with wonder, but in between there are lots and lots of books. There are explicit problem-solving books that are too direct for most children to swallow. There are books that are earnestly well-intended but will not captivate an audience of children. These books could not be recommended. While no one can put together a wonderful book simply from a list of ingredients, it is possible to think about the elements that, taken together, may make a book both enjoyable and enlightening. Some of the qualities that make a fiction book especially useful for helping a child include:

- *Characters we care about and believe in.*
- *Characters with believable emotions and reactions.*
- *Humor, surprise, or suspense.*
- *Creative problem-solving.*
- *Engaging, eye-catching illustrations.*

I also looked at the wonderful websites, including those of Cynthia Leitich-Smith, Esme Raji Codell, Carol Hurst and the American Library Association's lists of award-winning titles.

Q: Did any teachers or librarians review your list of recommended books?

A: Oh yes, when I finished assembling my own list of recommended books, I worked closely with an elementary school librarian, a preschool teacher, and elementary school teacher and a youth services public librarian to review my recommendations and to add theirs.

Q: What topics are covered in ***Books to Grow With?***

A: Everything! No, seriously, just about everything children encounter from ages two through age ten. I begin with potty training and move on to new experiences and skills, then to school-age issues like learning to read and school pressure, to relationships with other children such as making friends, learning to share and bullies, to relationships within the family including siblings and new babies, to feelings, appearance, and fears, and then to the most challenging issues, such as divorce, chronic illnesses and death. Lots and lots of different topics!

Q: Can you share an example of using your book to help a child?

A: Sure. A few situations come to mind:

Seth, a nine-year-old boy, was severely affected by his parents' impending divorce. His teacher watched him change into a quiet, withdrawn child from his former star-student self. She shared with him books about boys whose parents had divorced: *A Month of Sundays* and *Rope Burn*. "It helped him to see that other kids had gone through the same problems," said his fourth-grade teacher. "He started spending time with his friends again."

Lily, a five-year old, was worried about starting kindergarten. She wondered whether she would make new friends. Her mother brought home from the library *First Day Hooray!* Together they read and talked about what starting school might be like. "She really identified with the main character," said her mother, Karen. "She made a new friend on her first day and came home eager for the next day."

Six-year-old Kobe was a shy first-grader who was immediately targeted for bullying by a third-grade boy. Hoping to put a stop to things, his teacher gave Kobe *Herbie's Troubles*, *Just A Bully*, and *King of the Playground*, good books about young boys being bullied. "Kobe realized that he could stand up for himself – he didn't need to have a lot of friends to defend him. Reading about other boys really helped him," says Kobe's teacher.

Q: What has writing this book meant to you?

A: I guess you could say – the fulfillment of a dream. I believe passionately in the power of children's books to entertain, to bring joy and enlightenment and to help guide children through the adventure of growing up. It's been great fun to read all these books and even more fun to share them everyday as I now do.