

Excerpts from *Books to Grow With: A Guide to Using the Best Children's Fiction for Everyday Issues and Tough Challenges* (Lutra Press; July 2004; ISBN 0-9748025-7-3).

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INTRODUCTION

We read to know we are not alone.

--C.S. Lewis

“Oh Mom, don’t tell me you’re going to give me a bunch of books to read about lying,” my son Eli moaned as I came home one day with a stack of books. I had caught him in a lie and I responded by bringing home fiction about other children who had told lies.

On this particular occasion, my nine-year-old son had discovered the powerful allure of lying. Eli noticed that when he told the truth, particularly when it involved something he wanted to do or possess, the results did not seem to be rewarding. Often, he did not obtain the toy he wanted and, if he had broken a family rule, there was a consequence. So why not lie about it? Why not say that he had taken his vitamin even though he hadn’t? Why not report that he had brushed his teeth when all he’d really done was rinse his mouth with water?

He needed to understand that there are consequences to lying, consequences more serious than the loss of television or parental approval. So off I went, hoping to find books with characters who also had succumbed to the temptation to lie. Perhaps, if I were lucky, I would find a book about a nine-year-old boy who had lied to his mom. I had discovered that reading about fictional characters and how they handle a problem offered my children a roadmap, not only to solutions to that particular problem but also to the very tools of problem-solving.

If you can find a book dealing with a fictional situation similar to your child’s issue, you can accomplish two 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. Is there a parent who hasn’t experienced the glazed-eyes syndrome the moment she opens her mouth to deliver well-meant words of wisdom? When you provide the right book to your child, to be read-aloud together or read on his own, the glazed-eyes syndrome surrenders to engagement in the story.

What I knew from past experience was that even if my son recognized that I had deliberately given him a book to make a point, it still would help him. That was the case whether I read the book aloud to him or he read it to himself. We would talk, perhaps not about his own lies, but about the character and what the character did. We might talk about the long-term consequences and what they meant for that character. Or we might focus on how the character felt. Somehow the story would work its magic. It would reassure him that other children had tried lying and that giving in to the temptation to lie, while wrong, was not unusual or different. It might not change everything but it would start him thinking.

Years earlier, his sister Nora, when transitioning from diapers to the toilet, had been afraid to go to the bathroom alone at night. I was in despair about how to persuade her to give up her 3 a.m. escort. Although we lit the hallway with nightlights and offered her talismans to carry to the bathroom, Nora was reluctant to walk through the house alone at night.

Then I stumbled on Anna Grossnickle Hines’s *All by Myself*, a story about a little girl who was afraid to go to the bathroom at night. After a few readings, Nora seemed empowered to conquer her fear. Was it the realization that another little girl had faced the

same problem? Was it that she could identify with the character and see that someone else could solve the problem, hence she could too?

When you think about it, seeking fictional characters with whom we can identify is something adults instinctively do for ourselves. Anyone who has had a friend with cancer will find Elizabeth Berg's *Talk Before Sleep* a compelling and powerful story. Similarly, other books have explored the territory of marital relationships, mothers and daughters, and extended families. When we experience impending motherhood or the empty-nest syndrome, we are naturally drawn to stories with characters facing the same issues.

When your child is adjusting to preschool, having trouble sharing with other children, or dealing with a bully, you want to help. But simply offering advice may not work. Perhaps your child is too young to understand explicit advice. Perhaps he's at that stage when your advice is the last thing he thinks he needs. You want to help your child solve the immediate problem and learn how to approach other problems that lie ahead. You want to reach your child and open the opportunity to discuss the issue. The right fiction can help.

An approach known as bibliotherapy uses books, both fiction and nonfiction, to help people. Some experts view traditional bibliotherapy as the exclusive province of trained librarians, psychologists and psychiatrists. Others distinguish between developmental bibliotherapy (for normal life stages or transitions) and clinical bibliotherapy (for especially difficult emotional issues).

Although traditional bibliotherapy may be carried out by a therapist, using fiction to help children isn't limited to that setting. It's simple common sense. As children read fiction and observe the behavior of the characters, they learn how to solve problems or at least that problems can be solved. A parent, a teacher, a librarian or a counselor who knows a particular child need not shy away from finding an appropriate fiction book for that child. Reserving bibliotherapy to specialists means foregoing a valuable tool to help kids with resources available to all of us.

The critical element is always the choice of book. The entire process depends on choosing a book whose characters a child truly can relate to and identify with, a book that assures a child he is not alone and offers him the opportunity to consider and discuss different strategies for handling a problem. Only then can the book work its magic.

HOW TO USE FICTION TO HELP CHILDREN

Books are the quietest and most constant of friends: they are the most accessible and wisest of counselors, and the most patient of teachers.

--Charles W. Eliot

Whether you are a parent, teacher, school librarian, or school counselor, the first step is to find the right book for a particular child and the issue he is facing. *Books to Grow With* includes a variety of organizational tools to help you. Your first stop should be the Table of Contents, to look for the topic that interests you. From there, you'll want to read the reviews of the recommended books to find the ones that you think will interest your child.

Perhaps you are looking for books with multicultural characters or which are available in Spanish. If so, you can check the Index that specifically lists those books. If your child is especially fond of *Berenstain Bear* books, you may want to use the Titles Index. Or maybe you'd like to look for a favorite author or illustrator, in which case the appropriate index will assist you.

Once you have selected the book, you'll want to read it, together or separately. You may read the book with just one child or with a group of children. Not every child will be enthusiastic about reading a book you've selected. A child may not show interest in the book and there's no point in insisting. I always found it remarkably effective simply to leave the book on the kitchen table. Sooner or later, I would see my child pick it up and become engrossed.

After you both have read the book you will naturally be ready to talk about it. But not every child will want to talk. Discussion is not critical to success with fiction. As any teacher knows, there are approaches other than talking for following up on reading. Some of the options both for individual children and for groups include drawing, story telling, acting the story out, creating a diary for a character in the story, writing a letter from one character to another, composing an alternate ending, or producing a puppet show from the story.

If you do have a conversation about the book, be open to the possibility that it may go in many directions, depending on the child's maturity, interest, and personality. Children enjoy giving their opinions on books and often will respond to your question about a particular element of the plot or perhaps an especially funny part of the story.

Ask your child what she liked or disliked about the story. Give her a chance to talk about the main character and the problem she is facing. Ask your child what he thinks the character is feeling and what he might do to solve the problem. Sometimes it's engaging to consider other ways the book might have ended or other approaches a character might have tried.

There are a few pitfalls to avoid. Most of them call for simple common sense and kindness. No child wants to face scrutiny as the designated representative of a particular issue:

"So, Tommy, is that how it feels to you?"

"So, Mary, now do you see ways to stop bullying?"

It is neither fair nor effective to embarrass a child and force him to discuss a problem. You may be surprised at how well you can communicate when the focus isn't on your own child's behavior but on a fictional character.

Listen to what your child tells you. It may offer you valuable hints on how to help him progress with his issue. Remember, it's not so much the solution that the fictional character comes to as it is the message. What your child is learning is that the problem can be addressed and that it is one that many people experience. By the way, these conversations often work best in the car or at bedtime.

STARTING KINDERGARTEN

There is something very special about starting kindergarten even when a child has already been away from home. Many kindergartens are part of a larger elementary school. There is noise, confusion, and lots of big kids. It's the beginning of formal learning, a time when a child must meet external standards. Every child needs preparation for this big transition and there are many good books to help your child feel ready.

First Day Jitters, by Julie Danneberg, illustrated by Judy Love. Charlesbridge Publishing, 2000. 28 pages. Detailed, expressive drawings. Read-aloud or intermediate readers. Multicultural.

Sarah Jane Hartwell worries whether she'll be liked, whether she will like school, and about everything that could go wrong. Her concerns are very familiar to any child starting school. By the end of the story, we sympathize thoroughly, and it's a delightful touch when we discover that Sarah Jane Hartwell is the new teacher, not a new student! A great way to remind your child that everyone has fears. (Ages 5-7)

Lunch Bunnies, by Kathryn Lasky, illustrated by Marilyn Hafner. Little, Brown and Company, 1996. 29 pages. Soft, whimsical drawings. Read-aloud or intermediate readers.

Clyde's worries about his first day of school are focused on the lunchtime part of school. Will he be able to carry the tray? Will anyone sit with him? His older brother unhelpfully tells him scary stories about the cafeteria food and the lunch ladies. When lunchtime comes, it's not Clyde but another bunny that falls down, and Clyde comes to her assistance, making a new friend as well. A sweet story about a little-discussed feature of starting school. (Ages 5-7)

Wemberly Worried, by Kevin Henkes. Greenwillow Books, 2000. 32 pages. Watercolors and black pen. Read-aloud or intermediate readers. Available in Spanish. 2000 NAPPA Award winner; 2000 Parenting Best Books of the Year Award winner.

Wemberly, a little girl mouse, worries about everything. She worries all the time and everywhere she goes so it's no surprise that the very thought of school worries her. On the first day of school she meets a new friend, Jewel, with whom she shares a lot in common. By the end of the day Wemberly's worries aren't gone but she is worrying less. Wemberly is a child many parents and kids will recognize. It's helpful to have a funny, well-written book in which to explore the limits of worrying. (Ages 4-8)