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Student Research

The Impact of Bibliotherapy on Positive Coping in Children Who Have Experienced Disaster

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Search Terms: child* AND bibliotherapy; child* AND bibliotherapy AND coping; child* AND storytelling AND coping; youth AND bibliotherapy.

Years: 2005–2013

Databases: Academic One File INFOTRAC, Academic Search Premier, CINAHL, ERIC, Google Scholar, MEDLINE, PsychARTICLES, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, PsycINFO and SportDiscus

Number of Articles Reviewed: 8

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Summary of Research Findings

Children who have experienced disaster are at heightened risk for psychological disorders. They often struggle to express their feelings about the traumatic events they have endured, and subsequently have difficulty coping (Gangi & Barowsky, 2009). One possible intervention to facilitate children's understanding of difficult situations is bibliotherapy (Heath, Sheen, Leavey, Young & Monday, 2005). Using books and stories to give children the opportunity to understand what they have endured can help them gain insight about their emotions, and ultimately promote healing and growth (Heath et al., 2005; Lu, 2008).

Since children may encounter a variety of disasters, this literature review focused on the use of bibliotherapy following natural disaster, terrorist attack, or war (Chase, Son & Steiner, 2010; Gangi & Barowsky, 2009; Rycik, 2006; Webster & Harris, 2009). Given the limited literature in this area, articles providing general guidelines and outlining specific considerations for implementing bibliotherapy sessions with children (Allen et al., 2012; Heath et al., 2005; Lu, 2008; McCulliss & Chamberlain, 2013) were also included.

Bibliotherapy sessions typically follow a comprehensive assessment of the child and selection of a book that aligns with the individual's experience (McCulliss & Chamberlain, 2013; Rycik, 2006). Sessions are frequently implemented in a library (Allen et al., 2012; Lu, 2008) or classroom setting (Heath et al., 2012; McCulliss & Chamberlain, 2013), by librarians and teachers. However, these individuals often lack the clinical training necessary to facilitate the therapeutic dialog that is an essential component of treatment. Consequently, some argue that bibliotherapy is more effective when implemented by professionals

with training in therapeutic techniques (Allen et al., 2012; Heath et al., 2005; Lu, 2008). While recommendations for specific books that can be used to promote healing and growth in children following disaster exist (Chase, Son & Steiner, 2010; Heath et al., 2005; Gangi & Barowsky, 2009; Rycik, 2006; Webster & Harris, 2009), general guidelines on book/story selection and structure of the bibliotherapy intervention enable individualization to unique situations and circumstances (McCulliss & Chamberlain, 2013).

The unpredictability of natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and war has undoubtedly contributed to the limited research in this area. However, bibliotherapy appears to be a viable treatment modality for improving the coping skills in children that have experienced life-altering disasters, such as September 11, the Iraq War, and Hurricane Katrina (Gangi & Barowsky, 2009; Lu, 2008; Webster & Harris, 2009) and has served as a valuable intervention for children trying to cope with disasters they have experienced (Gangi & Barowsky, 2009; Lu, 2008; Rycik, 2006; Webster & Harris, 2009).

Knowledge Transition Plan

Recreation therapists working with children who have experienced disaster should consider bibliotherapy as an evidence-based intervention to improve coping. Therapists should first identify the type of disaster a child has endured. This should be followed by a comprehensive assessment of the child, where the child's developmental ability, cognitive and literacy skills, interest in reading, and psychosocial needs are especially important to note (Allen et al., 2012; McCulliss & Chamberlain, 2013). Books/stories should mirror the child's traumatic experience, while also aligning with the child's overall ability, skill, and needs. Librar-

ians and teachers might serve as possible collaborators in identifying appropriate books/stories that reflect disaster in an age appropriate manner for individual children and their unique situations.

Treatment sessions should be structured around the processes of classic psychology. These processes include identification, catharsis, problem solving and universalization. Identification involves affiliation with a character in the story, catharsis is connected to the release of tension experienced by the reader who has lived through the character's situation and problem solving involves delineating and describing the problem, brainstorm-

ing possible solutions, guessing the consequences of different actions and choosing the best solution (Allen et al., 2012; McCulliss & Chamberlain, 2013). Universalization focuses on realizing one is not alone (Heath et al., 2005; McCulliss & Chamberlain, 2013). To engage the child, focused discussion questions should be used to help the child reflect on their experience and begin coping (Chase, Son & Steiner, 2010; Webster & Harris, 2009).

Using these processes, outcomes documented in the literature (McCulliss & Chamberlain, 2013) include: increased empathy, new interests, positive attitudes, personal and social adjustment, positive

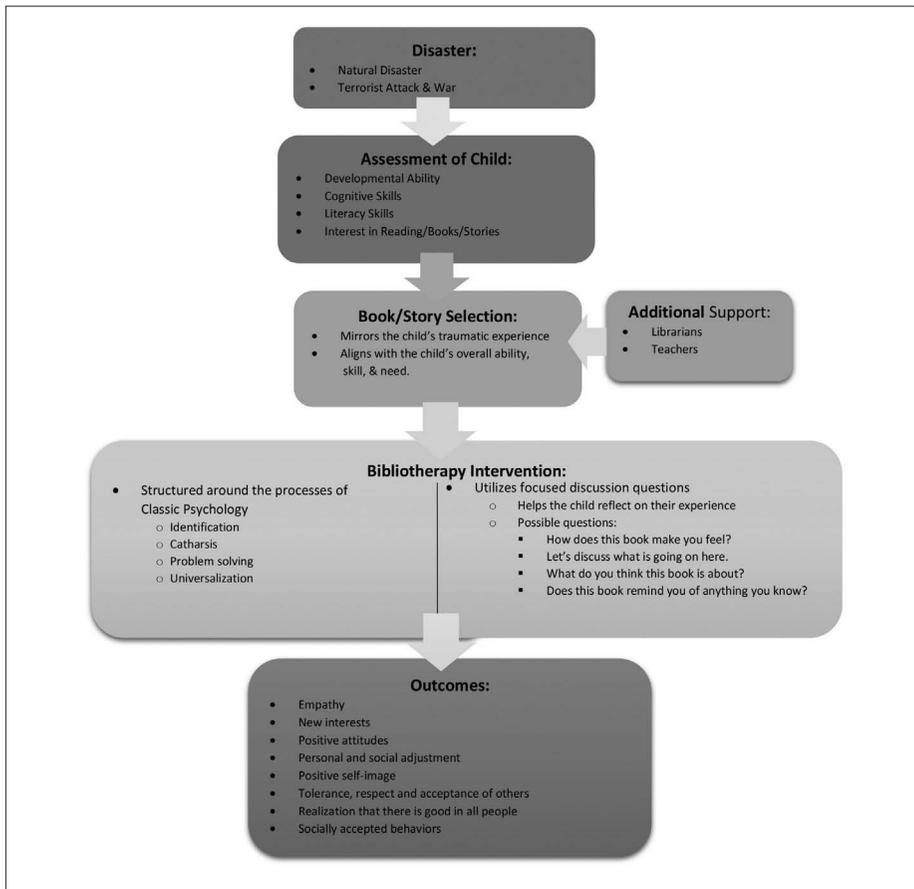


Figure 1. Bibliotherapy Interventions for Children who have Experienced Disasters

self-image, tolerance, respect and acceptance of others, realization that there is good in all people and socially accepted behaviors. Since current recommendations indicate that bibliotherapy should

not be used as the only intervention for children trying to learn positive coping skills after experiencing disaster, recreation therapists should aim to supplement bibliotherapy with other treatment interventions (Heath et al., 2005).

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