

Promoting self-healing  
engagement through

# Bibliotherapy, Play & Expressive Activities

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# What is Bibliotherapy?



Books used as a therapeutic tool with the opportunity to introduce potentially difficult or emotional subject matter while allowing for the listener to choose emotional distance from potentially triggering traumas, fears, adversity, and pain. (Malchiodi & Ginns-Gruenberg, 2008).



# Why are Child Life Specialists appropriate to facilitate bibliotherapy?

- ✓ Professional training and competency in child development
- ✓ Professional training and competency in providing a healing and therapeutic strengths based environment
- ✓ Professional training and competency in developing a therapeutic relationship
- ✓ Professional training and competency in being resilient focused, play based, taking an individualized approach, being relationship oriented and trauma informed (Boles, et.al., 2020).
- ✓ Professional training and competency in assessment of children and families



Promoting the internal magic of self-discovery and healing for the child is facilitated by a relational connection where the child is seen and the child life specialist “intently observes, empathically listens, and encouragingly recognizes not only the child’s play but also the child’s wants, needs and feelings” (Landreth, 2012, pg. 97).



# Who benefits from bibliotherapy?

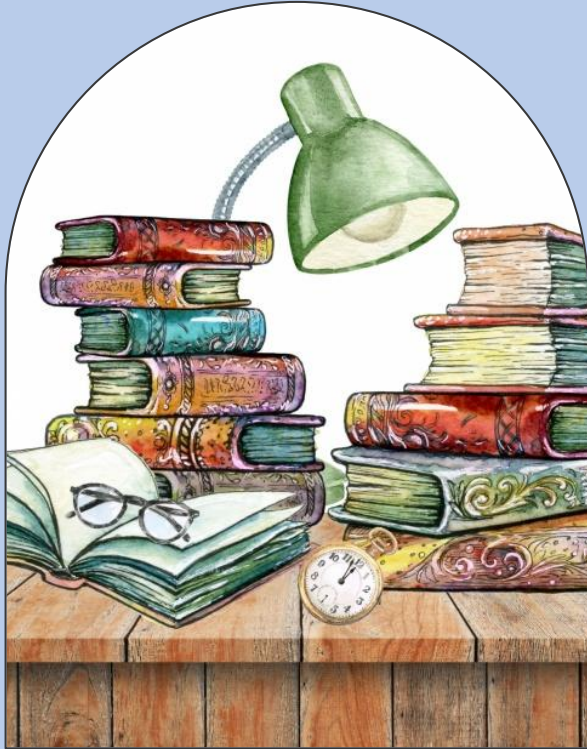
Children

Adolescents

Siblings

Caregivers

Characters inside a story can promote understanding of a specific topic, offer relatable connections and perspectives, and guide adaptive coping through modeling choices and outcomes.



# Healing Potential of Bibliotherapy

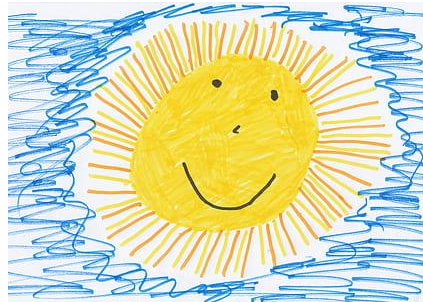
Children, adolescents and adults learn to become their own healers when met with genuine regard, compassionate care, and developmentally tailored interventions to meet their psychosocial needs through bibliotherapy.



As children and families genuinely experience the unconditional acceptance, worth and regard inside the therapeutic relationship, they begin to see their value, strengths, and weaknesses and learn to accept themselves and move forward. This promotes healing.

(Landreth,2012).

Bibliotherapy opens a window to promote this.



# Steps for using Bibliotherapy



**1**

## *Involvement*

Bringing a child's interest level into the story and involving them in such a way as to "get caught up" in the narrative (Heath et. al., 2005, p. 567).

**2**

## *Character Identification*

The child resonates with the characters in the story who may be experiencing similar circumstances to themselves.

**3**

## *Catharsis*

"Vicariously experiencing the character's feelings," (Heath, et. al., 2005, p. 567) finding release of emotional tension, connecting to their own difficulties and seeing characters successfully cope with circumstances.

**4**

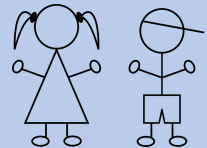
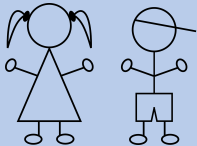
## *Insight*

Apply the character experiences to their own life, and see that "a seemingly insurmountable problem becomes approachable" and then a child can see hope (Heath, et. al., 2005, p. 568).

**5**

## *Universalism*

Step outside a self-focused perspective and egocentrism and see that others share similar pain, difficulties, and problems. This step helps increase coping and decreases feelings of being alone and isolated in their experience (Heath, et. al., 2005).





# Using Therapeutic Play & Expressive Arts after Reading

According to developmental theorist Jean Piaget, children are not yet cognitively able to think with the abstract thought necessary to articulate emotions and feelings under the age of 11-years-old. Instead, they think more in concrete ways. (Landreth, 2012).



“Play is the concrete expression of the child and is the child’s way of coping with the world” (Landreth, 2012, p. 10).

Play, Create, Paint, Draw, Discover



When the pace of the child is honored and the child life specialist patiently remains in tune and fully present:

*Fears are channeled*

*Questions expressed*

*Internal discoveries are made*

(Landreth, 2012)



# What about Bibliotherapy for Trauma?



*Bibliotherapy with relational connection fosters coping  
and promotes self-healing*

Dr. Bruce Perry, from The Child Trauma Academy models his approach to healing after healing rituals used throughout history.

*Neurobiological and relational experiences in which repetitive, somatic, and sensory experiences such as dance, song, touch, retelling stories, reenactment, and drawing created an effect on neural brain activity and promoted resilience because of the relational, rhythmic, and sensory properties. (Malchiodi, 2015)*

# What is the Window of Tolerance?



Emotions of varying intensities that are experienced, processed and integrated happen according to specific range of tolerance as a function of the autonomic nervous system according to Dr. Daniel Siegel, clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine who coined the term in 1999 (Wright, 2023).

When working with children and adults who have experienced trauma it is particularly important to stay inside their Window of Tolerance to promote optimal functioning and toleration emotions.



# Why is staying in the Optimal Zone of Functioning Important?



The Optimal Zone of Emotional Functioning and Thriving is marked by:

“Groundedness, flexibility, openness, curiosity, presence and ability to be emotionally regulated and tolerate life’s stressors”

**Optimal Zone:** Emotional regulation and toleration of stressors

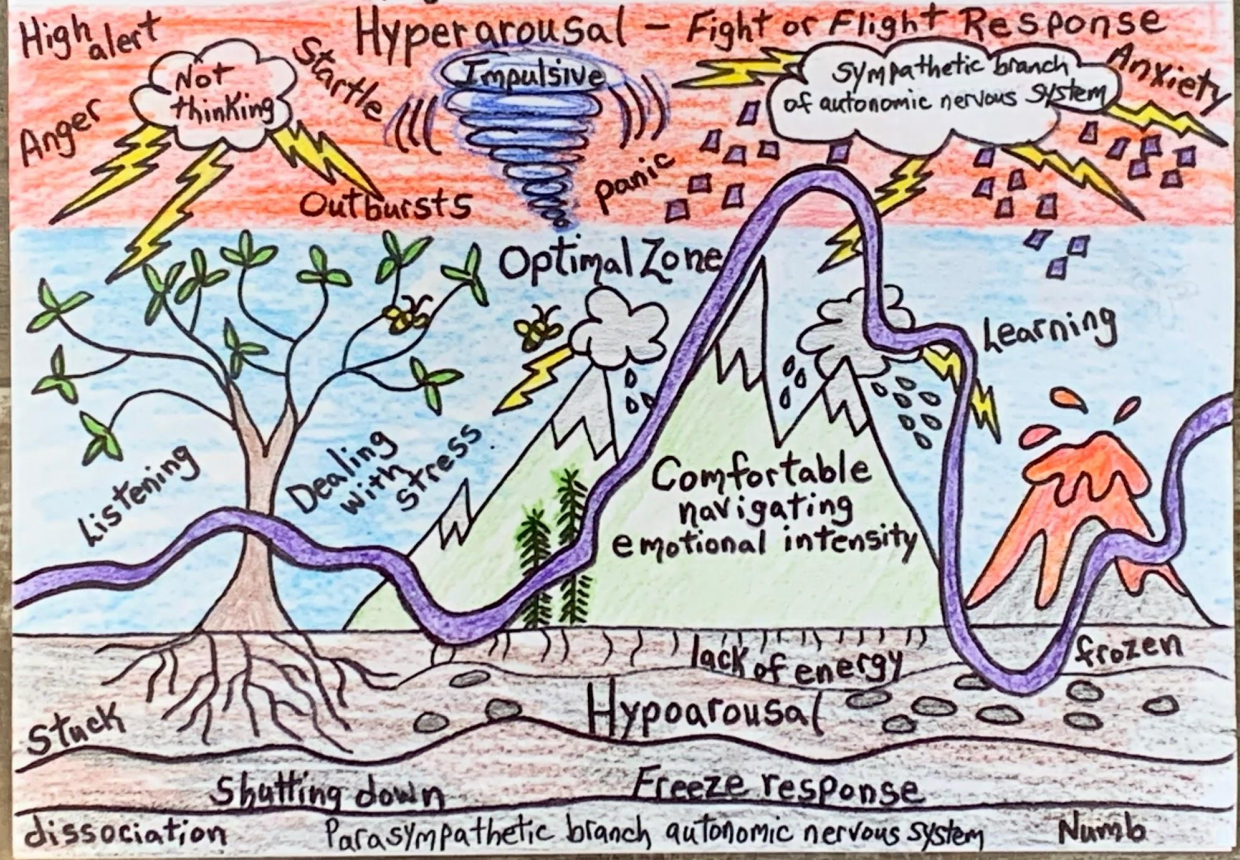
*(Going outside the optimal zone leads to emotional dysregulation.)*

**Hyperarousal Zone:** Emotional hypervigilance, panic, anger, overwhelm, fight-or-flight

**Hypoarousal Zone:** Emotional numbness, withdrawal, shutting down, disconnection, freeze

(Wright, 2023)


# Window of Tolerance





# How does bibliotherapy work for grief?

“Something goes out of alignment when we try to avoid sadness and grief” (Kessler, 2019, p. 35). Using bibliotherapy to aid in emotion identification allows for holding a space for grief and validates it.



# Why grief work is essential to healing:

*Making meaning of painful grief experiences “both begins and ends with the stories we tell. Storytelling is a primal human need” (Kessler, 2019, p. 51)  
Bibliotherapy provides the means to start sharing stories.*



## A Story to Tell

- Provides a unique way of reframing feelings each time a story is read and feelings processed.



## A Witness

- “No matter how people grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed”  
• (Kessler, 2019, p. 29).



## At their Pace

- Opportunity to confront many kinds of grief gently, from a distance and at their own pace.



## Choice

- Opportunity to identify with characters, identify emotions and process a reaction to the story by choice.



“Each person’s grief  
is as unique as their  
fingerprint”

(Kessler, 2019, p. 29).

*Bibliotherapy provides the listener the choice to  
vicariously be a part of the story according to their level  
of tolerance.*

*(Ludwig, 2002)*



# Empathic Responding

An empathic response is being able to validate and reflect a deeper level of understanding of what is being shared, then further illuminate in the individual, a deeper internal understanding of themselves (Garza et al., 2009)

Affirmation

Acceptance

Connection

Positive Regard

Validation

Tracking

Bibliotherapy provides a starting point for conversation, perspective sharing, and developing understanding after reading while creating art or playing in a non-threatening environment.



# Bibliotherapy helps introduce the Family Systems Theory



Example: The Perfect Shelter  
By: Clare Helen Welsh

Title:

The Perfect Shelter

Setting:

A family's home  
The hospital

Characters:

Mother, father, and  
two sisters

**“When something happens to one member of the family,  
all members of the family are affected” (Rollins, 2018)**

Problem:

One sister starts feeling  
badly and is hospitalized,  
leaving her sister at  
home with lots of  
feelings.

Solution:

The mother and father  
help support their  
relationship and bring a  
little bit of home to the  
hospital.

Theme:

Each member of the  
family is affected by the  
illness and  
hospitalization of one.

## RESOURCES



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# THANKS!



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