Helping children adjust to adoption through the bibliotherapeutic approach

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Bibliotherapy is an emerging treatment approach that literally means treating through books. Both professionals and non-professionals have found bibliotherapy to be a useful treatment technique. As a helping strategy, it has proved useful for working with development, adjustment, and complex clinical problems. In the 1930s, Drs. Karl Menninger and William Menninger were early advocates of bibliotherapy as a treatment tool by not only professionals, but also laypersons.

Over recent years we have published a number of articles on strategies for using bibliotherapy for various problems including helping children deal with divorce, the changing family and child abuse (Pardeck and Pardeck, 1985; Pardeck and Pardeck, 1987b; Pardeck and Pardeck, 1984). In our recent book, Young people with problems a guide to bibliotherapy (1984), over twenty studies are reported which suggest that bibliotherapy is an effective treatment strategy. The research literature also suggests that those who work with children experiencing difficulties can use bibliotherapy effectively.

The bibliotherapeutic approach is helpful in working with children for the following reasons. First, the child reads about others who have solved similar problems, and with the support of the helping person, gains insight into alternative solutions to use. Second through books, a child can see how other have encountered anxieties and frustrations, hopes and disappointments, failures and successes, and then apply this insight toward meeting real-life situations. Third, bibliotherapy can also be a tool for preventing some difficult situations developing (Pardeck and Pardeck, 1987a). In other words, bibliotherapy can be used for helping children deal with various problems of childhood, as well as for preventing personal troubles from becoming problems that interfere with social functioning.

Problems of children in adoptive care

When children move into a permanent adoptive setting, a number of critical steps need to be recognised. First, children must begin to realise that they will not be returning to their biological family. Even if the child has been in foster care for a long time, the child may continue to harbour the fantasy of returning to the biological family. Adoptive parents must help the child work through this fantasy and realise that it will not be given up easily. Once the fantasy has been abandoned, the child may well go through a period of mourning. Throughout this period, the child will need help to express anger and pain in reminiscing about the past, and must be helped to understand that he or she will not return to the biological family. Open and truthful discussion of the child's past is the best approach as denial and secrecy can, damage the child's social functioning.

Another major component of the adoption process is helping the child gain greater self-knowledge and awareness about the self and his or her past history. An adopted child develops a greater sense of continuity with the past and the present if he or she has knowledge about biological parents and other adults who have shared the child's past. This process will help the child relinquish fantasies about parents and clarify the child's sense of self as a
human being with continuity and connectedness to the past and the present, as the child moves into the adoptive home.

Once the child has moved into the adoptive placement, fantasies of returning to the biological family may continue and the need to connect to the past continues to be critical. Adoptive parents should recognise that children, especially those who have been maltreated or who are older, may be fearful, angry and anticipating one more rejection (Ward, 1981). Even though the first weeks of adoption may go smoothly, this period of tranquility may be artificial because the child has not yet become attached to the family. The ‘honeymoon’ often ends when the child begins to feel stirrings of caring and longing. These feelings in return stimulate earlier unresolved pain and generate fears of being rejected by the adoptive family. Children of adoptions may respond to these feelings by resisting the new attachment to the adoptive parents. Through this process the child may feel that he or she can prevent the rejection experience of earlier relationships, by not involving the self emotionally with the adoptive family. Clearly, adoptive parents need help and support in dealing with the complexities of the adoption process (Pardeck and Pardeck, 1987a). Bibliotherapy can be one technique for helping the adoptive parent work with a child experiencing the pressures related to the adoption process.

The application of bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy can be effectively used by parents who adopt children. The important issue is insuring that the adoptive parent chooses an appropriate book for a child. Criteria which should be used include: 1 the child's age, and 2 special needs of the child related to reading (Pardeck and Pardeck, 1987a).

Obviously, determining the child's chronological age is easy to do. However, the adoptive parent must be sensitive to the child's emotional age as well. The social worker is a source of information on the child's emotional development. Both teachers and social workers are an excellent source for providing information on the special needs of children related to reading (Pardeck and Pardeck, 1987a).

As a general rule, children will be most interested in reading or hearing about characters fairly close to their own age. A preschool child will need a book with many illustrations and a simple format. School aged children need greater character development and can comprehend more story detail. The adolescent child can sometimes handle junior novels with many chapters, covering an extensive time period.

The parent who adopts a child with special needs can also effectively use bibliotherapy. Many books are available in braille for the blind child and in large type for the visually impaired child. Talking books are also available. The adoptive parent may also read a book on to a cassette tape for the child with special needs or for the child who does not want to read, but may enjoy listening to the tape recorder. If a child has a history of reading failure, bibliotherapy should not be ruled out. The adoptive parent can use a tape cassette if the child is not threatened by such an approach, or may even read aloud to the older child, giving the child a chance to share in the reading.

The following is a list of books that are available for adoptive parents. Each book has been screened for believable characters or situations with which the child can identify. The books present a wide range of ages, from pre-school children to teenagers, with a general interest level (IL) indicated to help the adoptive parent select an appropriate book. All of the books have been published since 1970, with a number of recent titles in the 1980s.

Anderson, C W Lonesome Little Colt Macmillan 1974 IL: Ages 5 - 8
After a colt's mother dies, he is lonely and frightened. His colt friends all have mothers they can run to. A new mare brought to the farm adopts the lonely colt.

Brodzinsky, Anne The Mulberry Bird: story of an adoption Perspectives Press 1986 IL: Ages 5-10

A young mother bird struggles to provide food and security for her newly hatched baby. After some hardships, the mother bird finds she cannot adequately care for her young one. She bravely makes the difficult decision to let two birds who can provide a stable home adopt her baby bird.

Bulla, Clyde Open the door and see all the people Crowell 1972 IL: Ages 7 - 10

Sisters Jo Ann and Teeny and their widowed mother move to a city after a fire destroys their farm. The girls miss their mother, who goes to work, but they also grieve the loss of their dolls in the fire. Jo Arm and Teeny discover a toy-lending library, where they can borrow dolls and adopt them after proving they will care for them.

Bunin, Catherine and Sherry Is that your sister? Pantheon, 1976 IL: Ages 5 - 8

Six-year-old Catherine and her mother explain how children like Catherine and her younger sister live in foster homes until an adoption agency finds a 'forever family' for them. The social worker's visits and the adoptive parents going to court to obtain legal adoption are described. Catherine says that she and her sister don't think a lot about being adopted, but just concentrate on all being a family together.

Caines, Jeanette Abby Harper and Row 1973 IL: Ages 3 - 8

Young Abby delights in her mother retelling about her arrival in their home when she was less than a year old. Abby's many questions are answered naturally and gently.

Her family is black and includes an older brother who sometimes teases her.

Drescher, Joan Your family, my family Walker and Co. 1980 IL: Ages 4 - 8

Various family forms are described: a two-parent family where both parents work, an adopted child's family, a family where child custody is shared, two children in a foster family, etc. The strengths of family life such as the sense of belonging, sharing with others, and working together are stressed.

Eber, Christine Just momma and me Lollipop Power 1975 IL: Ages 4 - 8

Regina is adopted by Momma, a single mother. Later they are joined by a man named Karl and Regina has to share her Momma. Momma and Karl eventually have a new baby, making Regina's family even larger.

First, Julia I, Rebekah, take you, the Lawrences Watts 1981 IL: Ages 8 - 12

After a series of short-term foster placements, 12-year-old Rebekah is adopted by a warm and welcoming childless couple. She has mixed feelings about leaving the orphanage, fantasises about her real parents, and feels shame at being adopted. Rebekah yearns to love and be loved, which happens gradually when a brother is adopted into the family as well.

Gordon, Shirley The boy who wanted a family Harper and Row 1980 IL: Ages 6 - 9
After years of being in a number of foster homes, seven-year-old Michael is about to be adopted. The proceedings take a full year, during which time Michael feels tense about his adoption by a single woman. However, Michael adjusts quite well.

Krementz, All How it feels to be adopted Alfred A. Knopf 1982 IL: Ages 8 - 18

Nineteen adopted children between the ages of eight and 16 tell their stories and share their feelings. The children represent many adoptive situations: they are from varied ethnic backgrounds; some were adopted by single parents; some have handicapped siblings; a few of the older children are involved in searches for their biological parents' All stress the specialness of being adopted.

Lapsky, Susan I am adopted Bradbury Press 1975 IL: Ages 2 - 5

Charles is a happy child who knows he is adopt A. He is a secure and busy preschooler. Charles knows that adoption means belonging.

Livingston, Carole Why was I adopted? Lyle Stuart 1978 IL: Ages 6-10

Reasons biological parents give up their children, how an adoption happens, and why people adopt are explored. The fact that the adopted child is a special and unique person is stressed.

Meredith, Judith And now we are a family Beacon Press 1971 IL: Ages 8-18 How babies are adopted, why parents adopt, and why biological parents must sometimes give their children up for adoption are explained. Complex issues such as illegitimacy are discussed and a text for adults is included.

Miles, Miska Aaron's door Little, Brown, and Co. 1977 IL: Ages 5 - 9

After being deserted by their biological parents, Aaron and his younger sister are sent to an adoptive home. Aaron locks a door against the world, angry and envious of his younger sister's acceptance of their new home. Over time, the powerful but gentle love of his adoptive parents shatters Aaron's self-imposed isolation.

Milgram, Mary Brothers are all the same Dutton. 1978 IL: Ages 4 - 8

There is no difference between an adopted brother and a biological one, according to Nina and Kim.

Pursell, Margaret A look at adoption Lerner 1977 IL: Ages 8 - 18 Children's frequently asked questions about adoption are answered.

Silman, Roberta Somebody else's child Warne, Frederick, and Co. 1976 IL: Ages 7-10 A young boy and his school bus driver learn about the love between parents and their adopted children.

Simon, Norma All kinds of families Albert Whitman 1975 IL: Ages 4 - 7 Different patterns of family life are explored, including the family with an adopted child. All the family styles have caring for one another in common.

Stein, Sara The adopted one: an open family book for parents and children together Walker and Co. 1979 IL: Ages 5 - 9

Four-year-old Joshua feels left out when his cousins discuss their births. Joshua's adoptive mother answers his questions honestly, to the best of her ability. An adult text focuses on special needs of adopted children and ways to
encourage discussion of feelings.

Tax, Meredith Families Little, Brown, and Co. 1981 IL: Ages 4 - 8

Six-year-old Angie describes her own family which includes a stepmother. She also tells about the family forms of various children she knows: an extended family, a two-parent family, an adoptive family, a single father home, etc. Angie claims the important thing in all families is how much they love each other.

Follow-up activities

For bibliotherapy to be most effective, adoptive parents should try to explore their child's reaction to books that have been read. Young children may naturally comment on book illustrations while being read to. Older children may mention main characters of a book. Adoptive parents can use discussion to guide the child toward identification with certain aspects of a character's situation or with feelings the character expresses. Additional activities may be used to further involve the child in the story such as art activities, dramatisation, or written responses to the literature.

Art activities allow the child to develop fine-motor coordination. A child's feelings can be expressed non-verbally through artistic endeavours. For young children whose verbal skills are still under-developed, drawing and painting are ways of expressing their own very personal reactions to a story. It is generally felt that children should not try to produce perfect representations, but be free to express moods and feelings through their art (Pardeck and Pardeck, 1986).

Dramatisation can be developed around activities, mood and feeling, or characterisation evident in the story. Pantomiming, which is action and gesture without words, is a good starting point for the pre-school child. Puppetry is less threatening than other forms of dramatic activity for children who are shy. Role-playing, in particular, allows children to play through a problem in order to discover alternative solutions (Pardeck and Pardeck, 1986).

Written responses to literature are generally associated with the older child, but can be adapted to use with pre-school children as well. Young children can simply dictate words, sentences or a story for the parent to write down and read back to them. By involving the child's thinking skills and verbal responses, insights into problem solution may occur (Pardeck and Pardeck, 1986).

Follow-up activities should be chosen with regard to the child's age and whether he or she prefers art, dramatisation or writing. Examples of activities which adoptive parents may wish to encourage their child to do after the reading of a book include: 1 Drawing pictures from the story in sequence and making a TV scroll of important incidents.

2 Using pictures and words cut from a magazine to create a mobile or collage representing story characters and key events.

3 Constructing puppets from paper bags, socks, small boxes, or fruits and vegetables, to depict story characters, then using these puppets to dramatise a story scene.

4 Drawing or painting a family tree on which to place actual photographs of members of the adoptive family or paper leaves with family members' names.

5 Pantomiming a character's mood or actions.
6 Taking the part of a child character, or the part of a parent in the story, in role-playing a key event in the book.

7 Writing, or dictating to an adult, a different ending for a book.

8 Composing a letter from one book character to another character.

9 Making a time line of story events, then a time line of recent events in the child's own life.

10 Listing the advantages and disadvantages of being an adopted child.

11 Making clay family figures to place inside a shoebox house to represent the adopted child's family.

12 Constructing a life story book complete with photographs.

Conclusion

Just as certain books dealing with adoption may be read again and again for the message they convey, the end-products of activities such as those listed above can be kept together in one room of the house for further discussion by the child and the adoptive parents. Concrete images such as these help the child to clarify a sense of the self and provide a connection to the child's past as well as his or her present adoptive family situation. Through the use of bibliotherapy, the adoptive family can spend much valuable time reading books, sharing reactions to the books and engaging in enjoyable and insightful activities together.

Some of the titles listed are available from booksellers in this country, others are available from English distributors of American publishers. However, English titles dealing with the same themes could be substituted for those listed and used, following the guidelines provided in the article.

References


