

Research examines parents' use of bibliotherapy to help children struggling with social issues

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A new study out of the University of Cincinnati not only finds that parents feel responsible for taking action when their children struggle with social issues, but also that parents are influenced by their own childhood memories when it comes to dealing with their kids problems.

Jennifer Davis Bowman, a recent graduate of the [special education](#) doctoral program at the University of Cincinnati, will present her research at the 108th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association. Bowman's study focuses on the experiences of parents concerned with their [children's social behavior](#) and parents' use of bibliotherapy as a tool for helping their children address this issue.

"There is evidence that children will likely face [social challenges](#) during their childhood and that parents are key in helping them manage these struggles," Bowman said. "However, little research has focused on the thoughts and feelings of parents regarding their use of interventions to aid their children. More specifically, there is a shortage of research on parents' experience with the literature-based social intervention bibliotherapy."

Bibliotherapy generally includes books or stories with characters facing a dilemma similar to the reader, realistic elements such as plot and character, a model for problem solving, and opportunities for sharing the story through discussion or an activity. Bowman said previous research

found that bibliotherapy can improve communication and attitude as well as reduce aggression for children with social issues.

The adult participants in the study were four caregivers who had concerns about their child's social behavior. One of the participants was raising a grandchild, but for all intents and purposes was a parent. The other three were [biological parents](#). The children involved in the study were three boys and one girl, ranging in age from 4 to 12. The children's social needs varied, but parent concerns were related to social behavior challenges associated with Down Syndrome, Attention Deficit Disorder, speech impairment, or developmental issues.

The adults received training on using bibliotherapy to offset negative social behaviors in children. Each adult also participated in three structured interviews to explore their experiences with social interventions, as well as their own early childhood experiences with friends, family, and reading. They also were asked about their experiences using stories as an intervention to address negative behavior. The final interview examined parental views on social intervention and, more specifically, the use of bibliotherapy as a social intervention.

The study found that parents who used bibliotherapy with their children were cognizant that their own feelings about reading books were established when they were kids and continued into adulthood. "Parents who loved reading when they were children naturally incorporated reading into their children's daily routine," Bowman said. "On the other hand, parents who were nonchalant about reading as children were concerned that their own child would feel the same way, and those parents reported that they went to great lengths to prevent that from happening."

Bowman also discovered that parents sometimes experienced problems with bibliotherapy. For example, parents reported occasions in which the

children disagreed with the book selection, but the parent had selected the book as an intervention to address a particular behavior. Other challenges involved the child's attention span during the book reading.

Interestingly, Bowman said her research revealed that perceived challenges around bibliotherapy actually strengthened parents' resolve to use the intervention.

Bowman also found that parents could still vividly remember their own childhood social struggles, and that these memories influenced their views on interventions. "Workshops, trainings, or classes that provide an opportunity for parents to explore their perception toward interventions would assist in strengthening parent efforts in implementing interventions," said Bowman, who suggested that future research on the issue should incorporate interviews with couples—rather than one parent—as well as the children who the interventions target.

Bowman also suggested that future research should explore interventions among a more racially diverse range of parents working in a range of careers—parents who may not be as familiar with bibliotherapy, as some parents were in this study.

The adult study participants included three females and one male. Three of the four adults were African-American and two African-American participants were married. One of the adults was Caucasian and married. Most of the [parents](#) reported working in so-called helping professions. The majority of the children had siblings.

More information: The paper, "Parent Experiences with Child Social Interventions and their Perception of Bibliotherapy," will be presented on Monday, Aug. 12, at 2:30 p.m. EDT in New York City at the American Sociological Association's 108th Annual Meeting.

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