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# ADDRESSING SENSITIVE ISSUES THROUGH PICTURE BOOKS

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*I*t was a Wednesday morning, and the class of pre-service elementary teachers was discussing sensitive topics in children's picture books. Melissa had prepared several tables with representative literature dealing with topics such as divorce, adoption, sexuality, religion, and death, and students were reading and discussing the books. Suddenly Dorothy noticed a student clutching one of the books to her chest and smiling. Dorothy walked over to her and the student said, "I love this book. There were no books like this when I was a little girl." She went on to tell Dorothy that the child in the picture book was doing and saying the same things she did and said as a child going through a very similar situation. She said she wanted to take this book home to share with her mother. We were reminded once again of the power of literature and how a simply written picture book can speak to both children and adults.

Though many adults instinctively wish to shelter children from the harsh realities of life, this experience helped to validate our belief that realistically written literature on tough topics can help children in a variety of ways and a number of researchers confirm this idea. Sandmann addresses the most obvious way teachers, parents, and librarians can use this type of literature: to provide comfort and support for children who are experiencing these difficult issues first-hand. She cites an article published in 1980 in which it was noted that "as early as 300 B.C., libraries were considered 'the nourishment of the soul.'" Sandmann goes on to discuss how such books help children by showing them that they aren't the only ones going through a certain situation. When children find a book that features a character whose situation they identify with, there is a release which enables them to take control and find a solution to their own problem (24,25).

Books on sensitive topics are also useful for children who aren't (yet) coping with difficult situations. On an individual level, Lewison asserts that reading such literature promotes understanding and empathy with others, as children "make personal connections to characters that are different from themselves and events that are different from those in their lives." Stories can humanize abstract issues and encourage children to think (and talk!) about how they might feel and what they might do in a particular situation (217). On a larger level, books about sensitive issues can be used in the library or classroom to promote discussion and complex thinking among children, as they examine problems and explore possible solutions. Lewison cites Gallo on this important function of "sensitive" children's literature: "If we do not provide our students with a variety of literature—however controversial—and teach them to read it and discuss it critically, we cannot hope that they will ever develop into sensitive, thoughtful, and reasonable adults" (224).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SENSITIVE ISSUES TITLES

The following is a bibliography of titles of picture books that could be used when addressing sensitive issues with elementary school children. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list, nor to endorse these titles as necessarily the best ones in each category. Rather, the examples provided will serve as a springboard to other titles focusing on these and other sensitive issues.

## FAMILY ISSUES

All families experience tough times and challenges, and at some point most parents will face a curious child's question on a sensitive family-related issue, such as divorce, adoption, homosexuality, pregnancy, or aging. A plethora of children's books exists that deal with

these topics. It may be more appropriate for parents and caregivers to select and share these stories with children, but librarians and teachers (and all adults who work closely with children) should be aware of the resources available. In addition to reassuring children whose families are not perfect, Bargiel affirms that such books “can help all children accept various family structures as variations of a family unit focused around love, rather than as exceptions to the ‘normal’ family” (489).

**Butler, Dori Hillestad. (2005). *My Mom’s having a baby!* Illus. by Carol Thompson. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman.**

This story, narrated by a young girl with a sibling on the way, follows the girl’s mother through the nine months of pregnancy and the birth of a baby brother. Readers learn how far the baby has developed each month (e.g., at two months, all his body parts are formed; at five, an ultrasound can determine whether the baby is a boy or a girl) and accompanying illustrations provide a visual record of the baby’s growth. The question all children have about how babies are made is also briefly and matter-of-factly touched upon.

**Cruise, Robin. (2006). *Little Mamá forgets.* Illus. by Stacey Dressen-McQueen. NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.**

Lucy’s beloved grandmother, who lives with her family, has begun to forget ordinary things—the bread she is toasting, how to tie her shoes, and which way to turn at the corner. But this joyful story with its vibrant illustrations communicates to young readers that while Little Mamá’s forgetfulness presents challenges to her family, she is treasured and lovingly cared for. After all, she never forgets the important things: dancing, skipping, telling stories, and tucking Lucy in each night “with a song and a kiss.”

**Friedrich, Molly. (2004). *You’re not my real mother!* Illus. by Christy Hale. NY: Little, Brown.**

This heartfelt book captures an adoptive mother’s response to her daughter’s accusation that she is not her real mother. The mother explains that while she and her daughter do not look alike because she is not the birth mother, she asserts that love, not biology, which makes a real mother. She reminds her daughter of the ways she shows her love every day, from driving back to a friend’s house to retrieve a favorite stuffed animal, to catching fireflies “after bedtime.” At the end of the

story, the daughter affirms that though she’s adopted, she does have a *real* mother.

**Kuklin, Susan. (2006). *Families.* NY: Hyperion.**

This photojournal provides children with exposure to a wide variety of contemporary family situations. Diversity of ethnicity, religion, and family structure becomes personalized as the author interviews the children in each family and readers come to understand that they have things in common with those whose families look different from their own.

**Masurel, Claire. (2001). *Two homes.* Illus. by Kady MacDonald Denton. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick.**

*Two Homes* is told in the voice of a young boy named Alex, whose parents have divorced. The focus is on the positive here. In simple text Alex tells the reader that he has two homes: two front doors, two favorite chairs, two toothbrushes, and two parents who love him “wherever we are.” The accompanying ink and watercolor illustrations portray scenes of domestic tranquility in both of Alex’s homes.

**Richardson, Justin and Peter Parnell. (2005). *And Tango makes three.* Illus. by Henry Cole. NY: Simon & Schuster.**

This picture book relates the true story of two male penguins at the Central Park Zoo who paired off and eventually raised a penguin chick together. The zookeeper noticed that Roy and Silo did everything together and that when other penguin couples made nests of stones for their eggs, they did the same, but had no egg to hatch. He entrusted them with an extra egg that needed to be cared for and they soon had their very own baby penguin, Tango. This fascinating tale may be a gentle way to introduce children to the idea of families with two mommies or two daddies.

**Woodson, Jacqueline. (2002). *Visiting day.* Illus. by James E. Ransome. NY: Scholastic.**

*Visiting Day* recounts a day in the life of a little girl whose father is in prison. She takes the reader through the monthly ritual that she and her grandmother share: cooking fried chicken, riding out to the prison on a bus full of inmates’ family members, and an all-too-short visit with Daddy. The book is faithful to the child’s point of view: the anticipation, excitement, and sadness she feels, and there is no attempt to explain why her father is incarcerated.

## WAR & VIOLENCE

Although few American children have had direct experience with war, many have fathers, mothers, uncles, brothers, sisters or friends in the military, and they are aware of the threat war and violence bring. These examples provide a variety of situations in which life-changing situations brought by war and violence have been faced by children. Books on these topics should be made available to children "lest we forget" what those before us have experienced. Children may receive hope from the courage of those in the past who have been successful in facing these issues.

**Kalman, Maria. (2002.) *Fireboat: The heroic adventures of the John J. Harvey*. NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons.**

This is the true story of a fireboat that was the largest and fastest of twelve built in 1931 and then retired in 1995 because there was no longer a need for it. The plan was for the fireboat to be sold for scrap, but before that happened she was purchased by a group of friends who fixed her up and put her back on the water. Everyone said, "The Harvey is a nice old boat, but she could NEVER be used to fight a fire. NEVER." That all changed on September 11, 2001 when she was called into service to extinguish fires in New York City. The *John J. Harvey* provided invaluable help in a great hour of need.

**Krinitz, Esther Nisenthal, Steinhardt, Bernice. (2005). *Memories of survival*. NY: Hyperion Books for Children.**

This is a stunning collection of thirty-six embroidered pictures which illustrate the stories of the childhood of Esther Krinitz, who grew up in Poland during the war. Her daughter Bernice Steinhardt finishes the story after her mother's death.

**Williams, Mary. (2005). *Brothers in hope: The story of the lost boys of Sudan*. Illus. by Gregory Christie. NY: Lee & Low.**

Based on the mid-1980s Sudanese civil war, this picture book tells of a band of approximately 30,000 Sudanese boys who walked nearly 1000 miles in search of refuge. This is the story of Garang Deng, one of the leaders of this band.

**Winter, Jeanette. (2005). *The librarian of Basra: A true story from Iraq*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt.**

Alia Muhammad Baker, the librarian of Basra,

fears that the war will cause the destruction of the books in her library so she recruits neighbors to help her hide them. She dreams of the day when the war will end and she will have a new library. "But until then, the books are safe—safe with the librarian of Basra."

## RACIAL & CULTURAL ISSUES

Children frequently encounter classmates who are culturally or racially different from themselves or they are a member of a minority race or culture group and are struggling with feelings of not belonging or of being different. The following titles are examples of books which allow children to read about others who are going through similar experiences and who realize that "maybe different is good," or at least that it is not a negative thing to be different. They may also learn ways to become change agents in situations where racial and cultural prejudice exist. As with the titles on war or violence, these books also give hope when children read of those who have faced similar situations.

**Johnson, Angela. (2005). *A sweet smell of roses*. Illus. Eric Velasquez. NY: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.**

Two young girls sneak out of the house and witness a civil rights march. They listen to Dr. Martin Luther King's speech and sing freedom songs. Black and white pencil drawings effectively place the story in the appropriate time setting.

**Recorvits, Helen. (2003.) *My name is Yoon*. Pictures by Gabi Swiatkowska. NY: Frances Foster Books.**

Yoon is a Korean girl who is struggling to adjust to America, where everything was different. She finally learns, "Maybe America will be a good home. "Maybe different is good."

**Wiles, Deborah. (2001). *Freedom summer*. Illus. by Jerome Lagarrigue. NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.**

Joe and John Henry are a lot alike. They both like shooting marbles, they both want to be firemen, and they both love to swim. But there's one important way they're different: Joe is white and John Henry is black. In the South in 1964, that means John Henry isn't allowed to do everything his best friend may. The story illustrates how the community in which they live handles the new law which states all races should be permitted in the town pool.

## DEATH

Often a child's first experience with death is the loss of a pet. These stories also tell of children coping with the death of a friend, a parent and a grandparent. In each case the pain is presented realistically and sensitively. The stories convey that it takes time to deal with death, but that time does bring healing. It may not happen today, but there is hope that one day the loss will not hurt as much.

**Bahr, Mary. (2001). *If Nathan were here*. Illus. by Karen A. Jerome. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Books for Young Readers.**

The story begins with a young boy describing how it would be if Nathan were here, but he isn't. His best friend has died and he is struggling with the loss. He misses Nathan and wants to be alone. He is finally able to reach out to Nathan's sister Mary Kate, and the healing process begins.

**Demas, Corinne. (2004). *Saying goodbye to Lulu*. Illus. by Ard Hoyt. NY: Little, Brown.**

The little girl in this story loves her dog, Lulu, then Lulu grows old and dies. Saying goodbye is very difficult and she does not want another dog. Eventually she is able to say goodbye and find another puppy. "You're not Lulu," she whispers to him. But she is able to love her new puppy.

**Fraustino, Lisa Rowe. (2001). *The hickory chair*. Illus. by Benny Andrews. (2001). NY: Arthur A. Levine Books.**

When Gran died, Louis, her youngest grandson, was very sad. He always enjoyed the times he sat next to her while she sat in her favorite chair, a chair carved by Gramps from a hickory tree. The family read Gran's will and learned that she had left notes hidden all over the house, telling who was to receive her belongings. Louis couldn't find his note, and it was many years later when his own granddaughter found the wad of paper telling what Gran had left him.

**Napoli, Donna Jo. (2002). *Flamingo dream*. Illus. by Cathie Felstead. NY: Greenwillow.**

A little girl learns that her daddy is dying of cancer. One day Mamma came to school to get her and said Daddy was in the hospital. The next day Daddy died. She is heartbroken, but after some time, she begins to cope. She remembers all of the happy times they had together and is finally able to write a book about her memories of her Daddy.

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