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Uses of Bibliotherapy for Adoptive Children and Their Families

Paper based on a program presented at the 2009 American Counseling Association Annual Conference and Exposition, March 19-23, Charlotte, North Carolina.

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Adoption is a legal process in which a child is raised by someone other than his or her biological parents and can be accomplished with varying degrees of openness. Adopted children often experience a period of grief at some point in their lives related to their adoption and their loss of their biological origins. Bibliotherapy is one method of helping children cope with adoption-related grief, though most of the adoption books in print are authored by adoptive parents and fail to address the issue of the child's birth parents in any detail. In response, one of the writers of this paper authored a children's picture book intended to supplement the available literature—recreational, educational, and therapeutic—written from the perspective of a birth mother that focuses on the love involved in adoption. The purpose of the book is to function as a bibliotherapy tool and aid in the healing process of adopted children as well as facilitate a better understanding of the often stigmatized practice of adoption.

Openness in Adoption

There are several types of adoption that differ in the way the legalities are handled, either through private attorneys or through adoption agencies, and in the amount of contact allowed between the birth and adoptive families. In closed adoptions, there is no contact between the child and his adoptive family and his birth parents; all access that an adopted child may have to his biological origins is cut off until he is an adult and able to search for his birth family himself. Open adoptions, on the other hand, allow for open contact between the two families. This contact can include letters, pictures, and visits. In between closed and open adoptions are semi-open and semi-closed; adoptions that have varying degrees of openness and contact.

The most important benefit of open adoptions is the access the adopted child has to his entire history. Children of open adoption have the opportunity to learn about the

history of their biological family, their own medical history, ethnicity, genealogy, and even whose eyes they have or from whom they inherited their talents—all luxuries children in closed adoption do not have. Adopted children run the risk of not being able to develop a complete sense of self and that risk is even higher in adoptions where the child is not able to explore freely his biological origins.

No matter what the circumstances or openness of an adoption, many adopted children struggle with related grief and loss. While open adoptions can aid in minimizing these feelings by providing immediate answers that only birth parents can provide, the grief process is one that most adopted children will most likely have to work through at some point in their lives.

Grief in Adopted Children

In our western society, we operate under the assumption that children do not grieve. We believe them to be resilient and able to bounce back from any loss or injury, be it emotional or physical. Often we conclude that if we simply do not mention loss or, at the very most, give it only a passing acknowledgment and stay strong, children will do the same and just move on; in essence, if we as adults skirt the issue of grief and loss with children then they will remain protected from sorrow and pain. We want so badly to protect the fleeting innocence of children that we have convinced ourselves that the best course of action is to brush aside their pain with phrases like “you’re ok,” “don’t feel bad,” and “don’t worry,” and not address their grief directly, or at all, because, after all, they are only children and, therefore, cannot possibly comprehend loss to the extent that an adult is able to. The latter comment may have a kernel of truth, in that children rarely have to deal with the logistical aftermath of a loss, such as death, but that does not mean, however, that they do not grieve that loss as deeply or personally as their adult counterparts. When we shelter children from grief, we are really protecting ourselves from addressing our incapability to relate to and help a child through a loss (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006).

The fact of the matter is children do grieve. Though their understanding and concept of loss matures with time (a 9-year-old will recognize that death is permanent while a 3-year-old may ask when the deceased relative is coming back), they are capable of internalizing and recognizing a loss no matter what their age. What eludes adults and leads us to believe that children do not grieve is the way in which children grieve. They will often act out, or alternate between being sad or angry and being outwardly “fine”, or they may escape to a world of fantasy (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006). Children are not adults and as such we do not expect them to approach the world in the same way we do, so why should we expect them to approach loss as we do or grieve as we do?

Adopted children face a unique type of loss. Their loss occurred very early in life; in many cases right after they were born. This pre-existing loss was one they could not deal with or even comprehend as a newborn, but this does not mean that it is one they will never feel the ramifications of. Adoption is a process, not simply a single, isolated event and will be a large part of a child’s story and sense of self; while it does not define a person, it is, nevertheless, a part of who they are (Silber, 1990).

Loss can be defined as: “the permanent or temporary removal of an important object, person, or event, or failure to achieve a coveted goal” (Van Gulden & Bartels-Rabb, 1993, p. 20). Under this definition, the loss of an adopted child is the loss of a person, or persons; his birth family. It is also a loss of origins and of a complete self identity (Joshua & DiMenna, 2000). The lack of shared physical traits with family members could create feelings of detachment as physical similarities are an easily recognizable, outward sign of belonging (Van Gulden & Bartels-Rabb, 1993). This feeling of isolation is further compounded by societal conceptualizations that define procreation and parenthood as indistinguishable entities, thereby facilitating the notion of “real” parents. Adopted children face the dilemma of who their “real” parents are, those who gave birth to them or those who raised them. Their grief may also stem largely from their conflicting feelings as they struggle to integrate the two sides of themselves: their adopted family, which to them is their “real” family, and their biological family, which society has deemed their “real” family (Leon, 2002). Family is where you go to belong and feel like an intrinsic part of something. Adoptees, however, lose that biological connection and so may feel as if they do not truly belong anywhere.

As a child grows and matures so does his concept of adoption, which may trigger feelings of grief. Adoption loss is certainly a loss that can change and reemerge over time. As children grow they will understand information regarding their adoption in new and different ways. Things that didn’t make sense to them as a child may make sense as an adolescent and they may need to grieve and reprocess their feelings in order to reconcile their new understanding. This cycle can easily take a lifetime and may never be fully resolved.

Preschool aged children often grieve by rejecting the fact that they were born to someone other than their adoptive parents and mourn the loss of not only their biological family but also the loss of a genetic tie to their adoptive parents (Silber, 1990). Adoption related grief typically becomes most noticeable in school aged children at which point they are cognitively able to better understand and internalize adoption and apply its implications to their own lives. They may become angry with their adoptive parents for not being their “real” parents or they may feel as if they “should have been” born to the parents they live with like many of their friends were (Silber 1990; Van Gulden & Bartels-Rabb, 1993, p. 34). At this age children may also begin to feel guilty about being adopted; they may feel there was something wrong with them and that is why they were unwanted by their birth parents and will view the relinquishment as abandonment and rejection (Joshua & DiMenna, 2000). In a study conducted by Triseliotis (1973, as cited in Watkins & Fisher, 1993) the main thing interviewed adult adoptees said they would have liked to have been told was that they were not rejected but wanted and loved by their birth parents.

As children begin to make sense of their own adoption story they may experience many secondary losses including:

Security — if their first parents gave them up why wouldn’t their second (adoptive) parents who they are not even biologically related to, in most

cases, do the same? Also, what if their biological family came to take them away from the only family they've known?

Control — someone else chose who their family would be and what their life would be like.

Sense of normalcy — if few, or any, of their other friends are adopted, thereby making them “different.”

Innocence — they are realizing that life isn't always easy and that sometimes bad or sad things happen—especially if their adoption was in response to drugs, alcohol, abuse, abandonment, economic hardships, etc.

Perspective — they may view their adoptive parents differently. They are no longer their only set of parents. They may even idealize their birth parents and make up stories about their past if not enough information is available to them.

Identity — they may feel like they don't know who they are or where they belong, especially if they are from another country or culture. They may feel disconnected from themselves because they don't know anything (or little) about their ethnic, medical and genetic background.

They may also grieve the fact that their questions may never be answered. They will have to come to terms with the fact that they may never have the opportunity to know “why” or have the chance to speak with a birth parent or someone else who can answer at least some of their questions. This unknowing may leave them with a feeling of emptiness. Those of us who are fortunate enough to have been raised by our biological parents undervalue the easy access we have to information regarding our past. We even take for granted the fact that a person's past doesn't begin with their birth but instead encompasses events that happened long before they were born, events that involved our family members and ancestors whose actions laid the pathway to our present. For adopted children, their adoptive parents' past is not their past and their own story often only involves the events of their lifetime. Curiosity about one's origins is natural but, unfortunately, it is this natural inquisitiveness that adoptive children usually feel guilty about having.

The adoption process involves extremely complex emotions on all sides of the triad (the adoptive parents, birth parents, and adopted child) and therefore warrants the same level of openness that is necessary in other relationships (Silber, 1990). Children may not want to approach their adoptive parents (the only link to information they have) with questions regarding their birth family as they are worried they may hurt their parents' feelings. By asking about their adoption story and genealogy they fear that it may suggest to their adoptive family that they do not love them or view them as their true family. They may even swallow their grief or questions in an attempt to fit in with their adoptive family due to fear of further rejection as sometimes adoptees feel as if they owe their adoptive families for accepting them when their biological families did not (Eldridge, 1999). It is, therefore, up to the adoptive parents to be receptive to their children's grief and curiosity and encourage conversation to address issues and concerns

related to their adoption that may arise. Maria Trozzi outlines the three major functions that caregivers of grieving children have:

1. To foster honest and open relationships with children
2. To provide a safe and secure space in which children can mourn
3. To be role models of healthy mourning. (Trozzi, 1999, p. 11)

Children grieving the losses associated with adoption or questioning their self identity and origins need their feelings to be recognized and validated; they need to be assured that what they are going through is normal. Due to possible fear and guilt of the child adoptive parents often need to initiate conversation or at least let children know that it is okay to talk about their adoption. It is important for children to know that they can approach their adoptive parents with their questions and that they will share in their grief and search for information. Adoptive parents themselves are not immune to feelings of grief and loss of their own related to adoption. They feel the loss of being able to have biological children, loss at having to “share” their children with another set of parents, loss at having to prove to others that they are ready for and would be good at parenting. By sharing in this grief and mourning together parents and children can begin to cope together and will only strengthen the bond between them. After all, “grief shared is grief diminished” (Trozzi, 1999, p.11).

Bibliotherapy as a Coping Tool

Bibliotherapy is broadly defined as the use of books to address emotional or behavioral issues (Barancik, 2006). It is meant to create a therapeutic interaction between the audience and the literature (Grier, 2006, Manifold, 2007). When using picture books as bibliotherapy, the child not only interacts with the book itself but also with the reader. It is this added dimension that makes bibliotherapy an ideal way for a parent to open up communication with their child on topics such as their adoption and birth family. The advantage of bibliotherapy is that it allows children to step back and take a third-party, objective view of their own personal situation and test out their different emotions and reactions in a safe, risk-free environment (Grier, 2006). Books can provide a voice for children who are unable to express what they think and feel and even promote an enhanced self awareness and worth, especially valuable to children dealing with adoption losses. By reading about how others dealt with similar situations or by being introduced to another perspective children can identify and develop their own healthier, more informed method of coping (Pehrsson, 2006). Perhaps most importantly, by using bibliotherapy to approach topics related to their child’s adoption, adoptive parents are not only validating their child’s feelings, reassuring them that it is ok to talk about their adoption and aiding in their grieving process by sharing in it with them, but they are also strengthening the parent-child bond that will further their emotional growth and healing.

Finally, selection of an appropriate bibliotherapy book must be done with the child in mind (e.g., his age, maturity and education level, interests, and specific

problems). If the child is unable to relate to or is simply uninterested in the book he will be unable to internalize its meaning and it will fall short of its therapeutic, healing goal.

It is with the coping process of children and the goals of bibliotherapy in mind that this author conceived and designed a picture book that would be a useful bibliotherapy tool for children dealing with adoption related grief and loss. The story is meant to explain one possible adoption scenario and explain why birth parents might relinquish their child. Unique among most adoption books available, it focuses primarily on the birth parents and the dual love of the child's two families. Adoption, while emotionally difficult at times, is a beautiful practice that can lovingly create families and should be celebrated as such.

An Excerpt

Every so often
A child comes along
So unique and so special
Too little love would be wrong

The love of one family
Just will not do
For one so amazing
Double the number by two

Though so far away
We love you so much
There's not a day that goes by
That our hearts you don't touch

So remember, my love
We whisper each night
To reach you by moonbeams
"We love you, good night"

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