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## Using Children's Books to Build Empathy in Children

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Using Children's Books to Build Empathy in Children

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

4/15/18

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Art Therapy

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### **Abstract**

An art therapy group was carried out to assess whether children's books positively affected children's ability to empathize. The group consisted of one therapist and three children aged 8, 9, and 10 in a therapeutic classroom. The group met for 30 minutes once a week. The children listened to a story, followed by a discussion and a related art project. Observations from each session were recorded in a spreadsheet. The results suggest that reading and discussing the books allowed the children to have a better understanding of their own and others' emotions.

### Using Children's Books to Build Empathy in Children

When I was a child I would get lost in stories, both ones that I read and ones that I created. As a child who tended to get easily scared and anxious, stories were a way for me to escape into another world. I would put myself deep into the minds of the characters in the stories and I felt like I was really there. I believe the process of being read to, talking about the stories, and making my own stories helped me develop a stronger sense of empathy to others.

My topic is the benefit of children's books for building empathy in children. I ran a weekly art therapy group at my internship site, which is a therapeutic elementary school. There were three students, and each one had a developmental delay. Two had official diagnoses of autism, one had features of autism without an official diagnosis. Each group began with reading the children a book and then leading an art therapy project related to the book. I facilitated discussion with the children about the feelings of the characters in the stories.

This topic is important because there is a wide variety of children's books and a huge potential to use that resource to benefit children and help them to be better prepared for their future. There are various factors that could cause children to have a more difficult time with empathy, but even typically developing children can benefit from having a better understanding of the experience of others. Not only will this help them form more positive relationships, understand themselves, and have an easier time moving forward in the world, it will also benefit the people they interact with. In addition to the reading of children's books, I believe that the processing of the books and thinking about the characters plays a large part in the development of empathy.

Despite the importance of children's books, there seems to be a minimal amount of research published on the topic. I have learned from the literature that although there is so far

only preliminary research on the benefits of children's books, the research shows the potential positive effects. Several researchers discuss how children's books affect a child's theory of mind, defined by Mar, Tackett, and Moore (2010) as "understanding the mental states of others" (p. 70). This idea is very similar to empathy. Mar et al. (2010) found that the conversations the children in their study had with their parents about the books they read positively benefited their theory of mind. This demonstrates the potential of the idea that children's books, and the discussion of them, can positively impact a child's ability to empathize.

There is evidence showing the potential positive outcomes of the discussions that follow book reading with children. Symons, Peterson, Slaughter, Roche, and Doyle (2005), studied conversations between parents and children after reading children's books. Their conversations were coded based on how they talked about the mental states of the characters in the story. Symons et al. (2005) found that the conversations about mental state discourse were related to the children's theory of mind.

There is also literature that looks at the positive effects of narrative therapy and bibliotherapy. These are both therapies that use stories or books, so they are related to the group that I will be leading. Beaudoin et al. (2016) found that the children who received narrative therapy were "more likely to endorse empathic themes in their stories than children in the control group" (p. 51).

In this paper, I use the literature and my experience with my art therapy group to further explore the benefits of children's books on building empathy with children. I show the potential of this method through the preliminary studies I have found, and through my own process with the children at my internship site.

### **Literature Review**

Although there is minimal research on the benefits of children's books in improving empathy in children, the literature suggests potential and the need for further research. Cain (2015) clearly and simply explains the positive impact of stories, stating that reading stories "expands our knowledge of others' lives, helping us recognize our similarity to them" (p. 69). The articles I found mostly focus on three areas: children's books improving a child's ability to empathize and/or improve their theory of mind, the benefit of discussing children's books with children after reading, and the positive effects of narrative therapy or bibliotherapy.

In their article about the benefit of stories on empathy development, Cress and Holm (2000) describe the importance of stories during social development, stating that stories "allow for or encourage the projection of human values upon this material" (p. 594). Tsunemi et al. (2014) expand on this in a study that investigated the potential benefit of story books on increasing social perspective-taking in schoolchildren with autism. The authors define perspective taking as "inferring another person's desire and beliefs, in order to interpret their behavior and predict what they will do next" (Tsunemi et al., 2014, p. 1). Perspective taking is an important aspect of empathy. They explain their reasoning for their hypothesis, stating that "understanding a narrative requires one to understand the intentions, goals, emotions, as well as other mental state of characters" (p. 2). The sample size was quite small, and the results were mixed and not entirely conclusive; however, the results suggested a potential benefit of storybooks in enhancing perspective taking in children with autism. The authors believe it is worth testing again with a larger sample size. Although preliminary, this study focuses on the potential benefits of children's books improving perspective taking in children, which is directly related to my topic of developing empathy through children's books.

Bouley and Godfrey (2008) describe a college that used children's literature in several classes "as a means of facilitating student compassion and empathy for others" (p. 33). This article shows how children's literature can be beneficial at any age. The instructor stated that "reading our students children's literature liberates them to be childlike again, and gives them permission to open their hearts and thus their minds" (p. 37). The reaction of these students once they were able to feel childlike gives some insight into how children may react to stories as well. If the students were able to connect once they felt childlike, that speaks to the ability of actual children.

Kurtts and Gavigan (2008) discuss how children's literature can provide insight into the lives of individuals with disabilities. When children read about the struggles of others, they can develop empathy for others. Kurtts and Gavigan explain how children may be more willing to discuss certain topics when "a book or story is used as a focal point" (p. 24). They go on to say that children's books can benefit the teachers and other providers who read them, helping them "better understand the students with disabilities and become more responsive to their needs" (p. 27).

Several articles focus on how the discussion following the reading of books can further benefit the development of empathy in children. Mar et al. (2010) assessed how media (storybooks, movies, and television) affect children's theory of mind. They define theory of mind as "understanding the mental states of others" (p. 70). Cain (2015) further defines theory of mind as "the human ability to understand our mental states (i.e., beliefs, intents, desires, pretenses, knowledge, etc.), and to understand that others also have mental states that may be different from our own" (p. 69). Mar et al. hypothesize that the conversation between parents and children about the storybooks is just as important as the books themselves are for building

understanding of others. The authors recognized that the children in their study are exposed to many types of media in many areas, and it is impossible to know exactly what is affecting their theory-of-mind development. Despite a few problems with the research the authors showed a need for further studying of this topic and a potential benefit of storybooks, in particular the discussions that follow the reading of the books. Mar et al. explain that “talking about story characters and their desires, beliefs, and emotions appears to guide a child’s growing understanding that people possess mental states” (p. 75). This type of idea is largely what motivated me to start this group with these children.

Symons et al. (2005) looked at joint reading with parents, and two separate storytelling tasks. The researchers analyzed the conversations the children had with their parents and with the researchers. The results showed that the children’s discussion about mental and emotional states were related to their theory of mind task performance. They claim that “if parents routinely ask young children what storybook characters are thinking and feeling, it may become part of the routine for children to ask and answer similar questions” (p. 82). Symons et al. are stating that children may be able to generalize these conversations about storybook characters to conversations about actual people, therefore allowing themselves to develop stronger empathetic responses by putting themselves in the mindset of others. The authors noted that this study had some limitations, particularly due to the small number of subjects; however it showed the potential benefit of future research into this topic.

Aram and Aviram (2009) looked at both joint reading between mothers and children, and the actual book choice of the mothers. There is not much research that focuses on the specific book choice and how different books can have different effects on the children. The authors tried to fill this gap. They noted that the mothers’ expertise in book choices tended to be related



to having better socially adjusted and more empathetic children in general. This study had a fairly small sample size but showed promise for not only the benefit of children's books but the benefit of putting thought into which specific books one reads with children.

Sullivan and Strang (2002) define bibliotherapy as "a technique that uses literary sources to help individuals resolve complex problems" (p. 74). Elley (2014) explains that using bibliotherapy "provides a non-invasive and non-threatening way to help students think about and understand how their behaviors impact others" (p. 92). Maich and Kean (2004) expand on this idea of non-invasiveness, saying that the ease of using this technique stems from the fact that reading and talking about books is "already a familiar process to most school children" (p. 5), and is therefore approachable and child-friendly.

Maich and Kean (2004) further explain the benefits of the use of bibliotherapy. Some of the benefits they list include; "an awareness that others have faced similar problems", "the growth of problem solving skills", "the growth of interests beyond just the self", and "the fostering of a better understanding of human behavior" (p. 10). These benefits can all contribute to the further development of empathy.

In her article, Elley (2014) describes a study in which a third-grade class participated in bibliotherapy over a six-week period in attempt to improve their social and emotional skills. She wanted to find a non-threatening way for the students to discuss various issues and found that in bibliotherapy. She states that after the bibliotherapy, "students had a more accepting attitude of their classmates, had a significant decrease in interruptions, and had an overall growth in their social and emotional skills" (p. 91). Although this was a study of just one classroom, it shows promise for the use of bibliotherapy in improving children's social skills.

In a study using narrative therapy, Beaudoin, Moersch, and Evare (2016) studied 353 children over two years, analyzing the children's accounts of attempting to solve conflicts in their daily lives. They collected data before and after providing narrative therapy to the children, and compared it to a control group that did not receive narrative therapy. The results showed the children who received the narrative therapy showed an improvement in "self-awareness, self-management, social awareness/empathy, and responsible decision making" (p. 42). They also found that these children increased their vocabulary of self-descriptive words around how they were feeling. Although this study was thorough and seems promising, it did rely on children's self-reports, which are not necessarily reliable. Because the school district wanted the families' privacy protected, they did not request any identifying information from them, so there was no data gathered as to differences in racial backgrounds or socioeconomic statuses, and it is unclear how representative the sample was.

Although preliminary, the literature I found clearly shows the potential benefit of children's books on the development of empathy in children. The authors explain how accessible children's books are and how that makes them a great resource. They explore how the benefits of children's books can be furthered by discussing the stories with children after reading the books. There is also a good amount of research about bibliotherapy, which is often shown to be used in improving empathy or theory-of-mind in children. This literature helped me develop my method by giving positive evidence of my hypothesis that the reading and discussing of children's books can improve children's ability to empathize.

## Methods

This intervention was implemented in order to find out how children's books impact children's ability to empathize. Because of my previous experience with children and children's books, I have seen how this can be effective and wanted to try it in a longer-term group. Despite the low developmental level of the children in my group, I anticipated they would make some progress in understanding the emotions of others. I expected the discussions that accompanied the books to enhance their understanding.

My internship site was a therapeutic elementary school for children with emotional and neurological disabilities. The children I worked with were very interested in stories and books. They have had trouble understanding their own emotions and the emotions of others, and would often not think of others' feelings. I decided to use children's books with them because of their enthusiasm for stories and their difficulty empathizing. I chose to have the group in the classroom where we spent most of our time, so the children would be able to enter the group without a disruptive transition and without distractions from a new setting.

I ran an art therapy group with the three children in my class. The group met for 30 minutes once a week. This intervention took place in a very small classroom. I would occasionally be the only adult in the room, but usually either one or both of the classroom teachers were present. There were usually minimal interruptions from other people coming in during the group, because we remained in our classroom. A variety of materials were used.

The children were aged 8, 9, and 10, and their diagnoses included autism spectrum disorder, pervasive developmental disorder, and anxiety disorder, among others. Their situations were complex and included multiple diagnoses and other profound factors affecting their

wellbeing, including one who was born extremely prematurely with multiple surgeries as an infant, and one who was adopted from an orphanage in Russia at 15 months of age.

The format of the group was broken into sections lasting 3 weeks each. Each 3-week block included the same story. In the first week, the children did an activity to become familiar with the story. This was usually a simple activity, using printouts of images from the book. They would make a scene with the images or sort them based on what happened. The emotions of the book were discussed, but not in great detail. In the second week, the children did an art activity based on visuals in the book. This week the emotions of the book were explored a bit more deeply but the focus was on the visuals and how the art making represented the emotions. In the third week of each section, the children did an art activity that dove deeper into the emotions in the book, and were encouraged to discuss further. The final projects for each week were displayed on a board in the classroom, in addition to a printout of an image the cover of the book. These were left up until the next book was started.

One of the books I used was *Harriet, You'll Drive Me Wild* by Mem Fox (2003). The book is about a girl, Harriet, who frequently misbehaves. Her mother is frustrated but consistently does not yell at her and Harriet apologizes every time. Towards the end of the book, Harriet rips open some pillows and her mother yells at her. Her mother then apologizes and says she did not want to yell but sometimes that just happens. Harriet apologizes as well, and they hug and laugh and clean up the feathers together. I chose this book because I know the children in my class have all been reprimanded before, especially for behaviors that they may have difficulty controlling, so I knew they would be able to identify with Harriet. I also wanted them to see the feelings of the mother, so they could empathize with someone unlike themselves.

For the first week, I read them the book and we discussed what happened on each page. I scanned images from the book and printed them out and instructed the children to create a scene with the cut-out figures. I encouraged them to think about the placement of the images and look at the characters' faces to see how they might be feeling in that moment. We discussed their scenes, and I kept it simple and straightforward so they would retain the details of the story and think about the characters' feelings. For the second week, we did a more freeform art project. I read the book again, and then I had the children glue feathers onto one piece of cardstock to create a feather collage. This was inspired by the images in the book of the feathers bursting out of the pillows. We discussed the book as they were working, but this activity was more about getting them to work together on one piece and think about the visuals and textures of the feathers. For the third and final week of this book, I brought in small pillow cases, polyfill, fabric markers, and feathers. I read the book one last time and asked each child to choose an emotion from the book and depict it visually on their pillowcase with markers. They then each chose a couple feathers to put in their pillow and stuffed the rest with polyfill. I did this activity so the children would have a safe space to talk about some more difficult emotions while creating something comforting. Throughout these three weeks, I tried to get the children to think about both Harriet and the mother. Due to their lower cognitive levels it remained fairly basic, but they were able to begin to get into the nuances of the emotions in the book.

I anticipated some difficulties with this group due to their low cognitive level and my prior knowledge of their behavioral difficulties. I prepared for this by expecting to have to be flexible and understand that my plan might often change. Because of the small number of children, I also knew the group dynamic could change significantly if any of the children were absent. This was partly helped by repeating the same book three weeks in a row, because it

meant that a child was unlikely to miss any of the books, even if they missed one or two of the activities. In the beginning of the group I was using a different book each week, and it did not give enough time for the children to process the story and feelings, in addition to the problem of children missing a week. After about a month I implemented the structure of three weeks per book.

In order to keep a record of my plans and what I observed, I kept a spreadsheet that included plans for the group, how I anticipated each child might react, and what actually happened. I also discussed with other teachers in the classroom how they observed the group. It was a slow process because these children were starting at square one and had to get familiar with the structure of the group, and my reflections after each week helped to understand where to go next.

## Results

In facilitating this group, I was hoping to learn how children's books help develop empathy in children, how a discussion after the reading of the book helped further the progress of developing empathy, and how a related art activity furthers the progress. I hoped to see progress of their empathic abilities.

In leading this group, I soon realized that I had to start at a simpler level than I initially intended - these children needed help identifying their own emotions before they could work on better identifying emotions of others. Their low cognitive levels and other factors meant they had significant difficulties relating to others, versus a more typically developing child. They enjoyed the books but it was difficult to engage them in conversation about the characters and their feelings. There were some small changes, though. The most basic one was that they became better able to stay at the table and work as a group. Although it may seem insignificant, this is relevant to their empathy skills because in order to work on an art project with their classmates they had to think about how much they were doing, what they were allowing others to do, and how to compromise if they felt the project should be done a certain way. They also began to identify some more nuanced emotions, although this only started towards the end of the group. They started out mostly just identifying feelings such as sad, mad, happy, and nervous. We began to get into less straightforward feelings, such as embarrassed, disappointed, confused, and even loved. When they were not pushed, however, they always went back to the most basic emotions.

The children also learned ways to express emotions through art. They thought about what feelings different colors represent to them, and how line and shape can have different emotions. I asked the children to share their art pieces with the others in the group, so they had

to be able to observe what others had made and think about their classmates' processes rather than just their own. When asked to pick an emotion from the book to represent, the children would often think of what they were feeling in that moment and choose to represent that emotion rather than that of one of the characters. I did not push them to pick a different emotion, because I knew that even thinking about their own feelings was difficult enough. Their emotion choices would also at times affect the others in the group. For example, one of the children had a lot of behavioral issues and was often having limits set on him, so he would often pick *angry* when asked to depict an emotion. Another child in the class would become nervous when she saw him getting reactive, so she might choose *anxious* because of how she was feeling, or even *calm* because of how she would like to be feeling. In these instances, again I would not push them to think of the book, because I felt that any reflection on their emotions was beneficial.

The discussions following the stories were necessary in giving the children a better understanding of the feelings in the book. When I initially read each book, I would ask the children to talk about the various feelings. The discussion stayed at a surface level unless I pushed a little to get them to try to go deeper. However, due to the nature of these children, I did not get very far. If I had not discussed the stories at all, though, it would have progressed even less. For example, in the book I mentioned in the methods section, *Harriet You'll Drive Me Wild*, one of the children was particularly interested in talking about the fact that the mother still loved the daughter. I predicted this might be activating for her, because due to her being adopted and having some fears of being abandoned, she can react to her parents being angry or disappointed. She often needs reassurance that they still love her and will always be there for her. The other two students had a harder time connecting with the characters, and stuck with



identifying emotions like *angry* and *sad* and were not interested in elaborating or exploring further.

This was a difficult group for me, because it was hard to see progress over the months. I struggled coming up with activities that the children would be able to do, and I could become discouraged when they would not participate. It was a tough population to try this out on, as they have enough trouble staying at the table to do anything, let alone being asked to discuss emotions. They were also very limited in their understanding of others, and very resistant to being asked to think about it. I also struggled with the behavioral issues that arose during the group. The combination of my lack of training as a teacher and these children's complex issues made it hard for me to know how to manage a group with such unpredictable and difficult behaviors. I did get more confident and able to direct the group as time went on, but it was a steep learning curve.

I also had to learn to be content with small victories and adjust my goals accordingly. The successes I might expect from a different group were not realistic for my group. I had to notice the smaller improvements. In readings about therapy groups and in hearing about the groups my classmates were running at their internship sites, it was easy to feel like I was not making progress compared to them. However, the individuals they were working with were able to self-reflect, to have reciprocal conversations of reasonable length, and to behave relatively appropriately in their setting. The children in my class did not have these capacities, so I had to adjust my expectations accordingly.

## Discussion

The purpose of this project was to determine how children's books and the discussions following the reading can benefit children's development of empathy. An art therapy group was carried out over five months with three children who had already built a rapport with each other and with me. The findings showed a potential for the benefit of children's books in developing empathy. Although the children had low cognitive functioning so the improvements were minimal, there was still growth seen.

The literature I found helped backup my findings and inform my project. Cress and Holm (2000) state how, "through stories, children are able to bring meaning to their lives and make sense of their world" (p. 595). The children in my class were complex, and had many diagnoses and many factors that led to them being at a therapeutic school. This idea that stories could help them make more sense of what was going on in their world largely impacted my decision to do this project. I also put a lot of thought into what books I chose, because I believed it was important to have books that show relationships between characters in order to get the children thinking about feelings of others. Aram and Aviram (2009) explain that "stories focusing on relationships promote preschoolers' social adjustment and the understanding of the "other" more than do stories that lack this element" (p. 187). This concept informed my book selection process.

The literature also backed up my hypothesis that the discussions following the reading of the books was important to developing the children's ability to empathize. Garner, Carlson Jones, Gaddy, and Rennie (as cited by Aram & Aviram, 2009) found that "mothers' empathy-related statements predicted preschoolers' understandings of normative reactions to emotionally charged situations" (p. 177). In discussing the books, I hoped to further the impact the books

were having on the children and encourage them to think past their initial impressions of the book.

There were some limitations to this project. There were only three children in the class, which meant my frame of reference for understanding the potentially efficacy of this group was small. Generalizing the results based on only three children is difficult. It also meant that the nature of the group was very different if one or two children was missing. With a group of that size, each child played a large role in how each group went. This group was slow to start out due to figuring out the best way to run it. The beginning did not have as much structure and it took some time to get into a rhythm.

Another limitation is simply the question of how do you measure empathy? The results were just based on my own observations, and I did not have a straightforward way of measuring their improvement or lack thereof. It would be interesting to run this type of group with more children over a period of time and have a more concrete way to measure their ability to empathize to see how it did or did not improve. It also could be helpful to perform this intervention with several different groups of children, because the makeup of a group has a big effect on how it progresses.

In leading this group, I found myself thinking further about how different types of books could have different effects on the children. I ended up trying to choose books that had a diverse arrangement of characters, and in particular main characters of color (the three children in my group were all white). It would be interesting to see how having children relate to characters who are different from themselves could improve their ability to empathize with others. This would be a good area to look into for future research.

## **Conclusion**

Although I had to slow down my process due to the cognitive abilities of the children, starting with helping them to identify their own emotions as a first step towards understanding others' emotions, I did see some progress in their empathic abilities. Discussing the books did seem to further the children's understanding past what they understood after simply reading the book.

I had to make a lot of changes both in how I structured the group and how I looked at the progress that was being made. Despite my limitations, my findings show the potential benefit of children's books on the development of empathy. These preliminary results match up with what others have found in the literature. Although there is a need for further research to see how much it works, and why it works, this method has strong potential for being beneficial with many children, and perhaps people of all ages.

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