# A Parent's Guide to Bibliotherapy

## Learning Objectives

**After reviewing this guide, you will be able to:**

- Understand how stories help children explore feelings and feel less alone.
- Find books that fit your child's experiences and needs.
- Use stories to connect with your child, open conversations, and support them through difficult feelings.

## Using Books and Stories to Help Children Feel Less Alone

When there is a child in your family living with serious illness, medical complexity, or disability, it can be difficult to find the right words to explain what is happening. The child and their siblings may have questions they cannot yet articulate, feelings they do not know how to name, or experiences that make them feel different from their peers. Siblings, too, may be navigating uncertainty, changes in family life, fears about the future, or grief that is difficult to express.

Sometimes, a story can help begin a conversation that feels too hard to start on our own.

Bibliotherapy is the intentional use of books and storytelling to support a child's emotional understanding, coping, and sense of connection. Through a character's experience, children can explore difficult feelings, encounter situations similar to their own, and discover language for things they may not yet know how to say.

## How Can Books Help?

Stories can offer children a way to approach difficult experiences indirectly, with the safety and distance of a character's perspective. A child might not be ready to talk about their own fears, but may be willing to discuss what a character is feeling. That conversation can become a bridge to their own questions and experiences.

Bibliotherapy can help children:

- **Feel less alone.** Seeing a character navigate illness, disability, family changes, or loss can help a child recognize that others have experiences that resonate with their own.

*(continued)*

- **Name complicated feelings.** Stories can introduce language for fear, sadness, anger, confusion, jealousy, hope, or other emotions that may be difficult to articulate.
- **Prepare for what may come.** A carefully chosen story can introduce a new diagnosis, procedure, change in a sibling's condition, or the possibility of a loss in an age-appropriate way.
- **Build understanding and connection**. Books can help siblings, classmates, and other family members better understand the experience of a child living with medical complexity.
- **Maintain bonds and memories.** Stories about illness, death, and remembrance can create opportunities to talk about someone who has died and to find meaningful ways to remember them.
- **Create connections with a trusted adult.** Reading together offers time to be close, listen, ask questions, and share an experience without requiring a child to explain everything they are feeling.

## Getting started: Using books with intention

You do not need to be a therapist or an expert in children's literature to use books as a tool for connection. You know your child, and you can begin with curiosity about what they may need.

### 1. Consider what your child might need right now

Before choosing a book, take a moment to think about what you hope the experience might offer. Is your child struggling to understand a medical procedure? Feeling different from their peers? Worried about a sibling? Trying to make sense of a death? Looking for a way to remember someone they love?

Your goal does not need to be complicated. You might simply want to open a door to conversation or help your child see an experience reflected in a story.

Remember that each child responds differently, even within the same family. Consider your child's developmental stage, interests, emotional readiness, and individual needs rather than assuming that siblings will respond in the same way.

### 2. Find a story that fits

Look for a book that speaks to the experience or feeling you hope to explore. Depending on your child's needs, this might be a story about a specific medical condition or procedure, a character with a disability, a sibling navigating family changes, or a child experiencing grief.

Sometimes, a book that depicts a medical device or everyday experience can be just as meaningful as one that addresses illness directly. A child may feel seen simply by spotting a feeding tube, wheelchair, ostomy bag, or other familiar detail on the page.

*(continued)*

You can ask a children's librarian for help finding books on a particular topic. Child life specialists, psychologists, social workers, and other psychosocial professionals may also know of useful resources.

As you choose a book, consider whether it treats the experience with honesty and care. Does it leave room for complicated feelings? Does it reflect the realities your child may encounter? Be cautious of stories that minimize loss, avoid difficult truths, or promise a happy ending that may not reflect your family's experience.

### 3. Create a comfortable, low-pressure setting

Find a time and place where you can read together without too many interruptions. Let your child help choose the book, the setting, or the timing when possible.

Reading together can be a comforting shared activity, but it does not have to look one particular way. An older child may prefer to read independently while you read alongside them. What matters is creating an opportunity for connection without making the experience feel like an assignment.

### 4. Invite conversation without requiring it

As you read, pause when something catches your child's attention. You might wonder aloud about what a character is experiencing or ask an open-ended question.

You could try:

- “What do you think this character is feeling?”
- “What do you think is the hardest part for them?”
- “Was there anything in this story that surprised you?”
- “Is there anything you wish the character knew?”
- “What would you change about how the story unfolds?”
- “Does anything in this story remind you of something in our family?”

You can also invite your child to imagine different possibilities. What might the character do next? What could help them feel supported? What might they be afraid to ask?

You do not need to ask every question—or any question at all. Sometimes, simply reading and being together is enough.

### 5. Follow your child’s lead

Your child may identify strongly with a character, relate to only one small detail, or feel that the character's experience is nothing like their own. All of these responses are okay.

Try not to prescribe what the story should mean to them. Rather than telling your child that they must feel like the character, allow them to decide what feels familiar and what feels different.

*(continued)*

Pay attention to cues that your child is becoming tired, distracted, or overwhelmed. You can pause, skip a section, close the book, or return to it another day. There is no requirement to finish the story or reach a particular conclusion.

**The child sets the pace.** The purpose is to create a safe opportunity for connection and exploration, not to complete a task.

### 6. Let the conversation continue beyond the book

A story may give you language you can return to in later conversations. You might refer to a character when your child is facing a familiar challenge or experiencing a feeling that was explored in the book.

You can also invite your child to draw, write, play, or tell their own version of the story. Some children will want to talk directly about what they are experiencing; others may communicate more comfortably through play or creative expression.

You do not need to turn every reading experience into a conversation about illness or loss. Let the story be enjoyable, comforting, or meaningful in whatever way your child needs.

## Special considerations for siblings

When one child in a family has a serious illness or complex medical needs, siblings may experience significant changes in their own lives. They may feel worried, overlooked, confused, angry, or unsure about what is happening. Some children express these feelings openly, while others appear to be coping well.

A book can offer siblings a way to explore experiences that are difficult to discuss directly. Stories can help them understand a sibling's condition, anticipate changes, recognize their own feelings, or learn that mixed emotions can coexist with love.

When choosing books for siblings, consider their need to be informed, included, and recognized as individuals. Avoid assuming that they all need the same information or will respond to the same story.

For a sibling who is grieving, books may also provide an opening to discuss death, memories, guilt, anger, or the ways family life changes after a loss. Grief can resurface at different ages and milestones, so a story that was not meaningful at one point may become important later.

You do not have to protect children from every difficult emotion. Instead, you can help create opportunities for them to express what they are feeling and let them know that they do not have to be strong all the time.

*(continued)*

## When a book brings up difficult feelings

A story may bring comfort, but it can also raise questions or emotions you did not anticipate. Your child may ask something you do not know how to answer, become upset, or connect the story to a fear you had not realized they were carrying.

You do not need to have the perfect response. You might say:

- “I’m glad you told me that.”
- “That is a big question. Let’s think about it together.”
- “It’s okay to feel that way.”
- “We can talk about this now, or we can come back to it later.”
- “I’m here with you.”

If a story opens up concerns that feel difficult to navigate, consider reaching out to a child life specialist, therapist, psychologist, or another member of your child's care team. Bibliotherapy can complement other forms of emotional and psychosocial support; it does not replace them when additional support is needed.

## A few things to remember

- **There is no perfect book.** The most helpful story is the one that meets your child where they are.
- **There is no perfect response.** Your child may find meaning in something you did not expect.
- **You do not need to fix the feeling.** Listening and making space for an emotion can be meaningful in itself.
- **Timing matters.** A book that feels right today may not feel right next week-or may become meaningful months or years later.
- **Stories can be revisited.** Children’s understanding of illness, disability, and death evolves as they grow. A familiar book can offer new opportunities for conversation over time.

## A story can be a companion

When a child is navigating medical complexity, uncertainty, or loss, there may be experiences that are hard to explain and feelings that are hard to name. A thoughtfully chosen book can offer a way into those conversations, a chance to see an experience from another perspective, or a moment of recognition that reminds a child they are not alone.

You do not have to find the perfect words before opening the book. You can begin by turning a page together, wondering about a character, and making room for whatever comes next.

Sometimes, the most important thing a story offers is not an answer, but the opportunity to face a difficult experience together.

**Based on “Books, Bonds, and Bereavement: Helping Siblings Process Loss” presentation by Dr. Meaghann Weaver and Dr. Lori Wiener for the Courageous Parents Network “In the Room” webinar series, October. 2026.**