Bibliotherapy: A Parent's Pocket Guide

What is bibliotherapy?

Using books and stories intentionally to help our children with medical complexity and their siblings explore feelings, ask questions, make sense of difficult experiences, and feel connected to others. The goal isn't to find the perfect book or have all the answers. It's to create space to be together.

1. Before you read

- **Start with your child's needs.** What might they be wondering, feeling, or trying to understand?
- **Choose a story that fits.** You know your child best. Consider what would be helpful to represent—illness, disability, medical procedures, family changes, siblings, or grief. Even a familiar detail, like a feeding tube or wheelchair, can help a child feel seen. Look for stories that treat experiences honestly, make room for complicated feelings,
- **Keep it low-pressure.** Choose a comfortable moment and let your child know they can talk or simply listen.

2. While you read

Follow your child's lead. 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.

Try asking:

- "What do you think this character is feeling?"
- "What do you think is hardest for them?"
- "Was anything surprising?"
- "Does anything in this story remind you of our family?"
- "Is there anything you wish this character knew?"

You don't need to ask every question. Sometimes simply reading together is enough.

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3. What to say when feelings surface

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 don't need to fix the feeling or find the perfect response.

- "I'm glad you told me."
- "It's okay to feel that way."
- "That's a big question. Let's think about it together."
- "We can talk now and come back to it later."
- "I'm here with you."

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.

4. After the story

The conversation doesn't have to end when the book does. Your child might want to draw, play, ask more questions, share a memory, or move on to something else.

A few things to keep in mind

- **There is no perfect book.** The most helpful story is 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.
- **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.
- Books can open a door, but they don't replace **additional support when a child needs it.** A child-life specialist, counselor, psychologist, or other trusted professional may help.

The heart of bibliotherapy: A story can help a child feel less alone. You don't have to have all the answers. You just have to be willing to make space for the conversation-and stay alongside your child as it unfolds.

CPN's Children's Book Lists

1. Bereavement Bibliography
2. Facing End of Life Bibliography

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.