Reading ‘healing stories’ with babies and young children

Birdie storybooks are an example of ‘healing stories’ that help young children recover from emotionally distressing events. The Birdie stories are about severe weather, natural disasters and disruptive events like illness in the community.

The Birdie stories were originally written for children aged 0 to 4. But older children also relate to Birdie and Mr Frog, especially if they’ve had similar experiences.

Why read a Birdie story?

Under usual circumstances, reading a book with an adult can help a young child:

- develop language and literacy skills
- stimulate their imagination
- learn about the world
- feel more closely bonded with parents, carers and educators

When a child has been affected by a stressful event, there are even more reasons to read a story with them. Birdie stories help children cope with stressful events by:

- helping them understand what’s happened, and what might happen next
- helping them feel safe, sharing a story in a caring relationship with an adult
- helping them learn words for ‘big feelings’ like sadness, anger and worry; as well as words for feeling happy, cosy, content and safe
- reassuring them that it’s okay to express and talk about feelings
- giving them interesting, enjoyable experiences to work against unpleasant experiences they may have had or still be having
- helping them look back and process the event afterwards, fitting it into the story of their lives

Birdie’s messages for babies and young children:

- Disruptive events are no-one’s fault, and certainly not yours
- You are safe and loved
- You are not alone
- Hard times end
- Order will be restored
- Adults will take responsibility for fixing things
- It’s okay to have ‘big feelings’ and to talk about them
How do I read a Birdie story with my child, or a child I’m caring for?

- Parents and children often like to cuddle up together to read. It’s important to sit close enough so the child can see the words and pictures.
- It’s usually better to read a printed book, rather than one on a screen. But if you don’t have print copies of the Birdie books, you can read them on a computer, tablet or mobile phone. Just browse ‘Birdie’s Tree’.
- It’s nice to start by reading the title of the book, its author and illustrator.
- If reading is a challenge for you, or the book isn’t written in your first language, feel free to make up the story from the pictures.
- As a parent, it can be nice to make reading part of a bedtime ritual. But sharing stories is great any time of day.

CONVERSATIONAL READING

- ‘Conversational reading’ means sharing a story in a kind of ‘two-way conversation’ with the child. There are lots of ways to do this, even with a baby who’s too young to talk yet.
- Making sound effects and noises helps the child tune in and learn through your voice.
- Use your face to express the emotions in the story. For example, make a sad face when the character is feeling sad. Try asking the little one if they can ‘make a sad face’ too.
- You can also use your voice to ‘act out’ the emotions in the story, especially the characters’ direct speech (dialogue). You can vary the speed, volume and pitch of your voice to portray the various characters.
- We all have different levels of comfort with ‘acting out’ a story. It’s also fine to read the story ‘straight’, in your normal voice.

READING WITH BABIES

- Babies and young children like having stories read to them while they look at the pictures.
- Point to the pictures as you read the words. As baby grows, their eyes will look where you’re pointing. Soon they’ll start pointing too.
- Comment on what the little one is looking at or pointing to.
- Babies often don’t want to look at or read all the pages. Sometimes they like to flip back and forth, or start at the end. That’s all great – the important thing is to enjoy the book together.

READING WITH TODDLERS

- As babies become toddlers, they’ll start to join in by pointing and vocalising.
- You might describe features of the pictures, to help expand the child’s language and observational skills (e.g. ‘That’s Mr Frog sitting on a lily-pad. Look at the lovely white flower, with all its petals open’).
• Aim for a balance between making comments and asking questions. When you ask a question, give the child time to respond.
• Encourage the child to make comments, ask questions, and interact with you and the story. Ask them questions that suit their age, and help them relate the story to the real world (e.g. ‘Can you point to Birdie?’ ‘What do you think this person is doing?’ ‘That’s just like the fire-truck that came to our house, isn’t it?’)
• Listen closely to what they say. If they’re not yet using language to express feelings in a way you clearly understand, you might interpret or guess. Check with them to see if you’ve guessed right. The important thing is to help them feel it’s okay to talk about their memories, thoughts and feelings, and that you care about what they’re expressing.

READING WITH PRE-SCHOOLERS AND ‘NEW SCHOOLERS’

• As children grow toward school age, they’ll want to chat more, follow the words, and help you read the story. You can underline words with your finger as you read.
• Children in early primary school may want to read the books independently. Encourage them to read aloud to you. Help them gently with the tricky words and praise their efforts.

READING WITH A GROUP

Educators and librarians often read with a group rather than one child. The ideas in this hand-out are still helpful. You just need to bear each individual child in mind.
• Some children like to get close, make comments and turn the pages. Encourage their enthusiasm while helping them consider others (e.g. making sure everyone can see)
• Some quieter children need more encouragement to engage in conversational reading. You can try making comments or asking questions that acknowledge them (e.g. ‘These look just like the diggers Ngari and Tom were playing with this morning, don’t they?’)
• While reading a book with a group, it can be easy to miss a child’s comment or behaviour that shows they’re having an emotional response to the story. Other adults nearby (e.g. another parent, another educator) may be in a position to pick up these cues.
• It’s fun for a group of children to make sound effects together (e.g. clap and say ‘Boom!’ for thunder). Be aware of children who may be sensitive to loud noises.
• Some children may react emotionally to reminders of real-life experiences (e.g. thunder and lightning that frightened them during a real storm). Help them name the feelings that come up (e.g. feeling scared), and find ways to cope with these feelings (e.g. big breaths, physical movement, singing a weather song like ‘I Hear Thunder’, drawing, play)
• Singing is a great way to begin and end a conversational reading session. There are songs about weather and feelings in the Birdie’s Tree game ‘Singalong’.
• You can follow up a conversational reading session with craft, dress-ups or other play to deepen children’s experience of the story.
How does reading help with healing?

- Sometimes children want the same story over and over. This can be part of how they deal with something stressful that’s happened. A story can help them sort out their feelings and work out how to move on.
- If the child wants to talk about their own experiences and feelings, that’s great. But don’t push them if they’re not ready.
- The child may want to break off the story and do something else. Be patient and follow their lead.
- Young children often use drawing, craft or play to express their feelings and work through things that are troubling them. Watch, listen, affirm, reassure and support this work.
- Sometimes a child chooses to symbolically ‘take control’ of the experience they’ve had, through how they treat the physical book. They might walk around with it, asking different people to read the story. They might hide the book, keep it under their pillow, or refuse to read it. Help the child find words for how they’re feeling. There are many different ways children use books and stories to help them make sense of their experiences.
- Take care of yourself. Don’t read a Birdie book if you find it too distressing – that won’t help you or the child. You’ll both get many of the same benefits from reading a different book!

To read Birdie books, play games and get other useful information, go to:

Birdie’s Tree - Growing together through natural disasters | CHQ (health.qld.gov.au)

or just browse ‘Birdie’s Tree’

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