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Dale-Elizabeth Pehrsson, Virginia B. Allen, Wendy A. Folger, Paula S. McMillen and Imelda Lowe

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Bibliotherapy With Preadolescents Experiencing Divorce

Dale-Elizabeth Pehrsson  
*University of Nevada–Las Vegas*  
Virginia B. Allen  
*Idaho State University*  
Wendy A. Folger  
*Central Michigan University*  
Paula S. McMillen  
*Oregon State University*  
Imelda Lowe  
*Idaho State University*

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Preadolescence is a very challenging developmental stage. Rapid physical, social–emotional, and intellectual changes set these youngsters apart from both younger children and older teens. This stage of development involves hormonal and physical maturation, academic demands, personality structuring, moral development, and responsibility (Lefrancois, 1999), but each of these becomes more difficult with divorce.

Preadolescence, that stage of childhood prior to puberty, usually includes children aged 10 to 12 for girls and 11 to 13 for boys (Santrock, 2008). These children are also known as young teens and tweens. In the United States, these youngsters typically attend middle schools where, in recent years, learning and development has been criticized as “suboptimal” (Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004). Anxiety among girls and conduct disorders among boys worsen as young teens attempt to acclimate to middle schools (Kazdin, 1993). “These middle school children demonstrate social–emotional difficulties, motivational problems and low achievement, lack of interest, negative attitudes toward school, social alienation, and disengagement” (Juvonen et al., 2004, p. 48). When compared with youngsters in 11 other countries, U.S. middle school youngsters reported the highest levels of emotional problems and expressed negative feelings about school and peer relationships. These concerns are all exacerbated by divorce and family dissolution (Jurkovic, 1997; O’Brien, Bahadur, Gee, Balto, & Erber, 1997).

**DIVORCE AND PREADOLESCENTS**

For some adults, divorce may be a sobering alternative to personal unhappiness, financial instability, and emotional liability. However, most divorces cause some hurt for most involved. Effects on preteens can be extremely painful. Some react by exhibiting poor behavior, lower academic achievement, disengagement, and alienation. A common myth persists that youngsters who experience divorce eventually “snap out of it” and move forward relatively unscathed. In reality, they suffer profoundly. When divorce occurs during youth, maladaptive responses often persist into adulthood (Cantin & Boivin, 2004; Nair & Murray, 2005; O’Brien et al., 1997; Spigelman & Spigelman, 1991; Vuchinich, Angelelli, & Gatherum, 1996). Responses include feelings of sadness, confusion, guilt, loneliness, and abandonment; such feelings, when prolonged, can develop into severe problems. Academic functioning often decreases, and this has been associated with depression (Cole, 1990; Nolen-Hoxema, Seligman, & Girtus, 1992).

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One factor shown to help preadolescents is positive relationships with their parents. Although strong parent–child relationships have potential for enhancing both school performance and psychosocial adjustment, divorce issues can detrimentally affect those very necessary relationships (Spigelman, Spigelman, & Englesson, 1991). Confused loyalties and fear of losing the love of one or both parents can further complicate matters. Some preadolescents become overwhelmed, feel helpless, and are emotionally withdrawn (O’Brien et al., 1997).

In addition, constant arguing, financial instability, and unpredictable conditions take their toll. Some youngsters feel responsible and become “parentified” by taking on roles normally played by parents (Jurkovic, 1997). Often they feel pressed to side with one parent against the other. When family members endure protracted legal processes, youngsters are often embroiled in “adult business,” including issues of child support, property division, and daunting decisions about where, when, and with whom they will live (Bowker, 1982; O’Brien et al., 1997).

Two of the most influential settings for preadolescents are home and school (Cantin & Boivin, 2004). During divorce, the home may feel emotionally unsafe and their middle schools have been labeled as “suboptimal.” In addition, many have negative feelings about peers (Pardeck, 1994; Spigelman et al., 1991). It is understandable why many youngsters feel very disconnected and hurt (Cantin & Boivin, 2004; O’Brien et al., 1997).

COUNSELING PREADOLESCENTS

Preadolescents involved in divorce most certainly can benefit from counseling (Kazdin, 1993). However, conventional “talk” therapy is not necessarily the preferred approach for preadolescents, who often lack sophistication linguistically and cognitively (Pardeck, 1994; Vuchinich et al., 1996). Many, especially those who are still transitioning from the cognitive stages of concrete to formal operations (Santrock, 2008), are served best by approaches that include multimodalities and imagination (Gardner, 1992; Gladding, 2005). Although play therapy involves modalities and imagination, this approach has limited utility with preadolescents, who may view it as “baby-like.” Too mature for play therapy and not yet ready for talk therapy, preadolescents require approaches that fit their developmental stage (Pehrsson, 2006). One fitting approach is bibliotherapy (Hipple, Yarbrough, & Kaplan, 1984; Marrs, 1995; Pardeck, 2005; Snyder, 1985).

**Bibliotherapy, Preadolescents, and Divorce**

Bibliotherapy—the use of books, literature, pamphlets, play scripts, narratives, journals, poems, songs, and stories adapted from cinema and television (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994) for the purpose of promoting therapeutic gain—can facilitate and structure interactions between and among individuals (Pehrsson, 2006). Bibliotherapy use is emerging within both educational and clinical domains (Marrs, 1995; Mazza, 2003). Developmental bibliotherapy is used in educational settings whereas clinical bibliotherapy works toward specific mental health goals. The National Association for Poetry Therapy (2006) has developed certifications for both developmental and clinical levels. In family therapy related to divorce, bibliotherapy can focus on the transitional aspects of family dissolution. Advanced applications may be used when pathological behaviors develop, and specific mental health goals need to be addressed (Mazza, 2003).

Much of bibliotherapy focuses on materials such as self-help books and stories, fictional and nonfictional (Marrs, 1995; McMillen & Pehrsson, 2004). Books that contain stories to help preadolescents frame and deal with issues about divorce are particularly useful (Bernstein, 1989; Coleman, Marshall, & Ganong, 1986; Early, 1993). They provide a therapeutic container (Crenshaw, 2004; Gardner, 1992; Heath, Sheen, Leavy, Young, & Money, 2005). Stories about other families can moderate painful emotions from an emotionally safe distance (Hipple et al., 1984; Jasmine-DeVias, 1995). Discussions of characters and storylines may help youngsters understand their own personal feelings and realize they are not suffering alone (Bernstein & Rudman, 1989; Coleman & Ganong, 1990; Gladding & Gladding, 1991; Heath et al., 2005).

Books carefully chosen for specific clients and their needs can provide opportunities for discussing various interpretations and issues of divorce, allowing for interacting imaginatively, solving problems, developing a courageous attitude, adopting appropriate behaviors, adapting socially, and understanding others (Kramer & Smith, 1998; Nuccio, 1997; Pardeck & Pardeck, 1993; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005; Riordan, Mullis, & Nuchow, 1996).

Bibliotherapy encourages explorations about divorce from several vantage points (Coleman & Ganong, 1990; Pardeck, 1991, 1994, 1998). It opens a window from which a preadolescent can view a situation through the eyes of others and thus empathize with characters experiencing similar problems (Crenshaw, 2004; Hipple et al., 1984; Kramer & Smith, 1998). Story characters can model courage and appropriate decision making, can act as guides through these painful times, and may foster self-efficacy (Early, 1993; Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994; Jasmine-DeVias, 1995).

**Helpful Therapeutic Processes**

Although the benefits of using fiction as a therapeutic treatment have not been confirmed by empirical research, the increasing and continuing use of literature by therapists indicates clinical validity or at least functional credibility (Marrs, 1995; McMillen & Pehrsson, 2004). Support can also be found among experts such as Hynes and Hynes-Berry (1994), Mazza (2003), and Pardeck (1991), who observe that using books can help clients make changes and heal. From our school and clinical experiences, we have observed therapeutic gains when using both fiction and
nonfiction materials with preadolescents (Pehrsson, 2006; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005).

Stories as helpful healing tools can be found throughout history, dating back to ancient times (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994). The term bibliotherapy, however, coined by Samuel Crothers (1916), first appeared in the Atlantic Monthly. Shrodes (1950) later proposed a psychodynamic model, suggesting that clients move through three stages: identification, catharsis, and insight. Others have adapted this framework, but basic premises remain true to psychodynamic foundations, especially when using fiction (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994; Marrs, 1995; Mazza, 2003; Pardeck & Pardeck, 1984, 1985; Riordan et al., 1996).

Bibliotherapy, usually integrated within and as one part of a therapeutic plan (Marrs, 1995; Riordan et al., 1996), can be employed to assist with life’s normal transitions or clinically to deal with significant problems (Mazza, 2003; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005). Divorce issues involve both transitions and problems and thus can be addressed by bibliotherapy (Carlile, 1991; Coleman et al., 1986; Pardeck, 2005).

**Bibliotherapy With Preadolescents**

Although we argue for the use of books in working with preadolescents, we strongly recommend that such materials be selected with care and knowledge (Kramer & Smith, 1998; Pehrsson & Pehrsson, 2006). Neither will just any book accomplish therapeutic goals (Mazza, 2003; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2006) nor will just any method in using books be appropriate (Crenshaw, 2004; Gladding & Gladding, 1991; Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994; Riordan et al., 1996).

Counselors should be knowledgeable regarding developmental needs of preadolescents to choose suitable written materials (Pardeck, 1994; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005, 2006). The book and the preadolescents’ needs and maturity level must be matched with care—no simple task, especially, because a preadolescent fluctuates between adult and childlike behaviors (Gardner, 1992; Santrock, 2008; Spigelman et al., 1991). In addition, because each person responds uniquely to a book, the counselor will need to know the client’s interests and relevant prior experiences and be ready to discuss how the characters, events, and situations in a book relate to the client’s present circumstances (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994; Marrs, 1995; Shrodes, 1950). Interpretations will often differ and these differences can provide openings for in-depth discussions (Mazza, 2003; Riordan et al., 1996).

The way a book is used by a counselor differs from how a teacher might use a text to teach (Pehrsson & Pehrsson, 2006). Bibliotherapy is not “school work” (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1993; Pehrsson, 2006). The focus of discussion should be on situations and characters and how they deal with issues—in this case, divorce (Early, 1993; Heath et al., 2005; Kramer & Smith, 1998). The counselor helps clients identify with characters and cultural contexts, realize that others have similar concerns, and prompts insight (Gardner, 1992; Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994; Mazza, 2003; Pardeck, 1994; Pardeck & Pardeck, 1998; Tway, 1989). Discussions about a character’s actions can lead to alternative coping strategies and a discussion of the consequences of a variety of choices (Gardner, 1992; Pardeck, 1994, 2005).

Although many preadolescents process material with extensive analysis and dialogue, others need more support in communicating their interpretations (Gardner, 1992; Pardeck, 2005). For example, new vocabulary can be both a hindrance and a help. The counselor can explain how an unknown word functions in context (Pehrsson & Pehrsson, 2006). A story can be a highly effective context for presenting words that express concerns and hurts (Barclay & Whittington, 1992; Bernstein, 1989; Winfield, 1983). Thus, a story may help youngsters learn words to unlock private emotions and thoughts (Gardner, 1992; Pardeck, 1991, 1994, 1998). Interpretations are often discussed directly, but a young adolescent may also find it helpful to express emotions and to represent behaviors through the use of toys, drawing, puppetry, drama, and media (Crenshaw, 2004; Gladding, 2005; Pehrsson, 2006).

**Preadolescent Books on Divorce**

Young adult literature has grown during the past 30 years and has increased its presentation of situational problems, including divorce. Our research uncovered a small but steady discussion of divorce-related materials. The books may be used to assist youngsters to navigate feelings, lifestyle changes, altered relationships, and roles (Bowker, 1982; Carlile, 1991; Coleman et al., 1986; Coleman & Ganong, 1990; Heath et al., 2005; Hipple et al., 1984; Meyer, 1991; Nuccio, 1997; Pardeck & Pardeck, 1985; Snyder, 1985; Winfield, 1983; Yauman, 1991).

Below, we present a summary of information about books deemed useful by and for counselors when working with preadolescents. We selected some books for historical relevance and others for their inclusion of cultural and ethnic topics. Our suggested readings also include books with positive book reviews and books by award-winning authors.

Several nonfiction books for preteens have repeatedly been cited. Most notable is Gardner’s (1987) *The Boys and Girls Book About Divorce*. This book has been translated into several languages and is most suited for preadolescents who are aged between 9 and 13. In addition, What’s *Going to Happen to Me? When Parents Separate or Divorce* (LeShan, 1986) is appropriate for children aged 8 and older. Frequently recommended works include *How Does It Feel When Your Parents Get Divorced?* (Berger, 1977) for children aged between 6 and 11 and *How It Feels When Parents Divorce* (Krementz, 1984) for youngsters aged 7 and older.

Fiction titles include *It's Not the End of the World* (Blume, 2001), available in video for those aged 10 and older. *Chloris and the Creeps* (Platt, 1981) for children aged between 10 and 14, portrays a Latino stepfather positively; it is the first of a series. Other titles include *The Divorce Express* (Danziger, 2001) for children aged 11 and older; *Taking Sides* (Klein, 1982) for children aged 10 and older; and *My Dad Lives in a Downtown Hotel* (Mann, 1973) for children aged between 9 and 11.

Since 2000, books with protagonists from underrepresented groups are available. For instance, female protagonists are becoming more common, as in *Amber Brown Is Green With Envy* (Danziger, 2003) for children aged between 8 and 11, which is one of a series. *Becoming Naomi Leon* (Ryan, 2004) for children aged between 9 and 14, has a Mexican American protagonist. The main character in *Buttermilk Hill* (White, 2004), for children aged 9 and older, copes with disruptive challenges by writing poetry. *The Scream of the Hawk* (Belgue, 2003), for children aged between 8 and 12, is set in Canada and provides supernatural aspects. Sahara is the African American protagonist in *Sahara Special* (Codell, 2003) for those 10 years or older; she finds writing helps her deal with school issues and heal her father’s absence. The return to her mother’s village in India helps Maya and mom restore their relationship in *Naming Maya* (Krishnaswami, 2004) for children aged between 10 and 14. Others include *Losing Forever* (Friesen, 2002) for children aged between 11 and 15; *Here Today* (Martin, 2004), *Family Reunion* (Cooney, 2004), and *The Suitcase Kid* (Wilson, 2001) for children aged between 9 and 12.

Current fiction titles that offer male protagonists include *Been to Yesterdays: Poems of a Life* (Hopkins, 1999) for children aged 9 and older, which tells how divorce affected a youngster’s 13th year; *Chevrolet Saturdays* (Boyd, 1993) for children aged between 9 and 12, which presents an African American protagonist; *Dark Sons* (Grimes, 2005) for youngsters aged 11 and older, which links a contemporary African American, Sam, with the Biblical tale *Ishmael*; and *Dear Mrs. Ryan, You’re Ruining My Life* (Jones, 2000), which takes a humorous approach, as does *Guy Time* (Weeks, 2000), both for children aged between 9 and 12. Spanish phrases are interspersed throughout the hopeful tale *How Tía Lola Came to Stay* (Alvarez, 2001) for children aged between 9 and 12. *Night Hoops* (Deuker, 2000), for children aged 11 and older, appeals to basketball fans and nonfans alike. *Stand Tall* (Bauer, 2002), for children aged 11 and older, *The Summer of Riley* (Bunting, 2001), and, finally, the clever story of brothers coping with new parental partnerships in *How I Became a Writer and Oggie Learned to Drive* (Lisle, 2002) for children aged between 9 and 12, present strong sibling relationships and offer hope for preteens.

**Bibliotherapy Cautions**

Many books are available for working with preadolescents, and many of those books specifically deal with divorce (Pardeck, 2005). However, as with every therapeutic intervention, cautions exist (Pehrsson, 2006). Book use can be threatening, and children can sometimes experience fear related to reading (Green, 1986; Henk & Melnick, 1995). Often books are identified with school and test taking. Counselors should clarify how bibliotherapy differs from schoolwork and explain that reading will not involve correction of errors. Word stumbling can be avoided by asking youngsters to try out several books first to choose one at an appropriate reading level (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). For those who struggle with reading, counselors can do the reading. If writing is included, counselors should avoid correcting grammar or spelling (Pehrsson & Pehrsson, 2006). A counselor’s goal is not the same as a teacher’s and the two should not be confused.

Another important caution involves counselor preparation. Counselors should read selected books ahead of time and completely, cover to cover. When books deal with controversial topics, wise counselors seek parental/guardian consent before use (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005). Shrodes (1950) argued that no two individuals have identical psychological fields. Therefore, no two individuals will react the same way to a given book. Therapists should anticipate that responses will vary. One particular book may work well with one child; it may not necessarily have the same effect on another client. Counselors must thoroughly assess a client’s needs to determine how book use might be of benefit (Mazza, 2003). Although no book is a perfect match, issues should be similar enough to allow clients to identify with characters or to understand how storylines relate to their own situation (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994).

**CONCLUSION**

Preadolescents are between childhood and adulthood. They have challenges and developmental needs that can be detrimentally affected by divorce. Bibliotherapy often fits well for this developmental stage. Counselors require knowledge and training for bibliotherapy work and cautions exist. A carefully chosen book can provide an effective means for healing preadolescents experiencing divorce.

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Dale-Elizabeth Pehrsson, EdD, is an associate professor in counselor education at the University of Nevada–Las Vegas.

Virginia B. Allen, EdD, is a professor in counselor education at Idaho State University.

Wendy A. Folger, EdD, is a professor in counseling and special education at Central Michigan University.

Paula S. McMillen, PhD, is an associate professor in research and library services at Oregon State University.

Imelda Lowe, MEd, is a doctoral student in counselor education at Idaho State University.