

Reading 'healing stories' with 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.

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



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Who might read a Birdie story?

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.

Babies and very young children like having stories read to them while they look at the pictures. Children approaching school age may start to follow along as an adult reads the words. And children attending primary school are likely to want to read the books independently – they may even like to read the story aloud to a parent, carer or teacher.

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 real printed book, rather than one on a screen. But if you don't have print copies of the Birdie books, you can read them online by Googling 'Birdie's Tree'
- It's nice to start by reading the title of the book, its author and illustrator.
- Encourage the child to make comments, ask questions, and interact with you and the story. This is called conversational reading. Ask questions that suit their age, and help them relate the story to the real world (for example '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?')
- If the child wants to talk about their 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. Or they may want the same story over and over. Be patient and follow their lead.
- 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, and check with them to see if that's 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.
- 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 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 experience.
- 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!

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