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Real Life Calls for Real Books

Literature to Help Children Cope with Family Stressors

Sherron Killingsworth Roberts and Patricia A. Crawford

**I divide all readers into two classes;
those who read to remember and
those who read to forget.**

— William Lyon Phelps

IN THIS FREQUENTLY REPEATED QUOTE, Phelps points to two unique, yet closely related, potentials of literature. On the one hand, great books encourage readers to forget, to escape from the pressures of daily life and lose themselves within the pages of a story. On the other hand, literature invites us to remember and to take hope, practical support, and a few life lessons from the pages of a book.

These dual potentials of literature, so frequently recognized by adults, are unfortunately often overlooked in the reading lives of children. But high-quality children's literature offers even the youngest readers plentiful opportunities to at once find relaxation as they lose themselves in a story while also coming away from the reading experience equipped to meet life's daily challenges.

Sherron Killingsworth Roberts, EdD, is an associate professor of children's literature and language arts at the University of Central Florida. She has published both poetry and research related to innovative pedagogy and the role of children's literature. skrobert@mail.ucf.edu

Patricia A. Crawford, PhD, is associate professor in the early childhood education program at the University of Pittsburgh, where she works with prospective and practicing teachers. Children's literature plays an important role in her teaching and research. pcrawfor@pitt.edu

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This article provides a rationale and related practical suggestions for using literature as a support system for social-emotional development as children cope with the stresses, anxieties, and feelings of loss that can occur in family life.

Why children's literature?

In recent years, national programs and agencies have given tremendous attention to early literacy (NICHD 2000; No Child Left Behind 2002). Federal, state, and local legislation, curricular mandates, and a plethora of commercially produced programs focus on frameworks for teaching reading skills. Emphasis on the teaching of discrete skills associated with reading often eclipses discussions of the joys of reading and the explorations of ways in which literature can inform, support, and enrich children's social-emotional lives (Galda 2001; Williams, Hedrick, & Tuschinski 2008).

Today's children need tangible support as they face a range of challenges that extend far beyond the cognitive domain. Young children encounter many relatively small stressors in the midst of daily events. The discovery of a favorite toy broken beyond repair, a playmate refusing to share, or incidents involving sibling rivalry are typical events that can cause stress in the social-emotional worlds of young learners.

In other cases, children come face-to-face with dramatic events that challenge and change the course of their lives. A parent's unemployment, military deployment, or incarceration are all situations affecting daily and long-term stress levels. Divorce, remarriage, and the illness or death of a loved one have a potentially life-changing impact on every member of the family. Even happy events, such as the arrival of a new sibling

or a move to a new home, add a heightened level of tension for the family.

It is essential for children to learn the coping skills needed to successfully handle the distress, frustration, and anger that are a part of daily life and to emerge with a sense of self-control, hope, and resilience (Oddone 2002; Breslin 2005; Kersey & Malley 2005). Children develop these types of coping skills through a positive classroom environment, the consistent modeling of prosocial skills, and secure relationships with caring adults. In addition, reading high-quality literature is crucial in helping children better understand and manage life's daily challenges.

Denise Johnson (forthcoming 2009) suggests that quality children's literature offers many personal benefits to children. First, literature serves as a point of reference so children can better understand their life experiences. Second, literature offers insights into universal human behaviors, emotions, and moral dilemmas. Finally, literature stimulates children's curiosity and encourages them to develop problem-solving skills to address challenging situations.

Choosing supportive literature

Many kinds of literature can help support children as they confront emotional challenges in their daily lives. For example, *My Family's Changing* and *Stop Picking on Me*, by Pat Thomas, both in Barron's A First Look At series, address divorce and bullying respectively. Books of this

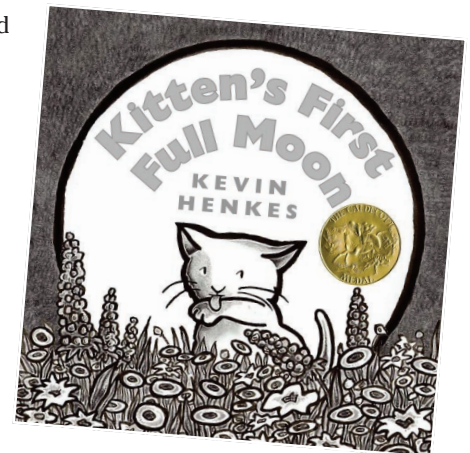
Most children enjoy and engage more fully with authentic literature that is crafted well and addresses challenging issues within the framework of a well-constructed story line.

type focus on specific situations in a direct format and may be helpful in providing and clarifying information. However, they are instructional in tone rather than literary, since they are primarily teaching tools and not written as literature. While these types of texts may play some role, thoughtful practitioners will want to look beyond them to consider

literature that is more inviting and less didactic.

Most children enjoy and engage more fully with authentic literature that is crafted well and addresses challenging issues within the framework of a well-constructed story line (Sipe 2007). Some stories are woven directly around stressful situations, while others include coping and creative problem solving as part of a broader story line. Books addressing real-life situations are effective with a wide range of age levels because their story lines ring true and they evoke real feelings.

They allow children to see painful changes or losses, disappointments, and other emotional stresses in the context of family life and to consider possible ways to solve problems.



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For example, classic texts like Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* depict young coping skills in action. After being sent to his room, Max deals with his frustration and loss of freedom by propelling himself into an imaginary kingdom where he is in complete control of his circumstances. His mom's act of love brings his desire for resolution full circle. A more recent book, Simms Taback's *I Miss You Every Day*, deals with loss in which a young child longs to be with a far away loved one and through the actions depicted in the illustrations offers a possible route to a reunion of the heart.

Kevin Henkes's *Kitten's First Full Moon* appears to be a simple tale of a little cat that chases after a full moon, thinking it is a bowl of milk. Thwarted in her attempt, she returns home to her place of security, only to find that a real bowl of milk is left waiting and her

longing is satisfied, yet in a much different way than anticipated. Likewise, Jude Daly's *To Everything There Is a Season* provides much comfort in the message that life revolves in a beautiful and timely cycle. In Charlotte Zolotow's *When the Wind Stops*, the reassuring refrain echoes that every ending is a new beginning.

Books of the style described above hold the appeal of an intriguing story line that challenges children to think beyond the words and images on the printed page. They can serve a variety of purposes during a read-aloud at home or as part of the early childhood curriculum (see "When Choosing and Using Literature to Help Children Cope," p. 5, for guidance).



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Using literature in various ways

Quality literature offers much for the social-emotional lives of young readers; that is, authentic literature can inform, comfort, and provide models of coping strategies.

To inform

Historically, the first children's book to broach the topic of death for children was Margaret Wise Brown's *The Dead Bird*, published in 1935. This newly reissued book is still useful to help children understand the realities of death, with phrases such as "cold stone dead with no breath." Along life's paths, almost every child has encountered a dead insect or animal but may not have experienced the death of a pet, classmate, or family member. Through this

quiet, respectful book, children can start to make sense of the concept of *not being alive*. No doubt, it is less emotional to approach this topic by discussing a fictional dead bird than by discussing a person who has died with whom the child had a more intimate relationship.

Knowing what might happen in situations surrounding deployment, separation or divorce, moving, illness, or death demystifies children's fears associated with these difficult times. Sometimes a child may imagine horrors that are just not possible, and books can open the child's eyes to the real circumstances related to a problem. One book that captures the idea of using information as a coping strategy is *We'll Paint the Octopus Red*, by Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen. This book relays a family's initial disappointment and grief as they deal with the knowledge that their new baby has Down syndrome. The book includes family discussions and models a family's journey in dealing with what they initially viewed as a loss. By reframing the family's expectations for the future, the book maintains a positive outlook.

Children's books are wonderful vehicles for increasing children's knowledge base so that they can experience life-changing events, equipped with newfound facts, concepts, and understandings to one day help them through scary, new changes surrounding loss. Life does not give us dress rehearsals to deal with difficult times, but through books and discussion children get that opportunity.

To comfort

Children's literature not only offers salient information but can also provide comfort within the lines of the print. Judith Viorst's well-known, yet sometimes controversial, *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* brings a calm, steady voice to the sad upset following the death of the beloved family cat, Barney. This book slowly, steadily builds as the main character reflects on Barney's life in telling the 10 good things about the cat in his eulogy. "Barney was brave, I said. And smart and funny and clean. Also, cuddly and handsome, and he only once ate a bird." Remembering the good things about the deceased is always comforting.

A book that comforts adults and children alike is *Me and Mr. Mah*, by Andrea Spalding. The book initially deals only with the topic of *moving* as it relates the story of a young boy and his mom who must move from the country to the city. Gradually, the facts inform the reader that the move is precipitated by the parents' turbulent relationship. Ian befriends Mr. Mah, who also misses his home country of China; together they commiserate and forge a friendship

based on the hopeful activity of growing a garden in the city. The book faces head-on the problem of moving, without any sugarcoating, but offers a peaceful focus amidst the chaos of a move.

Just as people can offer comfort in times of need, reading books with children comforts them in times of loss and separation. In *The Days of Summer*, by Eve Bunting, Nora, a fourth-grader, and Jo-Jo, a kindergartner, are shocked at their grandparents' impending divorce. This sensitive book portrays not only the children's upset feelings but also the sadness of the last days of summer in a series of *lasts*, such as the last visit to the duck pond.

Children are often totally dependent on the adults who care for them in terms of their emotional and financial futures. Anne M. Perry's *Just Like Always* takes on the topic of divorce in a straightforward approach. From the first page on, this author makes it clear that comfort for their child is built into the parents' approach to their subsequent divorce: "Mom and I garden. Dad takes me to a baseball game." Clearly, their priority is their daughter, and they stand firm in the ideal that their love and care for her will endure despite the separation and the divorce: "Mom and Dad love me, just like always." This book can be read and



reread to reassure a child in this vulnerable position that few things really change, especially parents' love for their child.

To model coping strategies

In addition to informing and comforting, teachers and families can offer quality children's books to model ways to cope with loss and separation. Bettelheim (1989) notes that vicarious

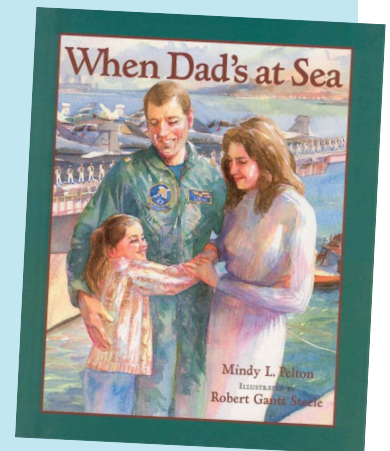
satisfaction is one of the most powerful roles that fairy tales can play. Notably, picture book stories can walk readers and their families through possible solutions. *I Remember Miss Perry*, by Pat Brisson, shares how a class copes with the death of a beloved teacher. Readers see how classmates help each other and bolster their feelings through the power of their memories of Miss Perry. Drawings show the class honoring Miss Perry and how Miss Perry's "fondest wish" brings them together.

Another book on coping skills, *I Don't Want to Talk about It*, by Jeanie Franz Ransom, models a young girl's conflicting feelings surrounding the divorce of her parents. Throughout the book, she uses metaphors of different animals to express her very different emotions: "I wanted to be a lion with a roar so loud that everyone would think I

Children's Literature

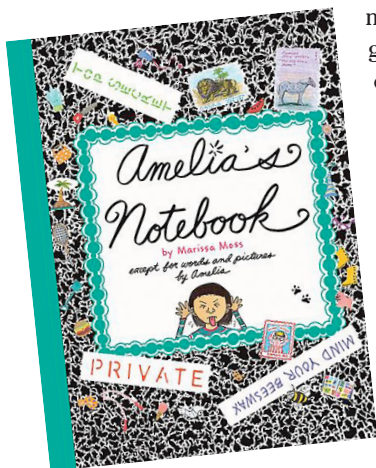
- Amelia's Notebook***, by M. Moss. 2006. New York: Simon & Schuster. Ages 4–8.
- The Days of Summer***, by E. Bunting. Illus. by William Low. 2001. New York: Harcourt. Ages 4–8.
- The Dead Bird***, by Margaret Wise Brown. [1935] 2008. New York: Morrow. Ages 4–8.
- I Don't Want to Talk about It***, by J.F. Ransom. Illus. by K.K. Finney. 2000. Washington, DC: Magination. Ages 4–8.
- I Miss You Every Day***, by S. Taback. 2007. New York: Viking. Ages 3–8.
- I Remember Miss Perry***, by P. Brisson. Illus. by S. Jorisch. 2006. New York: Dial. Ages 5–8.
- Just Like Always***, by A.M. Perry. Illus. by T. Lyon. 2005. New York: Children's Press. Ages 4–8.
- Kitten's First Full Moon***, by K. Henkes. 2004. New York: Greenwillow. Ages 3–8.
- Love, Lizzie: Letters to a Military Mom***, by L.T. McElroy. Illus. by D. Paterson. 2005. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman. Ages 4–8.
- Me and Mr. Mah***, by A. Spalding. Illus. by J. Wilson. 2001. Custer, WA: Orca Book Publishers. Ages 4–8.
- My Family's Changing: A First Look at Family Break-Up***, by P. Thomas. Illus. by L. Harker. 2000. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's. Ages 5–8.

- Stop Picking on Me***, by P. Thomas. Illus. L. Harker. 2000. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's. Ages 5–8.
- The Tenth Good Thing About Barney***, by J. Viorst. Illus. by E. Blegvad. 1987. New York: Aladdin. Ages 4–8.
- To Everything There Is a Season***, by J. Daly. 2006. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. Ages 4–8.
- We'll Paint the Octopus Red***, by S. Stuve-Bodeen. Illus. by P. Devito. 1998. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine. Ages 4–8.
- When Dad's at Sea***, by M. Pelton. Illus. by R.G. Steele. 2004. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman. Ages 4–8.
- When the Wind Stops***, by C. Zolotow. Illus. by S. Vitale. 1995. New York: HarperCollins. Ages 4–8.
- Where the Wild Things Are***, by M. Sendak. [1963] 1988. New York: HarperCollins. Ages 3–8.



was very brave.” Along with reassurance from her parents of their continued love, the book shows ways to identify and share various feelings.

Many families today deal with the separation and anxiety that come with military deployment. In *Love, Lizzie: Letters to a Military Mom*, by Lisa Tucker McElroy, a little girl reveals the longing she feels for her mother, who is serving overseas. Lizzie’s concerns are aired in a series of letters and drawings that begin shortly after her mom’s deployment and continue until her return home. Her mother’s reassuring yet realistic responses are sprinkled throughout the text. Similarly, *When Dad’s at Sea*, by Mindy Pelton, relays many good coping strategies for families dealing with deployment, even within just one page of this important book: “Mom checked the computer every day to see if we had an e-mail from Dad. Most days we did. I liked getting photos . . . he drew a picture for me. It was a stick man with his arms wide open saying, ‘I love you this much!’” Mothers, fathers, guardians, grandparents, other caregivers, and children who read this book together can harvest ideas for their particular family situations.



Another book that specifically models positive coping strategies for loss, separation, and change is *Amelia’s Notebook*, by Marissa Moss, with covers formatted to look like a familiar black and white Composition Notebook. Nine-year-old Amelia laments two things: that she has to move and that her mother thought this dumb notebook could help. Yet, in the lighthearted pages of this book, readers see Amelia model useful coping strategies: journaling and drawing

her feelings in the notebook, saving mementos like birthday candles taped on the page, writing and receiving letters from her old friends, recording her experiences attending a new school, and forging new relationships. This book is a great read-aloud with a child who is anticipating a move. A blank composition book makes a supportive gift for classmates moving away and starting a new chapter in their lives.

Conclusion

In dealing with the sensitive topics surrounding stressful family situations, teachers and families should treat children with respect and compassion. Early childhood educators can offer support. Reading a book in which the characters deal with stress can be timely and helpful. Providing a

When Choosing and Using Literature to Help Children Cope

Choose books that are well written and tell a good story in their own right. While books written to provide pat answers might be helpful, most children prefer authentic literature with engaging story lines and illustrations. High-quality literature features intriguing characters, gives voice to children’s viewpoints, and honestly addresses tough topics with a hopeful resolution.

Be sensitive to children’s circumstances and personalities when selecting books for the classroom. Some children appreciate and respond well to literature specifically addressing a new stressful situation. Other children, like adults, need more time before they are ready to deal with the issue. The key to selection is knowing both the books and the children. Often, it is appropriate to directly ask children their preferences. Supporting open lines of communication between home and school and creating a classroom environment in which it is safe to take emotional risks are important in getting to know children.

Provide opportunities for different responses to literature. Young children enjoy responding to lively stories. While some are most comfortable responding orally, others may prefer to respond through art, writing, movement, or dramatic play. Children may need practice as they find their authentic, honest, and caring voices and engage in large and small group discussions about the tough topics the literature presents.

Honor children’s unique responses to stories. No two readers will have the same response to a piece of literature. Thus, teachers or families should not be surprised when children’s perceptions vary widely from their own. Respect readers’ requests for a particular book or for refusing an invitation to read a particular book.

number of literature alternatives allows children to choose what they want to read. Children coping with loss will often repeatedly request a particular book.

Children should be introduced to a book’s content beforehand so as not to be caught off guard by sensitive issues presented. Short book talks that reveal the story line and hint at the tone of the book can work well to help the class as a whole to choose books for read-alouds and make choices for small reading groups. Teachers can provide annotated bibliographies of appropriate books on a variety of topics to support families in difficult times and to help

(cont’d on p. 8)

Picture Books to Help Children Cope with Family Stressors— Recent and Classic Titles

The following selection of children's books can help children develop skills for coping with stress. Suggested ages for each book are noted, but all the books can be used in different developmentally appropriate ways with children across the full spectrum of pre-K to age 8.

While older children may read the books independently, teachers and families will want to use read-alouds and follow-up discussion to help them navigate difficult or traumatic topics. Teachers can read books aloud to children and provide support in small groups or through a whole-group activity. With guidance from teachers and parents, children can understand and make sense of both the subtle and complex messages presented in the stories.

Adoption

- I Love You Like Crazy Cakes***, by R.A. Lewis. Illus. by J. Dyer. 2000. New York: Little, Brown. Ages 4–8.
- My Family Is Forever***, by N. Carlson. 2004. New York: Puffin. Ages 4–8.
- Waiting for May***, by J.M. Stoeke. 2005. New York: Dutton. Ages 4–8.

Angry feelings

- The Ant Bully***, by J. Nickle. 1999. New York: Scholastic. Ages 3–8.
- Hey, Little Ant***, by P. Hoose & H. Hoose. Illus. by D. Tilley. [1998] 2005. New York: Scholastic. Ages 4–8.
- What Are You So Grumpy About?*** by T. Lichtenheld. 2003. New York: Little, Brown. Ages 3–8.
- When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry***, by M. Bang. 1999. New York: Scholastic. Ages 3–8.

Death

- The Dead Bird***, by M.W. Brown. [1935] 2008. New York: Morrow. Ages 4–8.
- Goodbye Mousie***, by R. Harris. Illus. by J. Ormerod. 2004. New York: Aladdin. Ages 4–8.
- The Hickory Chair***, by L.R. Fausstino. Illus. by B. Andrews. 2001. New York: Arthur A. Levine. Ages 5–10.
- I'll Always Love You***, by H. Wilhelm. 1988. Albuquerque, NM: Dragonfly. Ages 3–8.
- I Remember Miss Perry***, by P. Brisson. Illus. by S. Jorisch. 2006. New York: Dial. Ages 5–8.
- A Story for Hippo: A Book about Loss***, by S. Puttock. Illus. by A. Bartlett. 2001. New York: Scholastic. Ages 4–8.
- The Tenth Good Thing About Barney***, by J. Viorst. Illus. by E. Blegvad. 1987. New York: Aladdin. Ages 3–8.



Developmental differences

- Be Good to Eddie Lee***, by V. Fleming. Illus. by F. Cooper. 1993. New York: Putnam. Ages 4–8.
- Giraffes Can't Dance***, by G. Andrea. Illus. by G. Parker-Rees. 2001. New York: Orchard. Ages 3–8.
- Keeping Up With Roo***, by S. Glenn. Illus. by D. Andreasen. 2004. New York: Putnam. Ages 4–8.
- Leo the Late Bloomer***, by R. Kraus. Illus. by J. Aruego. 1994. New York: HarperTrophy. Ages 3–8.
- We'll Paint the Octopus Red***, by S. Stuve-Bodeen. Illus. by P. Devito. 1998. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine. Ages 4–8.

Divorce

- The Days of Summer***, by E. Bunting. Illus. by William Low. 2001. New York: Harcourt. Ages 5–10.
- Fred Stays with Me!*** by S. Coffelt. Illus. by T. Tusa. 2007. New York: Little, Brown. Ages 4–8.
- Two Homes***, by C. Masurel. Illus. by K.M. Denton. 2003. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick. Ages 4–8.

Illness in the family

- Bear Feels Sick***, by K. Wilson. Illus. by J. Chapman. 2007. New York: Simon & Schuster. Ages 3–8.
- My Little Grandmother Often Forgets***, by R. Lindbergh. Illus. by K. Brown. 2007. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick. Ages 3–8.
- Now One Foot, Now the Other***, by T. dePaola. [1981] 2005. New York: Penguin. Ages 3–8.

Incarceration of a loved one

- Mama Loves Me from Away***, by P. Brisson. Illus. by L. Caple. 2004. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mill Press. Ages 4–8.
- Visiting Day***, by J. Woodson. Illus. by J. Ransome. 2002. New York: Scholastic. Ages 4–8.

Teachers can provide annotated bibliographies of appropriate books on a variety of topics to support families in difficult times and to help them identify books that might fit their needs.

Loss or separation

- Joseph Had a Little Overcoat**, by S. Taback. 1999. New York: Scholastic. Ages 3–8.
- Kitten's First Full Moon**, by K. Henkes. 2004. New York: Greenwillow. Ages 3–8.
- To Everything There Is a Season**, by J. Daly. 2006. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. Ages 4 and up.
- When the Wind Stops**, by C. Zolotow. 1997. New York: HarperTrophy. Ages 4 and up.
- Where the Wild Things Are**, by M. Sendak. [1963] 1988. New York: HarperCollins. Ages 3–8.

Making and keeping friends

- How to Make Friends with a Giant**, by G. Choldenko. Illus. by A. Walrod. 2006. New York: Putnam. Ages 4–8.
- My Best Friend**, by M.A. Rodman. Illus. by E.B. Lewis. 2007. New York: Viking. Ages 4–8.
- The Recess Queen**, by A. O'Neill. Illus. by L. Huliska-Beith. 2002. New York: Scholastic. Ages 3–8.
- That's What Friends Are For**, by V. Gorbachev. 2005. New York: Philomel. Ages 3–8.
- Will You Be My Friend? A Bunny and Bird Story**, by N. Tafuri. 2000. New York: Scholastic. Ages 3–5.

Military deployment

- Love, Lizzie: Letters to a Military Mom**, by L.T. McElroy. Illus. by D. Paterson. 2005. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman. Ages 4–8.
- My Red Balloon**, by E. Bunting. Illus. by K. Life. 2005. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press. Ages 4–8.
- Night Catch**, by B. Ehrmantraut. Illus. by V. Wehrman. 2005. Lansing, MI: Bubble Gum Press. Ages 4–8.
- Red, White, and Blue Good-bye**, by S. W. Tomp. Illus. by A. Barrow. 2005. New York: Walker Books. Ages 4–8.
- When Dad's at Sea**, by M.L. Pelton. Illus. by R.G. Steele. 2004. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman. Ages 4–8.
- See also "Children's Books," www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/200803/pdf/BTJ_Military_Deploy_Resources.pdf

Moving

- Alexander, Who's Not (Do you hear me? I mean it!) Going to Move**, by J. Viorst. Illus. by R.P. Glasser. 1995. New York: Simon & Schuster. Ages 4–8.
- Amelia's Notebook**, by M. Moss. 2006. New York: Simon & Schuster. Ages 4–8.

- Annie Bananie**, by L. Komaiko. Illus. by L. Cornell. 2003. New York: HarperTrophy. Ages 4–8.
- Ella the Elegant Elephant**, by C. D'Amico & S. D'Amico. 2006. New York: Arthur A. Levine. Ages 4–8.
- I Miss You Every Day**, by S. Taback. 2007. New York: Viking. Ages 3–8.
- Me and Mr. Mah**, by A. Spalding. 2001. Custer, WA: Orca Book Publishers. Ages 4–8.
- The Old House**, by P.D. Edwards. Illus. by H. Cole. 2007. New York: Dutton. Ages 4–8.

New baby

- Best Ever Big Sister**, by K. Katz. 2006. New York: Grosset & Dunlap. Ages 2–5.
- Julius, Baby of the World**, by K. Henkes. 1995. New York: Greenwillow. Ages 3–8.
- We Have a Baby**, by C. Falwell. 1999. New York: Clarion. Ages 3–8.
- What the No-Good Baby Is Good For**, by E. Broach. Illus. by A. Carter. 2005. New York: Putnam. Ages 4–8.

Separation anxiety—Saying goodbye

- Arabella Miller's Tiny Caterpillar**, by C. Jarrett. 2008. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick. Ages 3–8.
- Duck**, by R. Cecil. 2008. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick. Ages 3–8.
- The Hello, Goodbye Window**, by N. Juster. Illus. by C. Raschka. 2005. New York: Hyperion. Ages 4–8.
- The Kissing Hand**, by A. Penn. [1993] 2006. Illus. R.E. Harper & N.M. Leak. Terre Haute, IN: Tanglewood Press. Ages 3–6.

Starting school

- Chrysanthemum**, by K. Henkes. 1982. New York: Greenwillow. Ages 3–8.
- Countdown to Kindergarten**, by A. McGhee. Illus. by H. Bliss. 2002. Orlando: Harcourt. Ages 4–6.
- Mr. Ouchy's First Day**, by B.G. Hennesey. Illus. by P. Meisel. 2006. New York: Putnam. Ages 4–8.
- The Night before Kindergarten**, by N. Wing. Illus. by J. Durrell. 2001. New York: Scholastic. Ages 4–6.
- Tucker's Four Carrot School Day**, by S. Winget. 2005. New York: HarperCollins. Ages 3–8.
- Wemberly Worried**, by K. Henkes. 2000. New York: Greenwillow. Ages 3–6.

them identify books that might fit their needs. This idea can be extended through the development of family literacy bags.

In addition to a wide range of titles, it is helpful to include books in the classroom library that address common stressful situations, such as misunderstandings between friends, wanting to be independent, and losing a favorite toy. Also offer books on more sensitive subjects, like sibling rivalry, adoption, divorce, and moving. Book talks at parent/family meetings help families ask teachers for books they could explore more closely with their children at home (Brasel & Roberts 2008). (See a useful list of selected “Picture Books to Help Children Cope with Family Stressors—Recent and Classic Titles” on pp. 6–7.)

Real life does indeed call for real books: books that provide information, comfort, and models for coping with life’s difficult times. Teachers can thoughtfully offer them to children and families in an honest, open, and respectful way; introduce literature as a tool for developing coping skills; invite children to read together; and create safe places for talk and discussion.

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