



# The effectiveness of creative bibliotherapy for internalizing, externalizing, and prosocial behaviors in children: A systematic review



Paul Montgomery, Kathryn Maunder<sup>\*</sup>

Centre for Evidence-Based Intervention, Department of Social Policy & Intervention, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Creative bibliotherapy is the guided reading of fiction and poetry relevant to therapeutic needs. Experiencing stories is hypothesized to act on the same mechanisms as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). This systematic review assesses the efficacy and effectiveness of creative bibliotherapy for the prevention and treatment of internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and the strengthening of prosocial behaviors in children (aged 5–16).

**Method:** An electronic search in seven major databases was conducted along with hand searches of key journals and bibliographies. Only randomized or cluster-randomized trials were included. Primary outcomes: internalizing behavior (e.g., anxiety and depression), externalizing behavior (e.g., aggression), and prosocial behavior (e.g., behavioral intentions and attitudes towards others). Secondary outcomes: parent–child relationship, peer relationship, educational attainment and reading ability.

**Results:** 9180 records were located after removing duplicates. 9134 were excluded prior to screening. Of the 46 full-text articles assessed for eligibility, eight met the inclusion criteria and 38 were excluded. Meta-analysis was inappropriate due to study heterogeneity. Overall results suggest that creative bibliotherapy has small to moderate effect for internalizing behavior ( $\delta$  range: 0.48–1.28), externalizing behavior ( $\delta$  range: 0.53–1.09), and prosocial behavior ( $\delta$  range: 0–1.2).

**Conclusion:** Creative bibliotherapy can have a small to moderate positive effect on child behavior. Although no definitive model of creative bibliotherapy emerges from the included studies, to some extent all interventions reflected CBT mechanisms. Further research is required to: 1) model the change processes taking place when children experience stories; 2) develop and pilot an intervention; 3) assess subgroup effects by gender, age, modality and literacy.

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<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 7463 288 944.

E-mail addresses: [paul.montgomery@spi.ox.ac.uk](mailto:paul.montgomery@spi.ox.ac.uk) (P. Montgomery), [k.maunder@gmail.com](mailto:k.maunder@gmail.com) (K. Maunder).

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## 1. Introduction

Healthy behavioral development in children is critical at both the individual and societal levels. A longitudinal study showed that 73.9% of adults with mental disorders had a mental health diagnosis before the age of 18, and 50% had a diagnosis before the age of 15 – with particularly high correlation for conduct disorders and anxiety (Gregory et al., 2007; Kim-Cohen et al., 2003). At the society level, sizeable costs are associated with deficient child and adolescent behavioral development (Centre for Economic Performance, 2012).

This review considers the potential of creative bibliotherapy – guided reading of fiction and poetry relevant to children’s therapeutic needs (Riordan & Wilson, 1989) – as a low-cost, easy-to-disseminate intervention for the prevention and treatment of internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and the strengthening of prosocial behaviors in children.

### 1.1. Description of the condition

Internalizing behaviors are mood disorders such as anxiety, fear, and depression (APA DSM-V, 2013). Overall depression prevalence in children under 13 is 2.8% (SE 0.5%) and in older children 5.7% (SE 0.3%; Costello, Erkanli, & Angold, 2006). The prevalence rate for anxiety disorders in the same population is 5%–19% (Costello, Egger, & Angold, 2004).

Externalizing behaviors include aggression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), conduct disorders (CD), and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) (APA DSM-V, 2013). Global ADHD prevalence is 5.29% (95% CI = 5.01–5.56) (Polanczyk, de Lima, Horta, Biederman, & Rohde, 2007), CD 1.5%–4% (Loy, Merry, Hetrick, & Stasiak, 2012) and ODD 2% (Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Van Kammen, 1998)–16% (Cohen et al., 1993) depending on definitions used.

Prosocial behavior is typically defined as “voluntary behavior intended to benefit another” (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2013, p. 301). Prosocial tendencies include prosocial moral reasoning, social competence, and self-regulation, which are strongly correlated with empathy (Eisenberg et al., 2013). A survey of American students aged 11–18 found that only 29%–45% reported they had “social competencies such as empathy, decision making, and conflict resolution skills” (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011, p. 405).

### 1.2. Description of the intervention

Bibliotherapy has conceptual roots dating back to Ancient Greece (Riordan & Wilson, 1989, p. 506) and can be categorized into two distinct typologies: creative and self-help.

Self-help bibliotherapy uses non-fiction self-help books for therapeutic purposes. It has been shown to be effective for adults with depression, panic disorder, and certain sexual dysfunctions (Fanner &

Urquhart, 2008; Marrs, 1995) as well as for those with anxiety when compared to no treatment (Mayo-Wilson & Montgomery, 2007). Less research has been conducted among children; however, media-based self-help does appear to be moderately effective in treating behavioral disorders (Montgomery, Bjornstad, & Dennis, 2009).

Creative bibliotherapy uses fiction, poetry, and film as prevention or treatment for emotional and behavioral maladjustment. While the intervention delivery may differ substantially (Rubin, 1978), the critical element is the selection of age- and literacy-appropriate narrative materials conducive to the therapeutic objective at hand (Pardeck & Markward, 1995). There is very little research into the effects of creative bibliotherapy on psychosocial outcomes in adults or children (Fanner & Urquhart, 2008).

This review is concerned with creative bibliotherapy. While creative bibliotherapy is widely used in practice, it has not received the same attention as self-help bibliotherapy in experimental research, nor is there a consolidated evidence-base for its use with children.

## 2. Theory

Although there is no definitive understanding of behavioral development in children and adolescents, it is theorized to consist of complex, interacting cognitive, social, and neurological processes (Bandura, 1969; Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Piaget, 1976; Schaffer, 1996). Internalizing and externalizing maladjustment occurs when individuals struggle to make sense of or misconstrue their experience of the world around them. Stories have the potential to help children find meaning and master social, emotional, and cognitive tasks (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 66):

*“When all the child’s wishful thinking gets embodied in a good fairy; all his destructive wishes in an evil witch; all his fears in a voracious wolf; all the demands of his conscience in a wise man encountered on an adventure; all his jealous anger in some animal that pecks out the eyes of his archrivals – then the child can finally begin to sort out his contradictory tendencies. Once this starts, the child will be less and less engulfed by unmanageable chaos.”*

Anchoring creative bibliotherapy in the best current evidence, we turn to cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT has demonstrated effectiveness in treating children with internalizing and externalizing disorders as compared to no treatment or other talking therapies (James, Soler, & Weatherall, 2012; Montgomery et al., 2009; O’Kearney, Anstey, Von Sanden, & Hunt, 2006). Briefly, a process of reframing negative thoughts underpins CBT: eliciting unhelpful cognitions, challenging their meaning, and eliciting more realistic thoughts and assumptions (Hunot et al., 2013).

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