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Children’s Literature as Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse

This article addresses the issue of child sexual abuse, providing contextual information about the problem, such as the fact that in 85–95% of cases, the offender is known to and trusted by the victim. Because children are greatly influenced by situations depicted in books (and other media), positive and negative influences of general children’s literature are discussed. More importantly, the author argues that carefully selected children’s literature can help to prevent child sexual abuse. Since statistics reveal that the average sexually abused victim is eight years old, this study focuses on current and suggested literature for children ages four through eight. Content and evaluative criteria are discussed, followed by a survey of thirteen children’s books that deal with child sexual abuse. Finally, ideal characteristics of prevention are suggested and some literary models are proposed.

KEY WORDS: child sexual abuse; children’s literature; bibliotherapy.

He wins every hand who mingles profit with pleasure, by delighting and instructing the reader at the same time.–Horace, Epistles (c. 8 B.C.)

I still think that the power of the word is the best medium to inform and entertain the minds of our youngsters.–Isaac Bashevis Singer, Stories for Children (1984)

When I ask my college writing students to name a favorite book or author, they often hesitate to answer, perhaps they are embarrassed to admit their preferences in the company of their peers. However, when I ask them if something they have read has drastically altered their perspective or even changed their lives, I usually get quite a few volunteers who are willing to share their experiences. They cannot always pinpoint exactly why the book or essay made such an impact, but they can recall how they felt. The best literature speaks to us individually yet holds universal appeal, connects with our lives, remains fresh and alive with subsequent reading—it delights and informs us. Children have the wonderful ability to let us know without
hesitation what delights them, eagerly asking us to read their favorite books to them again and again. After a while they will memorize an especially enjoyable book, which seems to be the most fun, because then they can read along with us and turn the pages at precisely the right time.

Literature can be powerful, inspiring, encouraging, informational, and potentially life-changing. Perry Nodelman writes that “children’s literature can be a powerful, positive force in the lives of children. It can make them less innocent. It can make them conscious that there is more than one way of being normal” (p. 114). This is especially important for children who have experienced situations that cause them to feel like “I’m the only one,” such as sexual abuse or living with an alcoholic parent.

Even without a teacher’s or parent’s guidance, literature can help children to recognize potentially harmful scenarios, to identify their own victimization, to receive reassurance that they are not abnormal, and most importantly, to seek help. A powerful antidote to feeling like “I’m the only one” is to discover others facing similar situations through literature. Likewise, although “classics” are certainly valuable and meaningful, especially when contextualized, more modern literature reflects current norms and gender roles, providing children with relatively accurate depictions of everyday life. Sheila K. Hollander believes that contemporary books can be especially worthwhile because they are “neutral vehicles for teaching about specific, often embarrassing topics such as the proper terminology for body parts, bodily functions, private zones, uncomfortable touching, and fondling. They help children to discriminate between different kinds of touching and provide examples of good and bad touching” (p. 187).

**Child Sexual Abuse**

Child sexual abuse is defined in United States federal law, in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, as:

(A) the employment, use, persuasion, inducement, enticement, or coercion of any child to engage in, or assist any other person to engage in, any sexually explicit conduct or simulation of such conduct for the purpose of producing a visual depiction of such conduct; or

(B) the rape, molestation, prostitution, or other form of sexual exploitation of children, or incest with children. (U.S. Dept. of Health, p. 29)

In *Child Sexual Abuse: A Reference Handbook*, Karen L. Kinnear states that “most experts agree on certain elements of the definition: exploitation of the child; use of coercion, gentle though it may be;