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Topics of Stress and Abuse in Children's Literature for Intermediate Readers

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Abstract

Close to 900,000 incidents of child abuse and neglect are reported each year in the United States. These children are abused or maltreated physically, emotionally and sexually, in addition to being abused through neglect. Introducing this topic in the intermediate grades as a social justice/civil rights issue is one way to open the door to discussions of child abuse with children who may be experiencing abuse in their homes. Included here is an in-depth analysis of thirteen current texts for intermediate readers that contain significant incidents of child maltreatment, comparing the abuse within the books to actual statistics and types of maltreatment currently recognized within the United States. Suggestions and guidelines are given to teachers for using these books with children, although cautions against using bibliotherapy are clear throughout.

Keywords: Child abuse/maltreatment, Children's literature, Intermediate grades, Social justice

Topics of Stress and Abuse in Children's Literature for Intermediate Readers

There are many books written for intermediate children that deal with authentic issues and have rich characters that interact in ways that mirror contemporary society. The themes are as diverse as our children and their families, and they include topics that are difficult even for adults, such as war, abuse, poverty, sexual activity, crime, gangs, and young pregnancy. Children benefit greatly from reading stories that reflect life's challenges when the stories' topics are handled in sensitive, developmentally appropriate ways and offer control and hope to the characters within.

According to the document "Child Maltreatment, 2005" (Children's Bureau, 2008), approximately 900,000 children in the United States were adjudicated as being maltreated in 2005, and these are just the reported cases. Each year in the United States, over 1,200 children are murdered by their families or friends of their families. Approximately 20% of these victims are aged eight to eleven. In addition, an estimated 10 million children witness domestic violence in their homes, children are bullied on a daily basis and the news describing graphic crimes and war comes right into a family's home (Horton & Cruise, 2001). Because of the violence children are exposed to, they need books to read that reflect the violence that surrounds their lives (Hearne, 1988, p. 29). Advocacy groups have demanded an increase in the number of books dealing with diversity, and the availability of books with situations where children are highly stressed such as child abuse and war have increased. Not only do the books allow children to explore their feelings and gain new understanding related to the topics, but children also learn to read more easily if their reading material relates to what they have experienced, are interested in, and if the teacher makes the books available (Vacca & Vacca, pp. 161-162).

Hearne (1988) writes that there is not much research available regarding books for children on topics of child abuse and violence (p.29). This lack of research persists even though many books with themes of violence are being written for young and intermediate children. Bibliographies are written that contain descriptions of books where the central character is involved in a violent situation, but the lack of solid research is substantial.

Messages in the books that children read stay with them (Misson, 1998, p. 53) and, if healthy and authentic, can present children with hope, avenues to understand people and their situations, and inspire them to be advocates for other children and adults (Smith-D'Arezzo and Thompson, 2006, p. 336). Issues of child abuse/maltreatment are often highlighted in books written for children in the intermediate grades – grades four through six. The purpose of this article is to examine how abuse is portrayed in books written for children in intermediate grades and how this portrayal compares to the reality of child abuse in the United States. Included is a rationale for using books that portray abuse, both those that stick to harsh reality and those that deviate from reality to soften the edges of child abuse and maltreatment.

Books in Intermediate Classrooms

Classroom teachers may select to read books containing themes of child abuse and violence to the children, or they may provide support to children who read the books individually. Teachers and parents may question why books about abuse are being introduced to children. It is important to consider that developmentally, intermediate readers are branching out from their families and becoming more aware of the world around them. They begin to discover that not all children and families live like they do (Pressley & McCormick, 2007). Reading books about injustice such as child abuse, even if not connected directly to their own lives, is one way that children can begin to understand issues of justice and fairness, first on a family level and second on a global level.

Teachers who choose to use books about abuse will need to reflect deeply on the value of books that contain strong messages about child maltreatment and the effect of these messages on children. Books with themes of abuse can help children see the abuse in a larger context, opening the door to discussions of human rights and social justice, thus justifying their use in intermediate curricula. Fenzel (2009) states that within the Nativity model, private tuition-free middle schools for low-income inner-city students, the teachers often make use of stories of children who have been abused as a "springboard for discussion …to address issues of family struggles, foster homes, child abuse and domestic violence, issues not unfamiliar to a large percentage of Nativity students" (p. 55).

Social justice in education is more than a catch phrase; it is a curricular stance strongly advocated by educators from a variety of backgrounds. Adams, Bell and Griffin (1997) advocate from a diversity/social justice position; Ayers, Hunt and Quinn (1998) connect social justice to the political ideals of schooling; Edelsky (2006) links language acquisition to social justice issues; Flores-Koulish (2006) connects critical pedagogy in media literacy to the broader aspect of social justice; and Sweeney (1999) teaches social justice as a part of the literacy curriculum.

Education in social justice naturally connects to children's literature. Johnson (2006), in addressing the needs of intermediate children, states that issues of human rights should be infused within the social studies curriculum, and a wonderful way to do this is through children's literature. Middle grade students should be able to "explain and apply concepts such as power, role, status, justice and influence" (p. 414).

Issues of Humans Rights surround us globally and locally. Books that deal with issues of abuse give Human Rights violations a face and make them more personal as children read about how these issues impact other children and their families. "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person" (General Assembly of the United Nations, 1948). When children read nonfiction or realistic fiction, they have the opportunity to think about children and families and the rights that should be afforded them, and children develop a framework for child rights worldwide, which they can refer to in the future when they hear of violations of children's rights. This understanding and framework better prepare them to be global citizens and advocates for others.

Another reason for including in classrooms books involving abuse and other types of violence against children is that many children live in abusive environments and/or experience violence. By openly addressing the topics of abuse and violence, teachers give children chances to reflect on incidents of violence in their own lives, which can open doors – invitations to talk to adults about what is happening. Through children's literature, children can also view family and societal dynamics from another perspective, which may give them more insights into their own situations, and provide additional understandings about the nature of violence in society. Children who are not in abusive situations will learn new things about children who are and, hopefully, empathy for others will develop and strengthen (Smith-D'Arezzo & Thompson, 2006, p. 337).

A few cautionary notes: children living in abusive homes may identify with the characters in the books, and internalize the feelings of these characters. If children begin to identify too closely with a fictional character, a facilitator might need to help them recognize differences between their own situations and those in the books. Generally, classroom teachers do not have the background or experience to help children sort through these differences and need to consult with a school counselor. For example, if a child reads about a character whose mother blames her [the child] for the abuse, the reader could internalize blame and believe he/she is at fault for an abusive situation. In addition, when a child is healing from abuse, the classroom may not be the best avenue in which to raise the issues of abuse without the benefit of a counselor.

The reasons for including in intermediate-level curricula books with themes of abuse and violence are sound. Even so, parents, colleagues, and administrators will question the appropriateness of such intense readings for children. Adults want to protect children, which is a noble but not very realistic goal. Jones and Borgers (1988) investigated children's feelings about war and discovered that children had many more fears regarding war than their parents realized. News and information about all types of violence, including war, comes into our homes through television, newspapers, and radio. Photographs capture children's attention and show bombings, fires, and even dead bodies. Children become confused with the violence they are exposed to through the media and public discussions, often times becoming fearful and anxious. Part of this fear and anxiety comes from not feeling in control of their environments and worrying about their lives and the lives of their families. Adults need to be there to discuss intense topics in ways that are developmentally appropriate and help children gain a better understanding of the events and how they impact their lives. Children can then begin to understand the contexts in which the violence is occurring. Also, by reading books where the families are being impacted by violence, children can explore difficult topics with adults in non-personal ways.

In our research, we encountered several definitions and alternative vocabulary for child maltreatment. Every state has its own laws on what constitutes child maltreatment (commonly known as child abuse). Throughout this manuscript, we use the terms *child abuse* and *child maltreatment* interchangeably. The following glossary of terms includes other common terms used throughout this article and other literature on child abuse. The definitions of these types of abuse can vary by state, but these are some general guidelines.

Glossary of Terms

Abandonment: When the parent's identity or whereabouts are unknown, the child has been left by the parent in circumstances in which the child suffers serious harm, or the parent has failed to maintain contact with the child or to provide reasonable support for a specified period of time.

Emotional Abuse: injury to the psychological capacity or emotional stability of the child as evidenced by an observable or substantial change in behavior, emotional response, or cognition, or as evidenced by anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or aggressive behavior.

Neglect: Deprivation of adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision.

Physical Abuse: Any nonaccidental physical injury to the child, including striking, kicking, burning, or biting the child, or any action that results in a physical impairment of the child.

Sexual Abuse/Exploitation: Some States refer in general terms to sexual abuse, while others specify various acts as sexual abuse. Sexual exploitation is an element of the definition of sexual abuse in most jurisdictions. Sexual exploitation includes allowing the child to engage in prostitution or in the production of child pornography (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2007, para. 5-10).

Selection of Books on Child Maltreatment

In examining books to select for this article, we found intermediate children have access to more books about child maltreatment than primary-aged children do. The exception is books about child sexual abuse. Fewer books dealing with sexual abuse are available for intermediate children than for very young children. This could be due to two factors: books about sexual abuse for very young children are designed to be shared with the child by a trusted adult, and this may not be the case with books for intermediate readers; sexual content in books for intermediate readers could lead to a classification as young adult.

In selecting the books for our analysis, we looked mostly to contemporary fiction written after 1995, with one notable exception, *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (Paterson), written in 1978, which is considered a classic in the genre of books about child abuse. We also looked for books that were representative of this genre. The books we chose fit into the category of realistic fiction - eight contemporary and five set in the mid-twentieth century. With one exception, they are all set in the United States. The books we selected tell well-crafted stories with believable characters. Many are written by renowned authors, several of whom hold Newbery Honors or Newbery Medals. The books in this article were narrowed down from a large assortment that were recommended to us by others, found on lists of award-winning books, listed on recommended reading lists, and otherwise discovered through our investigation.

In this analysis we were curious about how the stories of abuse and neglect are being told to children. How are the issues of maltreatment handled in the larger stories? Do the books tell the story of abuse and neglect in a realistic yet developmentally appropriate way for children in the intermediate grades? We also examined how the stories stand up to reality, who is being abused, who is perpetrating the abuse and what types of abuse are perpetrated. Next,

we analyzed the books from the perspective of the fictional children's responses to the maltreatment: do they run away, ask for intervention by other adults or the law, or try to handle the maltreatment in other ways? We also explored the causes of the maltreatment, what backgrounds are given by the author for the maltreatment of children, and how do the abusive situations make sense to intermediate readers? We conclude this manuscript with a section on how the maltreatment in the books is resolved, returning once again to the theme of realism within the story. Finally, we looked to whether or not the children in the books have some control over their circumstances and whether or not the book leaves the reader with hope.

In order to conduct this analysis, we each read the books, taking notes on the questions listed above, using a transactional reader response approach (Rosenblatt, 1991) that was enhanced by our own immersion in the topic of child abuse and our knowledge of research in the area of child abuse. After our separate readings of the books, we used our notes to discuss each book in-depth, returning to the books when we had areas of disagreement on the actions or motivation of characters within the books. Our notes from the books and from our discussions became the data with which we worked to develop both the analysis below and Table I.

Analysis of Texts

Who is Telling the Story; How is the Story Being Told?

In literature it is important to look at who is telling the story as well as who is being allowed to tell the story. For example, in children's literature written about children with disabilities, those who are severely disabled often do not have the privilege of telling their own stories (Smith, 2000). Their stories have been traditionally told by siblings, friends or parents. In the books we examined, the story of the maltreatment is generally told through another's eyes; this is particularly true when the victim is being physically maltreated. *Bruises* is the only book in this study dealing with physical maltreatment by a parent where the story is told from the point of view of the child who is being maltreated. In *What Happened on Planet Kid* and *When Ratboy Lived Next Door*, the physical maltreatment is perpetrated by a parent; however the stories are told through either the eyes of a friend of one of the children who is being abused, not from the point of view of the child herself. Four other books portray physical maltreatment perpetrated by adults other than the biological parent. These stories are also told through the point of view of a sibling, or a friend, with the exception of *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, in which Gilly tells her own story.

The stories contain a conventional progressive plot style, commonly found in traditional European tales (Lukens, 2007). Two of the books (*Ruby Holler* and *Canning Season*) take a light approach to the telling of the story and exaggerate the events in the book, sometimes straddling the line between realistic fiction and fantasy. It was important to include these two stories because they are such well-told examples of child abuse.

In the majority of the books that we reviewed where the adult is the perpetrator of the maltreatment, the maltreatment is neglect coupled with emotional maltreatment. While these cases are, in fact, more common in our society, they are also more difficult to prove and agencies that deal with child maltreatment often have a difficult time resolving the issue

when the primary abusive situation is neglect. The authors of the books we reviewed handle resolution in a variety of ways, sometimes involving the law, but always plotting the story in such a way that by the end of the book the child who is being neglected achieves the goal of living in a loving family situation.

Who is Abusing, Who is Being Abused?

Research in child maltreatment has shown that children are primarily abused by their parents. According to the Children's Bureau (2006), 83% of child maltreatment in the United States during 2004 was perpetrated by the mother and/or the father of the victim. In 46% of the cases the mother was the responsible parent, in 19% the father was responsible and in 18% the parents were equally culpable. Parents, primarily mothers, are the people who spend the most time with children and have the closest access to them. Boys and girls are equally represented as victims of child maltreatment; again, according to the Children's Bureau, it has been found that victims of child maltreatment are split almost equally between male and female (51.7% of victims are female and 48.3% are male), but girls are more likely to be sexually abused at any age.

Table 1. Depictions of Abuse in Thirteen Books for Intermediate Readers

Book Title	Abuser	Type of Abuse	Child who is abused	Main character	Topics for discussion
What Jamie Saw 1995 Newbery Honor Carolyn Coman contemporary	Boyfriend of mother	Physical/ life-threatening	Jamie's baby sister, Nan (female)	Jamie (male)	Family Trust
What happened on Planet Kid 2000 Jane Lesly Conly mid 1950s	Father	Physical/ life-threatening	Siblings (males and female)	Dawn(female)	An individual's role in correcting wrongs seen in the neighborhood
Evangeline Brown and the Cadillac Motel 2004 Michelle Ivy Davis contemporary	Father (1) Father (2)	Neglect	Evangeline (Eddie) (1) and her friend, Farrell (2) (female and male)	Evangeline	Loss of a parent/loved one Alcoholism
When Ratboy Lived next Door 2005 Chris	Father (1) Mother (2)	Physical (1) Emotional (2) Bullying	Willis (male) and his family (1)	Lydia	An individual's role in correcting

Woodworth 1962			Lydia (female(2))		wrongs seen in the neighborhood
When Zachary Beaver Came to Town 2003 Kimberly Willis Holt Late 1960s	Guardian (male)	Neglect	Zachary (male)	Toby (male)	Bullying War Treatment of people with disabilities
While no one was Watching 1998 Jane Leslie Conly contemporary	Aunt	Neglect Bullying	Sibling group (two males/one female)	Frankie (male)	Poverty Family
Bruises 2003 Anke DeVries contemporary	Mother (1) Father (2)	Physical/ Life-threatening (1) Emotional (2)	Judith (female (1)) Michael (male (2))	Judith	Rights of children
Silent to the Bone 2004 E. L. Konigsburg contemporary	Baby-sitter (female)	Physical/ Life-threatening	Nikki (female)	Bronwell (male)	Subtle distinctions between truth and lies Family and step-family
The Same Stuff as Stars 2002 Katherine Paterson contemporary	Mother	Neglect bullying	Angel (female) and Bernie (male)	Angel	Rights of children Poverty
The Great Gilly Hopkins 1978 Katherine Paterson 1970s	Mother and foster parents	Neglect, some physical Bullying	Gilly (female)	Gilly	Foster Care Rights of children
Ruby Holler 2002 Sharon Creech contemporary	Foster Parents (male and female)	Neglect Emotional Abuse	Twins, Dallas (male) and Florida (female)	Dallas and Florida	Foster Care Rights of children Family

The Canning Season 2003 Polly Horvath indeterminate	Mother and guardian	Emotional Abuse and neglect; abandonment	Ratchet and Harper (females); separate incidents of abuse	Ratchet	Rights of children Poverty
Tadpole 2004 Ruth White 1955	Guardian (uncle)	Physical abuse	Tadpole (male)	Tadpole	Poverty Rights of children then and now

In the thirteen books we examined, there are twenty abusers (see Table 1). The abusers are evenly split between the two genders. Examining the maltreatment categorically, we found in seven of the thirteen books the maltreatment was physical and life-threatening. Five of these physical abusers were male and two were female. Only one of the women and two of the men who were physically abusive were parents of the children involved. The other abusers were the mother's boyfriend, a babysitter, an uncle/guardian, and a foster parent. Counting all evidence of child maltreatment, we found that fifty percent of the abusers in the books were parents of the victims; the remaining fifty percent were other adults in the children's lives. While in reality the parent is the primary child abuser, we found that in fiction the parent was less likely to be portrayed as the abuser. We hypothesized that perhaps it is more difficult for authors to portray a parent as abusive. Our society likes to view parents as loving, or at the very least benign; and what parent will buy a book that portrays a parent as a child abuser? The only physically abusive mother, is in *Bruises*, which was originally published in Dutch and translated to English. In *Bruises* (2003), de Vries is brutally honest in portraying both the maltreatment that results in life threatening injuries and the child's feelings: "The first blow to her cheek made her gasp. Then came a dry *whack* on the other cheek. Judith tried desperately to dodge the blows that followed" (p. 10). In looking at the gender of the abused child, we found eight books where the main character was female and four that had a male protagonist; one book had a set of twins, male and female, as the primary characters. Girls were also more likely to be maltreated in these books than boys; eleven of the twenty abuse victims were female and nine were male.

Running Away

One common theme within these books was that of running away from the abuser. Dallas and Florida, 13 year old twins in *Ruby Holler*, make plans to run away from their institutional foster home. Before the twins can make good on their plans, Tiller and Sairy, an older couple, decide they would like to have Dallas and Florida live with them. Although Tiller and Sairy are kind to the twins, neither twin can accept sympathetic treatment at face value; they are sure that at some point the kindness will become "putrid" like they have previously experienced. Florida asks, "What if these old lunatics are like that last pair? That slimeball slave driver and his twitchy wife—" (p. 32).

Even though their treatment at the hands of Tiller and Sairy continues to be exemplary, the twins plan and carry out an escape, albeit one that ultimately results in them returning to their foster parents. (See discussion of resolutions) This is a theme in several of the books we analyzed. When Gilly, the main character in *Gilly Hopkins*, attempts to run away, she is stopped at the bus station because she is not old enough to buy a bus ticket for herself. Eddie and Farrell in *Evangeline Brown* are also turned away when attempting to buy tickets at the bus station. Farrell is determined to try again, but Eddie realizes that she would rather return to her father and try to work things out.

Judith (*Bruises*) runs away from her abusive mother, which seems to be a choice of life or death for her as the physical maltreatment is escalating. As she trudges to the bus stop, wincing from her bruised, possibly broken ribs, Judith is resigned to her fate, neither joyful at escaping her mother nor sad to be leaving. Judith's fate is not clear by the end of the book; more realistic than others, the book does not contain a happy ending.

In What Jamie Saw when Nin, Jamie's baby sister is thrown across the room by Van, the mother's boyfriend, Jamie's mother packs up the two children and their meager belongings, leaving that night to seek refuge with a friend. Here, the person running away is the adult and the purpose is to protect the two young children. Unfortunately, Jamie's mother, Patty gradually comes to realize she is unable to protect Jamie from what he saw. Nin and Jamie are physically unharmed, yet residual emotional damage is evident, shown in the following scene where Jamie is sitting alone in his classroom: "Suddenly, out of nowhere, there was a hand on his shoulder. He shot up in his seat, and whirled around, his body tense as wire" (p. 101). His teacher has approached him from behind, frightening him. The abuser has been left behind, yet Jamie cannot overcome the fear he carries with him.

Tadpole (*Tadpole*), a thirteen year old boy living with an uncle who beats him, also runs away and goes to live with another set of relatives who are more sympathetic. Set in 1955, *Tadpole* contains a different set of realities than the more contemporary books. Tadpole's aunt is willing to keep him in spite of the economic burden an extra mouth places on her family. But she is no match for the uncle who reports Tadpole to the law as a runaway. Child protective services provide no recourse for Tadpole.

In contrast, the character Zachary Beaver in *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town* is extremely passive. Grossly overweight and part of a freak show exhibit, Zachary is hauled from town to town in a travel trailer. When his guardian, Paulie, abandons him in a small town in Texas, the townsfolk provide him with food. Zachary makes no attempt to get away from his life as a freak. Although given the chance to run away, Zachary accepts his abandonment with equanimity and simply waits patiently for Paulie to return to him.

Children Internalize the Abuse

In many of the stories children, primarily girls, feel responsible for the maltreatment. The common theme seems to be: if only I could be better, my parent would love me and I would feel that love, either by less physical maltreatment, or more overt emotional love. The children wonder what they can do to make their parents love them enough to stop the

maltreatment. Judith questions her mother's love in *Bruises*, and Angel in *The Same Stuff as Stars* wonders why her mother is so harsh with her. Angel believes that if she can hold it together well enough, her mother will be able to care for her and her brother. Angel justifies the neglect and abuse perpetrated by her mother by believing that her mother's life is difficult. Angel makes excuses for her mother, "You couldn't blame Verna for getting mad. She had a hard life. Wayne [the children's father] was in jail, so she had to earn enough money to take care of all three of them, and it wasn't easy getting a good job when you were a high school dropout with two kids and your husband was in jail" (p. 68). Angel is also very young, only four years older than her brother Bernie, yet she is the one who is Bernie's primary caregiver. Both Angel and Judith are older sisters who hold too much responsibility for younger brothers while their mothers either neglect or physically maltreat them. Judith thinks, "What was it she [Judith] did wrong, and how was she supposed to behave to win her mother's approval?" (p. 51).

Lydia (*When Ratboy Lived Next Door*) does not know why her mother does not show her any love or affection; she believes it is because she always says the wrong thing to her mother, thus negating the affection she craves. After a typical confrontation with her mother, Lydia thinks, "Just one time I wanted to talk to Mother without messing up. I wanted to say something interesting enough to make her come toward me instead of skittering away" (p. 80).

Ratchet, the main character in *The Canning Season*, also feels responsible for the abuse perpetrated on her. Elements of this story are told tongue-in-cheek, almost crossing the line into fantasy. For example, when Ratchet is born neither parent takes seriously the naming of the baby. While her mother proposes names like Eugenie and Yvonne, she does so in between demanding better food and a private room; the naming process is secondary on her agenda. Her father is also inappropriate, proposing names like STINKO and FART. The encounter between parents degenerates into an argument over whether a ratchet or a wrench has been left in the room by a workman, and their new baby girl is named Ratchet. The mother, left with the responsibility of raising the baby on her own, does not care enough to bother changing the name. On top of having an unusual name, Ratchet has a birthmark on her shoulder that is hideous to her mother. She constantly harasses Ratchet to keep it covered. Ratchet feels that if she did not have this disfigurement, if she could come up with clever conversation or if she were somehow different her mother would pay more attention to her. Due to the clever writing, the reader has no doubt that the mother is self-centered and will never pay attention to Ratchet.

Dallas and Florida, the twins in *Ruby Holler*, also feel that the maltreatment they suffer is because something is wrong with them, instead of something being wrong with their foster parents. When they were returned to the Boxton Creek Home from yet another foster family who decided not to keep them, Florida thinks "that she and Dallas had been very bad and they would never be in a real family" (p. 18).

In a twist on the theme of children blaming themselves for the abuse, Branwell (*Silent to the Bone*) blames himself for the maltreatment of his baby sister, Nikki, by the babysitter. He

doesn't report the little signs that he saw in the beginning because the babysitter is emotionally blackmailing him; Vivian, the Au Pair from England, is sexually provocative around Branwell, making him unsure of himself and unsure of his level of culpability in the glimpses he has had of her when she is dressing and undressing. Konigsburg deftly handles the psychological complexities in this book, as the reader gradually comes to an understanding that Branwell did not tell what was happening when Vivian allowed the baby to cry uncomforted, refrained from changing her diapers and neglected her in favor of a relationship with the pizza delivery boy. Branwell is happy to care for Nikki himself in the afternoons when he returns from school. But, on the fateful afternoon when he finds his sister physically maltreated, he is not able to tell the truth of the situation because of his own guilt and feelings of culpability.

All of these books are excellent examples of the feelings that children experience when they are being abused, expressed in children's own words. The books become the mirrors that children can use to find themselves in literature (Galda, 1997). We did find it significant that authors were more likely to portray girls as the ones who felt responsible for their own abuse.

Why is the Abuse Occurring?

In several of these books, the author attempts to explain why the adult is abusing the child. Some explanations are quite complex, and others rely on allusions, mostly to the consumption of alcohol. One of the most complex is the story of Judith and her mother in *Bruises*. Judith's mother, Connie, felt emotionally neglected by her own mother, who favored Connie's sister and younger brother. As a teen, Connie was responsible for watching her younger brother when he drowned while trying to ice-skate. When she looks at Judith, Connie sees her brother's face and she becomes angry with herself for her role in his death.

Of course, the back-story is unknown to Judith. When her aunt visits, Judith learns a little bit of her mother's background, but she is not able to understand all of the nuances. Judith continues to wonder why her mother beats her and finds her in disfavor, while never finding fault with her younger brother.

Lydia (*Ratboy*) often wonders why her mother is emotionally distant from her. She is surprised to learn that her mother was married before her marriage to Lydia's father and had a son who died in a freak accident. The reader and Lydia both come to understand that her mother is afraid to love her or get too close to her because of the deep grief she felt after the death of her son.

Maltreatment caused by either alcohol or temper accounts for much of the abuse in the books we examined. Willis' father in *Ratboy* has a bad temper and a problem with alcohol. When he has been drinking he is mean, chasing Willis around his yard with a belt, threatening to kill Willis' pet raccoon, and beating his wife, Willis' stepmother.

Dawn discovers that her friend Charlotte and her brothers are being maltreated by their father in *What Happened*. This book makes no mention of alcohol abuse, just the fact that Charlotte's father is easily angered. His temper flares at the slightest provocation. The maltreatment in this book is heavy and physical, to the point of endangering the lives of the

children. Charlotte brushes the abuse off as a way of life when she tells Dawn, "He cools down once he sleeps. You just got to stay out of his way" (p. 77).

Alcohol is the surface cause of the neglect that Eddie faces in *Evangeline Brown*, but the underlying cause is the death of Eddie's mother. Eddie has few memories of her mother, but when she finds a treasure chest of letters her mother wrote to her own parents [Eddie's grandparents], Eddie realizes the depth of the love her parents felt for each other and the loss her father suffered upon her mother's death. Eddie begins to understand the intensity of her father's sorrow and the cause of his drinking. Eddie's friend, Farrell, faces a similar situation, he lives alone with his single father who pays more attention to alcohol than to his son. Eddie and Farrell have more responsibility than most children their age and basically need to fend for themselves.

While Angel's mother (*Same Stuff*) does drink, a problem with alcohol is not seen as the primary cause of neglecting her children. Angel's mother was young when she had her first child; she is uneducated and has a husband in jail. She is portrayed as immature and irresponsible; she expects more of Angel than she expects of herself. In her interactions with her children, she behaves as a child. When she wants something from her children she will bribe them with promises of future purchases, but when she gets the behavior she wants, she withdraws the bribe, saying she was only kidding. Yet, she expects total respect and honesty from Angel.

Immaturity is inferred as a reason for the maltreatment of Nikki in *Silent to the Bone*. Vivian, the au pair, is young and excited to be in a foreign country. But she is too immature to handle the needs of an infant. She is also manipulative in her treatment of Branwell. The physical maltreatment of Nikki is consistent with what you would find in Shaken Baby Syndrome, often associated with young, immature parenting skills.

Ratchet's mother is not chronologically young, but is immature in her behavior toward Ratchet, sending Ratchet to live with two great aunts, rarely calling and paying more attention to her boyfriends than to Ratchet. Harper, also abandoned in *The Canning Season*, has a similar story. Harper's guardian decides she can no longer care for Harper since she is pregnant with her own child. One child is enough, so she abandons Harper.

In *Tadpole*, the abuse of Tadpole by his uncle is severe, but seen by some as a normal part of child rearing. Uncle Matthew beats his nephew when he breaks a rule, or does not work as fast as the uncle thinks he should. Tadpole is a young man who is not used to the beatings and eventually runs away from his uncle to live with Aunt Serilda and her five daughters. Although money is tight in Aunt Serilda's household, the rules are less severe and there are no beatings.

Alcohol is one of the many issues dealt with in *While No One Was Watching*. Earl, Frankie and Angela have been left in the city with their aunt while their widowed father takes a job on the Eastern shore of Maryland, hoping to earn enough money to improve their lives. They all dream of the day when they can have a new house with a yard and room for a pet. The father has no one to watch the children while he works, and Aunt Lula is not equipped emotionally

or physically to take care of three children; her drinking escalates and the children, aged 11, 6 and 5, spend most of their time on their own. Poverty along with the pressures faced by those living in poverty, seem to be the causes of the neglect of the children. Conly does an excellent job of portraying the lives of children struggling with the issues and results of poverty.

Legal Issues

Several of the books include encounters between children and the legal system. The children are reluctant to be involved with child protective services and they see foster care as a last resort. In *The Same Stuff*, eleven-year-old Angel and her seven-year-old brother Bernie are abandoned by their mother at their great-grandmother's house. Although they have barely enough money for food, Angel is afraid they will be put in foster care if found by child protective services. Her memories of previous foster placements are not positive: "[Foster] Home, ha! More like a reformatory. Angel had gotten whacked every time she'd turned around" (p. 170).

Eddie, the female protagonist in *Evangeline Brown*, fears she will be removed from her home when a new teacher begins to explore her home situation. Eddie's friend Farrell spent time in foster care and is determined not to return. When their new teacher investigates their home lives, Farrell exclaims, "I won't let them do it [send him away]. I won't let them because I won't give them a chance. I'll run away first" (p. 113).

Gilly Hopkins (*The Great Gilly Hopkins*) has had her share of bad experiences in foster care. Some foster parents were "nice" and others were not so nice. She even bonds with one foster mother, but when the family decides to move to Florida, Gilly is "put out like the rest of the trash they left behind" (p. 71). Although her birth mother abandoned her, Gilly desires to be with her, to get away from the instability of her life.

In Tadpole's case (*Tadpole*), when he runs away from his uncle, his uncle calls the law on him. Uncle Matthew sees Tadpole as a possession, a free laborer for his farm. In spite of the physical beatings, the law takes Uncle Matthew's side. Tadpole's legal home is with his uncle and Matthew has the legal right to custody. In 1955, laws did not address child abuse; it was a disciplinary measure, the purview of the legal guardian.

Zachary (*Zachary Beaver*) was abandoned, left in a small travel trailer with no provisions for food or cleanliness. Passively, he sits in the trailer, knowing someone will care for him. Set in 1972, the story is told from the point of view of two young boys whose lives change in a number of ways over the course of the summer. When Toby and Cal realize that Zachary has been abandoned, they begin to take food to him, and form a relationship. The local sheriff also gets involved, calling social services wondering what to do with Zachary. After several weeks, he finds Paulie, Zachary's guardian who has spent some time overseas lining up new acts for the freak show. When the sheriff tells Zachary that Paulie is coming back for him, Zachary just nods as if he knew all along that Paulie would be back. The sheriff continues, "Now, that don't excuse him for going off and leaving you like he did. And I'll certainly have to have a long talk with him about that. But I guess everyone deserves a break now and then"

(p. 217). It was wrong to abandon a child in 1972, yet laws weren't as rigorous as they are now, it was a slower time and when a reasonable resolution was reached, it was easier to look the other way.

How is the Abusive Situation Resolved?

When a child is being maltreated by his/her parents, social agencies can be notified by outside parties, alerting social workers to the maltreatment. Current news stories tell us the intervention of social workers is not always a positive step. There are times when the investigation is inconclusive and the child who is being maltreated is left with the family, eventually to be killed by one or both parents. A notorious example of abuse escalating to the level of death is the 1987 murder of Lisa Steinberg in New York City by her adoptive father despite numerous warning signs and contact with social services. Even given these failures in the system, teachers and other professionals are still encouraged, in most cases mandated, to report any suspected child maltreatment. The reporting of child maltreatment is a factor in the resolution of the story in three of the stories we examined.

In most of the books, the progressive plot structure revolves around the maltreatment/neglect. In an attempt to resolve the issue within the confines of a book for children, some of the books have unrealistically "happy" conclusions; the abusive situation is resolved and the child lives his/her life without worry. The strongest example of an unrealistically happy ending is the story of Eddie and Farrell in *Evangeline Brown*. When their attempt at running away is unsuccessful, the two children return home only to find the police, their teacher and their fathers frantically waiting for them. Both of their fathers begin to attend AA meetings and life suddenly looks much better.

Although both girls were abandoned to live in the woods with two extremely old ladies, Ratchet and Harper in *Canning Season* thrive under the unusual living circumstances, practically raising themselves, going on to college, and living as happily ever after as any fairy tale characters. Florida and Dallas in *Ruby Holler* also find unexpected happiness with their new foster parents, Sairy and Tiller. The older couple who thought they just wanted the children to go on their end-of-life dream vacations, find they are fond of the twins and decide to open their home to them permanently.

What Happened on Planet Kid does not have such an optimistic ending. Dawn is spending the summer with her aunt and uncle on a farm because her mother is having surgery. When Dawn realizes that Charlotte and her siblings (neighbors of the aunt and uncle) are being physically abused by their father, she tries to tell her aunt to get some help for Charlotte. The aunt is a good woman who cares deeply for her own family, but she does not want to get involved in the neighbor's problems. Dawn shows much more maturity than her aunt, recognizing that it is necessary for all members of a community to care for one another. *Planet Kid* is set in the middle part of the twentieth century, yet attitudes have changed very little today. Many adults see abusive situations as family problems rather than societal problems and refuse to get involved.

When Dawn finally returns to the city, she is afraid to mention the problem to her mother, because her mother is still weak from surgery. Finally the problem is just too big for her to cope with and she does tell her mother about the situation. Dawn's mother copes with the information from Dawn in a realistic manner, telling Dawn that if Charlotte's mother has not left her father before now, that simply sending her money and encouraging her to leave will probably not be effective. She offers to help monetarily, as well as promising to make some phone calls. At the same time, she clearly tells Dawn, "I'm not saying we shouldn't try to help, Dawn; I'm just telling you it may not work" (p. 214). Leaving the future of Charlotte and her brothers unresolved, Conly gives us a realistic ending that parallels authentic situations in many families' lives.

In *Bruises*, the main character runs away from her mother with the aid of a friend at school and the encouragement of the only adults in her life who are willing to help her. While running away is not a solution that we want to encourage, the reader can see Judith is at a point in her life where she is not able to come up with any other solution. The maltreatment from her mother is escalating, and she truly feels, as does the reader, that her life is in danger.

Jamie's situation (*What Jamie Saw*) is another realistic story with an uncertain ending. By the end of the book, Jamie and his mother are still living with fear and symptoms that fall in the category of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Vin (the abuser) is no longer a part of their lives, but they can't help going through their days looking over their shoulders, fearful that he will pop out from anywhere to get them. Jamie is extremely protective of his younger sister, since she was the primary abuse victim.

In between these two extremes are books that end with more hope, but still keep the story in the realm of true life. The story in *While No One* concludes with Earl, Frankie and Angela riding a bus to reunite with their father. When he realizes that Lula is not caring for his children properly, he somehow he manages to rent a house and sends bus money so the children can join him. The children still dream of having room for a pet, but a discerning reader knows the family will continue to face the problems of poverty.

Conclusion

Intermediate Level Books with Topics of Violence in an Elementary Intermediate Classroom

There are many reasons for including books containing violent themes within an intermediate-level classroom. Large numbers of children live daily with violence, and those that do not experience violence personally, are very aware of the violence around them and in other parts of the world. Rather than pretend that children are not dealing with violence, access to books that explore the humanities' issues that allow violence to flourish, paves the way for intelligent discussions about violence, encourages children to discuss their own situations, helps build empathy for people who live with violence, and inspires children to be advocates for others locally and as global citizens.

Classroom teachers may want to read books with difficult themes aloud with children, so they can support the children in their feelings and ideas, plus scaffold additional understandings.

Other books can be made available to children who are developmentally ready for the story and individual discussion time can be scheduled to talk about the book. Other books can be the foundation for a unit on topics such as human rights, poverty, or war. Units of this nature need to be guided by not only the children's book, but also by the teacher's district curriculum and the recommendations of the National Council of Social Studies. There is also a national curriculum model that is commonly followed for social studies. It is developmental in nature and begins with the kindergarten child studying his or her self and expands outward to sixth grade studying the world (Nelson, 1998). This framework is excellent for helping a teacher to select children's literature that fits within an established developmental model. Although the model specifies what is to be studied in the different grade levels, there is room for many other topics per level. For example, fourth graders regularly study state history. Stories from their states that depict societal abuse such as slavery, child-labor, and internment camps are important to include in discussions on human rights, the social awareness of a community, and respecting the struggles of others that have come before us. At the same time, stories of slaves and child labor as well as concentration camps in other countries would be an important addition to the topics studied.

Books chosen to be shared with children should have strong literary merit that make them worthy of children's time and provide children with a rich, worthwhile story with whole characters, and authentic settings and situations, rather than a vehicle to talk about violence. Books that are rich and authentic will naturally lead to discussions of the violence characters are dealing with and then move into children's feelings and experiences. At this point, teachers must be prepared to really listen to the children and ask for assistance from the school counselor/social worker. If children reveal violence in their lives, teachers should network with other professionals – the principal, nurse, social worker, etc. to design a plan to help the children.

When choosing books for classrooms and school libraries, teachers should remember to reflect wisely on their choices. It is important to know your students, and choose authentic stories that deal with issues in real ways. When you know a child has been abused in the past, it may be important to consult with the parents or foster parents to know what types of books will be suitable for that individual. A book that seems harmless to an adult may be extremely frightening to a child based on his or her experiences. Teachers and other adults need to be available to talk with children in order to help support them with the reading, or in the case of the frightened child, another reading should be selected that works with the same objectives but does not scare the child.

The stories we selected represent children from a wide variety of backgrounds. Selecting literature that depicts children from many social classes, cultures and races allows children to see themselves in the stories they are reading. Understanding the nature of violence and abuse is important in helping children realize that it happens in all families, all places in the world, and we are all impacted by it in one way or another. Issues of violence can be difficult to talk and think about, but when we open up discussions about readings that are powerful, children recognize they have a safe place in which to discuss their thoughts, experiences and feelings,

and develop an understanding of advocacy for others. If carefully and thoughtfully done by the teacher or other adults, children will be provided with a sense of control and hope.

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