

Building Bonds Through Books

How to Read Our Books with Your Children

Disclaimer*

Below is a guide that provides information, general themes, as well as questions to consider and points of discussion for each of the books that we offer. This is a comprehensive guide of all the books that we offer. With that being said, not all points of discussion may be relevant, and some of the themes in the books may not be as relatable as others to everyone's individual situations. Please keep this in mind as you read and discuss with your child, and be sure to highlight the most important themes, while asking questions to foster a productive discussion.

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Rocko's Guitar - Geoffrey Alan Johnson

General Information:

This book is written for children who read at pre-k through 2nd grade levels or are around the age of six, which also happens to be the main character's age. This is a crucial age as your child will start to seek more autonomy, however, it is still critical to act as an audience for them to display new skills and activities as it aids in building their self-esteem. This book is meant to be read as a read along, as it can help to build the bond between the caregiver and the child, while also improving the child's literacy skills. Children around this age use pictures to make associations and correct mistakes when reading. It could be useful to pause on each page to go through the images in the book in order to ensure the child understands the message being conveyed.

Major Themes:

They are not alone

- Oftentimes children who are experiencing parental incarceration are left feeling confused, frustrated, and alone - much like Rocko did in the story. It is vital that the caregiver emphasizes that they are not alone and that they have people and resources, both at home and at school, to reach out to if they need help.

Be truthful

- We may feel as caregivers that it is easier and better for the child to tell an altered version of the truth or a lie in order to protect them. In the story, Rocko finds out the truth about his father and is left more confused and upset. Telling the truth builds trust between you and the child and also opens the door to conversations about how to cope with your situation and how to handle questions from peers.



Parental incarceration is not their fault

- Children often look up to their parents as role models. If a parent is experiencing incarceration, the child may not fully understand the reasoning behind their parent's absence and believe it to be their fault. It is important to emphasize that it is not their fault and that the parent still loves and cares for them deeply, despite not living at home with the child.

Children need to know you are there for support

- This is the most important guidance we offer and overarches all the other information provided: children at this age need a supportive guardian, and we remind caregivers that they need to know every step of the way that you will always be there for them. Parental incarceration can be an incredibly confusing experience for a child who cannot fully understand the nature of the situation, so it is vital to open a continued channel of communication between you and the child to answer any questions and provide support in any way you can.

Questions & Points of Discussion

* Before you begin the conversation, it's important to plan your topic, be truthful and don't provide answers to questions you don't know. Make sure to listen to your child's questions/concerns, and plan a course of action to get those questions answered and concerns addressed *

- How does it make you feel that (loved one) is away?
- Do you feel like you are at fault for (loved one) leaving?
- Who do you trust at school? Would you feel comfortable talking to them about it?
- Ask the child to provide a favorite memory of them with (loved one), and ask them to describe how it makes them feel



Kofi's Mom - Richard Dyches

General Information:

This book is targeted towards children reading at pre-k to kindergarten reading levels (or are aged 4-7), and is a story about a boy named Kofi navigating life after his mom goes to prison. It is important to note that this book does mention the fact that Kofi's mom goes to prison, so if a book solely on parental separation is desired, perhaps another book we offer could be a better fit. Although BBTB does not offer these books, there are other books by the same author that may be useful, such as *Doogie's Dad* also for this reading level, and *Where's Dad?* for children reading at 2nd - 5th grade levels (aged 7-11). The author also offers *Two of Every 100*, which is for kindergarten - third grade (children aged 5-8) and can be used as a conversation starter to help children discuss their feelings and emotions about the situation.

Major Themes:

It's okay to talk about it

- Children often feel like it is embarrassing or upsetting to tell classmates, teachers, and other people about the true nature of the situation. They need to know that it is okay to talk about the situation, as long as it is with a trusted individual who can display understanding, kindness, and empathy.

They are still loved

- Some children may not fully understand why their parent or loved one has gone away, and they may feel like it's their fault. They need to know that they are indeed still loved by their guardians and their



loved ones, despite the fact one of their loved ones may not be around all the time to express it.

They are not alone

- The confusion children may face when experiencing parental incarceration could lead to them feeling isolated and alone. They need to know that they are not the only child who is experiencing this, and there are people there to help them through this situation.

Questions & Points of Discussion

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- Is it hard to tell people what's going on with mom/dad/loved one?
- Is there anyone who you feel comfortable talking to about the situation at school? Who?
- Do you feel like you are not allowed to be sad about the situation? (Explain to them that their emotions are valid and what they are experiencing is completely normal.)
- Does visiting mom/dad/loved one make you feel better/ how does it make you feel?



You Weren't With Me - Chandra Ghosh Ippen

General Information:

This book is targeted for children aged 3-6, or reading levels for grades pre-k to first. This book is meant to be read-along, as it can help to build the bond between the caregiver and the child, while also improving the child's literacy skills. This book is directed more towards parents who are reentering society, rather than other caregivers. This is because the book does not mention incarceration at all and focuses on the reunion between a parent and their child after a difficult separation. Reuniting with a loved one can be a difficult experience for children, especially if they are unaware of the reason for them leaving in the first place. This book discusses a potential scenario of what it may be like to reunite a child with a loved one and how to handle the potential difficulties that come along with it.

Major Themes:

Be patient

- As much as we would like them to, sometimes children are not ready to express love and care to their parents and loved ones if they feel confused or frustrated about them being away. It is important to remain patient, and not try to force conversations that they aren't ready for.

Make sure to listen

- It is important to make sure you are rebuilding trust with your child and rebuilding your relationship. It is important to listen to them, what they did while you were away, and how your presence made them feel. Make sure to remind them that it was not their fault that



you were away and they didn't do anything wrong, but also that their emotions are valid and they have a right to feel the way they are.

Your love for them has never wavered

- There is a possibility that your child may feel like you do not love them anymore, or that you stopped caring about them while you were away. It is important to remind them that your love and care for them has never wavered and that even while you were away still loved them, thought about them, and did whatever you could to ensure that you would be together again.

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- What did you do while I was away?
- Did you have people to talk to and help you/who were they?
- How did me being away for so long make you feel?
- Talk to them about how you thought about them all the time, perhaps recall a favorite memory you have with the child and explain that you would think about this memory often



Cuando No Estabas Conmigo - Chandra Ghosh Ippen

Información general:

Este libro está dirigido más a los padres que se están reincorporando a la sociedad, que a otros cuidadores. Esto se debe a que el libro no menciona el encarcelamiento en absoluto y se centra en el reencuentro entre un parent y su hijo después de una separación difícil. Reunirse con un ser querido puede ser una experiencia difícil para los niños, especialmente si no son conscientes de la razón por la que se van en primer lugar. El libro analiza un escenario potencial de lo que puede ser reunir a un niño con un ser querido y cómo manejar las posibles dificultades que conlleva. Este libro está dirigido a niños de 3 a 6 años, o niveles de lectura para los grados de prekínder a primero.

Temas principales:

Sé paciente

- Por mucho que nos gustaría que lo hicieran, a veces los niños no están listos para expresar amor y cuidado a sus padres y seres queridos si se sienten confundidos o frustrados por su ausencia. Es importante ser paciente y no tratar de forzar conversaciones para las que no están preparados.

Asegúrate de escuchar

- Es importante asegurarse de que está reconstruyendo la confianza con su hijo y su relación. Es importante escucharlos, lo que hicieron mientras no estabas y cómo su presencia los hizo sentir. Asegúrate de recordarles que no fue su culpa que estuvieras lejos y que no



hicieron nada malo, sino también que sus emociones son válidas y que tienen derecho a sentirse como se sienten

Tu amor por ellos nunca se ha ido

- Existe la posibilidad de que su hijo sienta que ya no lo ama, o que dejó de preocuparse por él mientras se fue. Es importante recordarles que su amor y cuidado por ellos nunca se ha ido, y que incluso mientras no estaban todavía los amaban, pensaban en ellos e hicieron todo lo posible para asegurarse de que volverían a estar juntos.

Preguntas y puntos de discusión

* Antes de comenzar la conversación, es importante planificar el tema, ser sincero y no dar respuestas a preguntas le tiene respuesta. Asegúrese de escuchar las preguntas/inquietudes de su hijo y planifique un curso de acción para obtener respuestas a esas preguntas y abordar sus inquietudes *

- ¿Qué hiciste mientras yo estaba fuera?
- ¿Tenías personas con las que hablar y ayudarte y quiénes eran?
- ¿Cómo te hizo sentir que estuve ausente durante tanto tiempo?
- Hable con ellos sobre cómo pensaba en ellos todo el tiempo, tal vez recuerde un recuerdo favorito que tenga con el niño y explíquele que pensaría en este recuerdo a menudo



Visiting Day - Jacqueline Woodson

General Information:

This book is about a little girl who goes to visit her father in prison with her grandmother. They discuss their visiting day rituals and explain the excitement that everyone is feeling that their family can be reunited again for the day. This book is best for children aged 5-9, or reading grade levels kindergarten through fourth grade, and is specifically about visiting an incarcerated loved one. If visiting your incarcerated loved one is an option, this book provides a wonderful opportunity to discuss the process, the emotions, and other crucial aspects of visiting day.

Major Themes:

Visiting Day is Exciting!

- Getting the chance to see your loved one is always an exciting experience, and it should be something that you, your child, and your other family members look forward to. These moments are super important, especially for the child, so make the most of it!

Visiting is a Privilege

- For some families, visiting their incarcerated loved ones is unfortunately not an option. If you and your child are able to do so, it's important to treasure and appreciate every moment.

Be Patient and Persevering

- For some, having a loved one experience incarceration is a temporary thing. While this is undoubtedly a difficult time for yourself, the child, and the rest of your family, remember that this will



not last forever. It is important to be patient, dependable, and remain strong during this time.

Want to Know More about Visitation?

- Check out our how-to guide on [visiting an incarcerated loved one](#)

Questions & Points of Discussion

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- How does visiting day make you feel?
- Are you excited? Nervous? Something else?
- What are some of the things you are going to talk about with your loved one?
- Encourage them to think of exciting things that have happened in their life that they would like to share.



Ruby on the Outside - Nora Raleigh Baskin

General Information:

This book is about a girl named Ruby Danes, who is on the verge of starting middle school. Her mother is experiencing incarceration, and the only other person who knows is her aunt. She keeps this a secret from everyone, until eventually she makes a new friend named Margalit, who challenges Ruby's perception of the world.

This book is aimed at children aged 10+, or reading grade levels for fifth grade and above.

Major Themes:

Parental Incarceration is nothing to be ashamed of

- Although it is a difficult situation, having a loved one experience incarceration is nothing to be ashamed of. Your child has done nothing wrong, and they should never feel like they cannot tell anyone or they must keep it a secret.

Having a good support system is vital

- It is crucial that children, especially at a young age, have a good support system around them to discuss how they are feeling. Keeping their emotions inside and suppressing them is never a good option, so it's important to make sure they know they have people to talk to if they need it.

Friendship is very important

- Having friends is important for your child's overall well being. Not just to be there for them in times of need, but also to celebrate with



them in times of triumph. Surrounding your child with good friends will only make things better, regardless of their current situation.

Questions & Points of Discussion

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- Does anyone at school know about your loved one? Any of your friends?
- Do you trust your friends to tell them? If not, why?
- How do you think your friends would react if you told them?
- Do you feel like you have a good support system around you?
- Are there any things on your mind that you would like to talk about?



Any more questions...?

Email us at buildingbondsthroughbooks@gmail.com we're happy to help to the best of our ability!

