On any day, in any early childhood or primary classroom, any of the following scenarios might occur:

- Lamar, whose parents have just separated, is crying because he left his mittens at his dad’s house during his visitation weekend.
- Vanessa is scared because her best friend Jessica’s hair is falling out, and she doesn’t understand why their mommies are always talking about doctors.
- Mario is arguing with Alyssa. He says, “There is no such thing as two mommies. My mommy and meemaw told me that.”
- Sarah asks Jorge why his brother makes weird noises and walks and talks funny.
- Sue Ann’s mom tells you that Sue Ann’s grandmother, who has been her only babysitter since birth, has died suddenly of a heart attack.
- Jonathan has been having a rough time paying attention lately. You discover that his dad has recently been deployed to Iraq.
- James announces that he’s afraid of the new boy because his skin is brown.

These topics and others—including bullying, family diversity, homelessness, disabilities, and incarceration—are often referred to as tender topics. They can be difficult for us to explain to or discuss with children.
In our work with children, families, and teachers, we have seen that it is not necessarily the topic that makes conversations difficult, but who we are as individuals that determines our comfort level in addressing these subjects.

It is important to view tender topics not as problems, but as subjects that are part of the everyday lives of children and families. However, some might see these topics as problems because children and adults don’t know how to approach them, and are uncomfortable talking about them.

For example, at the first grade open house for families, you learn that Dashawn’s dad is blind and uses a companion dog named Candy. You might not know how to address Dashawn’s dad. Children may have questions or make comments, and you might not know how to respond. Is it okay to explain to the children what it means to be blind? What should you do when children approach Candy? Using families as resources is one excellent way to get some of these answers, and if they feel comfortable, families might also help you by visiting the children to answer questions.

When Dashawn’s dad came as a special visitor during morning message, he was pleasantly surprised that the children already had an idea of the meaning of blindness and what a companion dog does. The previous year in kindergarten, they had read Lucy’s Picture, a story about how Lucy created a collage in preparation for her blind grandfather’s visit. They shared with Dashawn’s dad that Candy reminded them of the dog in My Buddy, the story their teacher had read to them last week. They asked several thoughtful questions, such as whether Candy would be allowed to play with them.

**Bibliotherapy and critical literacy**

So what do you do when you see or hear Lamar, Vanessa, Mario, Sarah, Sue Ann, Jonathan, or James struggling to make meaning of their worries or concerns? Teachers can use bibliotherapy, the art of using literature to help individual or small groups of children understand specific difficult experiences (Thibault 2004). They can use critical literacy, in which children thoughtfully examine the language of the text and illustrations to think about meanings and to explore social issues that apply to their own lives (Meller, Richardson, & Hatch 2009). Bibliotherapy and critical literacy help explain tender topics to children on a developmentally appropriate level. Teachers may decide to address topics with the whole group or in a small group. Through the use of story, children can better understand their own experiences.

Picture books give children the opportunity to meet characters they have yet to meet in real life, but with whom they have much in common. “Books are mirrors in which children can see themselves. When they are represented in the literature we read, they can see themselves as valuable and worthy of notice” (A World of Difference Institute 2009). Read-alouds are one way to start conversations, giving children a chance to ask questions and discuss their thoughts.

**It is important to view tender topics not as problems, but as subjects that are part of the everyday lives of children and families.**

Using elements of critical literacy as you read to children supports exploration of tender topics. Asking and answering questions and listening to children’s responses are important elements when reading stories aloud. After reading a book, engage children in conversations in which they consider the meaning of the text and illustrations and share their own diverse perspectives. As you listen, you begin to understand their values and attitudes, learn about their experiences with the topic, and, if necessary, clarify their misconceptions. For example, some young children might assume that all families have a mother and a father, or they might believe that people in wheelchairs are helpless.

Giving children access to literature featuring tender topics is not enough. When teachers use the literature, they invite critical conversations, which probe children’s thinking. Of course, you must consider the children’s ages, developmental levels, individual needs, and familial contexts (Copple & Bredekamp 2009) before deciding how to approach any topic. Questions to consider include the following:

- Should you be the one to discuss this tender topic with a child, or should you first confer with a parent?
- Is the book appropriate for all the children in the class, or is it especially appropriate for one particular child?
Should you read the book to the whole group, a small group, or just one child?

- What do you know about how the topic affects the children in the program?
- How will you inform and include families in the curriculum, which includes tender topics? How can you become more knowledgeable about how children develop understandings about this tender topic?

Evaluating children’s books

During the last decade or so, a genre of books has emerged that tackles tender topics. However, it is our responsibility to critically review these books before choosing to read them to young children.

- Do the illustrations or story lines depict stereotypes, such as particular ethnicities living in poverty or disabled characters who succeed only with the help of nondisabled characters?
- Is the author knowledgeable about the topic from personal experience or vocation? Teachers can find this information by researching the author’s website or examining the dust jacket or pages at the end of the book, where authors typically share their personal connections to the story.
- Are problems solved realistically? Is there room in the story for more than one solution? Is it possible for children to figure out how they would approach the problem?
- Does the writing style encourage discussions?
- What kind of language does the author use to describe the characters? For example, are people with special needs praised and described primarily as helpless?
- Is the story developmentally appropriate and interesting? Are the illustrations eye-catchy? Is the text written for young children’s understandings?

Suggestions for addressing tender topics

For the tender topics mentioned in the article’s opening paragraph, here are some storybook suggestions that we have used with Lamar, Vanessa, Mario, Sarah, Sue Ann, Jonathan, and James.

**Divorce.** *The Family Book*, by Todd Parr; *Mama and Daddy Bear’s Divorce*, by Cornelia Maude Spelman.

Ms. Denny reads *The Family Book* to 4-year-old Lamar during center time. It stimulates a discussion about different kinds of families. She asks Lamar to bring in photos of both his mom and dad so he can hang them in his cubby and “visit” each of them when he misses them. Going to her bookshelf, Ms. Denny takes out two copies of *Mama and Daddy Bear’s Divorce* to give to both Lamar’s mother and father. As an offer of assurance and support, Ms. Denny takes the time to explain to Lamar’s parents how reading the story together will help him ask them questions about divorce, and how it might calm his anxiety about living in two homes.

**Cancer.** *Kathy’s Hats: A Story of Hope*, by Trudy Krisher.

Ms. Timms shows *Kathy’s Hats*—written for the author’s 9-year-old daughter, who lost her hair during cancer treatments—to Vanessa’s father. She explains Vanessa’s worries and points out how the book’s simple yet honest text and illustrations might benefit her understanding of what is happening to her friend. After he reads it to 6-year-old Vanessa at home, he asks Ms. Timms to read it...
to the class. Vanessa says she wants the other children to understand about her best friend, Jessica.

**Family diversity.** *In Our Mothers’ House,* by Patricia Polacco; *The Family Book,* by Todd Parr.

Mr. Thompson shares with first-grader Mario’s appreciative family Patricia Polacco’s beautifully written narrative about growing up in a house with two moms. In class, Mr. Thompson reads *The Family Book,* which mentions all kinds of families, including same-sex parents.

**Disabilities.** *Ian’s Walk,* by Laurie Lears.

Teachers of young children emphasize using senses every day. Ms. Langford takes kindergartners Sarah and Jorge for a walk in the neighborhood and talks about Jorge’s brother. What would his brother do if he heard that dog barking? What are some of his favorite things to do? Later, they read *Ian’s Walk,* a story about a girl who takes her brother out for a walk during which he gets lost. Finding him means figuring out what he likes and how he explores his environment. Ian has autism, and Jorge can talk to Ms. Langford and Sarah about what that means. Ms. Langford gives Jorge a safe way to explain to his friend Sarah what it means to have autism.

**Death.** *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs,* by Tomie DePaolo.

After hearing of the death of 4-year-old Sue Ann’s grandmother, Ms. Goulding meets with Sue Ann’s family. She suggests helping Sue Ann put together a memory box of pictures and objects that remind her of her grandmother. Sue Ann already knows that when someone or something dies it is forever. In school, the children often visit the small garden that memorializes fish and hamsters that were once part of the classroom family. Ms. Goulding had earlier read *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs* to the class, a story about a young boy whose grandmother dies. With permission from Sue Ann’s dad, she reads it again at circle time. They ask Sue Ann if she wants to show her memory box to the children during this time.

**Military Deployment.** *A Paper Hug,* by Stephanie Skolmoski; *Night Catch,* by Brenda Ehrmantraut; *My Dad’s a Hero,* by Rebecca Christiansen.

Before Jonathan’s dad is deployed, Ms. Edmonds, the first grade teacher, recommends *A Paper Hug,* a book that gives details about what the family can expect, including packing, saying good-bye, and how they will keep in touch. During the *What Our Families Do* unit, she asks all the children to bring in pictures of their families for a class book. Ms. Edmonds hopes this unit will give all the children a chance to talk about the family members they miss while they are in school, but especially Jonathan, who will not see his dad for many months. Surprisingly, she learns that several other children in the class have family members in the service. Ms. Edmonds decides it is not appropriate to mention the possible consequences of war, or that there is a chance Jonathan will never see his dad again. Instead, she reads *My Dad’s a Hero* and gives Jonathan a space to discuss his feelings about missing his dad. She also lends Jonathan’s mom *Night Catch,* a wonderful bedtime story about how a boy and his dad play catch with the North Star as it travels from son to dad each night.

**Race.** *The Skin You’re In,* by Michael Tyler; *Skin Again,* by bell hooks.

Hearing kindergartner James say he was afraid, Mr. Conway realizes that it is not enough to just hang up posters showing people of various ethnicities. He needs to find a project so that all the children can start talking about diversity. He understands that by the age of 3 children begin to notice physical differences in people, and that some children might be both curious about and afraid of differences that they notice. In small groups, Mr. Conway
reads a few stories about skin color and then asks the children, working in pairs, to mix paint colors to find their skin color. Since James’ comment was about skin color, Mr. Conway does not view it as a racist comment, but rather a topic to explore. After reading *The Skin You’re In* and *Skin Again*, children explore the multicultural paints. They choose a name for their paint color using descriptive language similar to that in the stories, and they paint self-portraits.

**Where do we begin?**

Read the book about a tender topic to yourself and think about your own experiences, feelings, and biases. Will you feel comfortable reading this story to young children? If not, read the story to a friend or another teacher. By starting conversations with colleagues, you may discover new perspectives and gain more confidence in approaching the topic. Remember, when teachers include all aspects of children's lives and families in the curriculum, children and families receive important messages about caring and respect.

Think about how you can support children and their understanding of tender topics. It may be beneficial to read two or more different types of books about the same tender topic.

Once you include storybooks about tender topics in your curriculum, you will be surprised how often the stories become a resource to address children's misunderstandings and help them talk about events. In addition, this becomes a comfortable venue to learn about children's lives.

---

**Be prepared to address misunderstandings**

At circle time one day, Ms. Brown reads these lines in *Kathy’s Hats*:

> Then one year something happened to me. It was something that doesn’t happen to many children, but it happened to me. That something was a very serious disease. Its name was cancer.

Ms. Brown asks, “Does anyone know what cancer is?” Five-year-old Becky raises her hand and answers, “Cancer is when something falls off your body.” As the story proceeds, Kathy, the narrator, loses her hair as a result of chemotherapy. Becky enthusiastically chimes in, “See, I told you. Her hair is falling off her body. When my grandma had cancer, her leg fell off.” From her own family experience with cancer, Becky has some understanding of the topic. Ms. Brown accepts Becky’s answer and later that day speaks to her mother about her response during story time. Until now, Ms. Brown was unaware of this significant event in Becky’s family.

As teachers invite conversations about tender topics, children might raise concerns that don’t initially make sense from an adult point of view. Ms. Brown accepted Becky’s explanation of cancer and listened carefully for more information. When adults accept children’s answers and listen carefully, they can develop a deeper understanding of how children use real-life experiences to construct knowledge about the world.

---

**For Further Reading**

The authors recommend the following resources, which provide information or are devoted to exploring sensitive topics with children.

### Websites

- **Action Alliance for Children.** “Children’s Advocate,” www.4children.org/books.htm
- **Anti-Defamation League.** “Recommended Multicultural and Anti-Bias Books for Children,” www.adl.org/bibliography/default.asp
- **Bookvine for Children.** www.bookvine.com
- **Carol Hurst’s Children’s Literature Site.** www.carolhurst.com/subjects/subjects.html
- **Family Diversity Projects.** www.familydiv.org
- **Michigan State University Libraries.** Websites and articles about children’s literature, http://libguides.lib.msu.edu/multicultural

### Journal articles

When talking about tender topics, finding out about children's experiences and listening to their ideas are first steps toward addressing misunderstandings. In a classroom culture where teachers, children, and families listen to each other and respect each other, the exploration of tender topics will be a collaborative effort. Whether the tender topics are part of a planned curriculum or arise for one child or family, address misunderstandings with simple and honest explanations and always include families in your efforts. When uncertain, take the time to do some research to learn what experts are saying about young children's understandings of the tender topics.

Some questions to ask yourself

- Can you think of a tender topic that a child (or children) with whom you work has experienced?
- Look at the book list (www.naeyc.org/yc). After reviewing some of the suggested books, is there one book that might be beneficial for a child or children in your class?
- What tender topic do you need more information about before you feel ready to discuss it through read-alouds?
- What tender topic is too controversial for you to address at this time, and why do you think this is so?

Conclusion

Reading books about sensitive topics and engaging in the ensuing conversations requires courage and honesty. Explore these topics as a matter of course and as they are raised, as part of day-to-day life in your early childhood setting and in the lives of the families in your program. As questions arise, offer simple, realistic explanations. Listen and respect each others' feelings. We don't need to have all the answers! What is most important is starting the conversation.

References


Copyright © 2013 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at www.naeyc.org/yc/permissions.