

THE UNDER-REPRESENTATION AND PORTRAYAL OF  
ANXIETY IN CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS

By

ASHLEY ROSE ANDERS

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Dr. Elizabeth Jaeger

## Abstract

My thesis will focus on the importance of the portrayal of anxiety in children's picture books and the lack of material that children have access to. This paper will explore the issue and offer insights to why it is important to address this topic and its importance to children. I will also provide data on the books that are available to children in my community of Tucson, Arizona, including the Pima County Library system as well as books available to children in classrooms. Through this investigation I will explore what gaps are still left when it comes to the availability of children's book's portraying anxiety. I will also discuss the current portrayal of anxiety and how this helps or hinders children's and adult's understanding of anxiety in children.

## **The Under-Representation and Portrayal of Anxiety in Children's Picture Books**

Reading and engaging with books plays an important part in childhood development as well as with how children grow into the people they are becoming. Children often look to books for a sense of comfort, seeing reflections of themselves with the characters they admire in the books they read. Whether reading for pleasure or reading for schoolwork, children need to have access to relatable characters that look and act like them, as well as accomplish hardships and push through the obstacles that they may go through as well. With a rise in the amount of picture books written each year, especially in multicultural literature, one may observe that there is a book out there for everyone on every subject. Books on hobbies, different family backgrounds, different family structures, and even LGBTQ+ youth are published every day. According to a report by UNESCO (2019), "There was a total of 2.2 million books issued in the most recent year available. That year was 2011 or 2012 for the top producers, much earlier for small nations, in many cases as far back as the mid-1990s. The United States led the list with 292,000 new books or editions published in 2011, followed by China with 242,000 in 2012 and the UK with 150,000 in 2011". Unfortunately, there is a gap in current publishing trends, a lack of picture books dedicated to mental illnesses.

While many may not see children as having mental illnesses, the truth is that millions of children around the world experience a variety of mental health issues each and every day. Whether these be depression, OCD, or another one of many different mental illnesses, one of the most common experienced in children is anxiety. Dacey, Mack, and Fiore (2016) state, "Anxiety is currently the most prevalent psychiatric diagnosis in individuals aged 16 and younger. Anxious children are two to four times more likely to develop depression, and as teenagers, they are much more likely to attempt suicide and to become involved with substance abuse. These

dismal data are similar to the United States, Australia, and many other countries, and represent an increase of as much as 10 percent in the past two decades.” Anxiety is still considered taboo and amongst many members of society, does not even exist. Often times symptoms of anxiety are ignored or brushed off as something else completely, which also adds to the lack of knowledge of what to do for children with anxiety. A step in the right direction would be to bring more awareness to this subject, most notably with picture books.

Children see themselves in books, and if they were provided with more characters that portrayed how they were feeling, more children may seek help from those closest to them for what they are feeling. Adults and parents also stand to gain something from picture books as well, gaining knowledge about something they may not realize is happening with their children or even other children around them. Another problem with picture books available for children is that oftentimes when anxiety is portrayed, it comes across as something that can be cured or something that will only happen once. This is often not the case as anxiety can happen on an occasional basis, or as something that a child will deal with every day of their life. There is a lack of available picture books that show children receiving help or guidance on how to get through anxiety. Instead, in the picture books available, children are often told to push through the hard situations and think of something else entirely and that this will help them get through their anxiety. While this sometimes helps, this will not always be how anxiety presents itself or affects a child experiencing that anxiety. As with other subjects, it is important to show multiple stories and perspectives, and this is especially important with mental illnesses as well. Not everyone will have the same symptoms or frequency of symptoms, which is why it is important that as many perspectives as possible are available to children.

## **Anxiety in children**

While fears and worries are a normal part of any person's life, when these fears and worries grow and persist, that is when this starts to be a problem, especially for children who have not quite mastered coping skills to deal with these types of feelings. In 2013 the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) released its first collection of data on childhood mental disorders that had been tracked through federal activities. The CDC (2013) defines mental disorders as, "Serious changes in the ways children typically learn, behave, or handle their emotions. Symptoms usually start in early childhood, although some of the disorders may develop throughout the teenage years. The diagnosis is often made in the school years and sometimes earlier. However, some children with a mental disorder may not be recognized or diagnosed as having one."

Anxiety is often overlooked in children because many don't see the symptoms or believe that children are not capable of experiencing this type of feeling. It is often ignored, and many children are then left to figure out their feelings on their own, something that can be detrimental to their mental health if ignored for too long. Chavira, et al. (2004) quoted in Sulkowski (2011) state, "Anxiety disorders are among the most common psychiatric disorder that affect youth. Prevalence rates for these disorders range from 2 to 27% depending on the specific disorder, child age, method of measurement, and the time period in which symptoms are measured." An early diagnosis, as well as an awareness of the level of help-seeking found in a particular child, can make a big difference. Zwaanswijk *et al.* (2003) quoted in Remschmidt (2007) state, "There are two chief barriers to care: (1) lack of awareness by parents and children of mental health disorders and services; and (2) lack of understanding by general practitioners of mental health disorders. Parental psychopathology is correlated with a greater recognition of child mental disorder but not with an increased use of services. Nevertheless, if parents are receiving mental

health care, children are more likely to seek help.” In general children are more likely to seek or receive help if they have someone in their life that also experiences mental health issues, otherwise most children never seek help for their mental health.

Mental disorders are considered chronic disorders which means that they can span long into adulthood and throughout a person’s life. The CDC published findings from The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine Report that estimated, “13 –20 percent of children living in the United States (up to 1 out of 5 children) experience a mental disorder in a given year and an estimated \$247 billion is spent each year on childhood mental disorders. Because of the impact on children, families, and communities, children’s mental disorders are an important public health issue in the United States” (CDC, 2018, para. 5). Yet as much as this is an important issue, even more so today than when these findings were released, mental disorders are still barely talked about in children. This has as much to do with the taboo of mental illness as much as the general public not understanding or seeing how anxiety presents in children.

### **How anxiety presents in children**

Many different forms of anxiety exist and involve different situations and presenting factors. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) (2015) indicates, “Roughly 8 different types of anxiety disorders common in children: Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Panic Disorder, Separation Anxiety Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder, Selective Mutism, Specific Phobias, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).” All fall under the umbrella of anxiety and all can present themselves in children at different stages in life and in different ways. General anxiety can involve children being worried about the future or about bad things happening. Separation anxiety normally shows as children becoming afraid of being separated from their parents or loved ones. Social

anxiety, the most common form in children, is when children are afraid of school or other places where there are a lot of people around. Phobias are the extreme irrational fear of something or situations that are outside of their control. The CDC (2013) also states, “Panic disorders can evolve from all of these types of anxiety disorders and can cause children to have repeated episodes of sudden, unexpected, intense fear that come with symptoms such as heart pounding, trouble breathing, or feeling dizzy, shaky, and sweaty...Anxiety may present as fear or worry, but can also make children irritable and angry. Anxiety symptoms can also include trouble sleeping, as well as physical symptoms like fatigue, headaches, or stomachaches. Some anxious children keep their worries to themselves and, thus, the symptoms can be missed.”

Anxious children can tend to be quiet and eager to please those around them and can sometimes be seen as people pleasers. They also tend to overthink how their actions can affect others around them. They may also suffer from self-esteem issues and feel that nothing they do is good enough. Children of the younger age also may have difficulty with understanding the feelings as well as how to deal with the feelings. Muris, et. al. (2015) talk about self-compassion as a coping mechanism for anxiety and depression, saying “it has been argued that (early) during the developmental stage of adolescence, youths are still very egocentric (e.g., Elkind 1967), implying that they become easily absorbed by their own difficulties, take negative things very personally, and have problems to reflect objectively on and distance themselves from such issues, thereby hindering the mechanism of self-compassion to occur.” (p. 613). Children often do not possess coping mechanisms that adults have learned through the years, thus making it harder for them to overcome without intervention.

With all of these different symptoms that can either be invisible to those not feeling them or brushed off as some other kind of sickness, how then can we help children who experience

anxiety disorders? We first need to start by treating mood disorders as a real disorder and start making mental health a priority for ourselves and our children. We also need to advocate for our children and encourage them to talk about their feelings with friends and with professionals. We also need to be providing them with more literature that shows them others can feel these feelings as well. This is not just something that affects them, and there is nothing wrong with them. These thoughts often pass through children's minds, leaving them with feelings of isolation which could in turn morph into self-loathing.

Gordon (2012) addresses how books can be helpful for helping children understand and relate to emotions; she quotes psychologist Sarah Kibblewhite who states "Books that address real-life problems like anxiety in a way kids can relate to are a powerful way to let them know they are not alone. They can help put into words what kids are feeling, especially when they have trouble articulating it." (p. 16). Gordon continues, "Books can also reach kids who can't reveal their own feelings directly but will discuss them in the context of an imaginary character" (p. 18). If we give children the opportunity to see themselves in books, they won't feel so alone and will be more inclined to talk with others about how they are feeling.

### **Why Children Need to See Themselves in Books**

No matter your age, you feel joy when you are able to relate to the characters you read about in books. This is especially true for young children who are introduced to a variety of different characters through the world of books. But what does it say when you are not able to find someone like you when you read books? Is something about you not normal, or is what you are experiencing not important enough to be written about?

Mental illness in general is often overlooked in children's books because we think children are too young to understand or that it will somehow hurt the way they see themselves.

However, seeing a character that reflects them or maybe others they know with the same characteristics is crucial to children's development. Johnson, Mathis, and Short (2019) focus on visual images and how these relate to societal understandings, as well as how children see themselves in said books and its importance to the readers. They argue that there is a:

need for more dialogue about the way notions of (dis)ability are shaped. Titchkosky (2009) contends that our imaginations are conditioned by the cultures in which we live, which shapes the way we imagine disability. When children engage with picture books, illustrations become part of their culture and shape their imaginations. As such, they serve as visual guides for understanding what is normal or abnormal and who should be included or excluded. At the same time, considering the systems illustrators employ allows students to think about how they are being positioned and what subtle messages are being conveyed.” (p. 149).

While focused on the presence of disability in picture books, what Johnson et. al. explain in their book pertains to all material that can be read by children. They see what is given to them in words and pictures, and if what they are looking for is not there, they may assume that they are the abnormal ones who aren't included.

Seeing oneself in a book or seeing someone not like them supports empathetic learning and understanding of others. In literature this is called providing windows and mirrors in which life stories can be found. The mirrors are where children are able to see their own unique experiences. Whereas windows allow children to look through to someone else's life and see their experiences. Picture books will always be an important part of children's lives and this idea has sparked some experimentation. Tunks (2017) discuss the effects of providing relevant materials of well-being and social justice to Stage 3 boys, suggesting that, “The well-being

picture books selected focused on feelings and emotions and how to deal with them in an effective way. These books were a great way to open up a discussion about belonging, loneliness, anxiety, resilience and problem solving. We used the picture books to talk about depression. It led to a discussion about sometimes feeling overwhelmed and anxious. Through this we discussed strategies that we use to help us when we are feeling sad.”

Giving children the exposure to such books gives us the opportunity to open up honest discussion and to provide opportunities that allow children a safe space to talk about feelings and emotions. However, as with every book we choose to read to children, we need to be careful about the stereotyping or wrongful images that the book may portray. Many of the books available to children, while relevant, do not give the whole picture to children.

### **Availability of Relevant Books in the Tucson Area**

When I started this project in January, I had grand plans of utilizing the schools where I was placed to see what was available in classrooms and school libraries for children. I had also planned on visiting all the local libraries in the Tucson area as well to see what was available to children who didn't have access to books at home. However, times have drastically changed since I started my thesis and COVID changed the plans that I had for my research. Since we are not back in schools with children and libraries are limiting the number of people in, I decided to focus my efforts on what can be found using the Pima County Library Website as well as what can be found in online searches. I can already acknowledge this as a limitation because I know that not all children will have the internet access to search through the library database, and many children's only access to books is through their classroom setting.

Some students as of now have some access to books through hybrid classes while some are still remote learning and have access only to the books within their homes. In some cases,

this could be little to no exposure to any sort of books depending on the home situation they are in. The sad truth is that children are losing what exposure they had to all picture books, not just books on mental illness which is an inconceivable loss for our students and children. My hope is that we will be able to find new ways or programs that can give children a better access to books during these unprecedented times and that hopefully at some point we can go back to school safely and renew a love of books and reading to all of our students in the classroom.

### **Findings and Portrayal of Anxiety in Children's Books**

My findings for picture books on mental illness were very slim even before the country shut down due to COVID. I had one chance to go to the library in Marana where I was able to find about 7-11 books that related to anxiety/mental illness/emotional responses to change. I am choosing this broad statement because while many of the books showed depression or anxiety, by the end of the book it was resolved because they had found a friend, or they finally met their new baby sister, or they were able to talk to family.

In my web searches I found an article by Taylor Pittman (2019) that gave a list of 17 books about anxiety. They laid out books for anxiety in both picture books as well as workbooks for teens on how to manage and work through anxiety. Unfortunately, I was only able to find one book that had an accurate portrayal of how anxiety can ebb and flow throughout a child's life, *Ruby Finds a Worry* by Tom Percival. This book depicts a little girl who discovers a worry that grows and grows the more she thinks about it. When it starts to take over her life she doesn't know what to do until she meets a little boy who also has a worry. As they talk about their worries, they disappear. Ruby still gets worries from time to time, but she knows how to deal with them now.

Of the books that I was able to see in person, three dealt with anxiety due to life changes. *Pilar's Worries* by Victoria M. Sanchez dealt with the anticipation of a big performance at school. In, *A Most Unusual Day* by Sydra Mallery, Caroline deals with a new baby sister in the house and how that may change her life. *What Happens Next* by Susan Hughes gives a first-person account of the protagonist dealing with a bully at school. One of the books, *The Girl Who Never Made Mistakes* by Mark Pett and Gary Rubinstein deals with a girl who has anxiety over being perfect in everything she does, but again in the end she is able to learn that mistakes make us human and its okay to not be perfect. Yet another book, *Willy & the Cloud* by Anthony Browne, showed depression as a dark cloud that followed the character around. It became so bad it was all that he could see, but again in the end the cloud disappeared, and a bright sunny day was shown. Thus, the character was no longer depressed and was able to play with his friends and be happy. While this particular book received much praise, this book has the most glaring misconceptions it sets forward for young children. I do believe this book is a step in the right direction, however it shows that depression can be solved by accepting that things will change, and once they do everything will be right in the world.

As humans we like there to be resolution in books, especially when we are younger and want everything to have that happy ending. And while I believe it is important that children see these satisfying endings, it is also not 100% realistic or really what children will see in their own lives. I'm a fan of the happy ending just as much as everyone else, but children should also be exposed to literature that shows that sometimes everything is not resolved and sometimes we need to be okay dealing with the hard in life. If children grow up thinking that life only has happy endings, we are setting them up for failure or even anxiety about themselves not fitting into the "perfect image" that they are given in literature.

## Conclusion

The lack of access to literature on mental illness is concerning and needs to be addressed. Children can and do experience anxieties or depression that may not go away. While it may seem to have passed on the outside, many times kids learn how to live with mental illness because they are told and shown that it passes. This is in fact not the truth, and in many cases, mental illness follows children throughout their lives. They need to be shown through picture books and literature that other children can experience these thoughts as well and that it is a natural process that many children go through. Anxiety may not be noticeable in children because they may portray it differently than what we think anxiety looks like. Children may not want to go to school, or have chronic stomach problems, their grades might even suffer at some point. Children may have trouble sleeping, become fatigued easier, or even become irritable or angry. It is important that children feel heard when they voice these issues and that we try to understand why they are experiencing these symptoms. Only then we might be able to understand that they are possibly having anxiety. Children need to see themselves in the books they read because they are windows and mirrors into our lives that allow us to feel empathy as well as feel validated about ourselves and others.

Another issue I came across was the actual portrayal of anxiety in the children's books that I was able to gain access to. Much of the portrayal was very stereotypical in nature whereas the characters would cry or just become very sad looking. While this can sometimes be the case, it is not the whole truth as anxiety can show itself in children as well as adults in a number of ways including anger, isolation, or perfectionism. While seeing images of themselves in books is important, we also need to pay attention to how mental illnesses are portrayed and treated in children. Oftentimes children will not seek help for their anxiety leaving them to cope with it on

their own. This leads to increased rates of self-harm and suicide as children grow into adolescence. There is not enough infrastructure in place to help children learn coping skills both in and out of the school setting. There needs to be more programs available to children that show coping mechanisms and teaches children that it is okay to seek help and that they are not weak for doing so. So much of the stigma surrounding mental health is present to this day, which only aids in helping this issue grow more and more profound around the world. It is our jobs as parents, adults, educators, and advocates to see the issues and find a way to solve them so that all our children can live happy and healthy lives.

### **Implications**

I am urging publishers to start thinking more about publishing books on all varieties of mental illness as they are necessary if children are to understand mental illness, as they or someone they know may experience them at some point in their lives. As a consumer, pre-service teacher, parent, and someone who has diagnosed anxiety/depression, I know just how important this topic is to understand and to individuals' well-being. In terms of what I would like to see published I think that there needs to be a focus specifically on fiction picture books as well as nonfiction informational books.

For the nonfiction books, I think it would be a great resource to find information and quick facts about different mental illnesses and then illustrate and talk about them in the book. For example, having sections on ADHD, depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder just to name a few. Within each section illustrate and then talk about what that specific illness feels and looks like and how that person can find help and get treatment. I believe showing children in an informational text would help them to see the realness of this subject.

While nonfiction books are important, I believe that the stories behind mental illness are just as necessary. I would also like to see fictional stories of characters struggling to understand their feelings, discovering what those feelings are, and fighting to get through those feelings. I would also like to show in these books how the diagnosis can be a long-term thing and how they may live with these feelings, but there is always a way to help them control and understand them. I can see this being done as a series of picture books that show different children in different backgrounds and their stories and experiences. For example, a picture book about anxiety could show a little boy struggling both in school and at home, discovering what he is feeling, and finding help in his journey to understanding what anxiety means in his own life. This is just an example, but I feel that it would be a powerful image and story that could help many children around the world. Unfortunately, that is what is missing currently, showing children that the way they feel might not go away, however there are ways to treat the feelings so that they can stay under control and they know how to help themselves when the feelings get out of hand.

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