

3-1-2006

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### Recommended Citation

Gilmore, D. P., & Bell, K. (2006). We Are Family: Using Diverse Family Structure with Children. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 46 (4). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol46/iss4/4](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol46/iss4/4)

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## **We Are Family: Using Diverse Family Structure Literature with Children**

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*The structure of the American family has changed over the years. Although the traditional father, mother, child structure still dominates, other family patterns are emerging. In this article the authors present 1) current statistics relating to diverse family structures, 2) reasons for using diverse family structure literature with children, 3) recommendations of books to read depicting the various family structures such as: children of divorced parents, children in stepfamilies/blended families, children of adoption, children of international adoption, children of gay and lesbian parents and children in all kinds of families. The authors also include a list of suggested reading for the various family structures including the appropriate age level for each book.*

FAMILIES ARE IMPORTANT to both adults and young children, and are often the primary support for individuals; but families are not the same as they were fifty years ago. Although the traditional pattern of father, mother and children is still dominant in the United States, there are other family patterns that are fast encroaching (Fields, 2003). If we have some understanding of the number of children who live in these diverse family structures, we can then select literature that represents these children. Children who live in homes with alternate family patterns need to see their lives depicted in the books they read.

In this article we present 1) current statistics relating to diverse family structures in the United States, 2) some reasons for using diverse family structure literature with children, 3) recommendations of books to read depicting the various family structures, such as: children of divorced parents, children being raised by grandparents, children of adoption, children of international adoption, children raised by single parents, children raised by stepfamilies/blended families, children raised by gay and lesbian parents, children in all kinds of families and, 3) a bibliography of books based on alternative family structures including appropriate age levels.

### **Diverse Family Structures in the United States**

According to the United States Census (Fields, 2003), only 68 percent of children live with the traditional family of father, mother and child. Other family structures have become more predominant in recent years. For instance, the rate of divorce is nearly half of those who marry and more than one million children have parents who separate or divorce each year (Children's Defense Fund, 2000). Furthermore, the number of single women raising children has increased from three million in 1970, to ten million in 2000 (Children's Defense Fund, 2000). Additionally, there are now approximately two million single fathers raising children; a 62 percent increase since 1990 (Fields, 2003). Another interesting phenomenon is that many children of divorce live with their grandparents; for example, an estimated 2.4 million in 2000 (Children's Defense Fund, 2000).

Based on national estimates, nearly one million children in the United States live with adoptive parents. In addition, the practice of adopting children from other countries has more than doubled from 6,720 in 1992 to 16,396 in 1999 (U.S. Department of State, 2005). There are also between six million and 10 million children of lesbian, gay and bisexual parents living in the United States (U.S. Census, 2002).

### **Reasons for Using Diverse Family Structure Literature**

There are many reasons for using diverse family structure literature with children. For instance, when children from alternative families witness themselves in literature, their confidence increases as well as their motivation (Hampton, Rak & Mumford, 1997). Also, when parents and teachers read diverse family structure literature to children, it demonstrates the fact that the children who live within these families are important (Hampton, Rak & Mumford, 1997). By using diverse family literature, teachers can unlock children's concerns and help them realize that there are others in their same situation. Furthermore, by listening to diverse family structure literature, children learn that not everyone has the same values and beliefs as their own (Charles, 2000). Finally, using diverse family literature offers a way to safely and sensibly discuss serious issues regarding families (Leland & Harste, 1999).

### **Recommended Books Depicting the Various Family Structures**

#### *Children of Divorced Parents*

Since nearly forty percent of marriages in the United States end in divorce (Munson & Sutton, 2005), it is important that parents and teachers read books that depict children growing up in this kind of family. This is helpful, not only for children of divorced parents, but also for others to understand how they are affected by this common occurrence. There are many quality books that address this subject and one does not have to be a part of a diverse family structure in order to appreciate good stories.

One excellent chapter book that could be read aloud to children from the fourth to sixth grade, would be *Buttermilk Hill* (2004) written

by the Ruth White (1997). In this fictional account, White weaves the story of a young girl named Piper Berry, with parallel stories of her divorced mother and father. After the divorce, ten-year-old Piper is shocked when her father remarries Melba so soon after divorce. Melba also has twin boys and suddenly informs Piper that her father is adopting them.

Another fictional account surrounding the issue of divorce, appropriate for grades four through six, is *Unfinished Portrait of Jessica* (Peck, 1993). In this chapter book, Jessica takes a trip to Mexico to visit her divorced father, who she has always idolized. After Jessica lives with her father for a while, she soon realizes that he is not the man she thought he was. Jessica then starts to reconstruct her relationship with her mother. An additional chapter book for grades four through six, representing children and divorce, is Blume's (1992), *It's Not the End of the World*. In this story, sixth grader, Karen, is trying to get her parents back together before they get a divorce. After several attempts at setting up situations where they might reunite, she finally understands that some people are just not able to live together. A chapter book covering this same topic that could be read aloud or used in reading groups is *Changing Tunes*, written by Napoli (1998). In this story, ten-year-old Eileen must come to grips with the reality that her life has changed drastically. First, her father separates from her mother and moves out, and second, he takes the family piano with him; a piano that Eileen has been using for several years, playing it every day of the week. Eileen cannot believe that her father has done this and she must practice on an old piano at her school. Eventually Eileen becomes resigned to the fact that things will never be the same with her parents. She does decide that she will keep practicing the piano to pursue her dreams.

Although it is an older chapter book, Cleary's Newbery Award winner, *Dear Mr. Henshaw* (1983) succeeds in showing the heartbreak a young boy goes through when his parents divorce. Ten-year-old Leigh Botts not only has to live through that, but his mother also moves him to another town. He feels so lonely that he decides to write to his favorite author, Mr. Henshaw. Finally, Mr. Henshaw writes to Leigh and advises him to write down all the things he is going through. Leigh takes his

advice, writes his thoughts in a diary and discovers that writing is a wonderful outlet for his feelings.

There are several nonfiction books that can help children of all ages understand divorce. One of the books is *Divorce Happens to the Nicest Kids*, by Prokop and Peters, (1996). In this book, written for pre-school to young adults, the authors have suggested various self-help lessons for children of divorced parents, in a workbook form. The activities allow children to express themselves in a personal way about their parent's divorce. MacGregor's *The Divorce Helpbook for Kids* (2002) is written for all grades and explains the reasons for divorce, the emotions that are experienced by the people going through a divorce in the family, and ways to cope with this event.

Pre-school and younger children also have to deal with the issue of divorce in their lives. Children in these age ranges, from preschool to grade three, should also have access to books about divorce. Two picture books for this age group that feature divorce as the topic are: *It's Not Your Fault, Koko Bear* (Lansky, 1998), and *Dinosaur's Divorce* (Brown & Brown, 1986). Richly illustrated in pastels, the first book follows KoKo Bear as she goes through the changes that take place when her parents are divorcing. KoKo Bear learns what divorce means, and that the divorce is not her fault. The second picture book, *Dinosaurs Divorce* (Brown & Brown, 1986), has whimsical illustrations of dinosaurs that talk. One section addresses this issue when the dinosaur teacher asks the entire class "Class, how many of your parents are divorced?" (p.22). Then several of the dinosaur students raise their hands and the teacher says, "It helps to remember that you are not the only one whose parents are divorced" (p.22). See Table 1.

### *Children Being Raised by Grandparents*

Since there are now 4.5 million children in the United States being raised by their grandparents, it is important to depict this group in diverse family structure literature (AARP, 2000). When children read stories about valuing the lives of grandparents, children become inspired to perform the same acts themselves, thereby benefiting the child socially as well.

Table 1

*Children of Divorced Parents*

Title	Author	Suggested Grade Use
<i>On the day his daddy left</i>	Adams, E. (2000)	Preschool-4
<i>Speaking of divorce</i>	Beyer, R. (2001)	2-7
<i>What in the world do you do when your parents divorce?</i>	Beyer, R. (2001)	2-7
<i>Since dad left</i>	Binch, C. (1998)	Preschool-3
<i>My parents are divorced too</i>	Ford, M., Ford, A., & Ford, S. (1998)	4-7
<i>Don't fall apart on Saturdays: The children's divorce-survival book</i>	Moser, A. (2000)	2-3
<i>Mom and dad break up</i>	Prestine, J. (2002)	K-3
<i>I don't want to talk about it</i>	Ransom, J. (2000)	K-3
<i>Mama and daddy bear's divorce</i>	Spelman, C. (1998)	Preschool-2
<i>Always my dad</i>	Wyeth, S. (1995)	2-5

While there are many books that show children in loving relationships with their grandparents, it is hard to find books written specifically about grandparents raising their grandchildren. One book that we recommend for children in grades five to seven is a Newbery Honor Book that is quite appropriate for this category, *Belle Prater's Boy* (White, 1997). In this classic children's fictional account, twelve-year-old Woodrow comes to live with his grandparents in Virginia after his mother suddenly disappears. Although the subject matter is somewhat dark, White handles it with poignancy and care.

There are more books written about children who happen to have grandparents living in their own home. One of these brightly painted picture books is written for younger children in grades two to four, titled *Sachiko Means Happiness* (Sakai, 1997). In this book, the author describes a relationship between a little girl, Sachiko, and her grandmother.

Another picture book, a Caldecott winner, gives us a wonderful view of a vibrant grandfather in *Song and Dance Man* (Ackerman, 1992). In this fictional account, written for grades preschool to second grade, Ackerman tells the story of a grandfather who used to dance and sing during the vaudeville days.

Other books that depict children in loving relationships with their grandparents are the following:

Table 2

*Children and Their Grandparents*

Title	Author	Suggested Grade Use
<i>The Wednesday surprise</i>	Carrick, D. (1990)	K-3
<i>Walk two moons</i>	Creech, S. (1996)	5-7
<i>Picture me with my grandma</i>	D'Andrea, J. (2000)	K-3
<i>Abuela</i>	Dorros, A. (1997)	Preschool-2
<i>Western wind</i>	Fox, P. (1995)	4-7
<i>Sun and spoon</i>	Henkes, K. (1998)	4-7
<i>Annie and the old one</i>	Miles, M. (1985)	K-3
<i>What grandmas do best: What grandpas do best</i>	Numeroff, L. (2000)	K-3
<i>Countdown to grandma's house</i>	Zakarin, D. (2002)	Preschool-3

*Children Being Raised by Single Parents*

There are also many single parents raising children. In 2003, for instance, there were 11.9 million single parents in the United States (Single Parent Central, 2003). The reason this number is so high, is that



some single parents are choosing to remain unmarried and are raising their children on their own.

An example of a book that addresses this issue, is the picture book written for small children, titled, *Do I Have a Daddy?* (Lindsay, 2000). The main character, five-year-old Erik attends a preschool while his mother works. While there, he talks to his friends and Erik soon realizes that most of his playmates have daddies at home. His mother tells him that he had a daddy, but that she chose not to live with him or marry him, and that she wanted to raise Erik on her own. There are several children's books written about this topic and some recommended readings are the following:

Table 3

*Children of Single Parents*

Title	Author	Suggested Grade Use
<i>Let's talk about living with your single dad</i>	Apel, M. (2000)	2-6
<i>Getting through Thursday</i>	Cooper, M. (2000)	K-5
<i>Totally uncool</i>	Levy, J. (1999)	K-4
<i>Soldier mom</i>	Mead, A. (1999)	K-4
<i>Junebug</i>	Mead, A. (1999)	3-6
<i>Goodnight, daddy</i>	Seward, A. (2000)	K-3
<i>When mama comes home tonight</i>	Spinelli, E. (2001)	Preschool-K
<i>Let's talk about living with a single parent</i>	Weitzman, E. (1996)	2-4

*Children Being Raised in Stepfamilies/Blended Families*

Another phenomenon in our country is the large number of children being raised in stepfamilies or blended families with the divorce rate being almost 40 percent per capita, per year for the United States (Americans for Divorce Reform, 2003). Another reason some children

become members of a stepfamily or blended family is because of the death of one or both parents. An important book for children to read about this subject is, *Let's Talk about Living in a Blended Family* (Weitzman, 1996), written for children in grades one to four. The non-fiction picture book uses full color photographs to portray two families who come to live together after their parents marry. The children in both families have to adjust as they find that not only do they have stepparents, they now have stepsisters and stepbrothers. Jane Hurwitz has also written a non-fiction book for children in grades kindergarten through grade six, *Coping in a Blended Family* (1997), which explains the various things children can do to adjust to living in a blended family.

There are also several fictional accounts that portray blended families and stepfamilies. One of the newer books written for older children is *Family Reunion*, by Cooney (2004). In this chapter book, Shelley comes to terms with her parent's divorce, her mother's absence, her new stepmother, and being the "stable" member of her colorful family. Another book we recommend for grades three to seven is the chapter book *The Worst Noel* (Cooper, 1994). Twelve-year-old Kathy has to live with her father and his new wife and family on the weekends. She really does not like it at this home because she has to share her father with her stepsister Anne, and her new baby half-sister Helena.

*My Mother Got Married and other Disasters* (Park, 1989), a fictional chapter book, relates another story of a blended family. In this book, twelve-year-old Charlie is the narrator whose mother divorced and remarried a man named Ben. To Charlie, it seems like she has just suddenly decided to marry Ben and bring his family into their own household. Table 4 shows some books that portray children either living with stepparents, or in blended families.

### *Children of Adoption*

Children of adoption are also faced with a special set of circumstances while they are growing up, and according to Schimmel and Love (1997), "thoughtful, well-written stories help parents, teachers, and children with both the concept and the language of adoption" (p. 32). For example, in the picture book *Day We Met You* (Koehler, 1997),

adopted children from the ages of two to five will relate to the message in this book; that their parents prepared for their arrival and they were welcomed into a new family. In another book titled *A Mother for Choco* (Kasza, 1996), younger children will delight in the main character, Choco, who is a baby chick looking for his mother. He is not able to find an animal that looks like him, but he spots a bear that has all the qualities of a mother. The bear takes him home and Choco understands that it does not matter what he looks like, but that he is loved by his new mother.

Table 4

*Children Living with Stepparents or in Blended Families*

Title	Author	Suggested Grade Use
<i>Terrible, terrible!</i>	Bernstein, R. (2002)	K-4
<i>The in-between days</i>	Bunting, E. (1996)	3-7
<i>The steps</i>	Cohn, R. (2003)	3-7
<i>Falling into place</i>	Greene, S. (2002)	4-7
<i>Mister and me</i>	Holt, K. (2000)	2-5
<i>I have a new family now: Understanding blended families</i>	Monroe, R. (1998)	K-2
<i>I hate weddings</i>	Petersen, P.J. (2000)	2-5
<i>Stepfamilies: Let's talk about it</i>	Rogers, F. (2001)	Preschool-3

*Adoption is for Always* (Girard, 1991) is a picture book written for children from ages five to eight and it is a more realistic depiction of the adoption process. In the story, Celia reacts to the fact that she is adopted, with anger and insecurity. Taking a different perspective, Brodzinsky (1996) used the image of a baby wren to tell the adoption story from the birth mother's point of view in *The Mulberry Bird*. In this charming tale, a mother wren loves her baby but she has to give the baby up for adoption because she is not able to give it enough food.

Books written for the older adopted child include *Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew* (Eldridge, 1999) and *How It Feels to be Adopted* (Krementz, 1988). In both of these non-fiction offerings, complex issues about adoption are discussed. The following books are recommended titles for children of adoption.

Table 5

*Children of Adoption*

Title	Author	Suggested Grade Use
<i>A is for adopted</i>	Cosby, E. (2001)	K-5
<i>Tell me about the night I was born</i>	Curtis, J. (1999)	Preschool-1
<i>Why was I adopted?</i>	Livingston, C. (1997)	4-6

*Children of International Adoption*

Americans are now adopting children from foreign countries in record numbers (U.S. Department of State, 2005). There are many reasons for doing this but one of the most prevalent is that there are fewer children to adopt in the United States (U.S. Department of State, 2005). In recent statistics, United States citizens adopted 22,884 children from other countries in 2004 (U.S. Department of State, 2005). The highest numbers were from China, 7044, followed by Russia, 5,865, Guatemala, 3,264, and South Korea, 1,716.

In examining the books on international adoption, it was interesting to note that the majority of the books represented adoption from China. This is not unusual considering that Americans adopt more children from China than any other foreign country. Many of the books are personal accounts written from the parent or child's point of view and are based on true events. For example, two popular books written about this subject for babies to preschoolers are *The Red Blanket* (Thomas, 2004), and *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* (Lewis, 2000). In *The Red Blanket*, based on a true story, a single woman flies to China to adopt a baby girl named

Pan Pan. Pan Pan is quite frightened when she is handed to her new mother and she cries very hard. Her new mother gives Pan Pan a soft red blanket to hold, which consoles her and gives her needed company. Another charming book that stands out in this category is *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* (Lewis, 2000). The pastel watercolor illustrations by Jane Dyer are outstanding and the picture of the rosy-cheeked baby girl on the cover would entice anyone to purchase this book. The story is about a mommy who goes to China to adopt a baby girl.

On the same subject, the older children, ages five to nine, will enjoy *When You Were Born in China* (Dorow, 1997). Based on a true story, it is more realistic picture of the adoption process as it includes actual black and white photos of the child being adopted from China.

Children from other countries are also represented in this section, such as children adopted from Central America. In *Over the Moon* (Katz, 1997), written for primary age children, a young couple is shown longing for their very own child. After a long wait, the couple finally receives a telephone call and they fly directly to Central America to pick up their new daughter.

Adoptions from other countries such as Russia, Korea and Viet Nam are also represented in this group. In the picture book, *Nikolai the Only Bear* (Joose, 2005), Nikolai, a young bear cub is growing up in a Russian orphanage. He does not fit in with the other little bears, because he growls, instead of speaks. A couple from America comes to Russia and adopts him. In a picture book written for younger children titled, *Borya and the Burps: An Eastern European Adoption Story*, (McNamara & Majewski, 2005) the authors present the humorous story of Borya, who has grown up in an orphanage in Russia. When his new parents come to take him to the United States, he has to leave everything behind, except his talent for burping. Another book about Korean adoption, *Somebody's Daughter* (Lee, 2005), is a story about a young woman who has been raised by Scandinavian parents in Minnesota. She longs to find her roots and returns to Korea to find her mother. An award winning book, titled, *Escape from Saigon: How a Vietnam War Orphan Became an American Boy* (Warren, 2004), has been written about adoption from

Vietnam. In this account, an eight-year-old Amerasian boy tells the story of his escape from Vietnam during Operation Babylift in 1975.

In a more universal theme, *Over Land and Sea*, (Layne, 2005) the author describes how families have traveled to different countries to find the babies that are supposed to be in their families. Layne not only depicts interracial families, but also shows landscapes from several foreign countries. Other suggested reading materials for this category are the following:

Table 6

*Children of International Adoption*

Title	Author	Suggested Grade Use
<i>When I met you: A story of Russian adoption</i>	Bashista, A. (2004)	5-9
<i>When you were born in Korea</i>	Boyd, B. (1993)	5-9
<i>Our baby from China</i>	Nancy, D'Antonio. (1997)	5-9
<i>I wish you a beautiful life: Letters from the Korean birth mothers of Ae Ran Won to their children</i>	Dorow, S. (1999)	7-12
<i>We adopted you, Benjamin Koo</i>	Girard, L. & Shute, L. (1989)	5-9
<i>Mommy far, mommy near</i>	Peacock, C. (2000)	5-9

*Children of Gay and Lesbian Parents*

There are now an estimated one million children being raised by gay or lesbian parents, and most of the books that are in this category are written to inform. One example of this type of book is *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman, 2000). Heather attends preschool and one day she realizes that most of the children in the class have daddies. She goes home to talk to one of her mothers about this. Her mother explains that

she has two mommies and that the most important thing about a family is that all the people in it love each other.

In *Daddy's Roommate* (Willhoite, 2000) the author uses his background as a cartoonist to depict a young boy who lives with his daddy and his roommate Frank. The brightly colored illustrations show his daddies eating, working, sleeping, arguing, and just being together. The following is a selection of books written about children raised by gay and lesbian parents:

Table 7

*Children of Gay and Lesbian Parents*

Title	Author	Suggested Grade Use
<i>A family counting book.</i>	Combs, B. (2000)	
<i>Jennifer has two daddies</i>	Galloway, P. (1990)	Preschool-3
<i>Zack's Story: Growing up with same sex parents</i>	Greenberg, K. (1996)	2-4
<i>How would you feel if your dad was gay?</i>	Heron, A. (1991)	2-6
<i>Gloria goes to gay pride</i>	Newman, L. (1991)	K-3
<i>Lots of mommies</i>	Severence, J. (1983)	Preschool-3
<i>One dad, two dads, brown dad, blue dads</i>	Valentine, J. (1994)	Preschool-3
<i>Two moms, the zark, and me</i>	Valentine, J. (1993)	K-3
<i>Daddy's wedding</i>	Willhoite, M. (1996)	K-3

*Children in All Kinds of Families*

There are many books published about children living in all kinds of families in a more general way. An excellent picture book we

recommend is *Who's in a Family* (Skutch, 1995). In this book, families are depicted in every manner, including the nuclear family, children living with single parents, children living with gay or lesbian parents, mixed-race couples, divorced parents, and being raised by grandparents. It is simple, realistic and does not portray any of the family structures in a way that could make a person feel uncomfortable about reading it aloud to young children.

There are also many books written for young children to show their individuality within families. The picture books we recommend which address this issue are the following: *Whoever You Are* (Fox, 1997), *All Kinds of Children* (Simon, 1999), *Different Just Like Me* (Mitchell, 1999), *A Family Like Yours*, (Dotlich, 2002), and *Families are Different* (Pellegrini, 1991). Each of these delightfully illustrated books contribute to the idea that families come in all shapes, colors and sizes, and with various family patterns.

Table 8

*Children in All Kinds of Families*

Title	Author	Suggested Grade Use
<i>Let's look at families.</i>	Driscoll, L. (1999)	K-4
<i>Family pictures</i>	Garza, L. (1990)	K-3
<i>How my family lives in America</i>	Kuklin, S. (1992)	K-5
<i>Why are all families different?</i>	Maynard, C. (1997)	K-2

### Conclusion

In our article, we have discussed the reasons for using diverse family structure literature and we have also drawn your attention to the numbers, the wide range of sizes, and the shapes that distinguish families in the United States. Furthermore, we included a description of some of the books we would recommend for reading in each of the categories. Finally, we included a list of other fiction and non-fiction books that address the various family structures.



Our hope is that you will read some of these books aloud, assign them for reading, or provide access to the books for students who are in the different family structures. We want children to understand that no particular family structure is guaranteed success, nor is it doomed to failure. We also want children to realize that no matter what the structure of the family is on the outside, there are many possibilities for happiness on the inside.

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