

Executive summary of the report *Reading aloud projects for refugee children. How can the power of stories be used to improve psychosocial well-being?*

This report focuses on the opportunities that reading aloud may offer in strengthening the psychosocial health of refugee children. It is known that reading and having books read aloud to them are important for the language and reading proficiency of children. Furthermore, in recent years increasing attention has also been paid to the psychological benefits of reading: the impact of reading (or having books read aloud to one) on our psyche, our thinking and our (mental) welfare.

Identification with a character and empathy with the narrative can provide an insight into one's own thinking and behaviour. Reading about the experience of a character can give a child a grip on their own emotions and teach them to express their emotions in words. Stories can also offer solutions and give guidance in challenges that children face in their daily lives. Recognising oneself or seeing reflections of certain situations in a story can offer comfort and show a child that there are other people who have found themselves in similar situations. It is often easier for children to speak about feelings and experiences they have had when they do not have to relate this directly to themselves, but instead can refer to a character in the safe context of the book. Perhaps the most important impact, however, is the pleasure, diversion and relaxation reading can offer and the necessary distance it creates to reality. These characteristics of literature form the basis of creative bibliotherapy, in which fictive stories are used in treatment or prevention of psychosocial problems or as an aid in personal or socio-emotional challenges.

From the literature research into bibliotherapy, it appears that reading aloud to children and activities involving books with children who have had traumatic experiences may have various positive effects. Many quantitative studies show that the psychosocial well-being of these children improved. For instance, they gained in self-confidence and showed better coping skills and a positive change in their behaviour. They were also in a better position to express themselves and to ask for help from adults. Elements that are crucial in a bibliotherapeutic session are pleasure and relaxation, interaction during reading aloud and adding depth through a conversation or creative activity afterwards. It is precisely the sharing and deepening of the experience of reading that seems to have a potentially positive impact. This interaction can also strengthen the bond between a child and an adult.

As in the case of other cultural interventions, the emphasis of preventive creative bibliotherapy does not lie on healing any problems, but on strengthening the reader's potential and resilience. The present study concentrates on refugee children and how reading aloud and activities involving books can be used as a preventative intervention in relation to this group.

More than 100,000 refugees live in the Netherlands, of whom approximately half are below the age of 18. At present, more than 5,000 children under the age of 12 live in Dutch asylum seekers' centres. Often these children have experienced a lot in their country of origin and during their travels to the Netherlands, where they then find themselves in sometimes lengthy asylum procedures that may be accompanied by considerable stress, uncertainty and relocation from one asylum seekers' centre to another. This does not mean that each child is adversely affected by this in the same way and certainly not that each child that lives in an asylum seekers' centre is traumatised. However, as a result of the above-mentioned circumstances, refugee children do have an increased risk of developing psychosocial problems.

Traumatic events and lengthy stress may have damaging effects on the brains of children, which can switch to a type of survival mode in the event of serious, (life) threatening situations or extremely stressful circumstances. As a result, areas of the brain relating to speech and social interaction, which give rise to a feeling of security and rest, are deactivated. These damaging effects of drastic events and extreme stress, however, need not be permanent. When children have positive, new experiences and other protective factors are present, their brains experience new stimuli and the areas that are deactivated by stress and traumatic experiences are reactivated.

Important protective factors are:

1. security, structure and continuity;
2. cohesion and support within the family;
3. participation and interaction with the social environment;
4. relaxation, pleasure and diversion;
5. positive attention and space for the child to feel heard and seen; and
6. the use of language, imagination and creativity.

Psychosocial support in the form of preventive activities may have a positive effect and contribute to the presence of the above-mentioned factors. The results of the literature study into bibliotherapy and an analysis of actual practice show that these factors are essential to and/or promoted by activities involving reading aloud, whose aim is to strengthen psychosocial health. Reading aloud and activities involving books therefore make a potentially valuable preventive intervention by strengthening the resilience, potential, and well-being of refugee children. It is important, however, that the reading aloud sessions satisfy a number of (pre)conditions:

1. a permanent offering;
2. sound organisation, choice of book and supervision; and
3. the availability of books in the children's own languages.

It also emerged from the literature study that further quantitative academic research is necessary to obtain more empirical evidence of the above-mentioned effects of preventive creative bibliotherapy, also for the specific target group of refugee children.

Reading aloud and activities involving books are often not a (permanent) part of the range of preventive interventions on offer to refugee children. In this report, the results of academic research into bibliotherapy, preventive cultural interventions, and the effects of traumatic experiences and stress are linked to each other. It is concluded that reading aloud and activities involving books may play a positive role in strengthening the resilience and the psychosocial health of refugee children, and could therefore be a good addition to the range of activities offered to refugee children. In addition, this report offers practical tips and recommendations for setting up activities involving reading aloud and books for this group of children.