USING LITERATURE

to Support Children's Mental Health

edited by KIM BECNEL and ROBIN A. MOELLER



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ISBN: 979-8-89255-576-0 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Becnel, Kim, editor. | Moeller, Robin A., editor.

Title: Using literature to support children's mental health / edited by Kim Becnel and Robin A. Moeller.

Description: Chicago: ALA Editions, 2025. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024042730 | ISBN 9798892555760 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Libraries—Special collections—Children's literature. | Children's libraries—Collection development. | Children—Books and reading. | Children's literature—History and criticism. | Child mental health in literature. | LCGFT: Essays.

Classification: LCC Z688.C47 U85 2025 | DDC 025.2/187625—dc23/eng/20241014 LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024042730

Book design by Alejandra Diaz in the Georgia Pro, Cabrito and Cabrito Sans typefaces

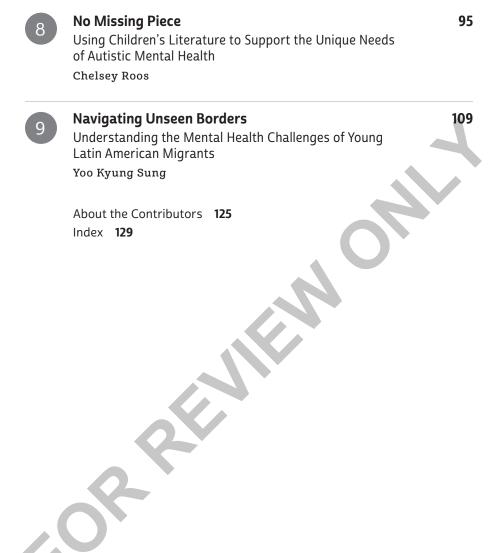
Printed in the United States of America

29 28 27 26 25 5 4 3 2 1

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INTRODUCTION

OUR MENTAL HEALTH is a vital part of our overall wellness, impacting our self-perception, ability to handle challenges, and capacity to connect with other people. This is true not only for adults but also, and perhaps especially, for children and youth who are in the process of developing mental frameworks and coping strategies that they will take with them into adulthood. Just as our physical health needs explicit care and attention, so too does our mental wellness. The global COVID-19 pandemic had such a devastating impact on the mental health of young people that it sparked national and global conversations, but experts say that the pandemic only exacerbated problematic trends already well underway.¹

In fact, over the past two decades, there have been dramatic increases in the number of young people reporting feelings of hopelessness, suicidal thoughts, and anxiety. These troubling patterns are attributed to many different factors, such as difficulty in accessing appropriate mental health care in a timely way, increasing academic expectations, the impact of social media, and societal stressors such as climate change and gun violence. In a more positive interpretation of these trends, it has also been theorized that at least some of the increase we are seeing in mental health struggles of children is due to the fact that youth and the adults responsible for them may have a greater ability to recognize and willingness to report and seek help for mental health concerns.²

On top of all of this are the challenges wrought by the pandemic, including social upheaval, isolation, and loss of support networks, and, for many youth, loss of financial stability, access to mental health care, stable housing, and even family members due to illness. According to "Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory," the pandemic brought significant mental health challenges and psychological distress to youth across the globe. Current studies "covering 80,000 youth globally found that depressive and anxiety symptoms doubled during the pandemic, with 25% of youth experiencing depressive symptoms and 20% experiencing anxiety symptoms." The issue of mental health and

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wellness is closely tied to social justice and equity as well. Children and youth who grow up in socioeconomically disadvantaged households are at a considerably greater risk of facing mental health challenges than youth who do not. Furthermore, children who identify with traditionally marginalized populations face greater risk; for example, the rate of suicide of Black children ages five—twelve is nearly twice that of their white peers.⁴

One small silver lining of the pandemic has been the opening up of this national and global conversation about the mental health and wellness of our youth. With this conversation comes the lessening of stigma and the search for resources to ameliorate identified problems and stave off new ones. The creative community and the publishing industry have responded to this resource need with the proliferation of new book titles with themes related to social and emotional learning, mental well-being, and specific mental health challenges. Meanwhile, librarians, educators, parents, counselors, caregivers, and other adults are seeking guidance on navigating this literature to find the resources that best meet the mental health needs of their families, students, and communities. As former public and school librarians, we want this collection of essays to fill a void by laying out the exciting landscape of current children's literature offerings on issues related to mental health, and by providing helpful frameworks and strategies for adults to think about the evaluation, curation, and use of these books with young people.

Some of the chapters in this book touch on challenges that adults in caregiving professions regularly seek resources for, such as books dealing with anxiety or grief and loss. Examples include "Coping with Anxiety: Fantasy Bibliotherapy for Children," which discusses the unique and effective ways that both classic and current fantasy books can help children to understand, process, and cope with anxiety-provoking situations in their lives. "Finding Hope in Death, Loss, and Grief," on the other hand, offers many suggestions for books that can be used as excellent tools for children facing different types of loss, as well as practical suggestions of activities that can be paired with these titles to further assist children in the grieving and healing process.

Other chapters focus on particular populations and go beyond providing excellent recommendations for teachers and librarians by supplying important information and context that will help them to better understand

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and serve these populations in their communities and schools. Chapters such as "Muslim Children's Mental Health: Understanding Religious Practices and the Challenges of Muslim Students," "Navigating Unseen Borders: Understanding the Mental Health Challenges of Young Latin American Migrants," and "No Missing Piece: Using Children's Literature to Support the Unique Needs of Autistic Mental Health" provide insights into the unique challenges faced by Muslim, migrant, and autistic communities, respectively, and as such will be helpful for any educators, counselors, or librarians who are trying to better support individuals in their communities who are part of these populations.

This volume will be useful to caregivers and professionals who dip into it in search of the guidance offered in particular chapters to address specific situations as they arise, as well as to those with a particular interest in the myriad ways that children's literature can be leveraged to support young people's mental and emotional well-being. The latter may find the whole volume useful, as they can not only use the book lists and accompanying descriptions provided here to help them to select and recommend titles, but they can also cultivate their ability to see children's literature through the lens of mental well-being and come away better equipped to evaluate and choose the best among the new titles being published every day.

NOTES

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- 4. Office of the Surgeon General, "Protecting Youth Mental Health," 8.

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