

TOUGH TOPICS

Inspiring Conversations in Difficult Times

Grade 6
through
Grade 8

Addiction/Substance Abuse

Hey, Kiddo: How I Lost My Mother, Found My Father, and Dealt with Family Addiction

By Jarrett Krosoczka
Graphix, 2018. 320p.

In this candid graphic novel memoir, the author shares the realities of his mother's heroin addiction, and the family love and support that guided him as he embarked on the path to becoming an artist.

Solo

By Kwame Alexander, with Mary Hess
Blink, 2017. 460p.

Blade's story as the son of a washed-up rock star battling addiction brings to light the complex issues of families dealing with addiction.

Adoption

Beyond the Bright Sea

By Lauren Wolk
Dutton Books for Young Readers, 2017. 304p.

Found as a baby on the shores of the tiny island of Cuttyhunk, Crow dreams of finding her biological family. Her quest involves a secret island community, pirates, and lost treasure, as well as finding out the real meaning of family in this ocean-drenched historical fiction title.

Half a World Away

By Cynthia Kadohata
Atheneum, 2014. 240p.

Jaden, who was adopted at age 8, sees himself as an "epic fail" because of his troubled behavior and inability to love his adopted parents. As his parents prepare to adopt a second child, the experience stirs up complicated feelings and worries that he is being replaced.

Just Like Me

By Nancy Cavanaugh
Sourcebooks Jabberwocky, 2016. 256p.

Three very different girls who were adopted from the same orphanage in China meet at a summer camp, where they are to journal their bonding experience for the camp counselor.

Anxiety and Depression

Cicada

By Shaun Tan
Arthur A. Levine Books, 2018. 32p.

Bullied, ignored, overworked, and underappreciated, Cicada works in a dreary, grey office building. Inspired by the 17-year life cycle of a cicada, as well as a haiku, this picture book for older readers uses brief lines of text and stark oil paintings to depict Cicada's humiliation, isolation, and persistence.

Don't Call Me Crazy

By Kelly Jensen
Algonquin Young Readers, 2018. 240p.

Thirty-three authors share their personal stories of mental illness in a variety of comics, short stories, and lists. This reminder that our brains are wired differently, including a section on depression, provide the reader with new opportunities to talk about mental health.

Sheets

By Brenna Thummler
Lion Forge, 2018. 238p.

Marjorie must run the family laundromat for her father, who is dealing with a severe depression after her mother's death. Daily pressures mount, but Marjorie finds support from an unexpected friend.

Body Image/Self Esteem

Goodbye Stranger

By Rebecca Stead
Random House Books for Young Readers, 2015. 304p.

Bridge's friend Emily doesn't seem to be concerned when her intimate photograph is exposed via social media...

Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus

By Dusti Bowling
Sterling, 2017. 262p.

Born without arms, 13-year-old Aven has never let that stop her from doing everything she sets her mind to. But a move to a new state challenges her innate sense of humor and indomitable spirit.

Like Vanessa

By Tami Charles
Charlesbridge, 2018. 288p.

Inspired by Vanessa Williams' 1983 win as the first African-American Miss America, 8th grader Vanessa Martin auditions for her middle school's pageant, and learns how to develop her confidence, face her fears, and challenge mainstream beauty norms.

The Poet X

By Elizabeth Acevedo
HarperTeen; 1st Edition edition, 2018. 368p.

This novel in verse tells the story of Xiomara Batista, a young teen living in Harlem who finds her voice through poetry, using it to come to terms with her changing body and her difficult relationship with her religiously conservative mother.

Tight

By Torrey Maldonado
Nancy Paulsen Books, 2018. 192p.

Bryan's new friend, Mike, pressures him into doing things that are pretty risky. Bryan needs to learn to stand up for and be true to himself, even when it means confronting his good friend.

Bullying

Blackbird Fly

By Erin Entrada Kelly
Greenwillow Books, 2015. 304p.

Apple, who moved to Louisiana from the Philippines with her mom, has always been aware of her differences from her classmates. But when Apple enters middle school, her name is added to a secret list of the ugliest girls in

school, and her friends abandon her. She copes through her music and searches for a new place to be herself.

Brave

By Svetlana Chmakova
Yen Press, 2017. 248p.

This graphic novel puts Jensen, aspiring astronaut and kid struggling to stay afloat in middle, front and center. When he's recruited to work on the school newspaper, Jensen realizes the kids he thought were his friends might really be bullies.

The Parker Inheritance

By Varian Johnson
Arthur A. Levine Books, 2018. 352p.

When Candice finds an old letter, she has no idea it will lead her on a puzzling chase through the history of a small town in South Carolina to find a treasure and clear her grandmother's name. Candice and her new friend Brandon, dig into a past full of racial tensions, hidden identities, and ugly secrets in this page-turning mystery that toggles between past and present.

The Truth as Told By Mason Buttle

By Leslie Connor
Katherine Tegen Books, 2018. 226p.

Mason Buttle, large for his age and dyslexic, is plagued by bullies. He finds new joy in his friendship with the equally-bullied Calvin, but when Calvin goes missing, Mason searches for the truth about his disappearance as well as the death of his friend Benny fifteen months ago.

Twerp

By Mark Goldblatt
Yearling, 2016. 288p.

This is a funny, poignant story of one middle school boy's experience as the bully, and the lessons he learns from his mistakes. Told through journal entries written by Julian, the main character, this story will resonate with middle school students struggling with any aspect of bullying.

Divorce/Single Parent

Blended

By Sharon M. Draper
Atheneum, 2018. 320p.

Isabella's identity is split- one week she lives with her white mother and the next with her black father. She wishes her divided life could come together like a magical, musical symphony through the black and white keys on her piano.

See You in the Cosmos

By Jack Cheng
Dial Books, 2017. 320p.

A space-obsessed boy and his dog travel from Colorado to New Mexico, Las Vegas to LA meeting remarkable people along the way. His father

is dead, his mom is troubled, his brother isn't around, and there are secrets to uncover.

Speed of Life

By Carol Weston
Sourcebooks Jabberwocky, 2017. 352p.

Eighth grader Sofia's mother died only nine months ago, so she's shocked when her dad starts dating again. She's even more appalled when she learns her father's new girlfriend is none other than Dear Kate, a woman who writes an advice column for teens.

Grief

The Girl with More Than One Heart

By Laura Geringer Bass
Abrams, 2018. 288p.

When the death of her father forces her to seek new perspectives, Briana uses her imagination as a coping mechanism.

Rebound.

By Kwame Alexander
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. 414p.

After the sudden death of his father, twelve-year-old Charlie struggles to find an outlet for his grief, until his mother sends him to spend the summer with his grandparents and he throws himself into basketball.

Summerlost

By Ally Condie
Dutton Books for Young Readers, 2016. 272p.

Still reeling from the death of her father and younger brother in a car accident, Cedar and her family move into a quiet summer house to grieve and heal. An unexpected friendship and an intriguing mystery help Cedar move forward through her sadness one day at a time.

Home Situation Change

Dollar Kids

By Jennifer Richard Jacobson, Illus. by Ryan Andrews
Candlewick, 2018. 416p.

Twelve year old Lowen Grover's family seeks a new beginning in a new town through a "dollar program", allowing them to purchase a new home for a dollar. This story explores one family's struggle to process complex emotions such as guilt, grief, and finding themselves in a new community.

Train I Ride

By Paul Mosier
HarperCollins, 2017. 192p.

After the death of her mother followed by her grandmother, Ryder is on a train to live with an unknown great uncle in Chicago, her last chance before entering foster care. Anxious, hungry and lonely, Ryder finds strength from new friends on

the train and ultimately within herself too.

Two Roads

By Joseph Bruchac
Dial Books, 2018. 320p.

After months of riding the rails during the Depression, Pop reveals to twelve-year-old Cal that they are part Creek and sends Cal to live at a government school. Although the school's conditions are harsh, Cal finds a community of boys who help him connect to his heritage and understand his father.

Illness (Catastrophic)

Auma's Long Run

By Euabeth Odiambo
Carolrhoda Books, 2017. 304p.

Set during the 1980's, Auma's dreams of earning a running scholarship and becoming a doctor, are crushed as the HIV/AIDS epidemic ravages Kenya. Auma struggles to decide what to sacrifice, the survival of her siblings or the fulfillment of her dreams.

Echo's Sister

By Paul Mosier
HarperCollins, 2018. 240p.

El's excitement at starting seventh grade at a new school is derailed when her little sister Echo is diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. El struggles with the fear, stress, and difficult emotions that arise as the family fights to stay strong together for Echo.

Family Game Night and Other Catastrophes

By Mary E. Lambert
Scholastic, 2017. 256p.

Annabelle's mother suffers from hoarding, a compulsion which affects the whole family's psychological well-being in different ways, until they realize they need to come together to help mom and each other.

Halfway Normal

By Barbara Dee
Aladdin, 2017. 256p.

After completing two years of treatment for leukemia, Norah is ready to tackle seventh grade, challenging classes, new friends and being honest about her experience.

Immigration

All the Stars Denied

By Guadalupe Garcia McCall
Lee & Low Books, 2018. 322p.

Estrella and her family struggle to contend with the consequences of U.S. government's unjust and discriminatory repatriation policy during the Great Depression.

It Ain't So Awful, Falafel

By Firoozeh Dumas
Clarion Books, 2016. 384p.

Set in the tumultuous times around America's Bicentennial and growing anti-Iranian sentiment, Zomorod (Cindy) Yousefzadah finds comfort in family and making new friends.

My Family Divided: One Girl's Journey of Home, Loss, and Hope

By Diane Guerrero
Henry Holt and Company, 2018. 251p.

Diane's parents thought their luck was finally turning for the better, but instead, 14-year-old Diane comes home from high school to find that both her parents have been picked up by ICE to be deported. Adapted from Diane Guerrero's memoir, *In the Country We Love*.

Undocumented: A Worker's Fight

By Duncan Tonatiuh
Abrams ComicArts, 2018. 15p.

Despite the danger of deportation, Juan demands that undocumented workers be treated with dignity and respect.

Natural Disaster

Another Kind of Hurricane

By Tamara Ellis Smith
Schwartz & Wade, 2015. 336p.

Two boys, both grieving terrible losses, somehow connect with one another in the chaos after Hurricane Katrina.

Drowned City

By Don Brown
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015. 96p.

A graphic novel telling the story of Hurricane Katrina and its effects on the city of New Orleans. The graphic novel format will engage readers in understanding the complexities of natural disasters.

Resilience

Be Prepared

By Vera Brogso
Macmillan/ First Second, 2018. 256p.

Vera is excited for a summer of new friendships and fun activities at Russian summer camp, but nearly goes home early when confronted with mean girls, too much nature, and loneliness. Vera rallies to save the summer and find a place for herself in this graphic novel memoir.

Hunger

By Donna Jo Napoli
Paula Wiseman Books, 2018. 272p.

Lorraine and her family are tenant farmers in 1846 Ireland, entering the second year of the potato famine that is devastating their community. Lorraine and the other children of the community struggle to keep starvation, illness and death at bay as the wealthy British landowners continue to ignore the problem.

You May Already Be a Winner

By Ann Dee Ellis
Dial Books for Young Readers, 2017. 347p.

Olivia's father has left her, her mother and her little sister to fend for themselves in their trailer park home. When money gets tight, Olivia has to stay home to take care of her sister since daycare is too expensive, but she finds solace in her daydreams.

Sexual Abuse

Speak: The Graphic Novel

By Laurie Halse Anderson, Illus. by Emily Carroll
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018. 384p.

Through her work on an art project, Melinda begins to face the terrifying fact that she was raped by an upperclassman at a party days before the start of her freshman year in high school.

The Summer of Owen Todd

By Tony Abbott
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017. 224p.

Owen and his best friend, Sean, are blissfully ready for summer vacation with nothing planned except trips to Cape Cod's beaches. Then Sean is sexually molested by their babysitter which drastically changes the course of the boys' lives.

Suicide

My Brother's Shadow

By Tom Avery
Schwartz & Wade, 2014. 176p.

Eleven-year-old Kaia isolates herself after her older brother's suicide. The mute wild boy who mysteriously appears outside her boarding school helps draw Kaia out of her mental funk as she begins to work through her grief.

Nest

By Esther Erlich
Wendy Lamb Books, 2014. 336p.

Set in the summer of 1972, Naomi "Chirp" Orenstein's mother is diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis; rather than face the disease and in the

throes of depression, Chirp's mom chooses to end her own life. Chirp and her family must stick together to find a way through this tough time.

Someone Else's Shoes

By Ellen Wittlinger
Charlesbridge, 2018. 304p.

This emotion-heavy title paints a picture of how divorce, suicide, and depression can affect a family. There may be a way twelve-year-old Izzy's can use her comedic skills to lighten and mend the situation, but it will be hard when she's stuck with her mom's boyfriend's on top of taking care of her cousin.

Trauma/Violence/War

A Game for Swallows

By Zeina Abirached
Graphic Universe, 2012. 188p.

A graphic memoir of the author's childhood in war-torn Beirut shows how amidst the horrors of conflict and fear one can always find solace in the strength of family and the comfort of neighbors.

Illegal

By Eoin Colfer, Illus. by Giovanni Rigano
Sourcebooks Jabberwocky, 2018. 122p.

Ebo leaves his home in Ghana hoping to reunite with his brother and sister and start a new life in Europe.

Long Way Down

By Jason Reynolds
Atheneum/Caitlin Dlouhy Books, 2017. 320p.

Will's brother has been shot, and Will is in an elevator on the way down to find his brother's killer, gun in hand. As the elevator descends, Will is visited by loved ones lost to gun violence from his past.

Refugee

By Alan Gratz
Scholastic, 2017. 352p.

Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud are all fleeing war and/or violence in their homes as refugees in this novel that takes place in three different time periods.

The Stars Beneath Our Feet

By David Barclay Moore
Yearling, 2017. 304p.

Twelve year-old Lolly and his best friend Vega cope with the loss of Lolly's older brother to gang violence as they resist being dragged into the same cycle of violence themselves through community and creativity.

Resources for Adults

Books

Building Resilience in Students Impacted by Adverse Childhood Experiences: A Whole-Staff Approach

By Victoria E. Romero, Ricky Robertson, and Amber Warner
Corwin, 2018. 248p.

Covering topics including poverty, divorce, neglect, homelessness, substance abuse, domestic violence and parent incarceration, this workbook style resource for K-12 educators shows how the school community can work together to assist children impacted by these issues.

Articles

Talking to Cyberbullied Kids—and to Bullies

By Tori Coridiano, PhD
School Library Journal. Accessed October 18, 2018.
www.slj.com/?detailStory=talking-to-cyberbullied-kids-and-to-bullies.

Article includes links to eight websites on coping with cyberbullying.

This Is How You Teach Kids About Consent

By the Good Men Project
Huffington Post/Life. Accessed November 28, 2018.
www.huffpost.com/entry/this-is-how-you-teach-kids-about-consent_b_10360296

A list of parenting action items (geared toward kids ages 1-21), created in the hope of raising a generation of children who have less rape and sexual assault in their lives.

After #MeToo: Educators Seek Strategies To Teach Students About Consent

By Drew Himmelstein
School Library Journal. Accessed December 27, 2018.
www.slj.com/?detailStory=after-metoo-educators-seek-strategies-to-teach-students-about-consent

With systemic harassment and assault in the news, educators are teaching age appropriate lessons about boundaries, safety, and sexual assault.

Parents Explain the Me Too Movement To Their Kids In Emotional Video

by Alanna Vagianos
Huffington Post/ Life. Accessed December 17, 2018
www.huffpost.com/entry/parents-explain-the-me-too-movement-to-their-kids-in-emotional-video_n_5ac51d16e4b09ef3b24309b4

In this video, three parents discuss the Me Too movement with their children, showing how difficult, but ultimately worthwhile, it can be to talk about sexual assault.

Websites

How to Talk to Children about Difficult News and Tragedies

American Psychological Association. Accessed December 15, 2018.
www.apa.org/helpcenter/talking-to-children.aspx

A brief overview of how to proceed after a tragedy, which includes the following downloads and weblinks:

- “Disaster Distress Hotline”—SAMHSA.gov
- “Listen, Protect, Connect—Psychological First Aid for Teacher & Students”—Ready.gov
- “Tips for Talking with and Helping Children and Youth Cope after a Disaster or Traumatic Event—a Guide for Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers”—SAMHSA.gov
- “Helpful Hints for School Emergency Management: Psychological First Aid for Students and Teachers: Listen, Protect, Connect—Model & Teach”—U.S. Department of Education
- “Explaining the News to Our Kids”—CommonSenseMedia.org
- “Children & Grief: Guidance and Support Resources”—Scholastic.com
- “The Road to Resilience”—APA.org

I’m Your Neighbor website

Accessed December 15, 2018.
www.imyourneighborbooks.org

Resources for teachers and parents to promote using children’s literature to connect “new arrivals” to “long term communities”.

National Alliance on Mental Illness, Learning to Help Your Child and Your Family, Teens and Young Adults

Accessed April 15, 2019.
www.nami.org/Find-Support/Teens-and-Young-Adults

Warning signs, conversation starters, and resources for how to help teens with mental illness, including but not limited to depression, eating disorders and addiction.

Talking about Difficult Topics with Children

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Accessed December 15, 2018.
www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/talking-about-difficult-topics

Suggestions for parents about how to open and carry on a discussion about a sensitive topic.

Teaching Tolerance website

Accessed December 15, 2018
www.tolerance.org

A project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, Teaching Tolerance has classroom resources like films and lesson plans on topics such as bullying, immigration, equality, and more.