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# CHILDREN'S LITERATURE FOR UNDERSTANDING SELF AND OTHERS

by Alice Hoskins

How many places have you ever gone without yourself? What a silly question, you say! Yes, perhaps that is a silly question. But have you ever stopped to think about the answer?

Consider this view. One thing you always take with yourself is you — your inner you. This inner you is the most important aspect of your existence, for it is a combination of all the elements that make up your unique self.

What is the self? Although the self has been described by many people from divergent points of view, the basic underlying theme suggests that the self is the sum total of all that I can call me. It is that part of a person which expresses his inner world and influences his personality. The self can also be thought of as an inner road map which helps a person determine that which is uniquely him.

Although there are numerous ways to learn about one's self, books are one of the most valuable and available means by which children can widen their intellectual horizons, expand their social insights and deepen their personal understanding. A book is a communication tool which, directly or indirectly, can help children perceive more clearly the feelings, attitudes, and values that they either are experiencing or may encounter in the future. This is particularly true if books are written by competent, empathetic adults who are in touch with the reality and fragileness of children's emotions.

Emotions play one of the most personal, sensitive and critical roles in the development and expressions of a child's inner self. Through the reading of books, however, a child can be exposed to and experience the many

emotions that make up the world in which he is existing. Therefore, good literature, which deals with the emotions that all humans must learn to handle, can serve as a valid avenue through which children can know and express this part of their inner selves.

Each individual is unique. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that no two encounters with a book may be the same. Quality literature seems to speak to the reader in a voice which is highly personal and influenced by a child's state of being at that given moment in his life.

The task of understanding one's self encompasses much more than the mere reading of books. However, the combination of a sensitive adult, an inquisitive child, and a good book are three positive factors that can work wonders in the continuous search for helping children understand their inner world. In the words of Arbuthnot and Sutherland, "Know your child and know books because for every child there is the right book at the right time."<sup>1</sup>

Some guidelines you may want to consider related to helping children understand their inner feelings through books:

1. Be alert to the many guises that children use to seek your assistance related to coping with and understanding feelings.
2. Provide an atmosphere conducive to the sharing and expression of feelings.
3. Expose children to a variety of books that reflect the numerous ways feelings can be expressed.
4. Allow more opportunity in the daily routine for children to read

books that deal with personal feelings.

5. Set aside more time for yourself to read and gain knowledge about the inner you.

Here are some books you may want to suggest for independent reading or consider for group sharing.

*Love is a Special Way of Feeling* by Joan Anglund. A "little book" with thought-provoking descriptions of ways we recognize receiving and giving love. (Primary)

*A Letter to Amy* by Ezra Jack Keats. Peter expresses a special feeling when he writes Amy an invitation to his birthday party. (Primary)

*The Temper Tantrum Book* by Edna Mitchell Preston. Dislikes which sometimes make people angry are portrayed through animal characters. (Primary)

*Crow Boy* by Taro Yashima. This is a story about a tiny Japanese boy named Chibi who was an isolate in school until his sixth grade teacher recognized his talents. (Primary)

*The Hating Book* by Charlotte Zolotow. A little girl discovers that sometimes people dislike each other because of misunderstandings.

*The Wheel on the School* by Meinert DeJong. A delightful story about how children overcome many obstacles in order to get storks to come to every roof in their little Dutch fishing village. (Intermediate)

*The Stone-Faced Boy* by Paula Fox. After an incident in first grade, Gus gets the nickname Stone Face, but still shows his feelings when he finds an old dog who is lost. (Intermediate)

*Meet the Austins* by Madeleine L'Engle. The tangled emotions of adolescence are brought into existence when an unhappy orphaned girl steps into the happy lives of the Austins. (Intermediate)

*Call It Courage* by Armstrong Sperry. This is the adventuresome story of a boy's courage and quest to overcome his fear of the sea. (Intermediate)

*The Spettekake Holiday* by Edith Unnerstad. A Swedish story which depicts the inner longings of a child for his mother when she is hospitalized. (Intermediate)

1. Arbuthnot, May Hill and Zena Sutherland, *Children and Books*, Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1972, p. 19.

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