



The Secret Life of Pets 2

Movie Discussion Packet

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As far back as ancient Greece people were utilizing books as methods for working through various ailments. The term, bibliography, is what we pair with the phenomenon of using media, specifically books, to help people suffering from trauma or psychological issues. While the Transfiguring Adoption is NOT claiming to be professionals in the psychological or mental health arena, we do believe that families can glean from this concept in using movies, video games, and, naturally, books, to help foster or adoptive children process their story.

Section I

Why are we using books, movies, and video games to help children?

- **Partially disengage mind from fear/problems**

Immersing yourself in media helps you to escape from reality for a bit. This can give our minds a partial break from the worry and stress so that we have more energy to attach the issue when we come back to it.

- **Introduced to new solutions**

We might discover new solutions to problems as we experience a character in media conquer an issue.

- **Emotional vocabulary**

Discovering more ways to express how we feel and think can help us to communicate our own thoughts and feelings. Overall, more effective communication allows us to ask for better assistance with our feelings and issues.

- **Identify with characters/stories**

You have heard the saying, “no man is an island.” No person wants to feel like they are alone in their thoughts, feelings, or experiences. When we discover a character in media struggling with similar issues as our own, it helps to “normalize,” our life situations and feel comforted. This can also help us to discover our own identify as a character goes through process in their life.

Section II

This Only Works TOGETHER - Parent & Child.

Here is why it is IMPERATIVE that a parent or trusted adult walk through these questions and media with a child:

- **Trauma Triggers**

An event or language in a piece of media might remind our children of past events in their lives which were traumatic. If we are to assume that they have not yet had enough life experience to successfully walk through these situations and make sense of them, then they will need a safe adult to be able to process feelings and emotions.

Some caregiver might be nervous or scared to discuss the details of sexual abuse, physical abuse, and so on. Our children are also scared but have no choice but to live through it. Our children need an adult who can help them process through issues by listening. They need an adult who knows when information needs to be given over to a trusted therapist and other professionals.

- **Reliving Trauma**

Some media might not simply suggest or bring up past trauma but could expose a child to a similar situation as what they have experienced. If a child is exposed to such media, it goes without saying that they will need a safe adult to help them process their thoughts and emotions. They will even need a safe adult who may not have the right answers but can get the child to a professional who can help.

- **Living in a Dream World**

As much as negatively living through trauma can have a devastating effect on our children, too much of a good thing can also have a poor effect when it is experienced on their own. Some children who have come from traumatic backgrounds may have trouble separating fantasy from reality. When given media where the main character is always rescued in the nick of time, the waif always marries royalty, or all problems are solved in a neat package, our children could be given over to considering this is how the world operates and that the solutions of the characters will produce similar fantastical results. It is important to have a trusted adult on duty who can applaud the fun of a tale but also bring everyone back down to reality.

- **Never Really Find Results**

Again it can be a pitfall for caregivers to be nervous about a topic and simply hope that children will learn by experiencing a book or movie on their own. The problem is that many of our children lack the life experience to be able to connect the dots to see how a character's struggles and life solutions could be compared to their own life.

A trusted adult can help a child to glean solutions and conversations from a piece of media to make real life change begin.

Section III

How To Use Our Discussion Packets:

1. **Exposure as a Family**

Watch, read, or play the respective media this packet discusses together before you begin the conversation. It is important that parent and child experience things together. Natural bonding and teachable moments come about when we experience things together.

2. **Wait for the Right Time**

As foster and adoptive parents, many of us want to help our children so badly that when we get a new resource we want to try it out faster than a child wants to open up presents on Christmas. However, it is important to judge when your child is ready to talk about issues brought up by media.

If your child is struggling with habitual lying and just reprimanded earlier in the day at school, there might be intense feelings of guilt and embarrassment. It may not be the correct time to point out that Pinocchio gets in trouble when he lies and try to begin a discussion about how lies can harm your life. Instead wait a day or two when everything is going right in your family's world, and then try to begin a conversation.

People who are hurt, angered, frustrated or depressed due to a topic are not going to be open to having a dialogue about the issues.

3. **Nudging Toward Identification**

If we look at this conversation as a swimming pool, "Nudging Toward Identification" is going to be the shallow end of the pool. The goal is to simply notice - just notice - similarities you might see in a character's life and your child's life. This step is helping our children to see that they might be able to relate with a character. The media is going from merely a source of entertainment to something we possibly - POSSIBLY - could connect with in some manner.

This might come in the form of phrases such as:

- "Hey, did you notice that in the book Sally had to figure out how to make friends at school too?"
- "Tom's brother in the movie was really good at soccer just like you, right?!"
- "Too bad you're not in the story with Samantha, because you like learning about science as much as she does, right?"

4. **Emotional Involvement**

In Step 3 we helped our child to consider that they might be able to connect with a character. During this step, if the atmosphere is still good for conversation, we are going to push the similarities with the media character a bit further. We are going to take a look at specific situations and emotions. We are going to take a look at issues that characters confronted and discuss solutions and emotional outcomes. Hopefully, through this step our children will be able to more deeply and emotionally be able to identify with a character.

We might ask questions such as:

- "Sally made up stories to try and make new friends. Do you think this was the right way to make friends? Why? What should she have done differently?"

- “How do you think Tom felt when missed the goal and lost the soccer game for his team? What would you tell him? Do you ever feel like Tom?”
- “Which do you think made Samantha feel better, winning the science fair or making new friends at school? Do you ever feel like that? Why?”

5. **Continued Conversations**

Always remember that helping children walk through trauma is not a sprint but a marathon. Do not get discouraged if the right time to talk about themes in a piece of media don't turn up right away. Do not get discouraged if your child doesn't want to talk about anything “deep” or life changing.

Some people have reported that their children might watch a movie, lightly discuss it, and then a month later begin asking deeper questions about a theme or topic in the media.

As parents our job is to create an atmosphere where learning and growth can happen AND CAN CONTINUE HAPPENING. We need to equip ourselves with the tools to be ready for those small windows of time that our children are ready to discuss and learn from us.

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Comprehensive Review

TRANSFIGURING ADOPTION'S OVERVIEW:

Secret Life of Pets 2 continues the story of Max the dog in this comedic family cartoon. The film was created for consumption by the general public and especially appeals to children from elementary school age through early middle school. However, considering the popularity of the first film the second film will definitely appeal to older children and adults as well. Will this movie help foster and adoptive families? Sure, there are possibilities which we will explore below.

The film brings back all of your favorite characters from the first movies and introduces a few new characters. While the viewer is showing up to watch one story, the characters seem to quickly split up into various groups to create three separate story lines which intertwine with each other toward the end. The main storyline will follow Max as his owner is married and has a child. As the child grows toward pre-school age, Max, who is very fond of the little boy, quickly becomes overly worried with the safety of the child and seems to develop an anxiety disorder, which results in a veterinary visit and a plastic cone around his head.

This alone could be enough entertainment for a whole movie but there is more. Max's family heads to the country to visit family. On the farm Max confronts his anxieties with the help of his new hero figure and mentor a dog named Rooster.

Overall, this reviewer had a fun time watching this movie with three of my adoptive children. Everyone in our party joined the theater full of viewers with audible laughs and were completely enveloped in this various story lines. It seemed that there was one pointed trauma trigger in the movie but this didn't seem to bother my children and the trigger seemed to be mild due to the cartoon nature of the film. Naturally, we will look at this trigger in-depth below but all in all, this movie provided a very enjoyable evening and a few priceless memories.

**** Spoilers Could Be Ahead ****

HOW IS THIS RELEVANT TO ADOPTION & FOSTER CARE?

This movie doesn't directly relate to foster care and adoption. Liam, who is the new child born in to the home, was born to Katie and Chuck as part of a traditional family. The closest that one

might consider linking an adoption-type situation in the movie is when the cast of characters is attempting to find their white tiger friend a new home in the city.

Why should foster and adoptive families watch this movie then? Well besides the fact that it promises to deliver a great comedic experience which will create great memories for your family, the movie has themes which all children (and adults for that matter) need to grapple with in life. The movie takes a look at theme of facing your fears or being brave in the face of your own personal anxiety. The film watches characters exhibit great loyalty to their friends and taking a stand for an unjust situation.

Personally, this reviewer found that the first two themes of bravery and friendship were of great worth if explored further in foster or adoptive families. This is largely do to the fact that many children from traumatic backgrounds are going to be struggling with anxieties or severe concerns that other children may not be struggling with. Thus, it this film allows parents to talk about coping with anxieties. Likewise, children in foster care especially have potentially lost many relationships at multiple stages in their life which creates a difficulty for them to learn how to create friendships. Discussing what loyalty or following through on your word looks like is a fantastic discussion to have.

Let's take a look at these themes up for discussion more in-depth...

DISCUSSION POINTS:

- **Anxiety - Bravery**

After his owner, Katie, has a baby boy, Liam, Max grows to become very fond and attached to the new child. Max begins to obsess and overly worry about all the things that might harm Liam. Eventually, Katie has to take Max to the vet as Max has developed an unhealthy habit of scratching himself when he suffers an anxiety attack. For children who have come from traumatic backgrounds it could be "normalizing" for them to be able to identify with a character who struggles with anxiety. Families may choose to talk about examples of Max's fears to see what everyone in the family feels are acceptable levels of concern as opposed to being overly worried or anxious about something.

Rooster, a dog who lives on a farm, helps Max overcome his anxieties and serves as a hero/mentor to Max. At one point Rooster expresses to Max that acting brave is the first step to overcoming anxiety and being brave. While Max takes his mentor's advice we can still witness that Max is scared. It would be worth families to discuss bravery and

noting that people that are brave still might be scared. It might be worth noting that Rooster gave Max the motivation (albeit seemingly slim encouragement) to keep moving forward. It would be good for families to discuss how to utilize other people as supports to walk through anxiety-ridden moments.

- **Loyalty - Keeping Your Promises**

Before Max leaves on a trip to a farm with his family, he enlists his friend, Gidget, to watch his favorite toy. Unfortunately, Gidget accidentally allows the toy ball to bounce out of her apartment and into the apartment filled with crazy and dangerous looking cats. Gidget could have decided to leave the toy but is determined to get the toy back since she promised Max she would watch his prized toy.

Children who have come through the foster care system and adoption may have had little or no role modeling for forming healthy relationships. Thus, it is difficult for them to know how to form healthy family relationships or healthy friendships. The storyline in this movie involving Gidget will allow families to discuss loyalty in friendships and keep your promises as we witness Gidget working hard to keep her promise to her friend Max.

- **Standing Up Against Injustice**

Snowball, the bunny, and Daisy, the dog, embark on a quest to free an abused white tiger from the circus. After freeing the tiger their quest doesn't stop as they must find a new home to care for the tiger. Their whole adventure begins when Daisy witnesses the tiger's abuse and she chooses to right the wrong.

This is a great theme to discuss within any household but it can be especially empowering for our children who may have first-hand been exposed to abuse or other injustices. It would be good for families to discuss how Snowball and Daisy handle the situation to learn what family members believe was done correctly/incorrectly to make the situation right. It would also be good for parents to create some hypothetical situations where children might witness an injustice and see how they would handle the situation.

- **Coping with New Family Normals**

At the beginning of the film, the main character, Max, expresses his dislike of children. The movie then quickly shows Max having to cope with the addition of a new baby boy into his household. As the boy grows into a toddler Max shares with the viewer about the negative feelings he has toward the child as the family unit is discovering a new "normal." Eventually, Liam (the young boy) and Max grow a fondness for each other and a new and loving co-existence is created.

When looking at media resources for foster care and adoption, we rarely see something that allows us to discuss how family dynamics are going to change with our birth

children. If a family had birth children in the home prior to foster care or adoption, it would be good for them to use this film to discuss with them (possibly in private) about the changes Max experienced and see if your child is experiencing changes as well.

CAUTIONARY POINTS:

- **Animal Abuse**

During the movie the circus owner, Sergei, can be heard cracking a whip at a young white tiger. The tiger is definitely seen as cringing from the attacks and shies away from the owner and his henchmen. The tiger is also seen being forced to perform circus tricks against his will. The depiction of the abuse is mild. However, it should be noted that these scenes do exist as a part of one of the three storylines happening in the movie. If your child is particularly sensitive to seeing/hearing animals being abused you might want to view this movie before your child sees it. Again, most of the abuse is simply heard but we do see the emotional effects of the abuse. The whipping of the tiger is a very brief part of the movie and simply allows us to understand why the characters in the movie go to great lengths to help free the tiger.

- **Participation in Anxiety Induced Situations**

Max the dog finds himself with many new fears and anxieties throughout this movie. On the farm a dog named Rooster helps Max overcome his fears by forcing him to confront his fears. At one point Max is made to climb the side of a cliff and get a lamb on a tree growing out of the side of the cliff. There is no real discussion or help to get him through this situation other than Rooster the dog sternly telling Max to keep going forward. While this might be a successful course of action for some people, more than likely children from traumatic backgrounds are going to require a more nurturing approach and consequently children may be triggered by experiencing a character in the movie being forced to push through his anxieties.

Discussion Questions

1. **Who was your favorite character in the movie? Why?**

This is a light question that helps the whole family learn more about each other. There is no need for every question about the movie to be deep and serious.

2. **Why do you think Max was so worried about Liam all the time?**

Although Max did seem to develop an anxiety, the initial reason for his concern for Liam was good. He loved Liam and wanted him to be protected and safe. This question can allow your family to talk about how people who love each other are concerned for each other's safety. This is especially important for children who may not have had this modeled in their birth home.

3. **When Gidget lost Max's ball called Busy Bee, why did she work so hard to get it back?**

Max and Gidget are good friends (possibly dating). It is good to discuss with our kids about what it looks like to follow through on promises. It is also good to talk about how we honor other people's items because we are friends and respect the person the item belongs to.

4. **Snowball and Daisy saw the circus owner being mean to a white tiger and wanted to save the tiger. What could they have done so that their mission was more successful?**

This is simply a question to see how your child read the situation.

5. **You're probably never going to have to save a white tiger but... What would you do if you saw a group of kids picking on another kid at school?**

6. **What would you do if you saw another person in the house take money out of mom's purse?**

We all have moments where we must make a decision on how we are going to react to an unjust situation. Creating hypothetical situations and discussing them help us to know how to handle similar situations in the future.

7. **What were some things that Max was scared of?**

This is simply a light discussion question to see what your child is thinking and helps to lead into the other questions.

8. **What were situations where it was okay for Max to be really scared? What were times that seemed silly for him to be scared?**

Being scared might be seen as a negative emotion. However, fear and concern are normal emotions that everyone experiences at some point in their lives. It is good to talk

with children about times when it is perfectly normal to be concerned or scared. Once normalcy is discussed we can turn the conversation to when things are exaggerated or out of hand. Question #11 will focus on you and your child but for this question it is important to simply talk about the movie characters as this is a good way to begin the conversation in a nonthreatening way.

9. What happened to Max because he was scared all the time? Could he have fun when he was scared?

When our emotions become exaggerated or out of balance we may find that our life suffers. In the case of Max he was unable to enjoy his life all the time. At one point in the movie he even expressed wanting to stay inside the apartment all the time. It is good to talk about how our lives can suffer from out of balance emotions using the characters from the movie. As with any person, if we can see that there is an issue, it is easier to admit that we need to seek out help.

10. On the farm what was Max scared of? How did Rooster help him?

We have spent a few questions talking about the issue that Max has to work on and talking about why it is an issue. Now it is time to talk about solutions and discuss how other people can help us. No one should ever feel like they have to tackle an issue alone.

11. What are some things that make you the "right amount" of scared? What might be some things that make your scared feeling "too high"?

The next two questions are going to be a bit more sensitive as we aren't talking about the fictional characters anymore and are searching for how the concepts we have seen apply to real life. Be attentive to your child's needs during this question. If they do not want to talk about themselves, honor that. Simply let them know that you're available to talk later. Also, some people need some time to think and reflect and some folks may not be dealing with anxiety or fear at the moment and not have anything to discuss. Again, the key is to be available and sensitive and not simply getting the question answered.

12. Who are safe adults that can help you when you are "too scared"? Can you think of some ways they can help you be brave?

If your child is brave enough to be able to talk about things that scare them, it is important to talk about the safe people they can talk to or who they can go to for help.

About the Reviewer

Co-founder and Program Director of Transfiguring Adoption, Darren is a graduate of Illinois State University where he studied fine art. He offers foster and adoptive parents over a decade of experience in parenting foster and adoptive children, as well as his introductory to counseling training. Darren enjoys visiting amusement parks with his family.