



A Christmas Carol

Book Review



Transfiguring Adoption is a nonprofit organization seeking to nurture growth in foster and adoptive families by giving a HOOT about their families. Transfiguring Adoption does not intend for its reviews nor its reviews nor its this discussion packet to be professional, medical or legal advice. These reviews and discussion guides are intended to help parents to better be able to connect and understand their children who come from traumatic backgrounds.

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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 identity as a character goes through a 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:

A Christmas Carol is a classic story by Charles Dickens originally published in 1843. It tells the story of Ebenezer Scrooge who hates Christmas and only cares about his money. Scrooge is visited by a series of ghosts on Christmas Eve who implore him to change his attitudes and behavior. Though some components of the story are somewhat outdated (workhouses and the 1834 Poor Law, attitudes towards women, among others), the overall message and themes of the story are certainly still relevant. For me, *A Christmas Carol's* message of kindness and redemption embodies the spirit of the Christmas holiday.

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

How Is This Relevant To Adoption & Foster Care?

A Christmas Carol is not directly related to adoption and foster care but does discuss some themes that are relevant. It is implied that some part of the reason Scrooge is such a miserly old man is that he had a traumatic childhood in which his father was neglectful and possibly abusive. He is also disdainful of his family. He learns that to become a kind and generous person and embrace both his biological family (his nephew) and a chosen family (The Cratchits).

Discussion Points:

- **Can people really change?**

A primary theme of this book is Scrooge's transformation from grumpy old miser to kind and generous man. However, we don't follow Scrooge beyond the first few days after his transformation. It may be interesting to discuss if your reader thinks that people are really capable of this kind of change, or if he will go back to his previous behavior after a while. If they don't think this kind of change is possible, why not? You can also use this to speculate about what the rest of Scrooge's life might be like.

- **Kindness**

Kindness is a major theme in this book. Scrooge refuses to donate any of his money to any people in need at the beginning of the book. He also disagrees with his nephew's characterization of Christmas as a time of kindness and charity. However, by the end of the book, Scrooge donates money, buys the Cratchit family a large Christmas turkey, gives Bob Cratchit a raise, and attends his nephew's Christmas celebration. What is kindness? What makes someone kind? You may also want to talk about the importance of being kind all year long rather than just at Christmas.

Cautionary Points:

- **Horror Elements**

This story uses a number of horror elements. The description of Marley and the other ghosts, as well as some of the imagery at the beginning of the story when Marley first appears and in the chapter with the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come may be disturbing to some readers.

- **Sexual Harassment**

There is also one incident that describes what would be considered sexual harassment today; in Stave Three, the Ghost of Christmas Present shows Scrooge his nephew's Christmas gathering at which one of the attendees follows Scrooge's niece's sister around all night and finally corners her and touches her, which she does not consent to. It is not explicit, and speaks more to Victorian attitudes towards women, but still may be a point of caution.

Discussion Questions

Stave/Chapter 1:

1. What are your favorite things about Christmas time, besides receiving presents?

Caregiver note: Scrooge's nephew, in trying to get Scrooge to attend his Christmas celebration, espouses many of the things he likes about Christmas, notably that people are kinder to each other. Talk to each other about your favorite parts of Christmas that aren't about material things. Do you like the people you get to spend time with? The way people act?

2. What does Marley mean by the warning he gives Scrooge?

Caregiver note: In the first stave, Marley appears to Scrooge wrapped in chains, imploring Scrooge to change his behavior before he is doomed to be chained himself. He says that a man's soul must travel, and so since he did not travel while he was alive, he is now doomed to roam the Earth in these chains. He wants Scrooge to change his behavior and become a better person so that he does not suffer the same fate as Marley.

Stave/Chapter 2:

1. Why do you think the Ghost of Christmas Past showed Scrooge these particular memories?

Caregiver note: The ghost shows Scrooge a series of memories starting with Scrooge being left alone at school on Christmas with only imaginary friends from his books. He also shows Scrooge being picked up from school by his sister, a joyous Christmas he spent when he was an apprentice, and his former fiancée breaking off their engagement because Scrooge has lost himself in becoming rich. Most of these memories have direct comparisons to Scrooge's behavior to others on Christmas Eve; for example, the memory of Fezziwig, his old boss, illuminates how cruel Scrooge is to his employee, Mr. Cratchit.

2. Do you think Scrooge learned anything from the Ghost of Christmas Past? Why or why not? If yes, what did he learn?

Caregiver note: Though Scrooge still has a ways to go, he does regret his actions towards the caroller at his office and to Mr. Cratchit. He is beginning to learn that kindness and generosity is not necessarily rooted in wealth and that he has missed out on a lot of happiness because of his isolation and greed.

Stave/Chapter 3:

1. Do you think the Cratchit's dinner sounded good? What is your favorite part of Christmas dinner?

Caregiver note: Though the dinner described is distinctly Victorian-Era British (goose, steamed pudding), some elements did sound tasty! This is a fun question, but you can also talk about how different cultures and time periods celebrate with different meals.

2. What do the boy and girl who appear at the end of the Stave from the spirit's cloak represent?

Caregiver note: The two children who appear represent ignorance and want, and they are described as Man's children. The spirit warns that you must be wary of both of them, but especially ignorance because he will bring doom. Talk about what ignorance is and how it can be potentially dangerous and damaging.

Stave/Chapter 4:

1. How does the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come differ from the other spirits?

Caregiver note: To me, the last spirit is the spookiest of all of them. He can't speak, he only points and nods. Scrooge can only see one hand; the rest of the spirit is "shrouded in a deep black garment". The Ghost of Christmas Past is described as childlike, and the Ghost of Christmas Present is described as a jolly giant with a horn of plenty. For advanced readers, you might want to discuss why Dickens chose to describe each of these spirits in the way that he did.

2. Why do you think this spirit showed Scrooge Tiny Tim's death? What lesson did he learn?

Caregiver note: In the previous stave, the Ghost of Christmas Present does tell Scrooge that Tiny Tim will die if nothing changes. Scrooge is upset but seeing the reaction of the Cratchit family after Tiny Tim has died solidifies the lesson that Scrooge needs to help support the Cratchits because they are less fortunate.

3. What does Scrooge mean when he promises to honor Christmas all year long?

Caregiver note: At the very end of Stave 4, after seeing his own death, Scrooge promises that he will honor the Christmas spirit all year long. This can be a good connection to the discussion about kindness and charity and why it is important all year rather than just at Christmas time.

Stave/Chapter 5:

- 1. Do you think Scrooge was really visited by the spirits and Marley, or was it all a dream?**

Caregiver note: This is left open to interpretation, though at the beginning of the book, the narrator insists that Scrooge was awake.

- 2. Why do you think Scrooge doesn't tell the Cratchits that he bought them the giant turkey?**

Caregiver note: Scrooge wants to do something nice for the Cratchit family, but he doesn't need the thanks and praise that he might get if he told them the turkey was from him. This can be a good discussion of altruism, and how it is better to do kind things for the sake of being kind rather than in order to get something in return.

- 3. How has Scrooge changed by the end of the book?**

Caregiver note: Scrooge now values family, gives to charity, and has stopped hoarding his money. This has opened up his life beyond isolation and greed and makes him into a kind and generous person.

About the Reviewer

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Julie is a Central Virginia native who currently resides in Rochester, New York. She received her Masters of Arts Degree in Psychology from the College of William and Mary in 2012 and is currently a PhD candidate in Epidemiology at the University of Rochester. Julie has worked in various mental health research positions since 2012 and is passionate about researching how physical health, mental health, and trauma experiences interact. When not working, Julie enjoys reading, cooking, spending time with her cats, and watching videos about otters (her favorite animal).