

# Turn Personal Struggles Into Books For Children

By Laura Backes

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by Laura Backes, Publisher, Children's Book Insider, the Newsletter for Children's Writers

Suppose you've just gone through a divorce and lost custody of your kids. Or a loved one has recently died of cancer. Or you struggled in school as a child because you have dyslexia.

Many writers turn difficult periods in their lives into books for children, hoping to help young readers through similar painful experiences. Here are some tips to keep in mind when creating and selling books based on real-life events:

Remember that you're writing a children's book, not a personal essay intended to purge your soul from a painful memory. Children want to read about how they feel. Many writers create a child character and tell the story through that character's eyes. Don't write in first person if the "I" is you, the adult author. Instead of explaining how bad you feel that your kids no longer live with you, show how a five-year-old character feels about only getting to see Daddy every other weekend.

Books for younger children (up to age eight) centering around a personal crisis are generally most effective if the author uses a fictional vehicle for imparting the information. If you want to stick closer to nonfiction, make sure the book focuses on the child in the center of the event, and is told in a narrative format with a beginning, middle and end. Older children can handle more traditional self-help books, with each chapter concentrating on a specific aspect of the problem. However, interspersing the advice with personal anecdotes from other children who have gone through the same thing will make the information more appealing and relevant to the readers.

Targeting appropriate publishers with these manuscripts is important. Look in subject index of Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market under "Self Help" and "Special Needs" for publishers. Peruse the children's nonfiction section of a large bookstore, and read reviews in Publisher's Weekly, School Library Journal and Horn Book (trade magazines found in most libraries) to see which publishers do similar types of books. Always send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the children's editorial department asking for writer's guidelines before submitting your manuscript. You can also look at books written for parents to help their children cope with an illness, loss or divorce, and query the publisher asking if they'd like to publish a children's book on the same topic.

Though many mainstream publishers are interested in books that deal with special issues, some topics have too narrow an audience for a large house to market the book successfully. In this case, many authors have elected to self-publish. If you get several personal rejection letters from editors who praise the book but say the audience isn't broad enough, you might consider publishing it

yourself. But self-publishing should be approached cautiously; color illustrations are essential for picture books, making them very expensive to produce. And you must be prepared to devote at least a year of your life to selling and distributing your book. Most self-published books are sold primarily through direct mail. Can you purchase mailing lists of parents with children who could benefit from your book? Stories on adoption, specific childhood illnesses, or those that might fit in a pediatrician's waiting room or hospital gift shop are examples of books with a very targeted audience. Dan Poynter's *The Self-Publishing Manual* (Para Publishing) and *The Complete Guide to Self-Publishing* by Tom and Marilyn Ross (Writer's Digest Books) are two good resources to check out before making the commitment to self-publish.

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