

Introduction

Many children fear dental visits. Fear can reduce a child’s collaboration during dental visits, contribute to a negative stigma associated with dental care, and potentially carry over into adulthood. [1] Bibliotherapy, using storybooks as a therapeutic intervention, has been shown to be effective in reducing fear and improving understanding in multiple pediatric medical conditions. [2] In contrast, the usefulness of children’s dental literature has yet to be assessed. [3] The purpose of this study was to examine the scope and breadth of current dental-related children’s picture books to identify themes, strengths and weaknesses, and evaluate each book’s overall quality. The purpose of this study was to examine the scope and breadth of current dental-related children’s picture books to identify themes, strengths and weaknesses, and evaluate each book’s overall quality. Through analysis of existing dental-themed storybooks, a comprehensive resource was developed that dental providers, educators, and parents can utilize to prepare for and improve a child’s dental visit.

Methods

All available dental storybooks were identified using WorldCat, Penn Libraries’ catalog FIND and Amazon.com using the search criteria, “dental medicine”, “oral health”, and “children’s books” as well as books from Penn Dental Medicine departments. Book lists were imported to Covidence, where two independent examiners screened each book based on whether they were dental-visit related or offered oral hygiene instruction, contained illustrations, and were written in English. Each book’s reading level was assessed according to the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level formula. Selected books were coded based on identified themes, creating a code book to guide further efforts once thematic saturation was achieved. Any disputes between examiners were resolved by a third examiner. Books were categorized by age group using the American Academy of Pediatrics periodicity schedule [4].

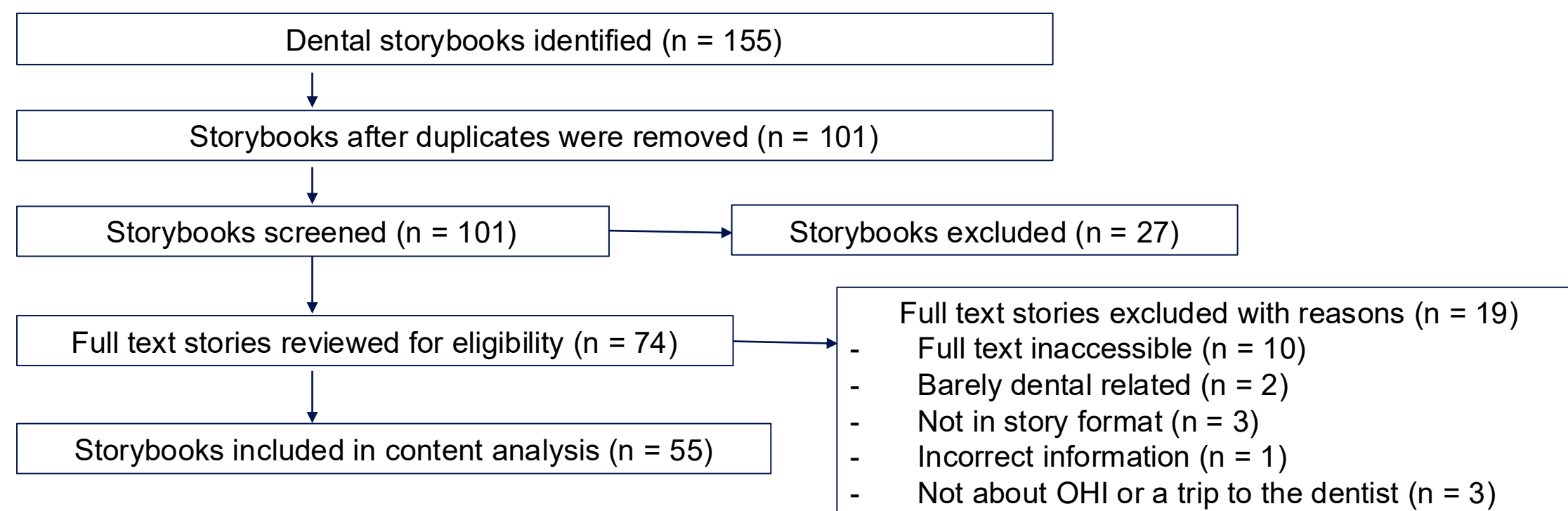


Figure 1. Process for the selection of storybooks



Results

A total of 55 children’s storybooks related to dentistry were included in this project and approximately 50 thematic codes were identified. The authors ranged from professional writers to dentists, dental hygienists, and medical doctors. Publication dates ranged from 1959 to 2024. The primary classification tags used to categorize the books encompassed factors such as age group (infant, early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence), oral hygiene instruction (OHI), type of procedure completed (cleaning, exam, restoration, extraction etc.), advice for parents, behavioral/emotional responses (fear/anger/positivity) and other relevant themes. Some books were developmentally appropriate for multiple age groups and were tagged accordingly. Descriptive analysis was used to identify the most frequently occurring themes and to visualize the distribution of author types and thematic content. The most commonly coded themes were dental exam, OHI, positive response to dentist, and fear/nerves.

Themes	# of Books
Infancy (<12 mo)	9
Early Childhood (1-4 yo)	55
Middle Childhood (5-10 yo)	43
OHI	43
Fear/Nerves	35
Pain	9
Cleaning	39
Dental Exam	52
Restoration	9
Caries/Bacteria/Sugar Bugs	31
Extraction	21
Wiggly Tooth	7
Tooth Fairy	18
Positive Response to Dentist	36

Figure 2. Frequency of Key Thematic Elements in Children’s Dental Storybooks (n = 55)

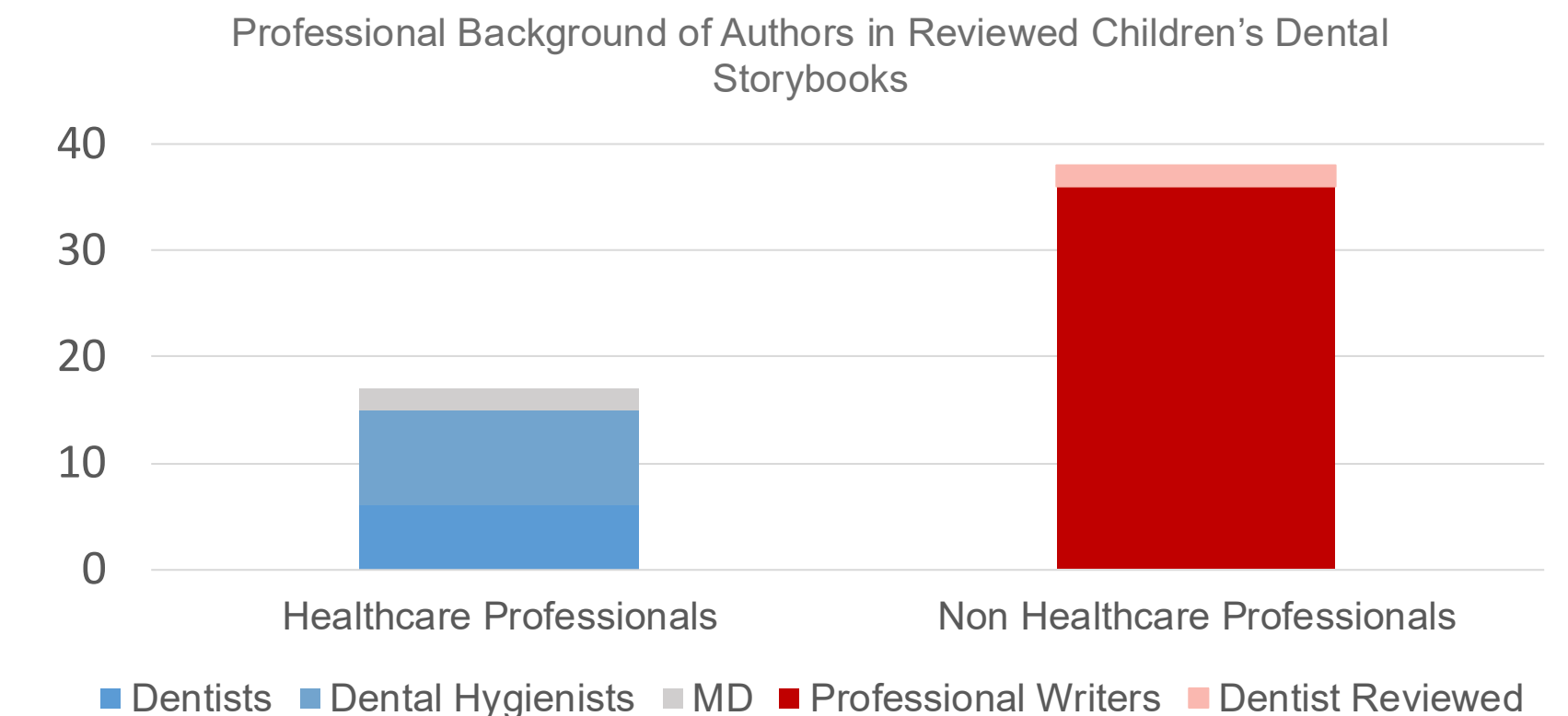


Figure 3. Professional Background of Authors in Children’s Dental Storybooks (n = 55)

Conclusions

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) does not offer a comprehensive list of recommended books for parents and families. By evaluating the commercially available pediatric dental literature, a resource was curated that thematically categorizes books for parents to select based on their child’s specific needs. Most books were within the early childhood (1-4 years old) range, while the AAPD recommended age for a dental home is within 12 months of age. Therefore, these books may be more applicable for a child who has a delayed first dental visit or simply prior to any dental visit, not necessarily the child’s first. As this study shows, many dental-related storybooks are available for parents and families, but not all should be recommended as the child’s first exposure to dentistry. Some may unintentionally contribute to dental fear rather than ameliorate it. Further research will select for a more curated list of dental storybooks, which may then be used to assess effectiveness in improving clinical outcomes and reducing patient dental anxiety.

References

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