



# ONCE UPON A FEELING

## Using Picture Books to Foster Well-Being and Compassion

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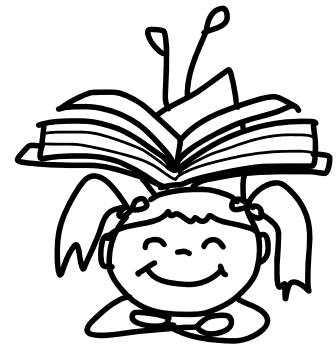
AN INITIATIVE OF HT PAREKH FOUNDATION



*Once Upon a Feeling: Using Picture Books to Foster Well-Being and Compassion*  
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# INTRODUCTION

“It’s no secret that reading aloud to children ... is one of the most important things any teacher, parent, or grown-up can do to help children become better readers, thinkers, and frankly, better human beings.” **Rebecca Bellingham**, author of ***The Artful Read-Aloud***.

Dr Molly Ness, reading researcher and teacher-educator, firmly believes that interactive read-alouds are not an add-on but a necessary component of a student’s day across all grades.<sup>1</sup> While the power of the Interactive Read-Aloud to improve literacy outcomes and thinking skills is undisputed, research shows that it can also promote social-emotional well-being and help children become socially responsible citizens.

The act of reading aloud is connection-building — the person reading aloud connects with their audience, and together, they connect with the words on the page, with the characters in the stories they read together, and share delight, surprise, wonder and, at times, despair, as the plot unfolds. Together, they get transported to different worlds and different times. The reader uses their voice to make the book come alive for the listener. They strategically ask questions and think aloud to spark the listener’s curiosity and encourage them to engage more deeply with the book.

We have investigated how this versatile instructional strategy can be used in homes, libraries, and classrooms for social and emotional learning or SEL.



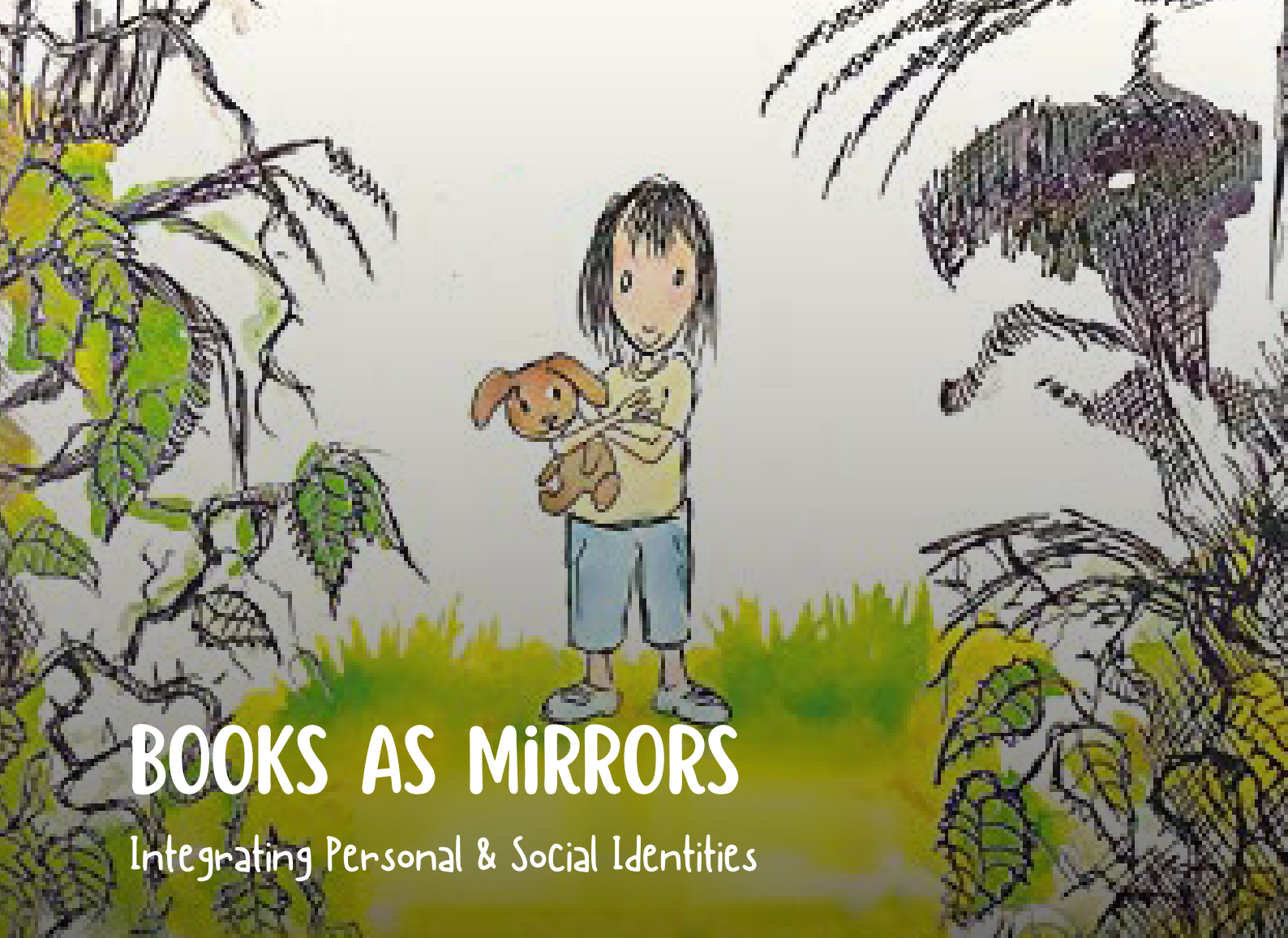
*When you figure something out for yourself, there is a certain thrill in the figuring. After a few successful experiences, you might start to think that figuring things out is something that you can actually do. Maybe you are even a figuring-out kind of person ... When you are told what to do, particularly without asking, it feels different. Being told explicitly what to do and how to do it—over and over again—provides the foundation for a different set of feelings and a different story about what you can and can't do, and who you are. The interpretation might be that you are the kind of person who cannot figure things out for yourself.<sup>15</sup>*

**Peter Johnston,**  
from his book “Choice Words”

Read-alouds can help educators and caregivers to build on all five dimensions of SEL of the CASEL framework. Given below are some of the capacities identified by the framework for each of these dimensions that can be built on through the interactive read-aloud:

- **Self-awareness**
- **Social awareness**
- **Relationship skills**
- **Self-management**
- **Responsible decision-making**

Let's explore how we could use picture books and the read-aloud to do this. While we have focused on picture books, many chapter books for older students can also be used as texts for read-aloud.



# BOOKS AS MIRRORS

## Integrating Personal & Social Identities

Dr Rudine Sims-Bishop, in her renowned essay, “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” brought home the importance of children having access to a variety of books — books in which they can “see” themselves, books that offer different perspectives, and also books which provide children with the opportunity to step into other worlds.

For far too many years, the only children’s books deemed worthwhile were by white authors and about people whose lives were so far removed from ours. There were virtually no non-white, neurodivergent, disabled, or LGBTQ+ characters in them, and if they were, they were not always represented favourably. Fortunately, the literary landscape is changing today, and many books are written by and about diverse people. These books usually celebrate diversity without being patronising or insincere and exemplify mirrors, windows and sliding doors.

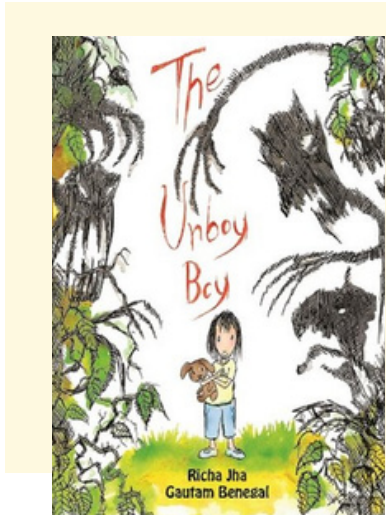
When we read aloud to children about people who are like them, we help affirm their identity and reduce any stigma or shame that society may have caused them to feel about their skin colour or appearance, disability, caste, or gender. Equally important is to provide access to children to books in the languages they speak and not hold one language in greater reverence than another.

Some great books that can be used as mirrors:

## WHAT IS A GIRL? WHAT IS A BOY?

KAMALA BHASIN

talks about gender, society,  
and patriarchy.



## THE UNBOY BOY

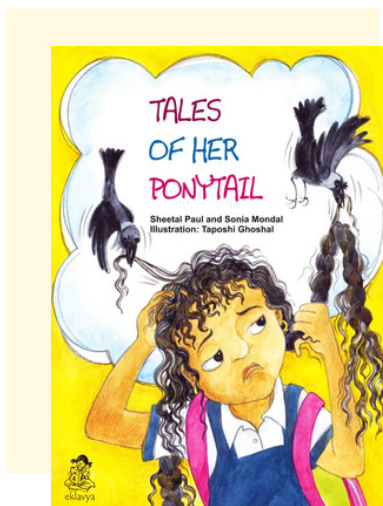
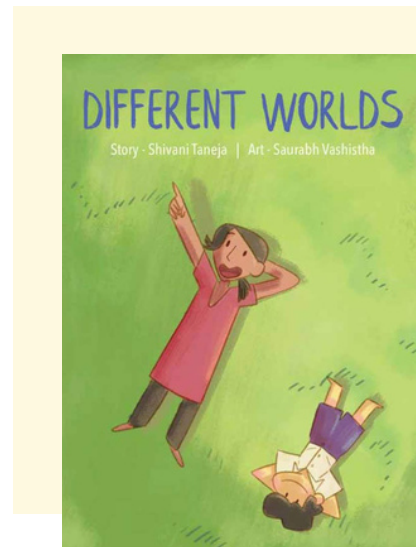
RICHA JHA

is the story of Gagan, a sweet,  
gentle boy who loves books  
and animals. But his family  
think he isn't "boy" enough.

## DIFFERENT WORLDS

SHIVANI TANEJA

is the story of two second-graders —  
one who is twelve years old and one  
who is seven years old — who meet  
and become friends and learn about  
each other's lives and identities.



## TALES OF HER PONYTAIL

SHEETAL PAUL &  
SONIA MONDAL

is a story about Guniya and  
her struggles with her long  
curly hair.



# DISSOLVING PREJUDICES AND BIASES

Providing children with access to diverse literature is invaluable, offering windows into worlds that differ from their own and challenging their perspectives. The world encompasses numerous cultures with distinct traditions, languages, customs, and religions. Encouraging curiosity rather than judgment towards these differences is essential. Books serve as potent tools to facilitate understanding, enabling readers to explore the lives of people different from them and discover common ground amid diversity.

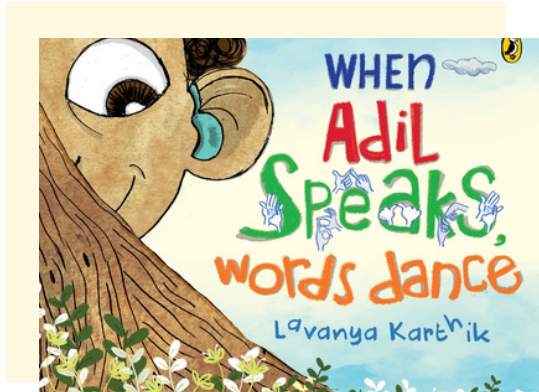
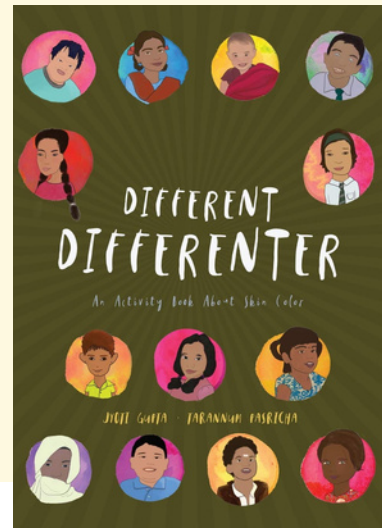
These literary windows can also function as doors, allowing readers to step into imaginative worlds created by authors. Sims Bishop (1990) notes that readers need only walk through imagination to become part of these worlds. Such experiences, applicable to all age groups, foster empathy by temporarily placing individuals in someone else's shoes. Through this immersive process, readers gain insights into the motivations, thoughts, and actions of others, fostering a nuanced understanding.

Books featuring diverse characters and cultures act as powerful tools for dismantling prejudices and biases rooted in ignorance or a reluctance to consider alternative perspectives. Engaging children in discussions about these literary explorations prompts reflection on personal biases and encourages the same introspection in young minds. In *I Never Thought of it That Way*, Monica Guzmán emphasizes that understanding others requires investing time and effort to unveil more similarities than differences, reinforcing the transformative impact of exploring diverse literature.

## DIFFERENT, DIFFERENTER

BY JYOTI GUPTA

takes an activity-based approach to helping kids learn and have conversations about skin colour, caste and discrimination.



## WHEN ADIL SPEAKS, WORDS DANCE

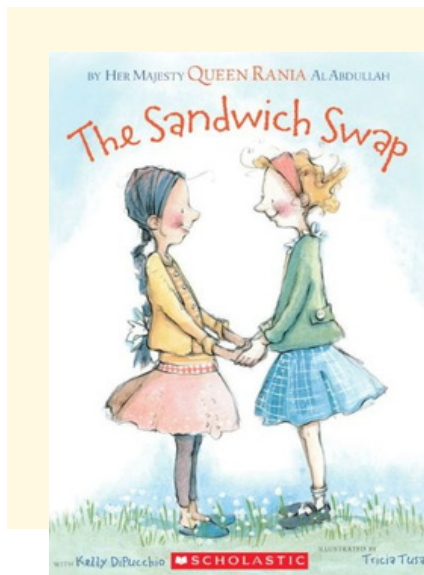
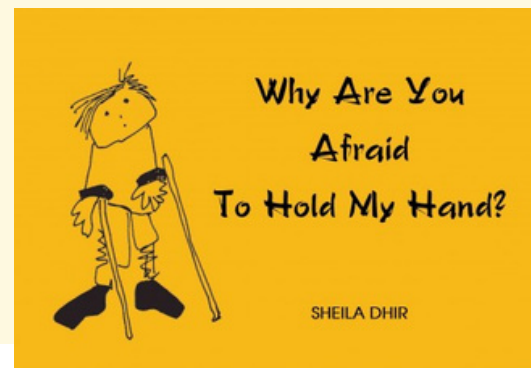
BY LAVANYA KARTHIK

is a book about friendship and inclusivity.

## WHY ARE YOU AFRAID TO HOLD MY HAND?

BY SHEILA DHIR

has a central character, who has cerebral palsy, who responds in verse to address the reactions, the misconceptions, and the questions people around him have about his condition.



## THE SANDWICH SWAP

BY HER MAJESTY QUEEN RANIA AL ABDULLAH

is another lovely story about two friends who learn about each other's cultures when they taste each other's sandwiches.

# FUELLING CURIOSITY



We thus get children to step outside the bubble they live in and learn about this planet we live on — its history, geography, the varied flora and fauna that populate it (and the threats to its existence). Some of these places and events may be makebelieve, but they still teach us, children and adults alike, valuable lessons about human nature and expose us to thinking beyond what our minds can imagine and fuel our curiosity.

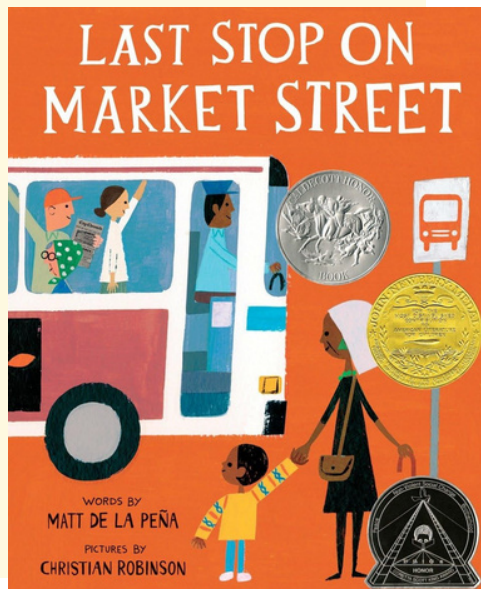
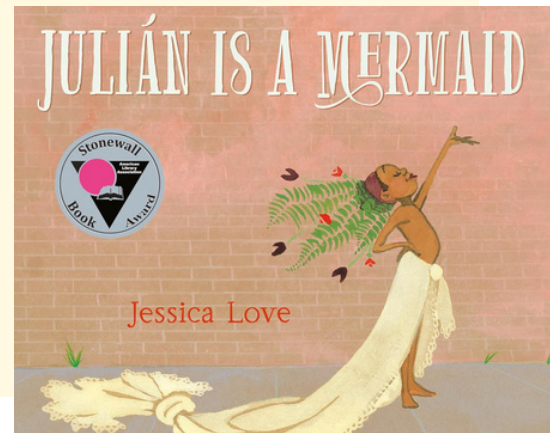
The value of nurturing curiosity is beautifully described in Dr Atul Gawande's commencement address to the graduating class of UCLA Medical School students in 2018, "Among the most important capacities that you take with you today is your curiosity. You must guard it, for curiosity is the beginning of empathy. When others say that someone is evil or crazy, or even a hero or an angel, they are usually trying to shut off curiosity. Don't let them. We are all capable of heroic and of evil things. No one and nothing that you encounter in your life and career will be simply heroic or evil. Virtue is a capacity. It can always be lost or gained. That potential is why all of our lives are of equal worth."

Books that do this particularly well are:

## JULIÁN IS A MERMAID

BY JESSICA LOVE

is a story about Julián who, after seeing some women dressed up in elaborate clothing, decides to go home and make his mermaid costume. The book helps us raise important questions about individuality and the assumptions we make because of our own biases.



## LAST STOP ON MARKET STREET

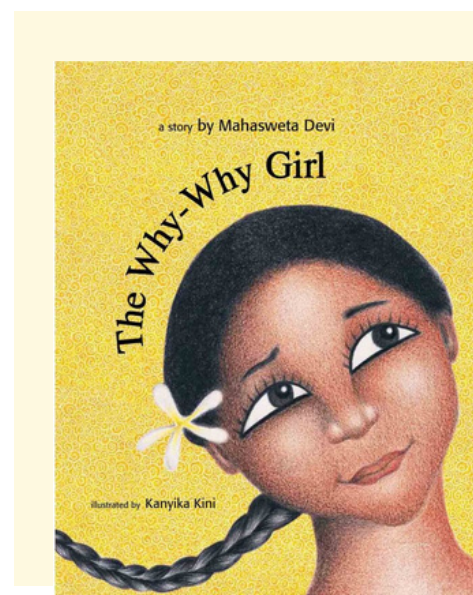
BY MATT DE LA PEÑA

is about a young boy who is disgruntled at having to accompany his grandmother to the soup kitchen to volunteer there. On the ride there, his grandmother's wise answers help him appreciate what he has and how much he can give to the world.

## THE WHY-WHY GIRL

BY MAHASWETA DEVI

tells us about Moyna, a young Indian tribal girl full of questions. The book teaches us about the beauty of the world around us and leads us to question social inequalities.



A vibrant illustration of a young girl with dark skin and curly hair, wearing a bright yellow raincoat and yellow boots. She is joyfully jumping in a puddle, holding a large green umbrella with a unicorn face and a yellow horn. The scene is surrounded by splashing water and a large, stylized blue handprint in the background.

# FOSTERING POSITIVITY

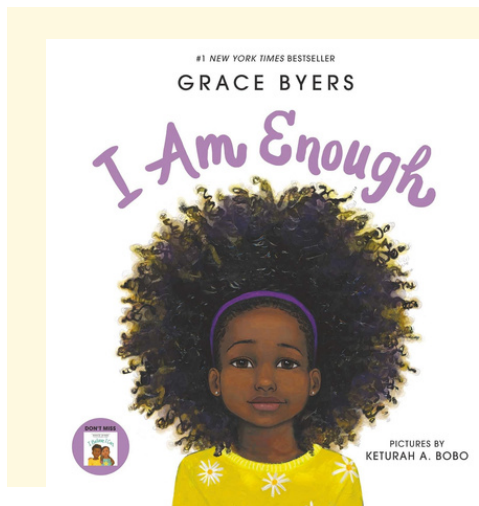
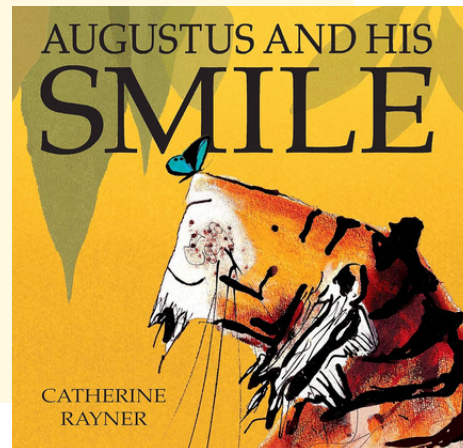
In a study carried out by Ledger and Merga in 2018<sup>2</sup>, more than three-quarters of the children who were read to, reported feeling 'happy', 'relaxed', and 'good inside.' This feeling of positivity generated by read-alouds is vital as the links between mental well-being and a mindset for learning has been well-established. This is especially important in a post-pandemic world which has caused a huge increase in mental health issues. In a study conducted by UNICEF India<sup>3</sup>, they reported that *"The COVID-19 pandemic brought a complex array of challenges which had mental health repercussions for everyone, including children and adolescents. Grief, fear, uncertainty, social isolation, increased screen time, and parental fatigue have negatively affected the mental health of children."*

There are a number of beautiful stories that stoke positive feelings and take children to happy places.

## AUGUSTUS AND HIS SMILE

BY CATHERINE RAYNER

is about a tiger who has lost his smile and sets off to look for it. He then realises that when he does things that make him happy, his smile returns.



## I AM ENOUGH

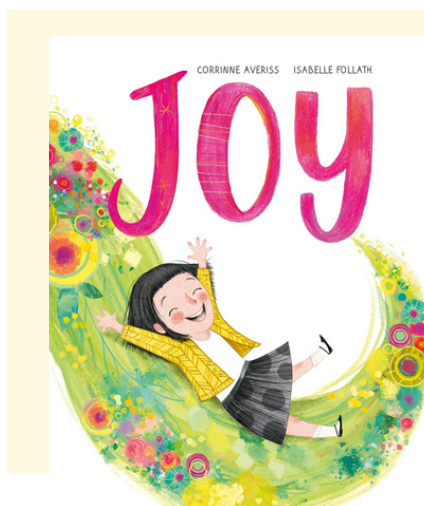
BY GRACE BYERS

is a beautiful picture book that encourages feelings of self-worth and pride in one's uniqueness.

## HAPPY RIGHT NOW

BY JULIE BERRY

is a book that affirms that sometimes things go wrong but we can always find joy in small things.



## JOY

BY CORINNE AVERISS

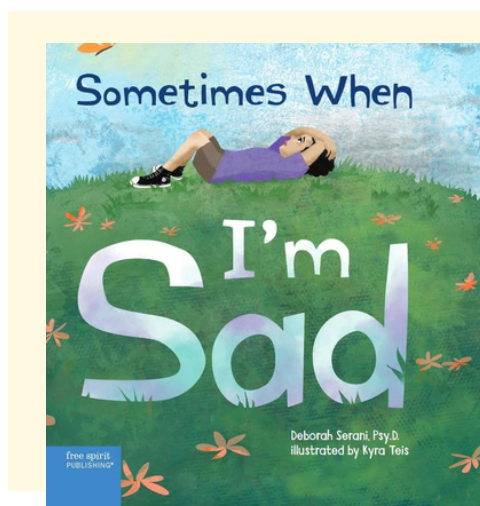
is about a little girl who wants to bring joy to her grandmother but discovers that she is an infinite source of joy.

# DEALING WITH DIFFICULT EMOTIONS



While positivity is one side of a coin, we cannot ignore negative emotions and find ways to deal with those as well. Clinical psychologist Dr. Jazmine McCoy writes, “Children learn to regulate their bodies and their feelings through us. We have to help them – it’s called co-regulate – before they can learn how to regulate on their own. A lot of this process needs to be walked through.”

Reading books to children about emotions like sadness, anger, jealousy and other such negative emotions is important to help them name these feelings and learn to regulate them.



## SOMETIMES WHEN I'M SAD

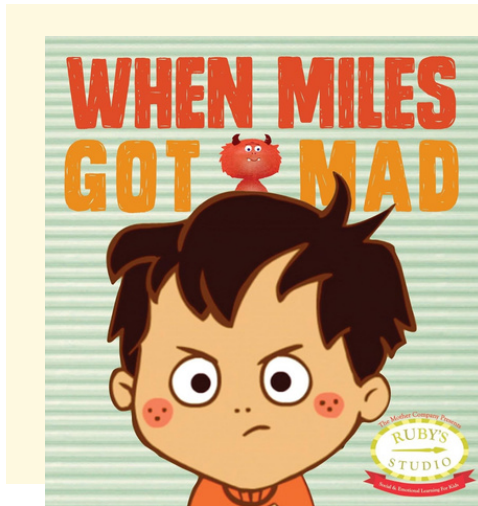
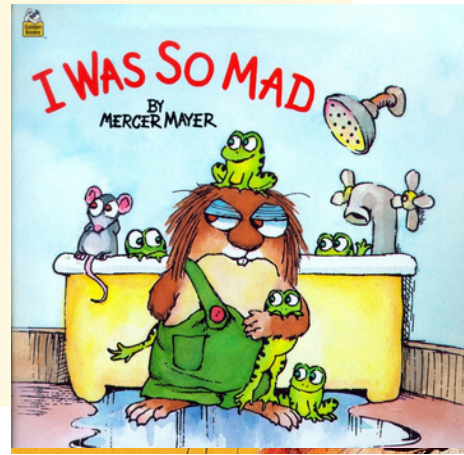
BY DR DEBORAH SERANI

is a lovely book that explores sadness as an emotion and explains the difference between sadness and depression.

## I WAS SO MAD

BY MERCER MAYER

normalizes anger as an emotion that everyone goes through at times.



## WHEN MILES GOT MAD

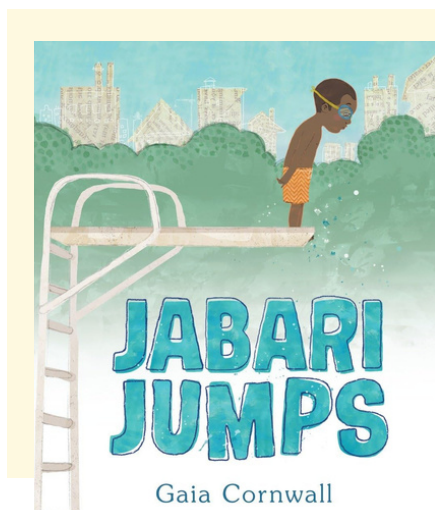
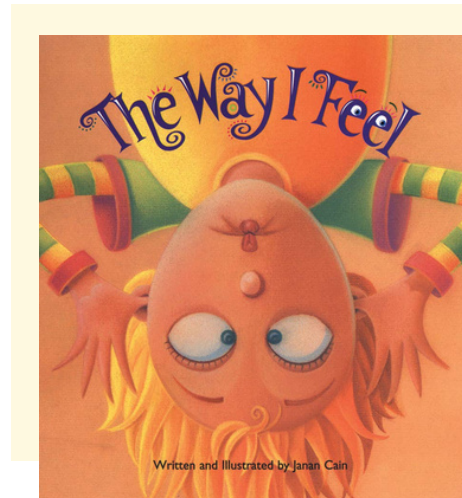
BY SAM KUTZMAN-COUNTER

helps children find healthy ways to deal with anger.

## THE WAY I FEEL

BY JANAN CAIN

is a great book to help children learn the vocabulary to express their feelings and deal with them.

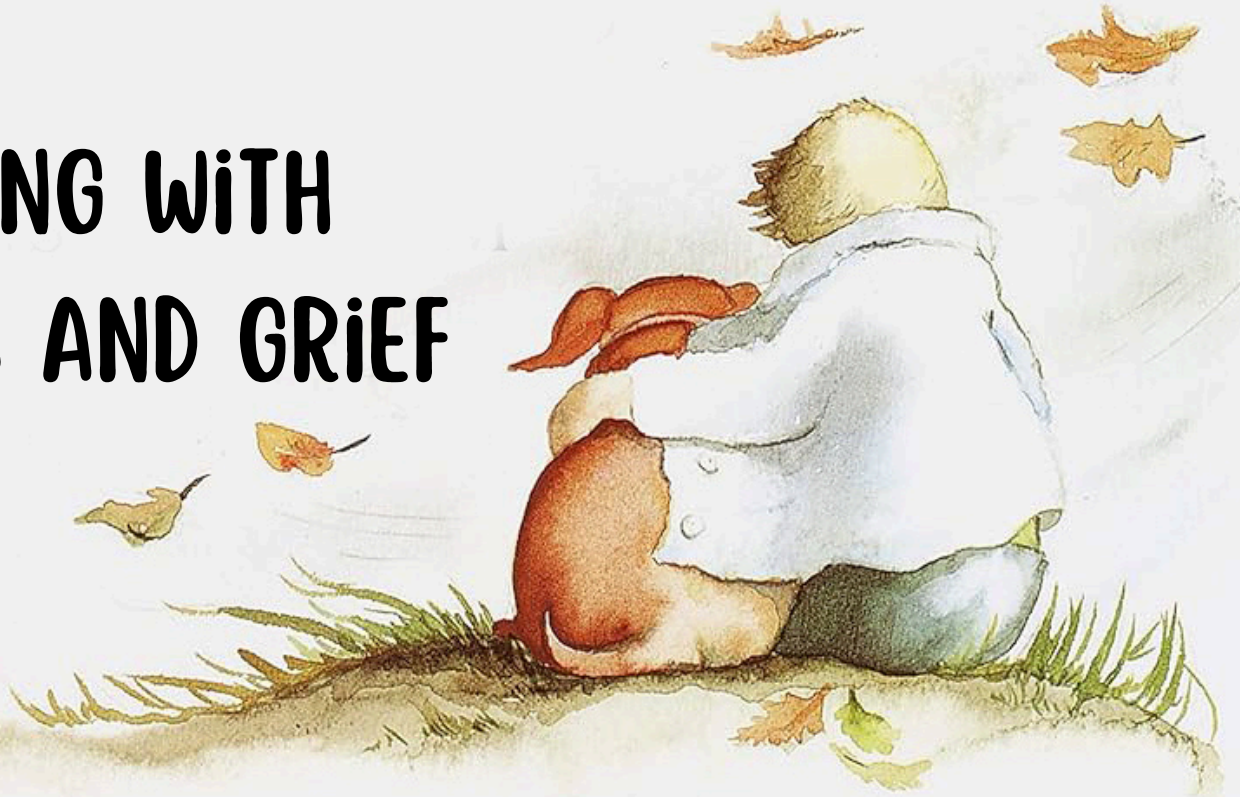


## JABARI JUMPS

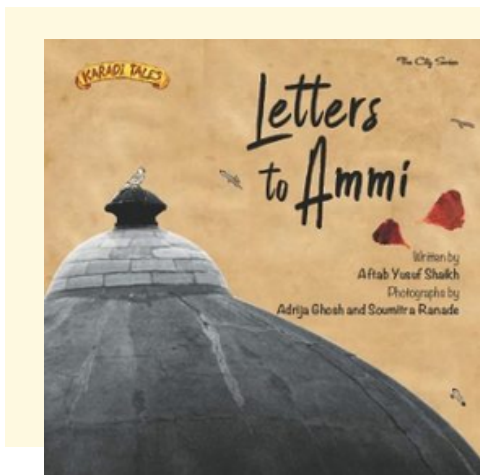
BY GAIA CORNWALL

is a beautifully written story about Jabari's fear of jumping off the diving board and how his father helps him overcome this.

# COPING WITH LOSS AND GRIEF



Coping with loss, whether it is of a beloved pet or another human, is something we all have to go through. We often try to shield children from the emotions that arise from such events. A much better approach, however, is to cultivate in them the emotional strength to deal with it and take it in their stride. Many beautifully written children's books make it easy to bring up such conversations with children and help them understand that death is a part of life.



## LETTERS TO AMMI

BY AFTAB YUSUF SHAIKH

The protagonist of this book shares her explorations of Old Delhi in a series of letters to her beloved Ammi who is no longer with her.

## I'LL ALWAYS LOVE YOU

BY HANS WILHELM

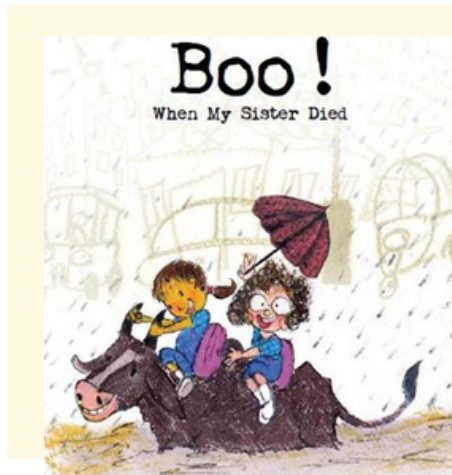
is a book about a boy dealing with his dog's death.



## THE HEART AND THE BOTTLE

BY OLIVER JEFFERS

is a story of a young girl who is so devastated after the death of a loved one that she puts her heart in a bottle. She loses all curiosity until she meets another child who is as filled with wonder as she once was. She then returns her heart to its rightful place and rekindles her curiosity and love of the world.



## BOO! WHEN MY SISTER DIED

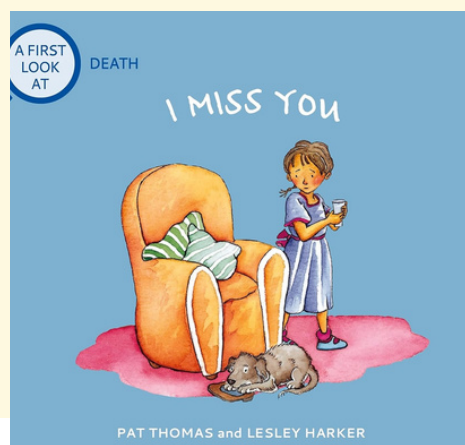
BY RICHA JHA

is a story that describes how Noorie's world goes silent when her sister Zoya dies and her irritation with Zoya's friend, Dhaara, who just won't leave her alone.

## PAATI'S RASAM

BY JANA K I &  
DHWANI SABESH,

is a beautifully written and illustrated book about a child struggling to come to terms with the loss of her grandmother.



## I MISS YOU

BY PSYCHOTHERAPIST  
PAT THOMAS

is the first in a series of books that helps young children understand the feelings that arise from loss and death.



# DEVELOPING RESILIENCE AND OPTIMISM

Apart from the pandemic, today's media is rife with stories about the ravages of climate change, conflict and political upheaval. Urban children, in particular, are accessing social media at progressively younger ages and rampant "doomscrolling" has exacerbated uncertainty and anxiety about the future. It is, therefore, incumbent upon the adults around them to help children develop grit, resilience and feelings of hope.

In an article published in *Psychology Today*, Dr Linda C. Mayes shares compelling data about the correlation between reading and good mental health.<sup>4</sup> She affirms what we already know, "Reading increases a child's capacity for critical thinking, develops empathy skills, gives them the support they need during challenging times, and builds much-needed resilience promoting skills which can help protect against various mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety."

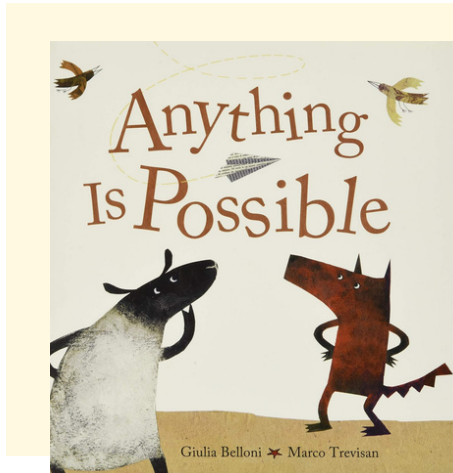
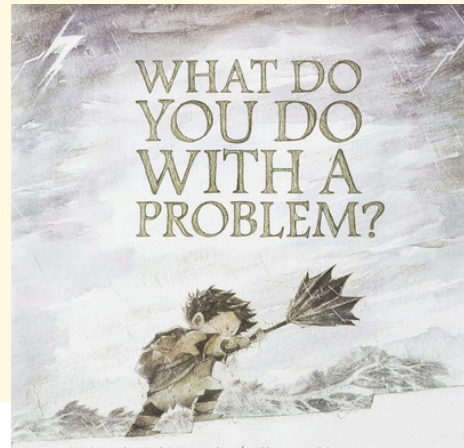
Some titles that can be used to develop resilience and optimism are:

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/happy-healthy-child/202305/the-mental-health-benefits-of-literacy>

## WHAT DO YOU DO WITH A PROBLEM?

BY KOBI YAMADA

is the story of a child who is faced with a problem but doesn't know how to deal with it until he finally faces it and discovers it was something quite different to what it first appeared to be.



## ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE

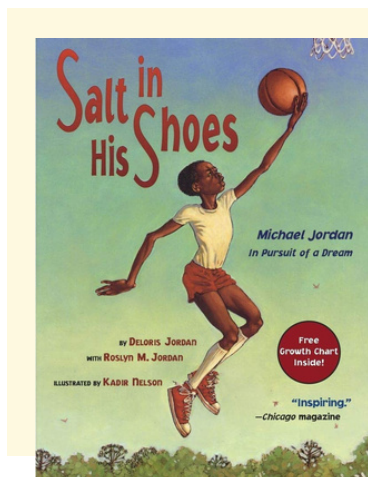
BY GIULIA BELLONI

is about a sheep who dreams of inventing a flying machine but her friend, the wolf, feels it is not possible. However, when she finally does make one, the wolf admits that anything is possible.

## ISH

BY PETER REYNOLDS

shows how things don't have to be perfect to be beautiful.



## SALT IN HIS SHOES: MICHAEL JORDAN IN PURSUIT OF A DREAM

BY DELORIS JORDAN WITH ROSLYN M. JORDAN

is the story of Michael Jordan as a child who was disheartened by his height compared to his siblings. With his mother's encouragement (and clever trick to make him believe in himself), he perseveres and eventually becomes the great player that he is.

# ENCOURAGING A GROWTH MINDSET



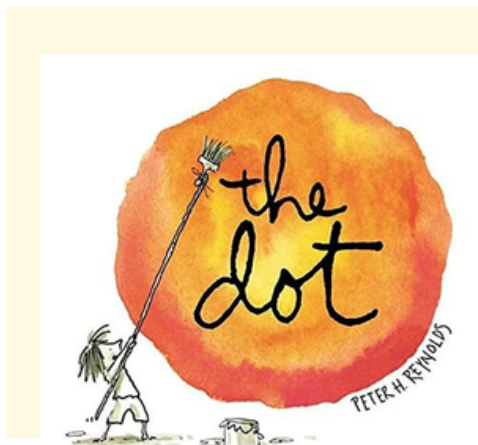
Hand in hand with developing resilience, it is important for children to develop a mindset that does not get fazed easily by failure. Treating mistakes as something we can learn from instead of being embarrassed or discouraged by them is essential. When children understand that skills and intelligence are not inborn but something one can develop, they develop greater confidence and are open to learning. Helping children understand this from an early age using stories is a great way to encourage this mindset.



## THE MOST MAGNIFICENT THING

BY ASHLEY SPIRES

A girl decides she wants to make the most magnificent thing, but it is harder than she realizes. Will she give up?



## THE DOT

BY PETER REYNOLDS

Vashti is frustrated because she believes she can't draw. Her art teacher encourages her by telling her to just make a mark on the paper and "see where it takes you."

## THE GIRL WHO NEVER MADE MISTAKES

BY MARK PETT AND GARY RUBINSTEIN

Meet Beatrice Bottomwell, a nine-year-old girl who has never (not once!) made a mistake. Life for Beatrice is sailing along pretty smoothly until she does the unthinkable: She makes her first mistake—and in a very public way!

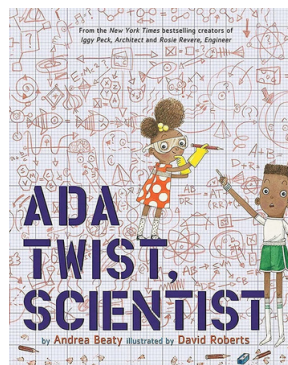
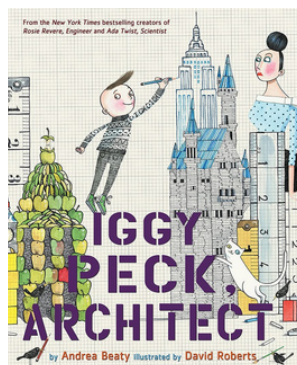
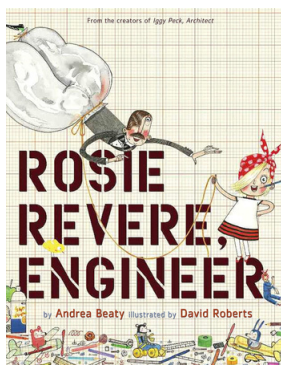


# DISCOVERING INTERESTS & A SENSE OF PURPOSE



As children grow up and listen to stories, they may discover new interests and hobbies and take inspiration from the characters to explore these. We can use picture books to help children learn about a variety of things that they might never otherwise try and do. From baking to conducting experiments to making things with their hands, there are a number of beautiful books that can help children find out about different hobbies and things that might interest them.

Apart from the series by Andrea Beaty (*Rosie Revere, Engineer*; *Iggly Peck, Architect*; *Ada Twist, Scientist*), there are books like *Cece Loves Science* by Kimberly Derting and Shelley R. Johannes in which we follow Cece and her quest for answers to her many questions.



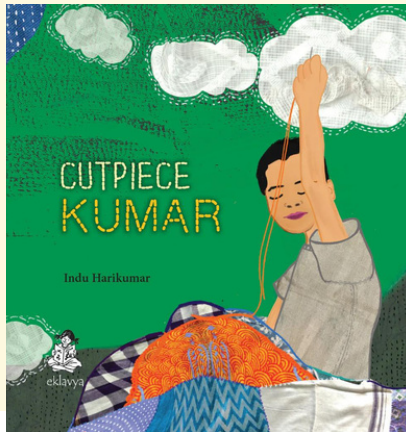
## SABRI'S COLOURS

BY RINCHIN

is a poignant story about a girl who loves to draw but had nothing to colour her pictures with.

## Sabri's Colours

story Rinchin pictures Shailja Jain

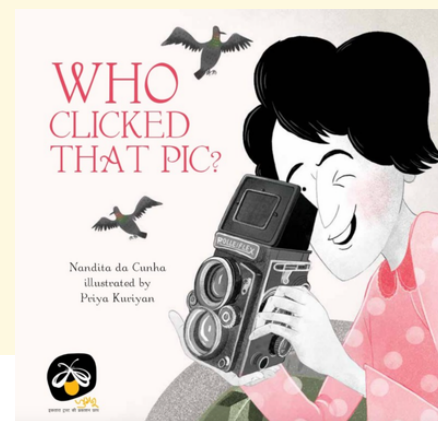
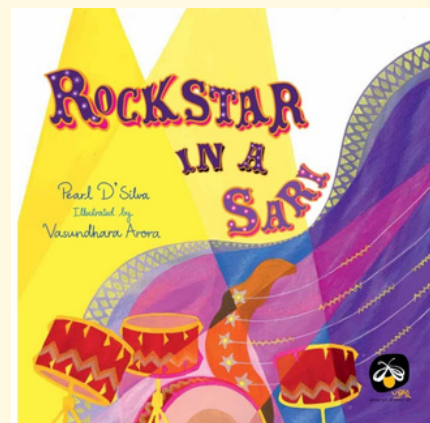


## CUTPIECE KUMAR

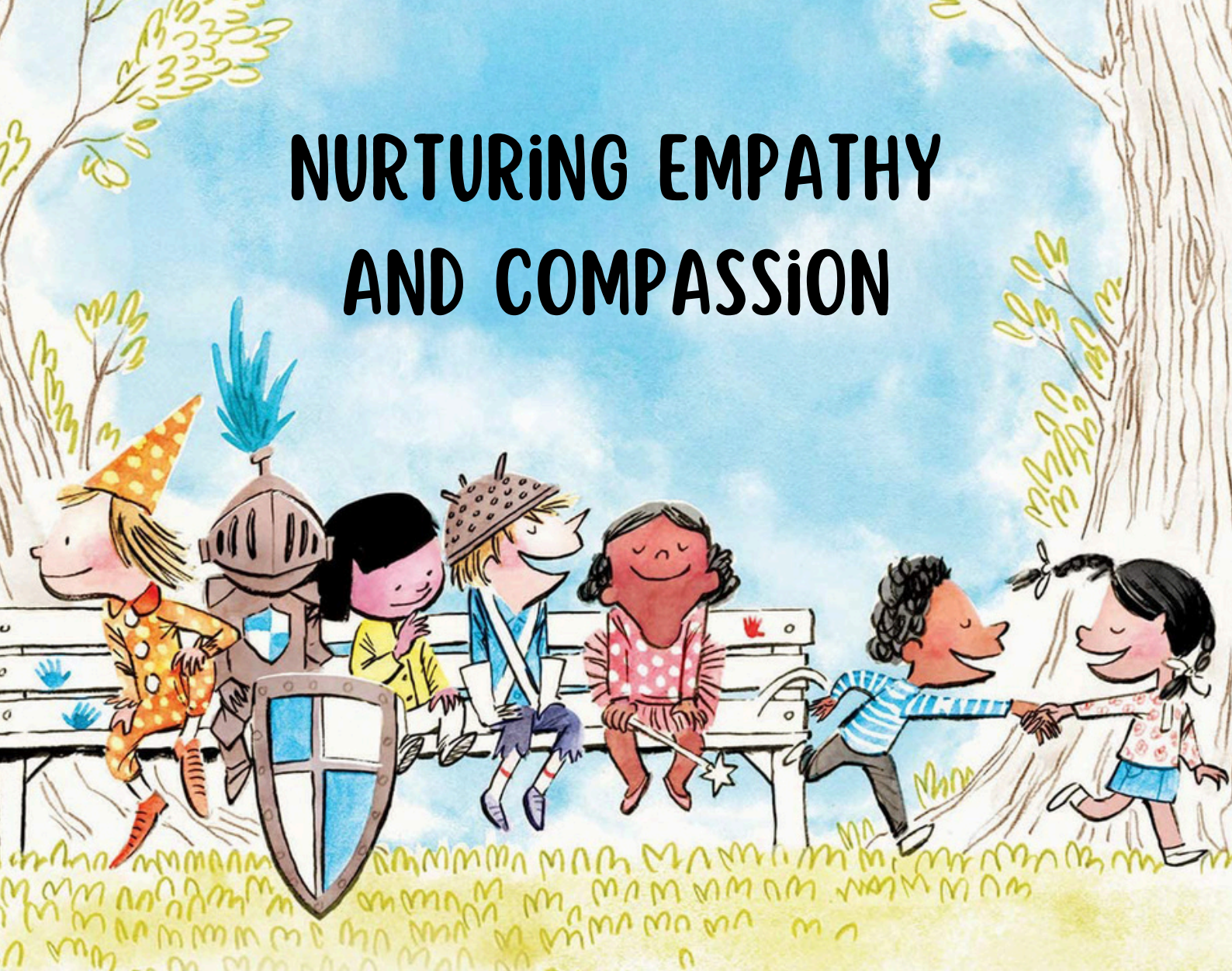
BY INDU HARIKUMAR

is a cute story about a young boy who loves to stitch and makes interesting things out of scrap materials.

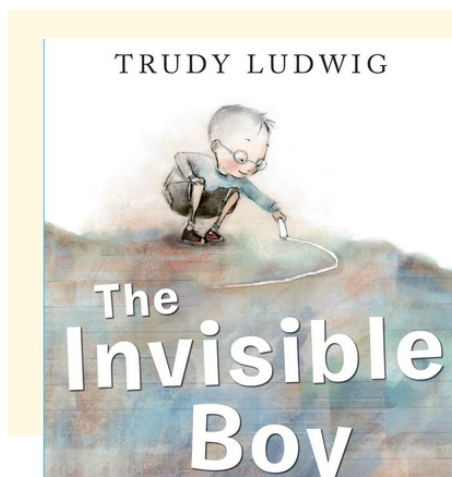
There are also some great books about real people who followed their passion and made careers out of it, like the story of Usha Utthup written by **Pearl D'Silva**, titled **Rockstar in a Sari**, or the story of the first Indian woman to become a photojournalist, Homai Vyravalla by **Nandita da Cunha**, called **Who Clicked That Pic?** Both are illustrated beautifully too.



# NURTURING EMPATHY AND COMPASSION



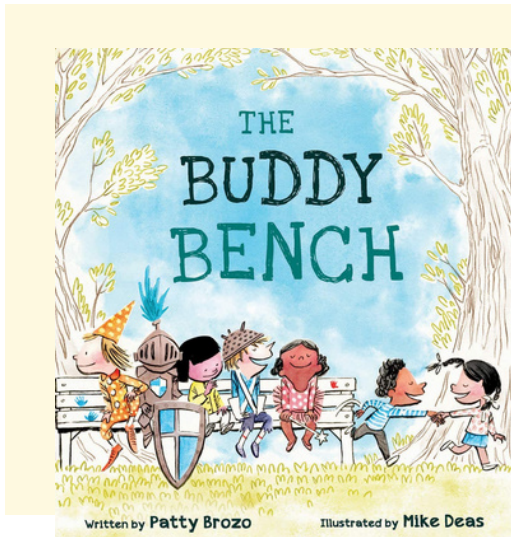
Reading aloud from books that have characters who struggle with loneliness or ostracism arouses our empathy for such people and helps us reach out to them. We also see why some people resort to bullying or act out in other ways when all they really want is to be loved and accepted. We learn to stand in someone else's shoes and see things from their perspective. We begin to realise that instead of judging someone, we should seek to understand them.



## **THE INVISIBLE BOY**

BY TRUDY LUDWIG

is a story about a boy who struggles to stand out. When he befriends a new student, he starts to grow in confidence.

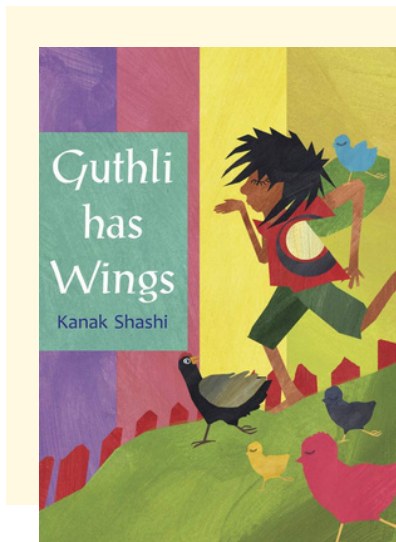
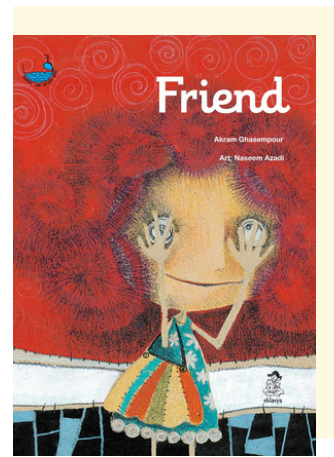


## **THE BUDDY BENCH** BY PATTY BROZO

is about a group of kind children who realize that some kids feel lonely in the playground and convince their teacher to let them build a buddy bench.

## **FRIEND** BY AKRAM GHASEMPOUR

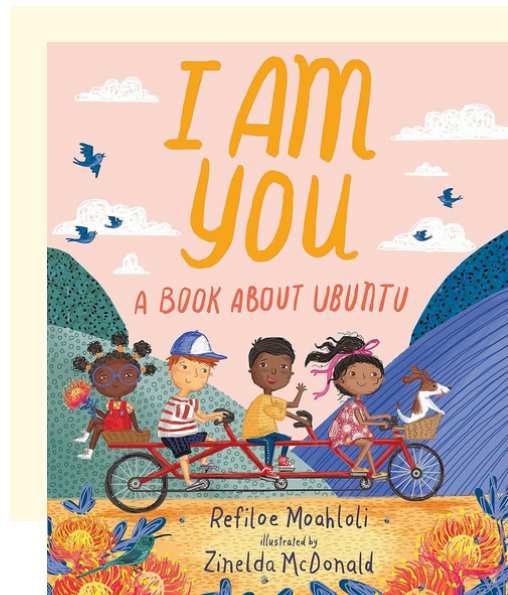
is a touching story about a friendship that blossoms between two children, one of whom turns out to be sightless.



## **GUTHLI CAN FLY** BY KANAK SHASHI

is a beautifully written and illustrated book that teaches us about the struggles of Guthli, whom the world sees as a boy but who knows deep down that she is a girl.

Many books deal with the theme of interconnectedness and highlight how, despite outward differences, we have so much in common with each other. For example, **Refiloe Moahloli**'s beautifully written and illustrated book, ***I Am You: A Book About Ubuntu*** shows us how we are all interconnected.



Besides this, the very experience of being read aloud from a book — listening to a story in unison, experiencing emotions together, and hearing each other's thoughts and ideas in the discussions that accompany the read-aloud — is a great way to build community in the group. Moreover, it levels the playing field for struggling readers as they can partake in the experience on the same level as fluent readers. Students who are weak at reading often do not have as much of a problem understanding complex spoken vocabulary (unless there is a language barrier) and can be seen coming into their own during such discussions. This can greatly alter their own and others' perceptions of their ability positively.

# EXPRESSING GRATITUDE



In a world where so much importance is placed on material possessions, it is easy for us to feel inferior when we compare ourselves to others who may be better off than us. All around us, we see messages that encourage us to buy more, possess more. We just have to step into the street of any small town or city and we see large hoardings everywhere that show people in flashy cars or in expensive apartments, wearing fancy clothes and glittering jewels. Movies and television shows too depict the same. Then there's the now ubiquitous social media which further reinforces this feeling that we do not have enough or feel a sense of envy and disappointment in our condition. This leads to unhappiness and a feeling of inferiority.

On the other hand, studies show that gratitude is closely related to a feeling of wellbeing — social, emotional and psychological. There have been numerous studies by researchers such as Lillian Jans-Beken et al, Woods et al, Portocarrero et al) in recent years have shown that gratitude leads to feelings of positivity and a desire to help and support others.

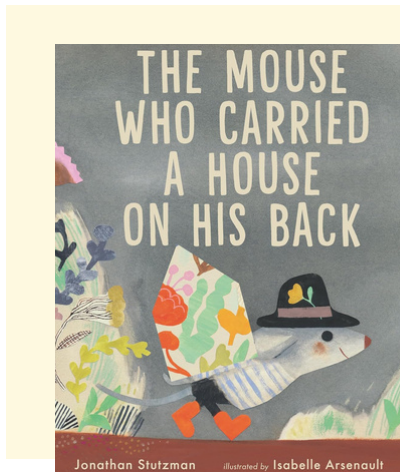
Instilling an “attitude of gratitude” in children from the time they are young might help in countering the pressure to accumulate possessions and seek happiness from external sources. They might learn to look inward and feel at peace with what they have are who they are.

Reading to children stories such as *Boxes for Katje* by Candace Fleming, *Here We Are: Notes for Living on Planet Earth* by Oliver Jeffers, *The House Full of Stuff* by Emily Rand, *The Thank You Book* by Mo Willems, *The Berenstain Bears Count Their Blessings* by Stan and Jan Berenstain, *Gratitude Soup* by Olivia Rosewood and many others like these are great to spark discussions about the importance of being grateful.

## HOME FOR GRACE

BY KATHRYN WHITE

is the story of a girl called Jess who befriends a homeless woman called Grace and her cat, Luna.



## THE MOUSE WHO CARRIED A HOUSE ON HIS BACK

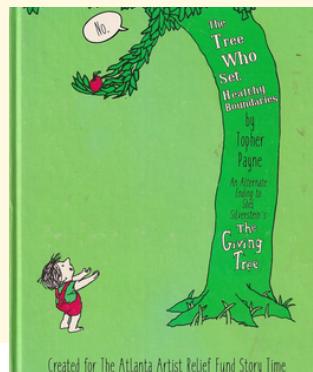
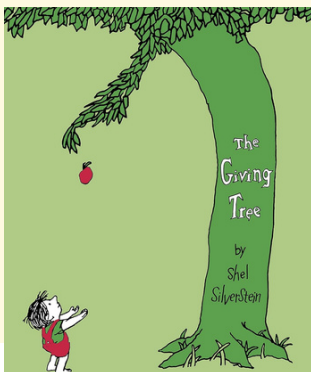
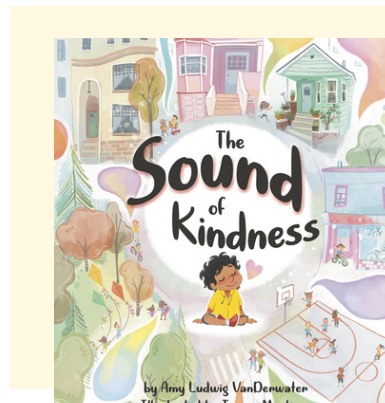
BY JONATHAN STUTZMAN

is about a mouse who despite the smallness of his home is generous enough to want to share it with all creatures great and small.

## THE SOUND OF KINDNESS

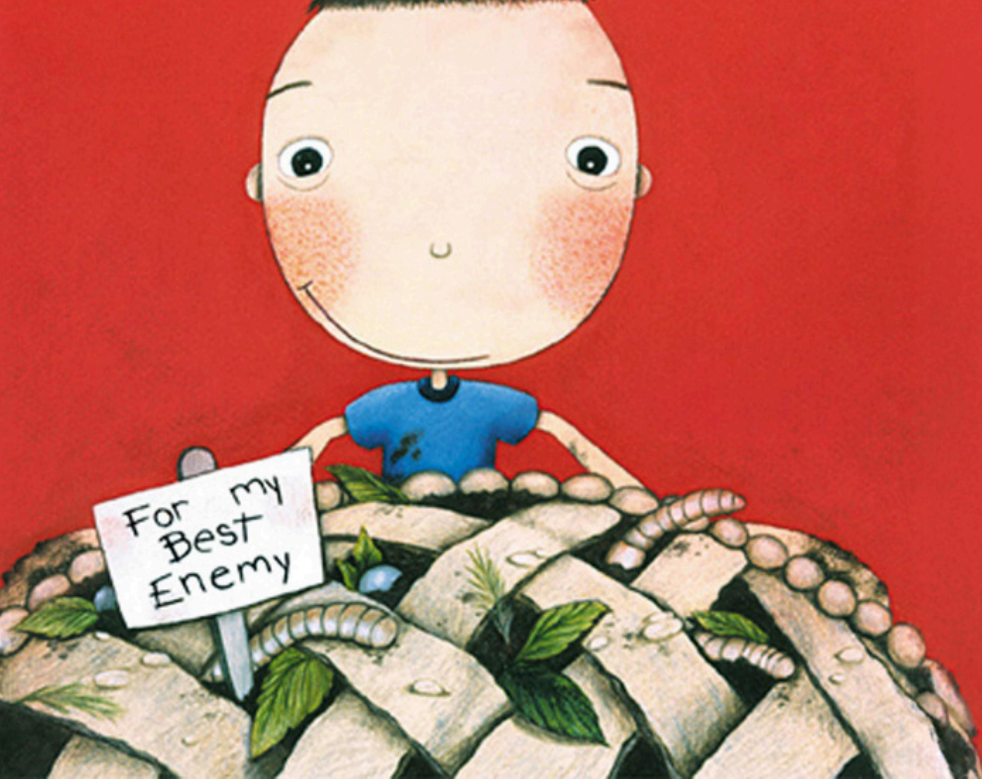
BY AMY LUDWIG VANDERWATER

is a beautifully illustrated tale about a child and an adult who are out on a "kindness walk."



**While *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein** is a highly popular book to teach children about selflessness, ***The Tree Who Set Healthy Boundaries* by Topher Payne** is a version of the book that disabuses us of the notion that it is altruistic to sacrifice ourselves to fuel someone's greed.

The discussions that follow read-aloud must allow such healthy debate.



# LEARNING PROBLEM- SOLVING & CONFLICT RESOLUTION

All of us encounter problems of various kinds almost daily during the course of our lives — some small and insignificant and others that might be much bigger and more complex. Unlike the problems they solve in class as part of their maths lessons, there is no set formula for solving the kind of problems we face in life. It is important, therefore, to equip children with the thinking skills they need to tackle these, such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, decision-making and emotional intelligence.

Too often, we adults are tempted to swoop in and handle the situation without giving the child any opportunity to think things through. The adult's intention is to relieve the child of any stress or discomfort but, unfortunately, the result is learned helplessness. Of course, there are certain situations in which adults need to protect children such as if the child is in danger or in a situation that can have grave consequences. However, for most everyday problems or conflicts that children face such as making choices, completing daily life tasks and chores, puzzles, homework, and even minor conflicts with peers — it is preferable to provide children with the opportunity to learn how to handle these independently.

— ” —

*When you figure something out for yourself, there is a certain thrill in the figuring. After a few successful experiences, you might start to think that figuring things out is something that you can actually do. Maybe you are even a figuring-out kind of person ... When you are told what to do, particularly without asking, it feels different. Being told explicitly what to do and how to do it—over and over again—provides the foundation for a different set of feelings and a different story about what you can and can't do, and who you are. The interpretation might be that you are the kind of person who cannot figure things out for yourself.<sup>5</sup>*

from **Choice Words**  
by educator **Peter Johnston**

**Andrea Beaty's** wonderful series of books like *Rosie Revere, Engineer* and *Ada Twist, Scientist* are great books to use to encourage creative thinking. The author of *What Do You Do With an Idea?*, **Yobi Komada** has also written an equally enchanting book called *What Do You Do With a Problem?* Another wonderful book is based on the real life story of **William Kamkwamba** in his own words *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* or *The Boy Who Grew a Forest* by **Sophia Gholz** which is also based on the life of Jadav Penang, a young boy from Assam.



Similarly, children need to learn how to settle conflicts and disagreements on their own. Reading books to them about how we can prevent petty fights from escalating into battles can help them use these strategies in their own lives.

*The Day the Crayons Quit* by **Drew Daywalt** is a much-loved children's book in which each crayon tries to put forth their views on why they are the most important one until they realize that they are all equally necessary to make the world a colourful place. Likewise, *Enemy Pie* by **Derek Munson** is another famous book that promotes friendship over rivalry and prejudice. Less well-known but also powerful is *The Fragile World* by **Alexandra Mirzac** about a cupboard full of red and blue chinaware, which explores rivalry and war. Another great book is *How to Apologize* by **David Rochelle**, which is all about the power of a sincere apology.



# TAKING ACTION



“Words have the power to change the world both locally and globally and that realization is what inspires me every day.” These particular words, by Amanda Gorman, 1st Youth Poet Laureate, U.S.A., are not a tall claim. The same sentiment is expressed by the author of *The Long Walk to Water*, **Linda Sue Parks**, in her famous TEDx Talk, when she asks, “Can a children’s book save the world? No. But the young people who read them can.” Her own book has inspired hundreds of young students in the U.S. to take action and raise awareness and funds<sup>6</sup> to help children in South Sudan get access to clean water. Besides this, the children have increased their own knowledge of the kinds of issues being faced in the world, they have developed empathy and brought about change in the world. Parks says in the same TED Talk, “After food and shelter and love, one of the most valuable things we can pass on to all kids is a passion for books.”

This passion led the great leader, Mahatma Gandhi, to strive for independence during the British Raj — his desire to make a difference was sparked from his reading of the works of Leo Tolstoy. Malala Yousufzai, the brave young woman who fought for girls’ right to education, was deeply influenced by *The Diary of Anne Frank*. In turn, stories about the Mahatma and Malala inspire us.

There are countless such stories of courage, of standing up for what is right and for social justice, that must be read to children to develop grit, perseverance and a moral compass. There are several beautifully written and illustrated biographies of great people like Rosa Parks, Tagore, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Jane Goodall, Helen Keller — the list is endless — that are inspirational.

<sup>6</sup> At the time of the TED Talk, students across the US had raised \$1,00,000/- for the cause.

## OUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE: GRETA THUNBERG'S CALL TO SAVE THE PLANET

BY JEANETTE WINTER

is based on child activist, Greta Thunberg's climate strike.



## RIGHT NOW! REAL KIDS SPEAKING UP FOR CHANGE

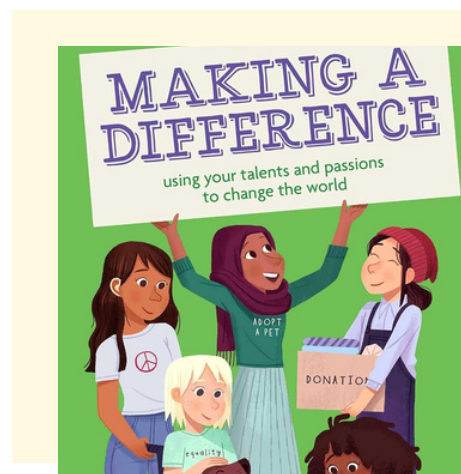
BY MIRANDA PAUL

captures the stories of  
child activists.



## MAKING A DIFFERENCE: USING YOUR TALENTS AND PASSIONS TO CHANGE THE WORLD

helps young children get  
inspired to do just that.



## SAY SOMETHING

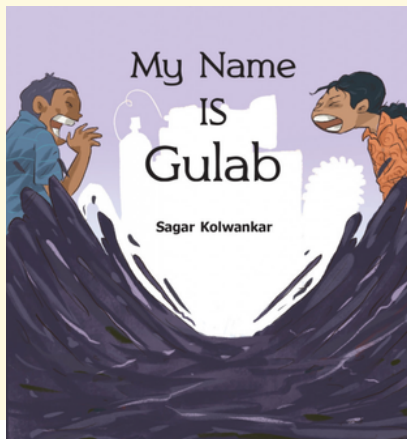
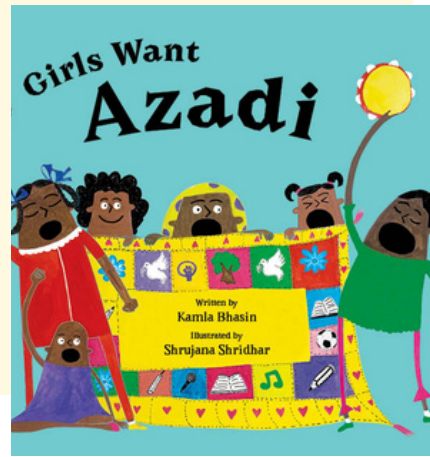
BY PETER REYNOLDS

is also a beautifully written and  
illustrated book by the author  
of *The Dot*.

## **GIRLS WANT AZADI**

BY KAMALA BHASIN

is simply written but encourages every girl to stand up for her rights



## **MY NAME IS GULAB**

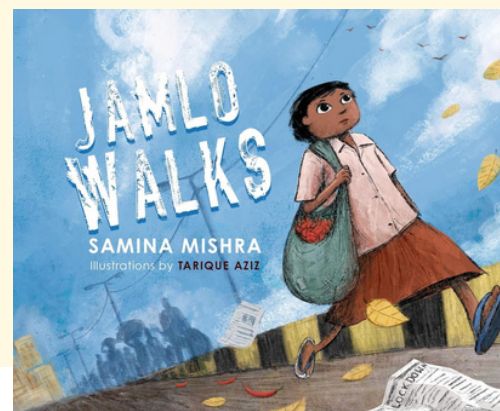
BY SAGAR KOLWANKAR

brings up the issue of discrimination on the basis of caste in a sensitive but relatable manner.

## **JAMLO WALKS**

BY SAMINA MISHRA

is a heartwrenching story about 12-year-old Jamlo who had to walk from Telangana to Chhatisgarh during the pandemic.



Children are not likely to pick up these books independently, even if they have access to them. It is our responsibility as adults to ignite children's curiosity and expose them to various thought-provoking literature through interactive read-alouds. Action does not necessarily have to be heroic or great. Not everyone needs to change the world, but we can certainly strive to improve ourselves.



# BUILDING A DIVERSE COLLECTION OF BOOKS

Walk into almost any popular bookstore or well-stocked school library in urban areas and one will find the shelves predominantly filled with books by popular children's authors and publishing houses— the majority being foreign authors (and mainly white authors). There is no denying that many of these are beautifully written and have gorgeous illustrations that attract our attention. These books must be read and savoured. However, there is a growing body of children's books written by Indian authors that also needs to be explored. These, too, are mostly in English.

Conversely, libraries and bookstores in smaller towns and villages tend to have a much leaner collection of books and these are mostly in the local language.

Publishers like Pratham and Eklavya are providing a great service by providing a platform to writers from all over India. They are also translating their books not just in Hindi but also many other Indian languages.

It is not enough to place these books in our collection and then leave it at that. We must pick up these books, read them aloud and discuss them. Reading aloud from books dealing with such issues sends a message to our children that we value diverse voices and are open to listening to them. We thus encourage them to think more deeply.

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*Reading aloud thoughtfully chosen books that centre on social justice gives children opportunities to engage in meaningful conversation about current and historical issues and support a curriculum dedicated to building inclusive school communities. It also gives children practice in the art of listening which is an essential first step to almost everything.*

**Rebecca Bellingham**

”

*... we have, too often, failed to teach them to question answers. To question authors. To question texts. To question those who demand acquiescence. To question anyone — especially leaders — who offer edicts without evidence. To question those who would lead without facts, divide rather than unite, and choose unfounded belief rather than science ... An empowered reader, an empowered person, is one who dares to raise those questions.*

from ***Forged by Reading***  
by **Kylene Beers and Robert Probst**



# THE IMPORTANCE OF PLANNING OUR INTERACTIVE READ-ALoud

While some of these conversations and discussions might happen organically and still be very effective, some advance planning is required in order to ensure that children engage deeply with the books we read to them.

Planning for the read-aloud need not be elaborate and time-consuming. Reading the book ahead of time and putting down a simple plan that makes a note of interesting vocabulary, questions that enhance comprehension skills, stopping points to help students make connections and for modelling think alouds (in which the teacher models their own wonderings and observations), and opportunities for discussions and reflection. Planning in this way also helps us to connect the story to other curricular areas and to the social-emotional skills we wish to develop in our students. At [this link](#), you will find a simple template that can be used to plan your sessions.



# CONCLUSION

Apart from building literacy skills, reading aloud to children and the discussions that follow can help children develop the social-emotional skills they need to grow into healthy, compassionate individuals.

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*“The problem in dealing with the social or moral issue in fiction for children or adults is that the author must not preach, must not make the reader’s decision for him, must not indulge in the fallacy that all nice people do good things and that all evil things are done by bad people. The author’s job is to throw sharp light on how real people act in a particular time and place.*”

*“We’ve always thought of children’s stories as fantastical, simplistic tales, of children as imaginative young humans. It’s time for us to press the clutch down, shift gear, to think of our young as intelligent beings capable of understanding complex, real stories. It’s time to tell ourselves — ‘They can. Yes. They can.’”*

from ***Choice Social Values in Children’s Literature***  
by children’s author and theorist, **Emily Neville**



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# LIBRARIANS OF INDIA

This work was developed as part of the Librarians of India initiative.

Librarians of India is an open community in service of children. Its objective is to strengthen libraries all over India, as libraries are an integral part of a child's learning journey. It does so by celebrating librarians, sharing their stories and learnings, and providing them with a platform to learn and grow together so their libraries can become vibrant spaces where children can thrive.

Librarians of India is seeded as a Bachpan Manao Collaboration by Adhyayan Quality Education Foundation and EkStep Foundation in 2024.

