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Bianca Birdsey & Claudine Storbeck
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Text © Bianca Birdsey & Claudine Storbeck
Illustrations © Elizabeth Goode



Benjamin's Girl is an autobiographical storybook series based on the events and experiences of the Birdsey family who have three deaf children and a very dear Benjamin bear!

Introduction to Literacy

In our first book 'Different is Beautiful' the cute and cuddly Benjamin introduced us to his special girl, Esther, who wears jewels on hear ears and listens with her eyes. We learned that she loves swimming, doing ballet and eating ice-cream, and that she and Benjamin love playing outside.

In this new story, 'Along came a Strawberry', we are going to find out what Benjamin and Esther do after their fun-filled days of swinging, jumping on the trampoline and zipping around on her zooty bike. This is a wonderful opportunity to link the story to your child's very own night-time routine. Personal connection is one of the keys to making reading meaningful.

In order for our children to learn to enjoy and value books and reading, we need to model our love for books from the very beginning. One idea would be to try and make the process of opening a new book an exciting event.

How do I start a new book?

In my view, opening a new book is like unwrapping a very special present and it always makes me feel excited... every single time. I can't help smiling when I open the shiny new cover and hear and feel the crinkle of the pages whilst I breathe in the 'brand new' smell of an unread book. When our children see us enjoying the book so much from the very start, they begin to see the value and beauty of books. This is where their *love of books* and reading is born.

But wait, before you even open the book... it is a great idea to sit with your child/children and study the cover of the book and look at the title of the story. One could then ask: "I wonder what this story is about? What do you think she is doing in this picture?". You could even share briefly now that it's time to read: "I am feeling excited to read this story" or "I love Benjamin, he is my favourite bear".



It's never too early to start reading to your child!

With either of these strategies, remember to involve the child by looking at them with an expectant face. It is also important to give them time to respond to your prompts, "What do you think? How do you feel?" Of course, her response will be determined by her age. She will either smile or wriggle (if she is really small), or babble, or use some individual words/signs or sentence if she is older.

The most important thing to be aware of here, is that it's not about us and our wanting to read, but about making the whole process of reading fun... whether or not it's easy to grab your child's attention. It may take a little time to build curiosity by using some imaginative coaxing on your side to stimulate interest. Reading should never feel like a chore to either your child or you. If need be, you can pretend to be excited to read (as teachers or parents it's okay to feel tired or even a little impatient), but I promise you that within a minute or two, you will actually start enjoying the process of exploring this book with your child/children.

Depending on the age of your child, there are a few options as to how you can work with this book; you can read it (whether in spoken English, Cued or Signed English or SASL), you can tell the story by referring to the odd visual or you can use the strategy of 'book sharing'. Whichever strategy you use it doesn't matter, as long as you have a smile on your face, a book in your hand, and a little one next to you. Let's turn the page and get going...

Enjoy!

Benjamin's Girl

Along came a Strawberry

For all the boys and girls out there who are different.
Know that you are loved. Good job for always being so brave,
we are very proud of you. Remember, just be yourself...
that is more than enough!



My girl and I love Friday evenings. They have the feeling of family time and fun. We usually sit together on the verandah as mom prepares dinner. Fish and chips is Esther's favourite!



As often as possible she'll also ask for a big bowl of strawberries. Mom gives them a rinse and the two of us munch on the ruby berries. It can sometimes get quite sticky!



We have strawberries so often that mom says, "Soon Esther is going to look like a strawberry!" Wouldn't that be funny!



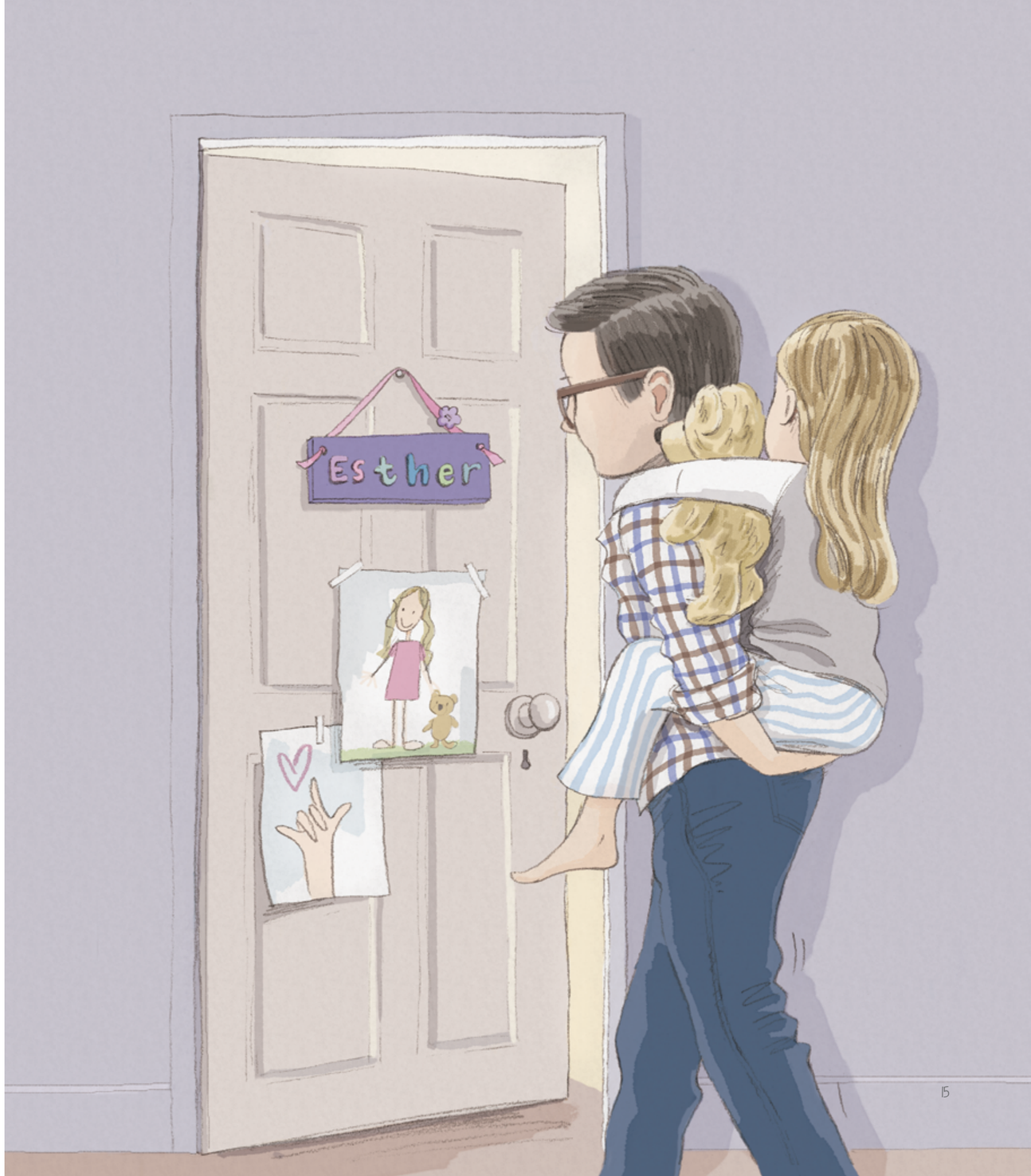
After dinner is bath time for Esther. Days of fun and learning can gather a fair amount of goo and grime. Before hopping into the bubbly tub, my girl takes out her special jewels and gently puts them in her special box. Water can damage them, so we have to be very careful. The special box keeps them dry when she sleeps.

This is a happy time when Mom and Esther have long conversations about school, and friends and... well, just about anything.



After drying off and slipping into
some fresh comfy pajamas,

Dad **piggy backs** us to our cosy room for bed time.

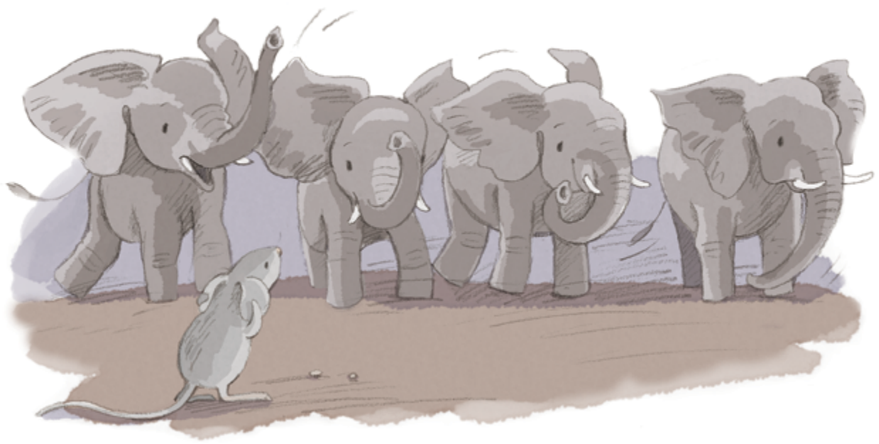


My girl and I love stories. Dad tells them the best! Whilst our family gets ready to rest, the loudmouthed Hadedahs gather outside her window to chat. Their voices are loud and raspy and terribly disrupting. Squawks buffalo through our story. But not for my girl. Their rowdy din is silenced in her special world.



"Dad, I'm thirsty. I'll be quick", she explained, as she trotted down the stairs to fetch some water from the kitchen.

A few second later it sounded like a heard of elephants was on its way up, as she dashed back into the bedroom. Her peachy cheeks had paled and her eyes were as big as Oreo biscuits...



Her hands mumbled and fumbled as they explained what she had seen.

"Spider!

Kitchen!

Spider!

There's a huge, hairy spider on the wall in the kitchen. It has four...no five eyes that looked at me, ready to pounce! It even had muscles on it's long dripping fangs!"





I could just picture this horrible,

hideous,

horrendous,

creature!

My knees began to wobble as I imagined the monster! As scared as I was, my girl needed me to protect her! After all, she wanted some water. I made my way downstairs towards the grisly creature. She had explained that it was waiting on the wall next to the bin. Dad wasn't far behind me. As we got closer, we could see the spidery shaped shadow.



I took a closer look. Glued to the wall near the bin was the emerald top of a sticky strawberry that we had tossed after dinner. It must have missed the bin when we were cleaning up. In the dimmed light, it's leafy fingers looked a lot like a fat, horrid spider!



Dad returned to our bedroom, a cup of water in one hand and me in the other. My girl was confused by his laughing eyes.

Sitting on our bed, he explained to her what she had actually seen. That silly strawberry tricked us!



"Sometimes the things that make us feel afraid, aren't really as scary as they first seem", he explained. "And anyway, many spiders are actually very kind and helpful. They can catch flies and other bothersome bugs." He was right.



"Sometimes we feel afraid because we think something is a certain way, when it isn't, or when we think something is going to happen and then it doesn't. Sometimes even when someone else is afraid when they don't need to be, you can feel scared just because they are. Being afraid can be catchy like a cold."

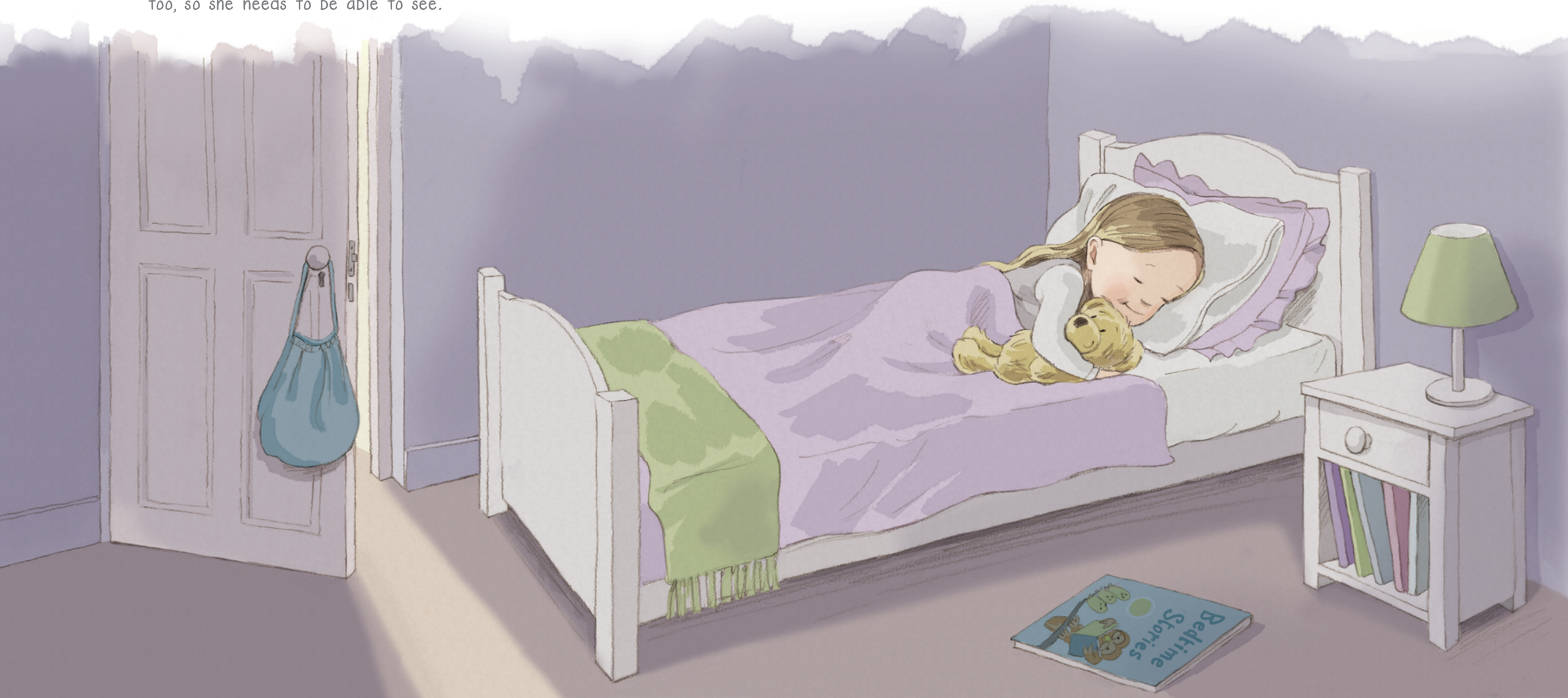
"Fear has a cousin who is called Courage. Courage helps us to be friends with the things that make us feel afraid."

Courage helps us to be brave even when we feel scared."

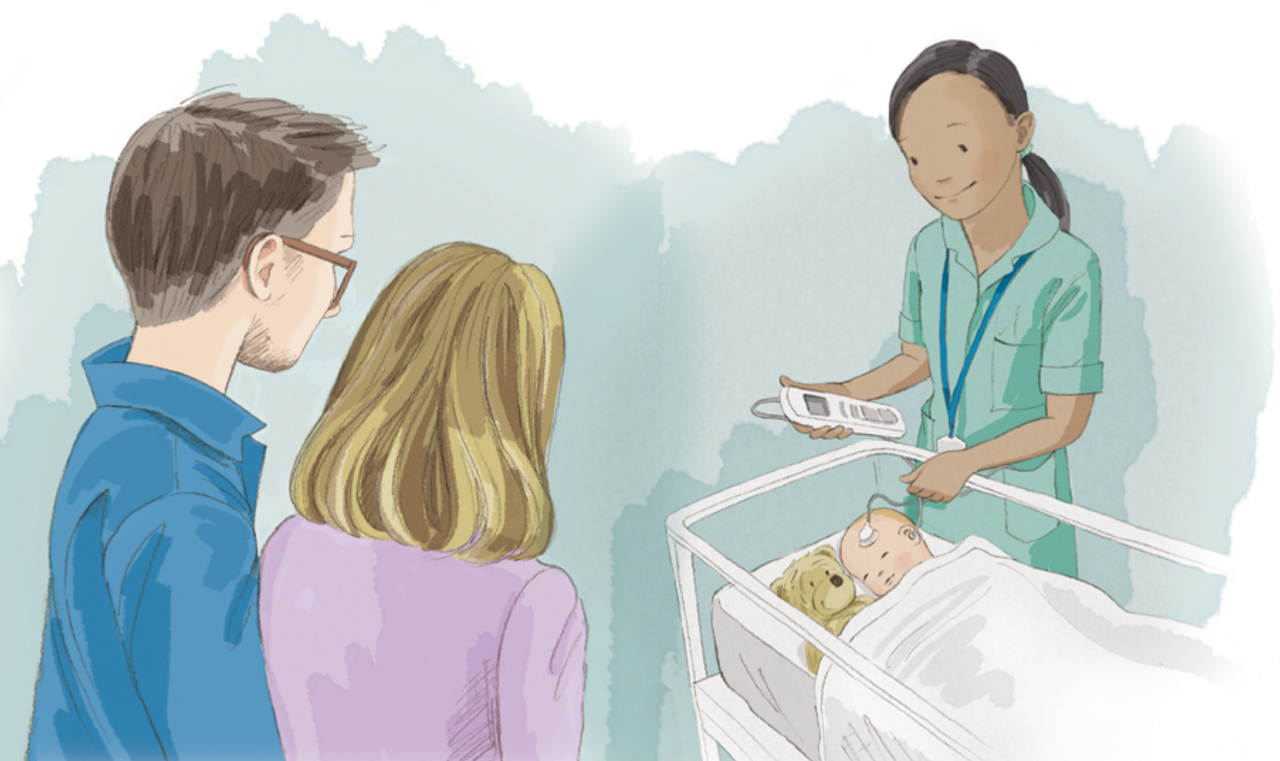


When Dad had left the room, we snuggled tightly. The door is always left open at night. My girl's eyes are her ears too, so she needs to be able to see.

I breathed in her smell as she gently fell asleep and thought of all the times that she had been brave.



I remember the day when Mom and Dad discovered that her world is quiet. She was poked and prodded and was so brave. That was a difficult day for Mom and Dad because they didn't yet understand. When they saw my girl being so brave, that helped them to feel brave too.





She's had lots of special tests, lots of people asking questions about her, and many times when she's needed to do new things or meet new people. She sometimes feels afraid. I can tell because she squeezes me tightly. She chooses to be brave.

When you are different, you have to be brave every day. You have to be brave to explain when you need some extra help, or when you need to be allowed to do things a little differently. That isn't always easy. My girl is brave every time she explains that she is deaf.





She's brave when she makes new friends, and when she gets new squidgy parts made for here jewels.



When I think of all the times she has to be brave, it makes me want to be brave for her too.





I'm so glad I braved that spider. Well... what we thought was a spider! I do love Friday evenings! I wonder what we will snack on next week? Oh, I hope it's strawberries!

what we can learn from this story...

This story is a wonderful opportunity for a child to experience a small adventure through the eyes of the characters in the book. It is also an opportunity for the teacher or parent to build rich and interesting conversations around the exciting things that happen in the story. Every book we read gives us new and authentic examples of the many different ways that we can encourage language and literacy development. This includes opportunities to increase and enrich vocabulary, introduce deeper issues of empathy through developing a 'theory of mind' as well as gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be deaf.

When reading about all these learning opportunities, it could feel very overwhelming, especially if you are in a class of children or if you are tired after a full day of work. Additional pressure may be felt when we become aware of the fact that most deaf and hard-of-hearing children miss out on a huge amount of incidental learning, highlighting the 'urgency to learn' further. We hope that through these literary discussions you will begin to feel more equipped and even excited to embark on your own literacy adventure.



1. Maximise each moment

Even if we know that it is important to maximise literacy each moment as it arises, it is also important to know that we can't use every opportunity all of the time. Choose wisely which things you decide to focus on and when... hint: follow your child's lead.

As we said in the first book 'Different is Beautiful", we need to learn to become expert observers of our children, noting what makes them curious and excited as well as what makes them feel disappointed or unhappy. This is an essential skill for us to learn as we invite our children on this journey to become readers.



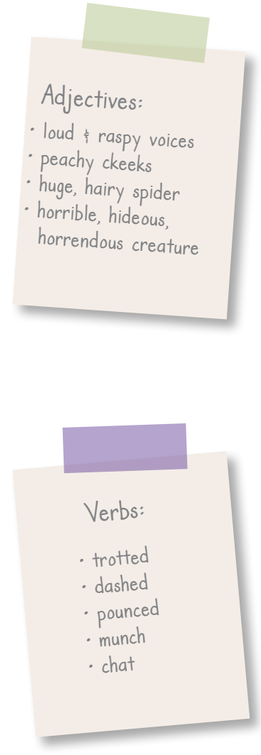
2. Language development



'Along came a Strawberry' is an ideal example of the kinds of stories we can use to develop and grow language, because it uses vivid and descriptive language that is not always the typical choice of words or phrases that a child will come across. This will mean that you as the teacher, parent or friend will need to create opportunities for some interesting and maybe challenging discussions on what these various new words and phrases mean. For example, describing the colour of strawberries as 'ruby' rather than red, and talking about 'goo and grime' rather than just saying that she is dirty. The key here is not to give them the answer as quickly as possible, but to open up discussion that will almost certainly grow their general knowledge and give them a more powerful understanding of the new word. For example, explaining that a ruby is a deep red gemstone might show that she loves and values strawberries.

Interesting and unique descriptive language is the type of language that Deaf children often miss or are often deprived of. In this story, there are many wonderful examples in the descriptions of the strawberries, the spider and the Hadedahs. There are also a number of interesting verbs used instead of the typical 'run', 'jump', 'eat', and 'talk'.

One of the challenges for a teacher or parent when reading this descriptive style of language, is that it's either a word that a child has never heard of or seen before and needs a full explanation, or it is typically signed with a shared synonym to place it in its natural context. In both cases, this is the perfect time to describe in detail what is being referred to, with a focus on this new word and an adaption of the synonym sign if necessary. For example, you could invite the child to help you think of a way to sign this new word and for a slightly older child you could also finger spell the word in order to differentiate between the two words e.g. 'horrible' and 'horrendous'.





3. Theory of mind

As I read the story for the first time my heart broke for little Esther as she dashed back into the room with her pale cheeks and huge eyes after seeing the spider. Sharing how you feel about something in the story allows your child to see the world through your eyes, and this is an essential aspect of developing a 'theory of mind'. Asking the right questions is another key strategy that can help the child start developing 'theory of mind' type of thinking. For example, on page 22 where Dad and Benjamin are walking down the stairs you could ask, "How do you think Dad and Benjamin are feeling? What do you think will happen when they walk closer to the spider?" When Dad returns with laughing eyes you could ask, 'Why do you think Dad isn't scared anymore?" You could also come up with a few scenarios of what could have happened. I wonder... maybe Dad has seen something?". This modeling is needed before a child can learn to go through the thinking process themselves.

A next step in developing 'theory of mind' is to ask the child to think about what they see on the page and then connect it to themselves. For example, "What makes you feel scared?" It is also a good idea for you as the teacher or parent to share a few ideas of what scares you, or a little about the last time you felt scared. Keep the age appropriateness of the questions in mind though, as one would not want any sharing to provoke feelings of fear for the child.

eg. When you did... you were brave, just like Benjamin was.

The wonderful thing about stories where the characters experience something and get through it successfully, for example when Benjamin is brave and goes downstairs with dad even though his knees are wobbling with fear, is that children get to see a model of what they can achieve. Here you could possibly discuss the last time someone in the class was brave or the last time your child acted bravely. This story is also something that you can refer back to when you or your child are a little scared, or when they next need to be brave.



4. Being deaf

Deaf and hard-of-hearing children have extra responsibilities that their hearing siblings or friends don't have, such as looking after their own hearing-aids or cochlear implants. Esther is a good role model in this story and gives you a perfect opportunity to open up the discussion of what responsibility means and why it is important to take care of these valuable and expensive amplification devices. Here the words 'careful', 'gently' and 'special' can be emphasised when signing or saying the words, and both the 'what' and the 'why' their device/s need to be handled in this way. You could discuss that they are expensive and easily damaged by water.

There is an ideal opportunity to talk to your child about Deaf superpowers on page 17. With Ben talking about how loudly the Hadedahs are squawking, you could ask, "How do you think Benjamin and Dad are feeling in this picture? Why doesn't Esther look grumpy?" If you are a hearing teacher or parent, consider that deafness can bring with it some benefits. These benefits can be referred to as 'Deaf Gain'.

Can you think of other examples of 'Deaf Gain'? Hint: Google has many articles on this topic.

This is a wonderful place to end our discussion on how we can best read and share literacy experiences with our children in a fun way... thinking of our children not in terms of loss and what they don't have, but in terms of **what they do!**

"Reading is to the mind, what exercise is to the body. As by the one health is preserved, strengthened, and invigorated: by the other, virtue (which is the health of the mind) is kept alive, cherished, and confirmed." - Joseph Addison

We found this quote inspiring, so let's get exercising!

