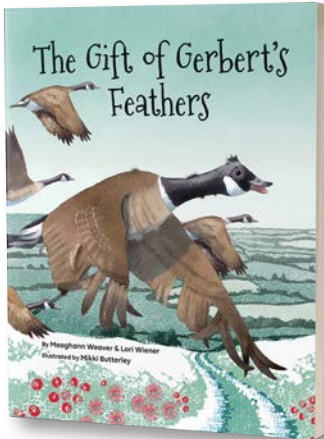




Talking About Feelings With Children Experiencing Serious Illness



Having a child who is very ill is one of the most difficult challenges a parent can face. Handling day-to-day medical needs can be exhausting, but often helping the child with their emotional needs can feel most stressful of all. A child's illness will impact the entire family.

For children living with a serious illness or for those worried about someone with a serious illness, storybooks can be a starting point for discussion, a safe way to ask questions, express concerns or worries about the character, or talk about their own feelings or experiences. Magination Press picture book, *The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers*, by Dr. Meaghann Weaver and Dr. Lori Wiener, provides families with an opportunity to explore how a child and his family navigate the feelings around serious illness and death. This excerpt from the book's Guide for Parents and Caregivers provides guidance about how to engage in conversations about feelings with children experiencing serious illnesses themselves or in their families.

Parents, Grandparents & Primary Caregivers

Parents may want to talk about what is worrying their child the most, but are afraid if they ask too many questions, they could upset their child even more. Children may want to talk with their parents about what is worrying them, but they worry about causing their parents even more stress. Children often worry more about how their illness is impacting their parents and siblings than they worry about what is happening to themselves. In this situation:

- Children might talk to other important people in their life, such as a grandparent, about deep concerns before sharing them with their parent(s). This is very normal!
- What children need most of all is the same unconditional love and support parents and caregivers have always provided, without all the chaos of the hospital or medications.
- Reading a book together can provide a quiet and comforting opportunity to talk about what is happening.

Other Special People

Families come in all shapes and sizes, and there might be many people who play an important role in a child's life. Sometimes children don't want to worry their parents or aren't sure how their parents will respond to their thoughtful questions, and so the child may inquire of others than directly to the parents.

Sharing a story, like *The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers*, can foster communication, providing opportunities to ask the child questions about their thoughts or feelings. This may be the only time the child feels safe enough to ask or answer such weighty questions.

- Make a connection to a character or situation in the story and ask the child how they feel about it. For example, "Why do you think Gerbert's mother brings him blueberries when he wasn't feeling well? What would bring you comfort?"
- Likewise, situations in a story may allow you to share and explore your family's beliefs about death.
- As a special person, you can bring the child's questions, worries, and concerns back to the child's parents to reduce the chance they will worry or suffer emotional isolation.

Getting the Conversation Started

Because sharing a picture book with a child offers a quiet, safe way to explore a difficult situation and the characters' feelings, it is a useful way to open the door to a conversation about a child's feelings around serious illness. There is no right or wrong way to read *The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers*. Talking about the pictures, reading just a few pages a day, or stopping to talk, and asking your child what they think or feel, about what is happening to Gerbert and how he and his family feel, are strategies to facilitate conversation.

After reading a book like *The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers*,

- a child may want to write about what they think the book is about and why the authors might have written it for children.
- A child may ask the same questions over and over again as they process this emotionally difficult subject. You may have to answer those same questions multiple times.
- If reading this book raises discussion of death, try and use specific words such as "Gerbert's death" and avoid euphemisms such as "he departed" and "he passed on/away."
- Try not to pressure your child to talk. Some children may prefer writing, drawing, or just listening to what is shared instead of talking about their own feelings. Offering to talk more about worries or concerns that your child may have may be very helpful as well.

This exclusive excerpt is from the Guide for Parents & Caregivers in Magination Press book, *The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers*, by Meaghann Weaver, MD and Lori Wiener, PhD, DCSW. It is [available online](#), along with tips for how to read the book, a guide for kids, and a feather page coloring sheet.

This Article's Authors

Meaghann Weaver, MD, MPH, FAAP, is a pediatric oncologist and Chief of the Division of Palliative Care at the Children's Hospital and Medical Center in Omaha, Nebraska. She works with a wonderful interdisciplinary Hand in Hand team which strives to foster the strengths and graces of children and families in the Heartland. Dr. Weaver's favorite life moments are spent painting, dancing, cooking, and gardening with her amazing daughter, Bravery. Dr. Weaver dreams of one day returning to Africa with her family.

Lori Wiener, PhD, DCSW, is co-director of the Behavioral Science Core and Head of the Psychosocial Support and Research Program at the pediatric oncology branch of the National Cancer Institute. As both a clinician and behavioral scientist, Dr. Wiener has dedicated her career to applying what she has learned from her work with seriously ill children and their families to create new therapeutic, communication, and educational tools. She lives in Annapolis, Maryland with her family and several animals, including a pup named Tessa, a rescue cat named Tupelo, and a pond filled with goldfish, koi and noisy frogs. One of Dr. Wiener's favorite pastimes is photographing the migration of snow geese.