

Note to Parents and Caregivers

For The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers
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Cuddling up with your child and reading a storybook aloud can bring much comfort to both the child and the adult reader. 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. Identifying with a character who has an emotional experience or situation like their own helps children to realize that they are not alone, and that what they are feeling is not unique after all. This can be very comforting and healing.

Children are great observers. They read messages on our face and in our voice. Therefore, it might be helpful to read *The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers* yourself before reading it with your child so that you have time to become comfortable with the words, illustrations, and content. When you are ready, consider introducing *The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers* as a special book that you picked out to read together.

In this Note, we address common concerns for various types of important people in a child's life before going into step-by-step suggestions for how to read this book with a child. But there is no right or wrong way to read with your child; do what feels comfortable and right for your family.

You may choose to only read one or two pages a day. Some children may want to read the book over and over again. Some children may ask many questions, others will ask none. It is not uncommon for children to ask questions many hours or even many days after finishing the story. What is most important is that you are paving the road for questions to be asked, concerns or fears to be shared, and for communication about topics that may not have been spoken about before to be had. We hope that *The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers* is therapeutic and meaningful for you as well as for your child!

Parents & Primary Caregivers

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.

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 to 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. Therefore, they 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 they need most of all is the same unconditional love and support you have always provided without all the chaos of the hospital, medications, etc. Reading a book together can provide a quiet and comforting opportunity to talk about what is happening.

Grandparents

Grandparents can play an immensely important role in the care of a child with a serious illness. They observe the child's suffering and how the child's parents are also suffering. Grandparents worry as much for their adult children as they do for their ill grandchild. If the sick child has a sibling(s), grandparents also worry about how these children are impacted, and how these children worry about their sibling.

The grandparents' own grief can be silent, as they mute their own concerns to remain strong for their own children. Their own dreams and plans for their children's lives change, and they can feel helpless and frustrated in the face of their grandchild's advancing illness. The grandparents' experience can also be transformative. It is not uncommon for children to open up to a grandparent about their own deep worries before they are shared with their parents, as they fear causing their own parents more stress. It is because of such a deep appreciation for the valuable grandparent role that grandparent geese are included in *The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers*.

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. There are many ways special people in the ill child's life can utilize *The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers* to foster communication. When reading the story, if the child notices that their own mother is bringing them more of their favorite foods like Gerbert's mom brings him the freshest blueberries, you can ask what the child thinks about this. You can also ask what else would bring the child comfort. If the ill child asks if they will die like Gerbert, you can ask if they think they will die like Gerbert. If the child says "yes" or "I don't know," this can be followed up with asking whether the child is scared or what worries them the most (about dying). The same applies if you are reading the story with the ill child's sibling. If the child asks if they will join other deceased family members one day as Gerbert would be with his Grandmother Goose at her final resting place, you can share your family's beliefs. This may be the only time the child feels safe enough to ask or answer such questions. 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 rather than directly to the parents. Such questions, worries, and concerns can then be brought back to the child's parents to reduce the chance that they will worry or suffer in emotional isolation.

For Teachers

Talking to children about illness and death can be especially challenging for teachers due to the varying life experiences their students might have had with these issues. Some children may find *The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers* to be comforting and inspiring while others may find parts of the story upsetting.

While every school is different, teachers who would like to share this book with a class might consider giving parents and school administrators a heads up by sharing a synopsis of the book in advance as well as how they plan to discuss the words and content within. This way, parents are prepared to respond as their children express their responses at home. Some schools may choose to have a reading with just parents first. This may help parents feel more knowledgeable and comfortable.

There are many different approaches teachers can take with this book depending on the circumstances in your school (e.g. a student who is very ill or who has died) and based on the students' intellectual abilities and conceptual understanding of death. A curriculum can be developed based on themes such as family love, illness, death, and/or how to help others in need. Teachers can also use the sample discussion questions as a guide.

Teachers can expect a variety of questions and responses to *The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers*. Some students may have never known anyone who has become very ill or died, especially a child. Others may be worried about their own health or the health of one of their own siblings. Students may have experienced other losses in their life, and this book can trigger some deep feelings. Feelings and responses may vary across students depending on their cultural beliefs and traditions. Some children may have a difficult time expressing their feelings or may not feel comfortable talking at school.

Supporting Siblings

When a child is diagnosed with a serious illness, everyone in the family is impacted. It can be especially difficult for brothers and sisters whose pain and suffering can feel invisible compared to what is happening to their ill sibling. Some siblings feel that their own needs, wants, and desires are not being valued as highly as those of their ill brother or sister. They can struggle trying to balance their love for their family and tremendous worry for their sibling with feelings of jealousy, anger, or frustration.

Sometimes siblings secretly worry that they caused the illness (due to something they thought, said, or did). It is important that the sibling is reassured that the sickness is not their fault. Sometimes siblings feel guilty for being healthy when their brother or sister is sick. Others may feel guilty for being jealous of the attention their sick sibling is getting from parents, grandparents, neighbors, and others. They should be reassured that these are normal emotions, and that it's not their fault. The person reading *The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers* with the ill child's sibling(s) can ask if they think any of Gerbert's brothers and sisters might have had the same feelings.

How to Read This Book

Find a quiet time and a comfortable place to read *The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers*. Allow your child to progress through the story at their own pace—this can mean letting them be the ones to turn the pages when they're ready or encouraging them to ask any questions they may have about a particular spread. Children may not want to talk about the content at first, and that's okay, too. Notice if your child seems especially interested or distressed by any of the words, emotions, or images. For example, if you are reading the book to a child who is living with a serious illness and your child asks why Gerbert wasn't growing or why he was losing his feathers, you can explain that a body can change with illness. You can ask if your child thinks their own body has changed or is worried about changes that might occur at a later time. If your child is worried about someone else they know who is living with a serious illness, you can ask if they have noticed any changes in that person's appearance. Similarly, if your child is upset about Gerbert's friends not coming around to play as often, you can ask your child how they would feel if this happened to them. You may want to ask if your child thinks Gerbert's parents are helping him; if Gerbert's siblings are supportive; and whether the family's return to the same place that Gerbert died year after year would bring Gerbert comfort or make him happy. This helps to make connections between your child's own life experience or concerns and the book's characters.

You may want to start with reading the first few pages to gauge how absorbed your child is with the story. This is when Gerbert's parents were excited about his birth and he was enjoying happy times with family and friends. Questions about early memories or stories about what the child was like as a baby can be discussed. Gerbert and his family had a special song. Does your child have a song that the family often sings together?

Then you can together read about Gerbert's short stature and not growing as quickly as his siblings. This can open up discussion about physical differences between siblings and even peers. Gerbert's ability to lead the V with the strength of his dad can be an opportunity for your child to talk about events in their own life when they felt very proud of something they had accomplished.

You can then consider reading the pages that follow, where Gerbert was starting to get ill (too tired to play, feathers falling out) and how he felt when he could only watch his siblings and friends play. What do they think this was like for Gerbert? Why does your child think that his friends might not have been coming around to play as often? Let your child know that most serious illnesses are not contagious. Remembering leading the V helped Gerbert during this time. Your child may want to share what they think this was like for Gerbert and if they have any memories that make them feel better when things are not going well for them.

The following page, where Gerbert overhears his uncle and father talking about his death, may be particularly moving for your child. You may want to just read this one page before continuing on to the rest of the story. Questions to explore may be why your child thinks Gerbert pretended not to hear their conversation, what your child thinks about Gerbert being relieved that his body would not have to join the migration, and your child's thoughts about the comfort Gerbert expressed about being with his grandmother who had died years ago.

If your child is engaged with the story and does not appear to be overwhelmed or frightened when they learn Gerbert may die, you may wish to continue reading the book up to the point where Gerbert and his family share their thoughts and fears with each other. Your child can talk about why Gerbert's parents were being more protective, why his siblings might not have been drawing the migration map with him like they used to, and why his friends might not have been coming around. Other questions can include what your child thinks about Gerbert's idea to share one of his feathers with each of his loved ones and the words he chose for each of them. You can hand out a printable feather color sheet and offer for your child to color one for a loved one, with a word that represents what that person means to them.

The last four pages can be read together. Why does your child think it was so important for Gerbert to let his family know that he wanted them to be happy and to take flight together? What does your child think about Gerbert's family surrounding him with one of their own feathers after Gerbert shared the ones he had spoken a word in for each of them? Finally, your child may have thoughts about Gerbert's family coming back each year to his final resting place, carrying the feather he gave them, and honking their song. Your child may have ideas of other ways to honor the memories of those who have died.

Your child may want to write a few words about what they think this book is about and why the authors might have written it for children. This can be an emotionally difficult subject and your child may ask the same questions over and over again and you may have to answer the same question multiple times. If the reading of 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."

Most important, 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.

There is no right or wrong way to read *The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers* to a child. Talking about the pictures and words in the book can facilitate communication about difficult and hard to talk about issues. If the child is not living with a serious illness, you can reassure the child about their good health and share your family's beliefs about life and death. If the child asks if they would join their parents or grandparents or another loved one after death, this can be another lovely opportunity to share your family's beliefs. This may be the first time the child feels safe enough to ask or answer such questions.

Sample Discussion Questions

- In what ways was Gerbert different from other geese? In what ways was Gerbert the same as other geese?
- What made Gerbert feel safe and comfortable? What made Gerbert feel strong? What makes you feel safe and comfortable? What makes you feel strong?
- What did Gerbert most like to do for playtime? What do you most like to play?
- What were Gerbert's favorite snacks? What are your favorite snacks?
- In what ways did Gerbert's body change? In what ways has your body changed over time?
- The migration each year seemed like a very special family trip for Gerbert with lots of memories along the way. What have been your favorite family moments or memories?
- What was it like for Gerbert to lead his flock in the front of the V point with his dad? Tell me about a time you surprised yourself with your energy, focus, and strength?
- Do you think Gerbert's dad would have understood if Gerbert would not have been able to focus and work hard to reach the front of the flock?
- Who took care of Gerbert as part of his community? Who cares for you in your community?
- How do you think hearing the conversation between his dad and his uncle made Gerbert feel? Have you ever overheard a conversation when people thought you were not listening?
- What changes in behavior did Gerbert's dad, mom, and siblings all show as he got sicker? Why do you think they each changed in those ways?
- Why did Gerbert share his falling feathers with his family and friends? Do you think this was a good idea?
- If you could share feathers like Gerbert, what would your feather messages be?
- Do you think Gerbert's family and friends will be okay?
- If you were one of Gerbert's gosling friends, what would you have wanted to tell Gerbert when he was entering his Final Migration?
- Why do you think the authors wrote *The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers*?