

Type of Text

Picture book

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

English Literacy

The Arts

Writing

Social Science, HPE

Science

Music

Maths

THEMES

- Family
- Relationships
- School
- Social issues
- Family
- Fathers
- Single Parents
- Imagination
- Writing
- Occupations
- Positive Role Models

Publication Details

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Author: Dimity Powell

Illustrator: Nicky Johnston

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Ideal for: 4 – 8 year olds

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SYNOPSIS

Leo is an only child living with his mother who is a single parent and an enthusiastic writer of children's stories, spending much of her day (and nights) battling bad guys and conjuring up strange new worlds.

Leo is accustomed to her virtual absence and comfortable with his family set-up. He loves school, especially opportunities to Show and Tell with the rest of his classmates. However, when they are invited to present a talk about their fathers, Leo falls silent and withdraws. How can he celebrate someone he has never met? Leo has never known a father figure and endeavours to find clues as to who he might have been.

He never finds any and worries that he will have nothing to share on the TELL US ABOUT YOUR DAD DAY at school. It's not until Leo realises that he does know someone who is cool, courageous and clever that he recognises a creative and unconventional solution to his dilemma.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Award winning children's author Dimity Powell loves to fill every spare moment with words. She writes and reviews exclusively for children and is the Managing Editor for Kids' Book Review, one of the world's leading review sites for children's literature. She is a seasoned presenter both in Australia and overseas and believes picture books are food for the soul, to be consumed as often as possible. She regularly relishes creating her own including *Oswald Messweather* (2021), *Pippa* (2019), the SCBWI Crystal Kite Award winner, *At the End of Holyrood Lane*, (2018) and the critically acclaimed, *The Fix-It Man*, (2017).

Dimity is a tireless advocate of Kids' Lit with strong convictions about the power of storytelling, reading and writing. She loves sharing her accumulated knowledge with big and little kids and is a [Books in Homes Australia Volunteer Role Model](#), [Story City Community Mentor](#) and [G.A.T.EWAYS online and onsite presenter](#).

WRITING STYLE

Dimity's writing style is often described as powerful and emotive, laced with humour and lilted language to soften the often sensitive subject matter she tackles. She ... *seems to have the ability to touch on subjects that in other hands would seem worthy or didactic, and to make them heartbreakingly real and emotional, in a way that is accessible to both children and adults* – Brian Falkner, children's author and writing coach.

Penning Leo's story was a truly joyous experience. Leo is a character for whom I felt an immediate affinity even though I've never been in a single parent situation myself. The poignancy of his predicament was the main motivator for the language used in this narrative; a gentle combination of lilting language, occasional alliteration and a sneaky dose of ambiguity to obscure the final twist and allow readers room for their own interpretation. I love the complexity a picture book text allows even when the deliberate absence of words is included to provide space for the illustrator to express their own magic.

ILLUSTRATOR BACKGROUND

Nicky Johnston is an educator, speaker, and author/illustrator of children's books. She is passionate about promoting emotional resilience in children and raising awareness of mental health issues. As well as teaching, she works from home writing and illustrating and has contributed to 20 books including *The Fix-It Man*, *At the End of Holyrood Lane* (SCBWI Crystal Kite Award Winner), *Grandma Forgets* (CBCA Notable Book), and *The Incredibly Busy Mind of Bowen Bartholomew Crisp*.

ILLUSTRATION STYLE

Nicky's illustration style is often referred to as being emotive, whimsical, touching and narrative. In *This Is My Dad*, Nicky used both watercolour and pencil to illustrate and included lots of details to share more of the story adding to the cleverly written text to keep the reader guessing as to who is Leo's dad?

SELLING POINTS

- Popular published Australian author and illustrator team.
- Zero – 100-year readership.
- Engages the concepts of mental and emotional well-being and balance.
- Spotlights diverse family dynamics and their impact on family members and family well-being.
- Highlights global contemporary social issues in primary school classroom settings.
- Encourages appreciation of various adult occupations.
- Promotes positive (parenting) role modelling.
- Addresses the Australian primary SOSE curricula plus many other areas including English, Science, Art, HPE, and Social Sciences.
- Endearing character-driven visual narrative provides humour and sensitivity through a soothing colour palette.

ABOUT WRITING *THIS IS MY DAD*

With over 10% of households in Australia comprising of a single or primary parent and of those single parents, 82% of them being female, *This Is My Dad* is a timely commentary on contemporary family dynamics and societal trends that highlights a situation many children experience within classroom set ups. Similar figures exist in countries throughout the world: in New Zealand, the Americas, the UK and Europe. Until I was prompted by a proactive teacher librarian during a Book Week visit to her school, I was only vaguely aware of these statistics. She highlighted a notable absence of mainstream picture books featuring children who had never known a ‘father figure’ and or had no significant male model in their lives. To furnish school libraries and homes with a story that embraced this theme was an idea I simply couldn’t let evaporate.

The absence of Leo’s father could be indicative of numerous situations: father abandoned the relationship before the child was born, FIFO dad, imprisoned dad, deceased dad, LGBT situations; the point being that there is no opportunity for the child to make any real, meaningful contact with their biological father and therefore in essence they have no dad – to celebrate – as it were.

This Is My Dad suggests that although the presence of strong positive male role models is crucial to a child’s well-being and healthy emotional balance, it is simply not always a realistic possibility and that the strengths and attributes of primary carers – be they female, single-parents, same-sex parents, grandparents or otherwise – are equally worthy of celebration. The opportunity to push this family dynamic into the spotlight and the way Leo’s show and tell experience concludes still chokes me up. For me, that kind of reaction is how I know this story works.

ABOUT ILLUSTRATING *THIS IS MY DAD*

Having lived the first seven years of my life in a single parent family, I know firsthand how the role of both parents can sometimes fall onto one. I delved into my own memories and feelings when illustrating this book. I wanted the pride of Leo (at the end of the book) to be visible and understood by all single parents who may feel they are not enough. Kids aren’t great at communicating this until they much older and as a kid, all they need is to be loved, cherished and supported, by whoever they have in their world.

TEACHING POINTS & ACTIVITIES

This book may be used in whole class, small group or independent learning activities in schools.

Please note, the following suggestions and activities are suited to a variety of year levels spanning Foundation to Year 6 primary aged children. Some activities may be applicable to early secondary school students, as well. Where possible, Australian Curriculum goal codes have been included which address Foundation to Year 2 curriculum learning outcomes and apply directly to the targeted audience intended for this book, (4 – 9 years).

Knowledge and Literal Understanding

- Before Reading (Interpreting, analyzing, evaluating / ACELY1660)
 - Show the cover to the class and ask the students what they think the book might be about.
 - Read the back cover blurb. Does this give them more of an idea of what the book could be about?
 - Ask students if they can recognize the setting of this story from the cover image.
- During Reading
 - Ask students if Leo reminds them of anyone they know: a friend, a sibling, themselves perhaps.
 - What is their first impression of Leo? Do they regard him as happy, shy, worried, outgoing or friendly?
 - What changes does Leo experience during the story?
 - Discuss why they think Leo is at first excited to deliver his Show and Tell topic but then becomes worried and withdrawn.
 - Ask students how they perceive Leo's situation. Do they think he is happy? Or anxious, embarrassed or worried.

Inferential and Critical Thinking

- After Reading (Responding to literature / ACELT1783, ACELT1582, ACELT1578)
 - Ask students how they think Leo views his family and friends by the end of the story.
 - What are the students' impressions of his mother? Does she seem 'normal' to them or unusual?

- Are they relieved that Leo found a way to deliver his Show and Tell presentation? Are they happy for him? If so, why?
- Do they find the ending: satisfying, touching, hopeful, predictable, a surprise, comforting, or a relief?
- Gently enquire if any of the students have ever experienced moments of anxiety like Leo when faced with doing something seemingly impossible? Discuss how it made them feel.
- What did Leo do to overcome the problem of not having a father to talk about?
- Examine the similarities between Leo's character, his family and school friends with their own relationships.
- Whom do students regard as the main character of the story? Who are the sub or secondary characters?
- Why are the sub characters important to the story?
- How do they support Leo and help him learn from his situation?
- How does Leo's imagination contribute to the story?

CROSS-CURRICULAR DISCUSSION AND IDEAS

ENGLISH LITERACY SKILLS

Vocabulary (Language for interaction/ ACELA1462)

- Alliteration – give examples from the story.
- Repetition – where and why is it used?

Grammar (Expressing and developing ideas / ACELA1786, ACELA1451, ACELA1462)

- Names can mean many different things. What do they think the main character's name, Leo refers to? (Lion, strong and friendly, determined?) How is this shown through his personality in the story?
- Discuss how the punctuation used enhances the flow and drama of the story.
- Do certain words and adjectives link to the action sequences and emotions depicted in the illustrations? If so, which ones?
- Identify some of the metaphors and similes (figurative language) the author uses and discuss their meanings. For example; *waded through oceans of photos*.
- Encourage students to identify some of the adjectives used. Can they suggest other words or ways to describe Leo's worries?

- There is very little dialogue shown in this story. Why do students think this is? Does it make the story easier or less easy to follow?

Comprehension (Wellbeing / [ACPPS005](#), [ACELT1581](#))

- Get students to name the sequence of events in this story. Attempt this via:
 - Listing them as a group.
 - Writing out key sentences from the story, cutting them out and then getting students to arrange in order.
 - Illustrating scenes in correct order of occurrence.
- Discuss how it would affect the feeling and outcome of the story if it began at a different point in time, i.e. with Leo trying to write his Show and Tell presentation or at the end with him presenting it.
- Do the illustrations follow the story? Do they enhance it, if so, how?
- At which point or points do Leo's emotions change? How many times does this occur?
- Were students able to predict what would happen next? Name the clues – in the text and pictures? If not expected, how did it make them feel? Were they ever anxious about what could happen next?
- What do they think happens after Leo completes his presentation?
- Make a list of the various emotions and the adjectives that describe them that Leo is experiencing e.g. lonely, worried, embarrassed, ashamed, strange, different, proud, happy...
- Discuss whether students feel this is a sad story, an anxious one or a happy one and encourage them to give reasons based on the words and images used.

Writing (Examining literature / [ACELT1584](#))

- Identify whose point of view (POV) the story is written in.
- Attempt to write the story from a different POV: Leo's mother, Leo's classmate, Leo's neighbour.
- Get students to choose a scene and rewrite it using dialogue.
- Define the difference between dialogue and internal thought and how it is shown in the narrative. Where does Leo use the latter and how does it make the reader feel about him?
- Ask students to work in groups or pairs to create an Acrostic Poem using story words such as: HAPPY, PROUD, FATHER, SHOW, TELL, PRESENTATION. Share with the class and compare.
- Write a book review of the story using the [WORKSHEET 1 Book Review](#)

Literature and Media (Responding to literature / ACELT1582, ACELT1583)

- Enquire whether students have ever seen information, news articles, and YouTube videos etc. that depict single parent families in a certain way. What are their thoughts on these? Do they feel they mirror their own situations / experiences?
- Ask students to name cartoons, books, fairy tales or movies that have similar themes to *This Is My Dad* or feature characters with single parents e.g.: *Sherman and Mr Peabody*, *Finding Nemo*, *Mavis from Hotel Transylvania*, *Belle from Beauty and the Beast*, *Toy Story*, *Mrs Doubtfire*, *Forest Gump*, *Horton Hatches the Egg*, *The Invisible String*, *Family Forest*.
- Define which ones stick most in their memories and discuss why? Is it because of the way they make them feel or perhaps because they can relate to them, for example?
- Consider how they end. Do all emotional tales end with uncertainty or on a happier note? If they think so, ask why they think this is.
- Which have the better endings? Which ones do students prefer most? Debate what makes a good ending and why that is important.

VISUAL LITERACY (Expressing and developing ideas / ACELA1453)

- Search for the visual clues the illustrator includes in the story to show a change of:
 - Emotion / action
 - Time / situation
- How do the end pages make students feel? What do they project about this story?
- How do the illustrations depict the personalities of the characters, notably Leo's, and what they are experiencing?
- Examine the perspective and angles used in the illustrations.
 - How does the use of altered or unusual perspectives enhance the story experience?
- How do the background patterns and colours influence the mood or feeling of the illustration?
- What direction do most of the illustrations flow to and from? When does this direction change? How does this influence the story and what does it tell us about the main character?
- How do certain colours make students feel? How can they apply these feelings to this story?
- Discuss the use of colours to project or symbolise emotion and a change of circumstances in this story. (Used with Visual Arts and Craft)

- Identify the predominant colour palette, and then list emotions to match those colours. Use their location in the story and the associated text to help identify matches. [WORKSHEET 4 Matching Emotions to Colours](#).
- Ask students to draw their own favourite thing that gives them a sense of comfort and security. It might be a toy or object or even a pet. (Used with Visual Arts and Crafts)

MATHEMATICS

(Probability/Chance, Shape, Numbers and Patterns [ACMSP024](#), [ACMMG042](#),

[ACMNA035](#))

- Chance and Probability
 - Explore the likelihood of Leo feeling more secure and confident when next faced with talking about his parents vs. feeling continued anxiety about his absent father.
- Shapes
 - Identify the geometric shapes and symbols used throughout the illustrations e.g. hearts, stars, rectangles, circles, squares etc.
 - Count them and examine their use in the illustrations (e.g. photo frames, bookshelves). Is it deliberate or incidental?
 - Discuss how certain shapes could produce certain subliminal impressions, e.g. order, calm, joy, confusion and loss.
- Discuss the presence of patterns. Can students spot any – mama’s apron, wall paper design, bedspread etc.?
- Spatial awareness. Have students complete a [custom made jigsaw puzzle](#) ([try the This Is My Dad jigsaw puzzle!](#)) Use different numbers of pieces to increase difficulty and time how long it takes to complete based on level of difficulty. Is it easier or no different beginning with the border pieces already set up?

THE ARTS

VISUAL ARTS / CRAFT

(Visual Arts / Communicating ideas [ACAVAM108](#))

- [Draw a dragon!](#) Use the instructions included on [Dimity’s YouTube channel](#) or in this [video link](#). Experiment with different colours and shapes to change the style of your dragon. Change your ‘cute’ dragon into a more ferocious one!
- Try drawing a space alien. Use your imaginations instead of a tutorial instruction.

- Make your [own Frisbee!](#) Use the instructions included on [Dimity's YouTube channel](#) or in [this video link](#). (Use with Science and Health and Physical Education)
- Using [colouring-in templates and worksheets](#) found online and throughout these notes, use colours to show the different levels of emotion in the various scenes.
- Invite students to name their favourite colour and explain why. (Use with Visual Literacy)
- Ask students which page (spread) of the story they feel is the most dramatic or moving one and how it makes them feel? (This is known as the Blue page in picture books) In what part of the story does this page occur?
- Which spread do they consider the saddest?
- Which do they deem is the happiest page?
- Ask students to draw their own favourite activities or past times using their favourite colours. (Use with Visual Literacy)

MUSIC

(Communicating and interacting, wellbeing, Music [ACPPS020](#), [ACAMUM082](#))

- Listen to and watch the [Book Trailer](#) (Coming soon!) for this story. What type of music is used? How does it make students feel?
- What types of instruments suggest anxious feelings? Excitement? Joy? Does the pace of the music dictate the feeling of this mini movie?
- Do students think background music is important for relaying the feel of the story and suggesting what it could be about? Do they think instrumental background music is enough or if a song with lyrics should be used instead; what would they choose?
- Can music trigger certain memories? Ask students if they have a particular song that elicits strong memories, good or bad. (Use with Science)
- Encourage students to name instruments or music styles that describe the various movements, vocal sounds and habits of a person who is anxious, scared, embarrassed, nervous or proud.

DRAMA

(Language for interaction, Drama [ACELA1787](#), [ACADM027](#))

- Using dragons, aliens, toys or even sock puppets get students to re-enact the story. Rig up a small stage to facilitate this. (Use with Visual Arts and Crafts)
 - Enlist someone to be the narrator.

- Get students to experiment with how to manipulate the puppets to show the different emotions and voices used in the story. Cover:
 - Body Language
 - Stage position
 - Influence of music to the performance – when to use it to inject drama or relief for the audience.
- Re-enact the story with students but not using words or a narrator, just music to accentuate the:
 - ‘Light and shade’ moments of the story
 - Show scene changes
 - Mood changes (use with Music).

SOCIAL SCIENCE

(Social Health [ACPPS005](#), [ACPPSO17](#), [ACELA1787](#), [ACPPS020](#))

- Discuss the notion of family dynamics, namely single parent families. Do the students understand:
 - What it means?
 - The various different examples: blended families, same gender families, multiple etc.?
 - Why there are so many different variants of family structure? (Use with Inferential and Critical Thinking)
- Invite children to discuss how they feel when asked to speak in front of fellow classmates, either formally or in a Show and Tell situation. Are these feelings considered positive or negative? Discuss why.
 - Explore the differences between self-esteem, confidence, self-doubt, apprehension.
- If negative, explore ways they can use to overcome feelings of: anxiety, nervousness, fear.
- Get students to discuss how they feel when they are faced with certain situations they may not be able to control e.g. changes in family situation, new things, being outside of their comfort zones, public speaking.
- Leo feels stricken at times because he is looking for something he cannot find. Discuss this emotion and how it affects him, his family, society as a whole based on recent world history (global pandemics).
 - Ask how students feel when something makes them feel frustrated. Get them to list some of the ways or things that would help them feel less frustrated. Explore ways to cope with bad feelings: writing / drawing them down, stepping back and counting to ten, meditation,

talking about them, engaging in your favourite activity, burning energy, crying, telling jokes, sharing your anxieties with someone you trust... and so on. [WORKSHEET 2 Safe People](#).

- Despite a failure to find evidence of his dad and anxiety over what he could talk about, Leo does not give up. Discuss the attributes of tenacity, perseverance and courage.
- '*Leo suddenly had an idea.*' Leo eventually realizes he does not have to stick with convention to deliver a winning Show and Tell presentation. Discuss what prompted this and how he approaches it. Invite students to comment on whether they think it is a clever, appropriate and satisfying solution. (Use with Contemporary Society)
- Leo's mother is a children's author. Discuss the terms: job, occupation and volunteer, and invite students to describe the occupations of their parents or primary care givers.
 - Do students associate various occupations with various genders?
 - Explore the difference between volunteer work and paid work.
- Ask students what they'd like to do or be when they grow up!
- Arrange a *What Does Your Parent Do* show and tell, perhaps involving parents and care givers!
- Use [WORKSHEET 3 Guess My Occupation](#) and [WORKSHEET 5 Important People in My Life](#) to stimulate and reinforce occupational roles and create visual portrayals of family trees respectively.

SCIENCE, NATURAL SCIENCE (STEM)

- Leo desperately wanted someone to throw Frisbees with. Discuss what students could do if they:
 - Don't have someone to play with.
 - Don't have a commercial Frisbee of their own.
- Make your own [Frisbee](#). (Use with Visual Arts and Crafts)
- Experiment with different:
 - Designs – round, with a central hole or without etc.
 - Materials – paper plates, cardboard, plastic plates etc.
 - Hand holds and throwing positions, e.g. horizontal vs. over arm throw.
- Which designs flew better / farther than others? Examine why?
- Discuss the results? Were they expected, a surprise, hard to believe?
- Explore other ways to improve aerodynamics.
- Consider the five senses and how music, smells and words can stimulate and trigger memories.
 - Hypothesize why they think this is and then research the answer.

- Locate words, phrases and images the author and illustrator use in the story to add sensory detail and evoke the reader's senses. Discuss how this could enrich the story telling experience.

PHYSICAL EDUCATION (Health and Wellbeing / ACPPS005, ACPPS020)

- Dancing is a fun physical activity that makes you laugh, move and feel good – useful in times of stress and anxiety. What other physical activities could positively improve mental wellbeing and confidence? (Hint: there were some in *The Fix-It Man!*)
- Frisbee throwing is very physical too! What other sports or activities:
 - Involve throwing and catching? Baseball, softball, football, boomerang throwing, volleyball?
 - Can be played in pairs, groups or even with a dog!
- What skills are needed for these sports: good eye hand coordination, the right equipment?
- Identify students who have tried some of these activities. How do they make them feel? Who would like to try them?
 - What's hard, scary, exciting, fun about these activities?
- Encourage students to make their own Frisbees. (Use with Science STEM)
 - Practice throwing Frisbees in groups, pairs, at an object (toy or target) or just to record longest distance thrown.
 - Discuss the best places to play Frisbee type games: in your backyard, at the beach, in a park, school oval etc.
- Have fun!