

“We say what's OKAY”

WE LISTEN TO OUR BODIES



With Song from
Peaceful Schools

Lydia Bowers
illustrated by
Isabel Muñoz



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free spirit
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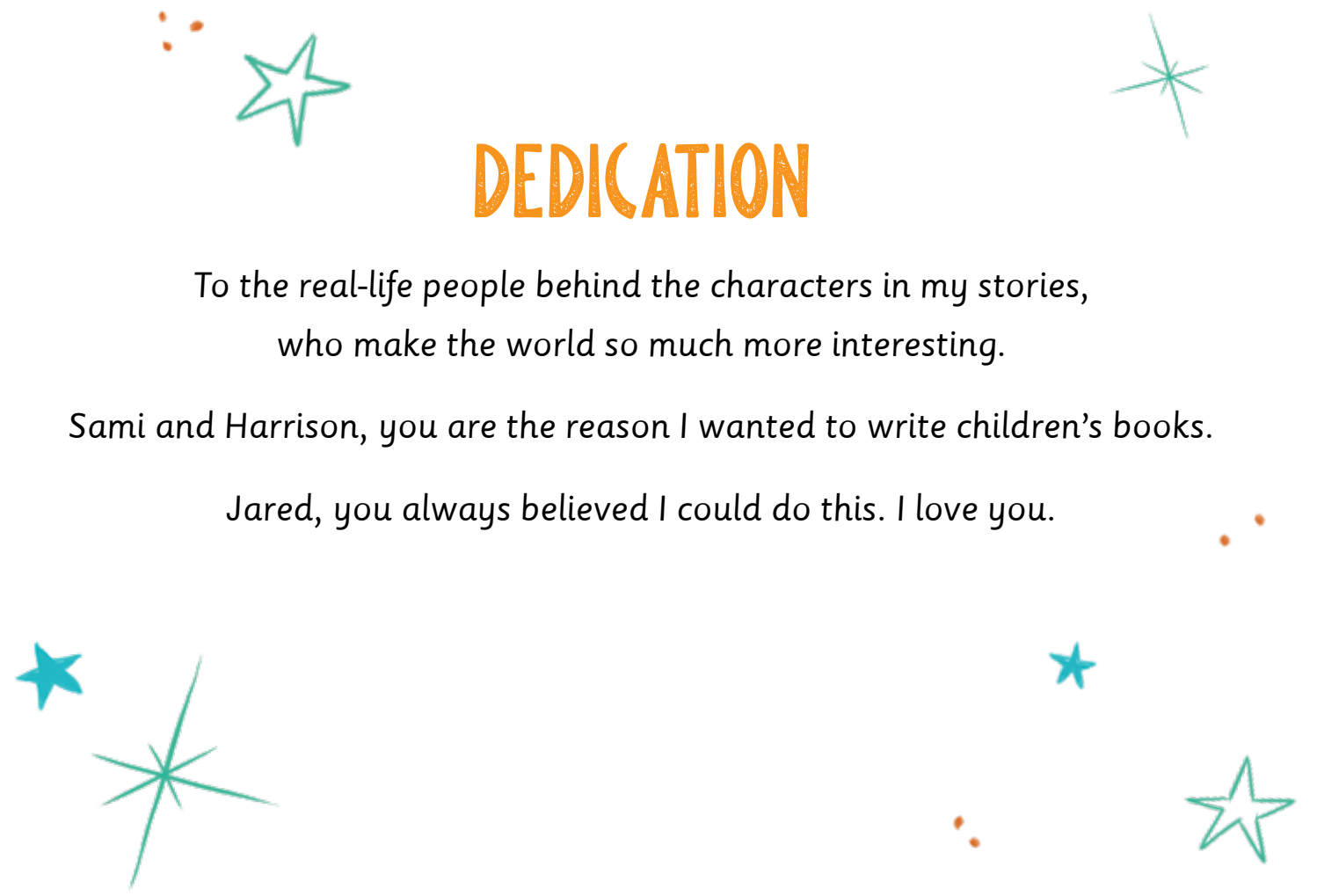
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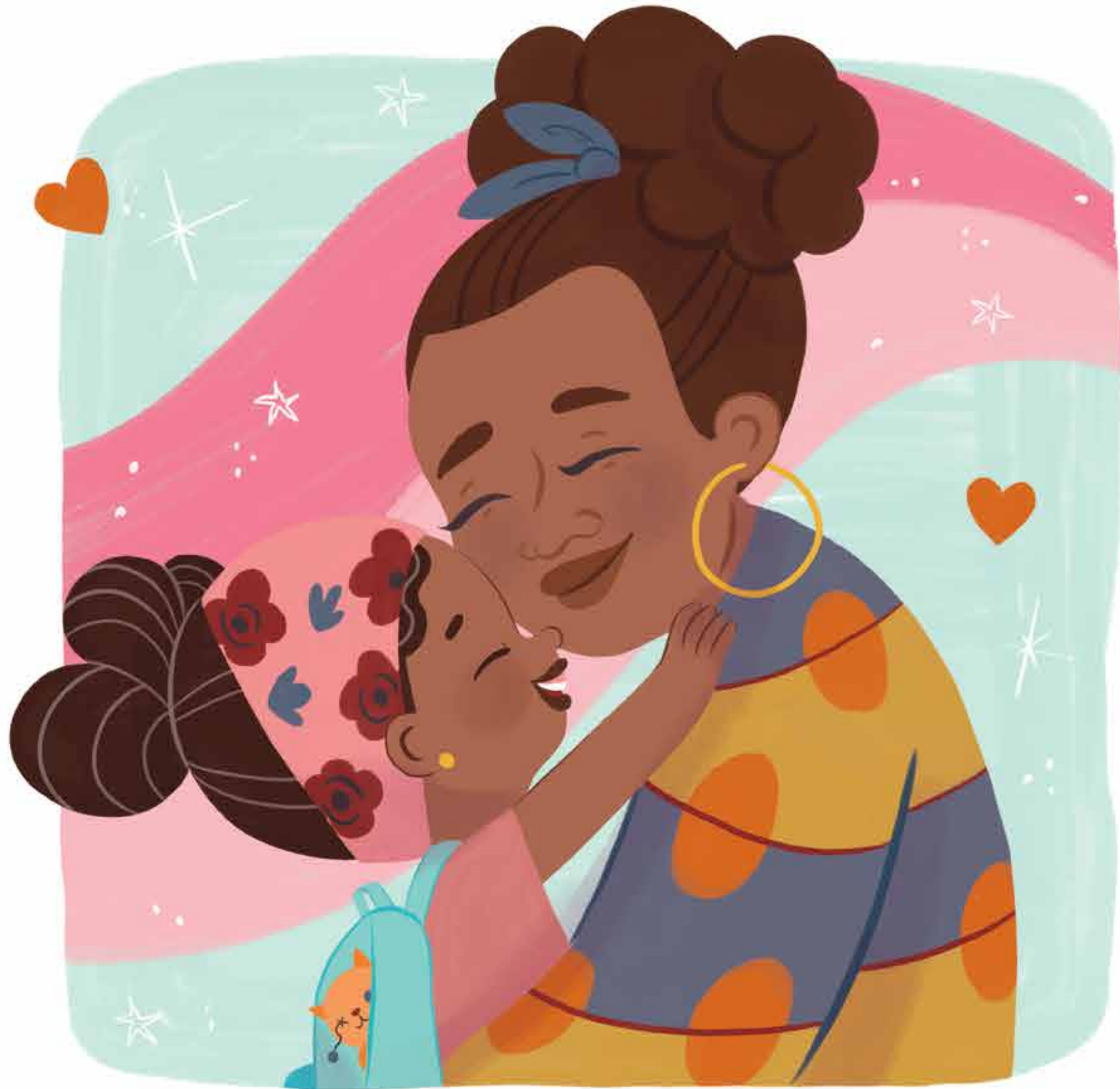


DEDICATION

To the real-life people behind the characters in my stories,
who make the world so much more interesting.

Sami and Harrison, you are the reason I wanted to write children's books.

Jared, you always believed I could do this. I love you.



Mom gave Deja a quick hug and nudged her into the classroom.
Rushed mornings like this made Deja's arms feel shivery. Her eyes felt like crying.
She wanted to hug Mom again. But Mom was already walking away.



Ms. H called out, “The weather is beautiful! Let’s head to the playground, everyone!”
Deja’s feet felt antsy. She loved playing outside.

On the playground Deja shouted to her friend, “Try to catch me, Jackson!” She took off.
She was a fast runner, but so was Jackson. He chased her under the climber and around
the sandbox. They laughed and dodged their friends as they ran.



CONSENT: A GUIDE FOR CARING ADULTS

CONSENT FOUNDATIONS

What Is Consent?

Consent is a nuanced concept. Its meaning expands as children and situations mature. With young children, we can use the definition *agreeing because you want to*. This child-friendly definition inspired the series title *We Say What's Okay*.

Why Consent?

As high-profile assault allegations and hidden abuse have come to light in recent years, more and more people have called for the need to teach about consent. These conversations tend to focus on high schools, colleges, and places of employment. However, they need to happen much earlier to be the most effective—just as it is important to read to young children and give them opportunities to run and play to support cognitive and physical development. Consent is a social and emotional skill that requires learning and practice. Caring adults can help children build the foundations of consent early on.

Consent is a principle that we as adults can practice in our lives and model for children. When we create a culture of consent, we provide a safe space for children and empower them to have a voice. This guide offers help in that effort. It is not just a one-time lesson plan. This is ongoing work. The more we and the children in our care practice

trusting our instincts and saying no when something feels off in the day-to-day, the more likely we are to trust ourselves when we are in danger. When we as parents, teachers, social workers, and caregivers can make our spaces safe, consensual, and communicative, children know that they can come to us for support.

The Fallacy of Stranger Danger

Of children who are sexually abused, 93 percent are abused by someone they know.* Saying no to someone you know and trust can be difficult, but it is a vital skill. We need to empower children to say no at home and in other familiar, day-to-day environments. It is not children's job to protect themselves from abuse. That is our job. But we can use consent foundations to empower children and to mitigate risk.

Five Steps for Teaching Consent

Building consent foundations involves teaching children five key concepts:

- I listen to my body.
- I am in charge of my body.
- I ask permission.
- I check in.
- I accept no.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL AWARENESS

Listening to Our Bodies

This book can help you teach children about the first concept: listening to our bodies. We humans tend to not listen to our bodies. We often push our feelings aside or say things like “I have no reason to feel like this!” We want to look for evidence to support our feelings, and we do not always trust our gut reactions.

But there *is* scientific evidence for trusting our gut reactions. The vagus nerve is the largest nerve in the body. It stretches from the brain through the torso, and its branches wrap around many of our organs. The vagus nerve and the brain constantly send messages back and forth. Our brain takes in information from our organs and makes decisions about our physical responses before we even realize it. If our brain feels we may be in danger, it tells the vagus nerve to alert our bodies: we may tense up, or the hairs on our arms rise, or our stomach clenches. Even when we are not in danger, our body is still sending us messages. Talk with children about the sensations *Deja felt*. Have you ever felt some of those feelings? What do you think your body was trying to tell you?

Unfortunately, we often just ignore all our body's warnings. We may say yes to something when we feel uncomfortable about it.

When we listen to our bodies, we notice our body's response to a situation. We think about why we feel that way. Let's say a relative wants to hug you and reaches their arms toward you. You feel your body tense up. Listening to your body means noticing that tension and thinking about it. Maybe you don't want to hug your relative because you

just feel touched out. Maybe you don't want to hug this person because they don't feel safe to you. Now let's say a relative reaches out for a hug and your body feels relief or joy. Your body might be telling you that you do want a hug because you need physical connection with someone who cares about you.

Trauma note: When we have experienced trauma, it may be challenging to make sense of our body's responses. Sometimes alerts from our brain may get communicated as “THIS IS NOT A DRILL! ALL HANDS ON DECK! GO! GO! GO!” The vagus nerve tells our lungs to tighten. We feel dizzy from lack of oxygen, we start breathing heavily, our whole body is tense and on edge, and we end up in a panic attack. When our bodies respond to trauma triggers or to chronic stress, we often experience a “fight, flight, or freeze” response. As adults, we may want to try to rationally talk through what's happening with a child. But because they are in



* RAINN. 2020. “Child Sexual Abuse.” rainn.org/articles/child-sexual-abuse.