

11 Books That Model Empathy and Compassion for Young Readers

by Charnaie Gordon

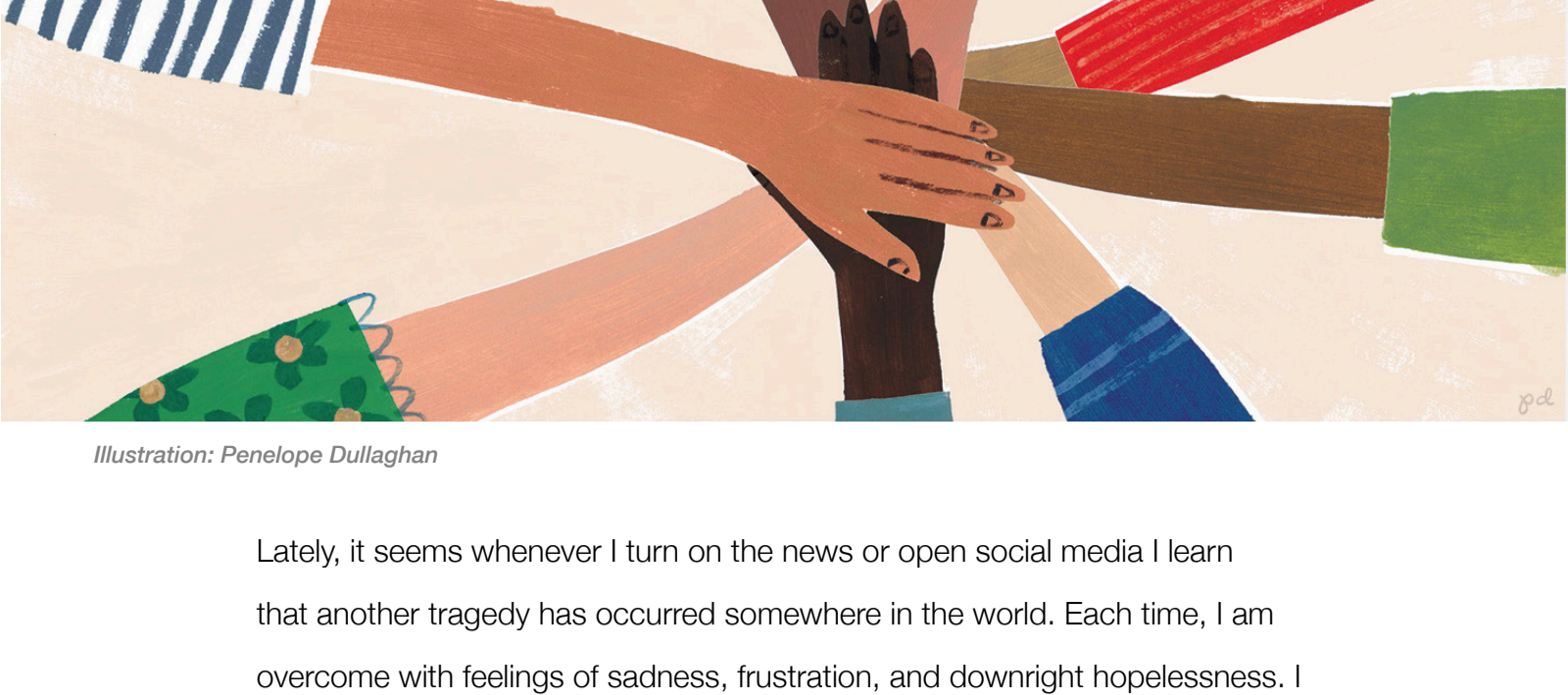


Illustration: Penelope Dullaghan

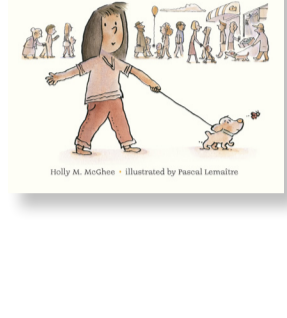
Lately, it seems whenever I turn on the news or open social media I learn that another tragedy has occurred somewhere in the world. Each time, I am overcome with feelings of sadness, frustration, and downright hopelessness. I try to think of how I can help make a difference in some small way, but usually end up falling short.

At moments like these, it feels even more important to have conversations with the children in our lives about topics like empathy, compassion, kindness, and inclusion. The interesting thing about empathy, though, is that it's not easy to teach. Yet there are some ways to instill and inspire it. One way is to read books that touch on the subject and can spark a conversation about what it means to be empathetic and compassionate. The following books can help you do just that.

**Pass It On**

by Sophy Henn

This is such a happy and joyful book about being kind, paying it forward, and passing it on! The illustrations are so bright and cheerful. I love the overall message it sends to children ... kindness begets kindness. The text is large and sparse which makes it great for reading aloud to smaller readers. The story and vivid illustrations evoke feelings of pure joy and encourage sharing and kindness.

**Come With Me**

by Holly M. McGhee, illustrated by Pascal Lemaître

I think this story is so great! It's about a little girl who is saddened by the news she sees on TV. She asks her parents what she can do to make the world a better place. Inspired and perhaps impressed by his daughter's question, the father takes her on a walk through the city, greeting everyone he sees with a kind smile and a tip of his hat. The little girl is inspired by her parents' gentle regard for the world and invites the boy next door to come outside and walk the dog with her. I appreciate how this book communicates that small acts of kindness and bravery are what ultimately makes the world a better place. Simply put, the kind things we do matter no matter how big or small.

**The Rabbit Listened**

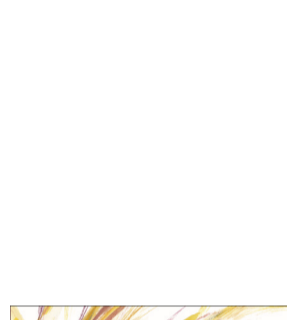
by Cori Doerrfeld

Much as adults try to shield them, every child will face grief and loss in life. Such is the case with Taylor, who is understandably devastated when the block tower he worked so hard to build is knocked down by a flock of birds. A parade of animals tries to help — suggesting Taylor laugh about it or scream in anger — but they all walk away once he discards their advice. Only the rabbit stays. By simply being present, the rabbit demonstrates empathy and support, and teaches kids that listening is the first step to understanding.

**How to Be a Lion**

by Ed Vere

Leonard is not your typical lion — he much prefers hanging out on his thinking hill to hunting for prey. He's a gentle and caring guy who loves spending time with his best friend Marianne, a duck. When other lions try to pressure Leonard into being more ferocious and "lion-like," the two friends write a poem to counter this singleminded way of thinking: "Let nobody say / just one way is true. / There are so many ways / that you can be you." Vere's *How to Be a Lion* is an empowering example of an ever-compassionate friendship and acceptance.

**Hey, Little Ant**

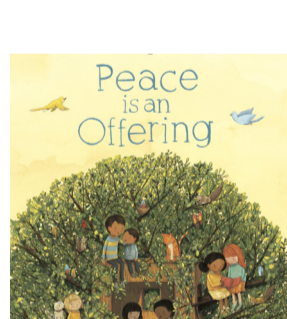
by Phillip Hoose and Hannah Hoose, illustrated by Debbie Tilley

This book is an absolute winner for fostering discussions around compassion and understanding. When a boy comes across an ant on the sidewalk and lifts his shoe to squish it, the ant quickly speaks up to make the case for why his life should be spared. The ant pleads for the boy to imagine how he'd feel if they switched positions. Their humorous dialogue shows a great contrast in how each sees the world. The book ends by asking, "What do you think that kid should do?" and inviting kids to share how they would respond.

**Adrian Simecox Does NOT Have a Horse**

by Marcy Campbell, illustrated by Corinna Luyken

Chloe is very frustrated by her classmate Adrian. He claims to own a horse, but she's absolutely certain that's not true. When an evening walk leads Chloe to Adrian's house, she learns to see the world through his eyes. A spare, yet stunningly beautiful story about perspective, empathy, and imagination.

**The Smallest Girl in the Smallest Grade**

by Justin Roberts, illustrated by Christian Robinson

This story serves as a wonderful reminder of how important each person is in making the world a happier place — even if you're the smallest person in your grade like little Sally McCabe.

With rhyming text and colorful illustrations, it has themes of bullying, injustice, courage, empathy, and finding your voice.

**Last Stop on Market Street**

by Matt de la Peña, illustrated by Christian Robinson

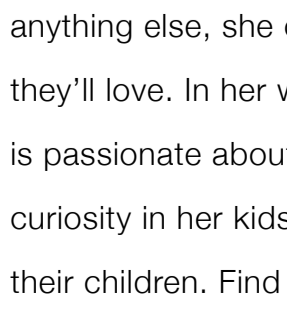
CJ's Nana helps him see beauty in his surroundings, whether it's on the bus or at the soup kitchen they head to every Sunday afternoon. As Nana says, "Sometimes when you're surrounded by dirt, CJ, you're a better witness for what's beautiful."

CJ's grandmother helps remind CJ, and little readers, that everyone we encounter has talents, skills, and their own story, but we must be kind and open-minded in order to hear it.

**Peace Is an Offering**

by Annette LeBox, illustrated by Stephanie Graegin

This book simply and beautifully illustrates how we can share peace with one another. Little readers will easily understand that they can perform small acts of kindness every day like bringing someone a muffin or wiping someone's tears. There is so much more to this book, though, than just providing a list of peaceful ideas. Children will not only come away with a better understanding that peace is all around them, but they may also feel empowered to create it themselves.

**We're All Wonders**

by R.J. Palacio

In this book, readers are reminded that we can choose to be kind to one another rather than cruel. Born with a facial deformity, Auggie knows that he looks different from other children but is hopeful that others will see past his differences and appreciate all the other things that make him unique. This is a powerful story of accepting others for who they really are and not judging them based on how they look. The illustrations are bright and stunning to hold the attention of young readers. This book is also a great resource to use in a classroom setting to help teach kindness by igniting conversations of when children have felt different, how they feel when others stare or poke fun at them, and what would they do if someone was making fun of one of their friends or family members. A great addition to any home or classroom library.

**Emma and the Whale**

by Julie Case, illustrated by Lee White

Emma and the Whale is a tender story of connection with a conservation message. Emma loves spending her days exploring the seashore. One day, a baby whale washes ashore and Emma feels for the stranded creature. She imagines how scared the whale must feel as she pours water to keep it wet while they wait for high tide. With beautiful text and gorgeous illustrations, this book touches on empathy, kindness to animals, and the value of protecting nature.

Charnaie Gordon

Charnaie is a wife, mom of two, computer programmer by day, blogger/influencer by night, self-proclaimed lifelong learner, podcast junkie and Distinguished Toastmaster. Her blog, Here Wee Read, is where she is currently expressing her creativity and passion for reading, diverse literature, and literacy. Her children and her husband are her inspiration and her followers/supporters are her book-loving tribe. More than anything else, she cares about connecting people with great books they'll love. In her world books are an absolute necessity. Charnaie is passionate about instilling a love of reading, lifelong learning, and curiosity in her kids. She hopes to inspire others to do the same with their children. Find her online at hereweeread.com and [@hereweeread](https://twitter.com/hereweeread) on Twitter.