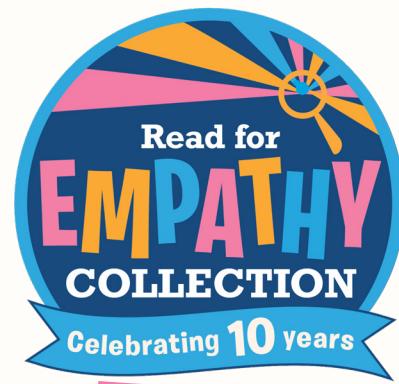


2026

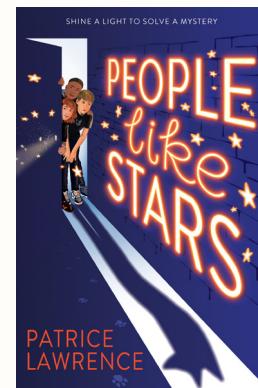
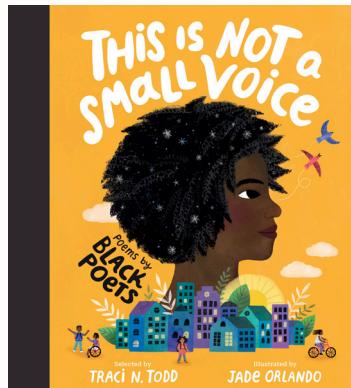
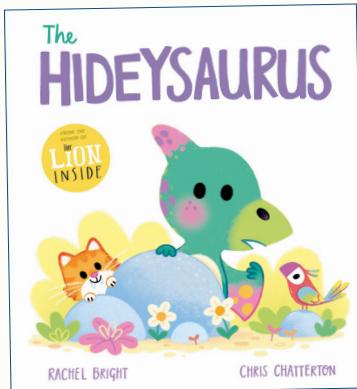
Read for

EMPATHY

Collection



A guide to empathy-building books for children aged 3-11



40 titles selected by experts



Jump into someone else's story

EmpathyLab's mission is to raise empathy-educated generations inspired to create a better world for everyone.

2026 marks 10 years of the Read for Empathy collection.

Stories, in all their forms, connect us - to ourselves, others and the planet.

GO
ALL
IN.

goallin.org.uk

During this National Year of Reading, let's Go All In for Connection and supercharge the power of reading to improve young people's wellbeing and build stronger relationships - enabling them to thrive now and in the future.

International research tells us that empathy plays an integral role in supporting individual and societal wellbeing.

As impact partners of the University of Sussex, we recently shared new evidence of the intertwined nature of empathy development, reading engagement and reading ability.

The key findings from this research indicate that:

‘Children who are better at understanding others’ emotions become better readers’

If we wish to encourage more young people to read, the evidence is clear that having an empathy focus is a brilliant route into greater reading engagement.

In this increasingly divided world, it's more important than ever that we nurture this ability and particularly consider the perspectives of those we disagree with, or who live very different lives to our own.



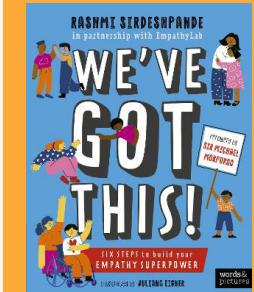
Illustration from *This is Not a Small Voice* © Jade Orlando

An expert panel has selected these 40 brilliant books for children aged 3-11.

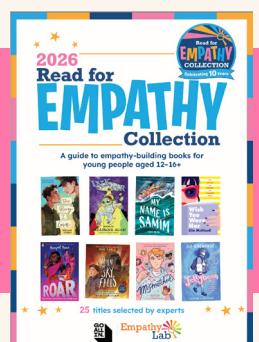
They have been specifically chosen for their power to boost empathy for, and understanding of, other people's feelings and life experiences.

At EmpathyLab we want every young person to benefit from a powerful reading-based empathy education, at home and school - anywhere where stories and young people come together.

Explore practical ways to do this by joining our FREE online learning event on 12 February taking part in our Schools Programme, or use our handy ‘how to’ guide *We've Got This* by Rashmi Sirdeshpande (Quarto).

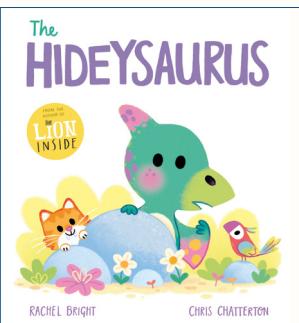
The book cover for 'We've Got This' by Rashmi Sirdeshpande. It features a blue background with the title in large, bold, white letters. Below the title, it says '7 STEPS to build your EMPATHY SUPERPOWER'. The author's name, 'RASHMI SIRDESHPANDE in partnership with EmpathyLab', is at the top. The cover also includes illustrations of children and the text 'WORDS & PICTURES'.

A Read for Empathy collection guide for 12-16+-year-olds is also available.



Emotions

If you can't understand your own feelings, it's hard to relate to other people's. Being able to recognise, name and share your emotions is a key empathy skill. This selection of wonderful picture books will provide a springboard for helping children expand their understanding of, and vocabulary for, emotions.

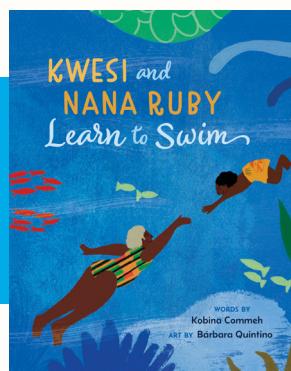


The Hideysaurus

Rachel Bright &
Chris Chatterton

Shy little Hideysaurus is happiest being quiet and pottering around alone. But her noisy dinosaur family throws a big party. A great book for exploring feelings and how joining in can sometimes feel unexpectedly uplifting.

Orchard



Kwesi and Nana Ruby

Learn to Swim

Kobina Commeh
& Bárbara Quintino

Fear takes many forms - Kwesi is burdened by his fear of swimming. Lovely Nana Ruby is scared too - in her Ghana home, black people weren't allowed to swim in public pools. Together, they learn to face their fear, and to swim.

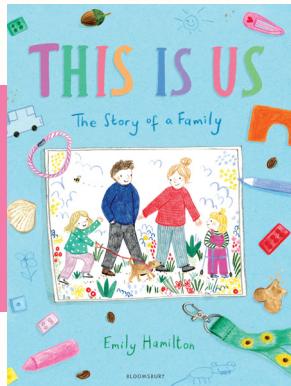
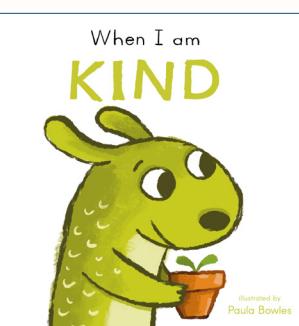
Barefoot

When I Am Kind

Paula Bowles

A simple but powerful board book, with appealing creatures who explore the different forms kindness can take, and what it feels like to be on the receiving end of it. Practical suggestions for how to show kindness, reinforcing key empathy skills like listening.

Child's Play



This is Us: The Story of a Family

Emily Hamilton

Parents talk to their disabled child, sharing how life is, with worries, moods, emotional and physical difficulties. All mixed in with reassurance and reflections on wonderful times, and how 'together, every day, we muddle through in our own way!'

Bloomsbury

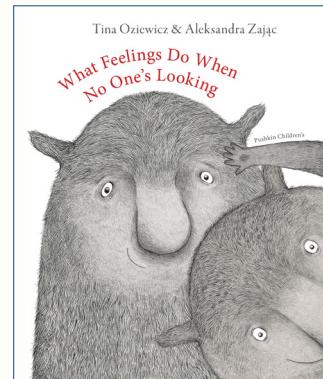
What Feelings Do When

No One's Looking

Tina Oziewicz &
Aleksandra Zajac

On each spread, powerful line drawings of creatures depict a whole range of emotions. They provide images and analogies which can act as a springboard for discussions with children, helping them explore, name and share their feelings.

Pushkin



Where Did She Go?

Cariad Lloyd & Tom Percival

A wonderful picture book exploring a child's grief when her grandma dies, and the confusion arising from unclear language, as adults attempt to shield her from the reality of death. A healing book, with an underlying message about being honest and clear with grieving children.

Hodder

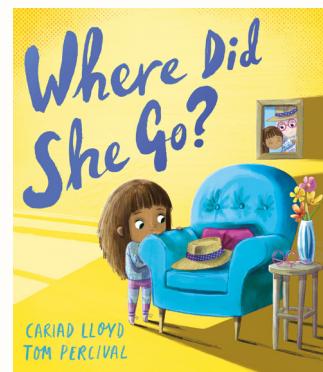


Illustration from *What Feelings Do When No One's Looking*
© Aleksandra Zajac

Picture books

The Playdate

Uje Brandelius & Clara Dackenberg, translated by Nichola Smalley
An apparently straightforward story about a playdate – but look at the pictures and you realise this is about social inequality and the challenges a family faces. It could be used sensitively, even with older children, to discuss injustice and poverty.
Lantana



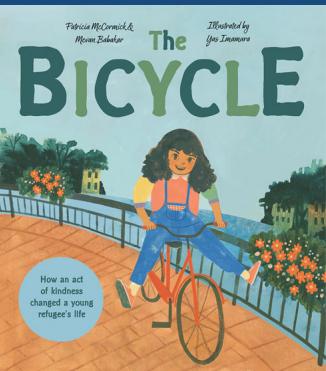
The Dinosaur Next Door

David Litchfield
A girl realises that much-loved local cake baker, Mr Wilson, is actually a dinosaur. Mayhem ensues as he is captured for a scientific show, until the community intervenes. Hugely heartwarming; about real connection melting away the significance of being 'different'.
Magic Cat



The Bicycle

Patricia McCormick, Mevan Babakar & Yas Imamura
Mevan's real-life story starts in Iraqi Kurdistan – her family is forced to leave, making a perilous journey to eventual safety in the Netherlands. A wonderful caretaker who nurtures refugee families brings Mevan a bicycle. For her, the kindness is transformative.
Farshore



Leave the Trees Please

Benjamin Zephaniah & Melissa Castrillon
Zephaniah's poetic text is a paean of praise to trees, which he sees as powerful beings, deserving every possible protection. Urging friendship with trees and the creatures they house, this is a clarion call for empathy towards the environment.
Magic Cat

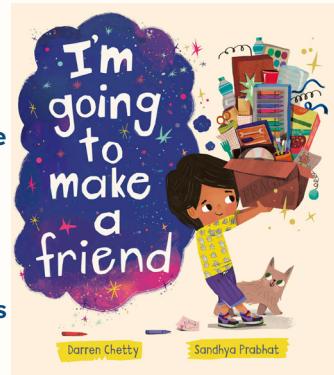


I'm Going to Make a Friend

Darren Chetty & Sandhya Prabhat

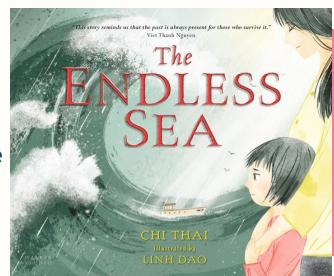
A despondent child longs to make friends and decides to make one from craft materials. The process prompts reflections on the qualities of friends, and what other people like or don't like. A lovely book to explore differences and ways to connect to Little Tiger

 Available for pre-order



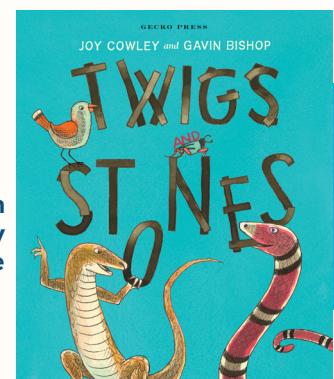
The Endless Sea

Chi Thai & Linh Dao
The Vietnam War prompted an exodus of refugees, many of whom found their way to the UK. We feel their struggles and trauma, as the powerful text and illustrations unfold. A picture book for older readers, supporting children's understanding of the refugee experience and respect for other communities.
Walker

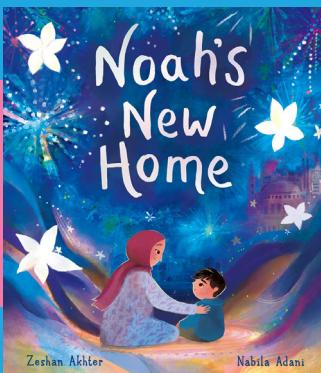


Twigs and Stones

Joy Cowley & Gavin Bishop
Snake and Lizard are friends, even though they're very different. They create their names out of twigs, but in a series of arguments, these morph into Sneak and Liar. A clever play on words, with a deeper message about what really matters in a friendship.
Gecko



Picture books



Noah's New Home

Zeshan Akhter & Nabila Adani

Noah is safe, having escaped war in the Middle East. But he has lost his father, and fireworks terrify him, reminding him of dangerous explosions. A wonderful picture book, helping us understand the feelings of a traumatised child, and the difference kindness can make.

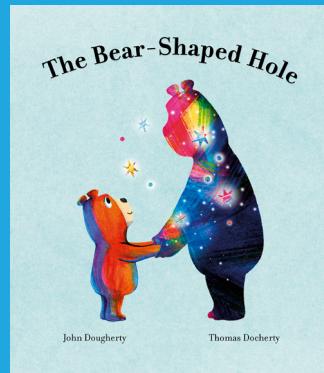
Templar

The Bear-Shaped Hole

John Dougherty & Thomas Docherty

An extremely sensitive picture book addressing bereavement. Orlo is ill and knows he will not get better. He helps his young friend Gerda prepare by making memories with her. A brilliant, reassuring book to help children understand the big emotions that come with grief.

Frances Lincoln



Poetry



This Is Not a Small Voice

Edited by Traci N. Todd, illustrated by Jade Orlando

A stunning collection of poems from black poets including Langston Hughes, Benjamin Zephaniah, Maya Angelou, Dean Atta and many more. Celebratory and joyful, but also charts injustice, inequality and rebellion. A book to dip into and discuss.

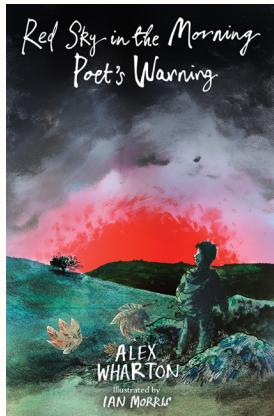
Nosy Crow

Red Sky in the Morning, Poet's Warning

Alex Wharton, illustrated by Ian Morris

A poetry collection rooted in the natural world. Some poems take the perspective of creatures that we exist alongside, such as spiders and fleas, others celebrate landscape and some bring us back to our own human nature. A warm, funny and compelling collection.

Firefly



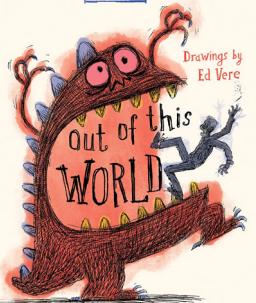
Out of This World

Michael Rosen, illustrated by Ed Vere

When you read Michael Rosen's poetry, it feels like he is talking directly to you. He uses everyday language to share thoughts, memories and experiences in a way that is profound and accessible. There are some truly powerful poems in this collection that will generate deep thinking and discussion.

HarperCollins

Michael Rosen



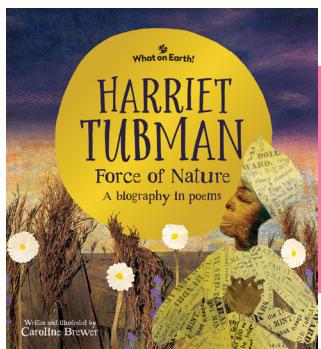
Poems to make you laugh, smile and think

Harriet Tubman, Force of Nature: A Biography in Poems

Caroline Brewer

A fascinating look at the life of social activist Harriet Tubman, through an unusual combination of poetry, illustration, photography and maps. A narrative style will help children understand the brutality experienced by Harriet and her community and learn how precious freedom is.

What On Earth!



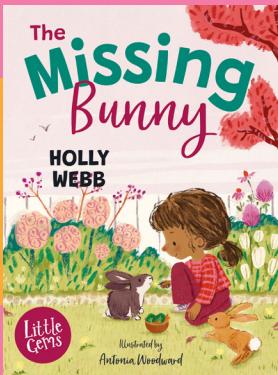
Early readers



Vicky and June

Patricia Toht,
illustrated by Hoang Giang
Vicky (a squirrel) and June (a hedgehog) are best friends. But they keep running up against their differences, with resulting disagreements. Charmingly illustrated, with very short chapters, this gentle book helps children understand how to connect with others by accepting them for who they really are.

Walker



The Missing Bunny

Holly Webb,
illustrated by Antonia Woodward
Told by two narrators – Annie, a little girl thrilled with the family's new rabbits, and Humbug, one of the rabbits. Everything is wonderful, until Annie leaves the hutch door open and Humbug is lost... A gentle story, which empathetically draws the reader into the characters' emotions.

Barrington Stoke

The Moonlight Mystery Agency

The Birthday Cake Thief

Vashti Hardy,
illustrated by Agnes Saccani
Hana feels very resentful that her brother Arlo has disrupted her life, especially as his allergies mean she can't have a pet. But a magical detective cat and a bionic unicorn help her understand what is important to her and to realise what it takes to say sorry.

Barrington Stoke



Illustration from 'The Moonlight Mystery Agency: The Birthday Cake Thief' © Agnes Saccani

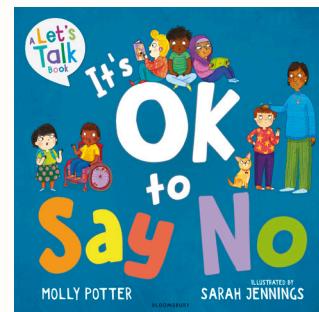


It's OK to Say No

Molly Potter, illustrated by Sarah Jennings

In exploring the vital topic of consent, this clearly written picture book also explores some key aspects of empathy, including the importance of respecting others' feelings, especially when they might be different to your own. Thought-provoking reflections on important areas such as checking and observing.

Bloomsbury Education

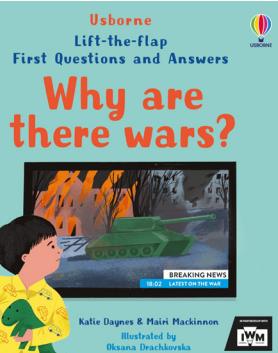
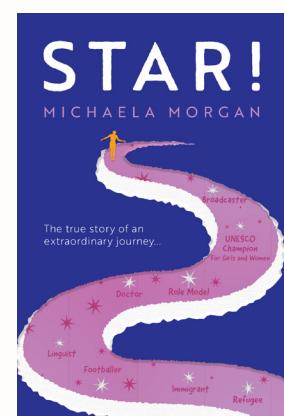


Star!

Michaela Morgan

The biography of Nadia Nadim who, with her mother and siblings, escaped the Taliban in Afghanistan. As an adult, Nadia has championed girl's education, been a celebrated football star, a surgeon and role model. Her inspirational story shows the power of human determination to overcome extreme challenges.

Troika



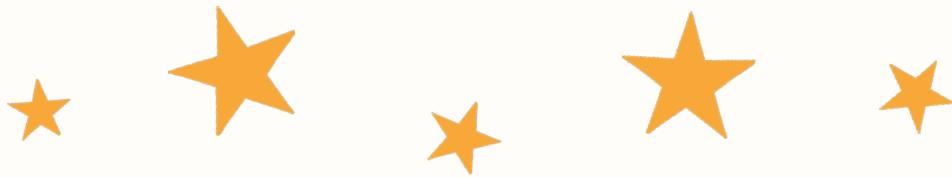
Why Are There Wars?

Katie Daynes & Mairi Mackinnon,
illustrated by Oksana Drachkovska

These thoughtful 'lift-the-flap' books sensitively explain complex social issues to children. This title explores why wars happen and the impact on individuals, but also highlights the peacekeepers and those who risk everything to keep people safe. Great for discussion and perspective-taking.

Usborne

Novels



Land of the Last Wildcat

Lui Sit illustrated by David Dean

A warm, pacey environmental adventure – Puffin must save the last wildcat, with its magical healing powers. The characters feel very real, helping readers connect with emotions, relationships and a sense of caring for nature. Powerful empathy themes to explore, from grief to justice.

Macmillan

Zac and Jac

Cathy Jenkins



Zac and Jac

Cathy Jenkins, illustrated by Monique Steele

Zac and Jac are best friends, unaware of racial tensions until they spill over with life-threatening consequences. Through Jac, we viscerally experience the distress racism causes, not just to victims, but to friends and allies. A short novel with a powerful impact.

Cadno

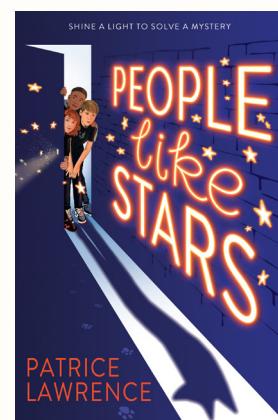


Birdie

J. P. Rose

Birdie Bagshaw is of mixed heritage, living in a children's 'home' in the 1950s. When she is sent to live in a small mining village, she is tormented by racist bullies. But Birdie's empathy ripples through the community, and her compassion for a suffering pit pony brings the village together.

Andersen

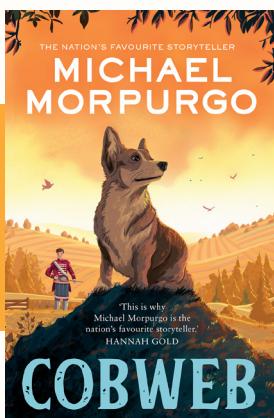


People Like Stars

Patrice Lawrence

A beautifully written mystery story about three young people who discover they have an amazing connection when they cross paths. As they uncover the story, they build an enduring friendship that opens doors to acceptance, understanding and forgiveness.

Scholastic



Cobweb

Michael Morpurgo, illustrated by Michael Foreman

Cobweb is a Welsh drover dog, and we follow his working life during the Napoleonic wars. Even as a puppy, Cobweb embodies the very best empathy qualities – kindness, friendship, courage and values that inspire tolerance and forgiveness.

HarperCollins

The Bird Thief

Rachel Keating, illustrated by Naomi Bennet

Erin is holidaying in Wales. She has OCD and struggles with daily pressures, but with Bess, a mysterious friend, she summons the courage to save precious goldfinches. Empathy for the environment and a budding friendship leave Erin with new confidence in this magical story.

Cadno



Jakub's Otter

Coral Rumble

This insightful novel helps us understand the conflicting feelings young carers experience. Jakub cares for his mum. He is anxious, overprotective and uncomfortable about relinquishing his responsibilities. An amazing Italian holiday gives him time to rest, relax and better understand future possibilities.

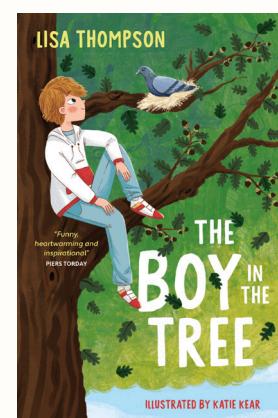
Troika

The Boy in the Tree

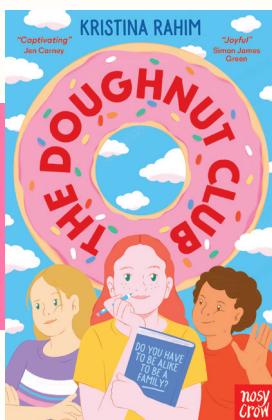
Lisa Thompson, illustrated by Katie Kear

Noah is in trouble at school, distressed at his parents' break-up. He unwittingly gets involved in a campaign to save an oak tree and this focus brings him peace and acceptance. Social action goes hand in hand with exploring emotions in this charming short novel.

Barrington Stoke



Novels



The Doughnut Club

Kristina Rahim

Quinn and Olly are donor-conceived siblings, on holiday with their mums. It's a trip that will change Quinn's life and her understanding of her identity. This book includes engaging characters and lots of fun and warmth, allowing many children to see themselves and their lives celebrated.

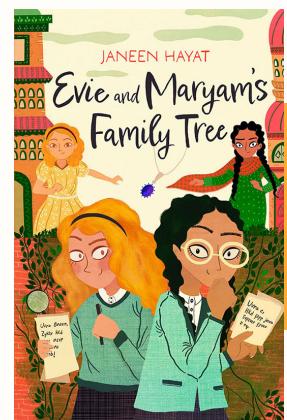
Nosy Crow

Evie and Maryam's Family Tree

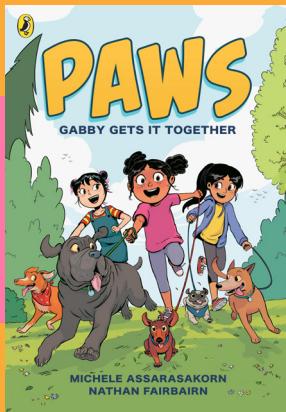
Janeen Hayat

Two girls who feel they have little in common work together on a family tree project and learn about each other's backgrounds, building a friendship and discovering startling family connections from the time of Partition in India. A story encouraging kindness, curiosity and respect for other cultures.

Guppy



Graphic novels



PAWS: Gabby Gets It Together

Michele Assarasakorn & Nathan Fairbairn

A funny graphic novel brilliantly capturing complex pre-adolescent friendships. Gabby, Mindy and Priya are very different girls, whose relationship is tested when they become dog walkers. They must use empathy skills, particularly listening and understanding each other's perspectives, if their friendship is to thrive.

Puffin

Unfairies

Huw Aaron

Join Pip on a thrilling, action-packed adventure as he takes on a vital mission. Overturning expectations on every page, this fast-paced story explores making friends and building trust, community responsibility and facing the consequences of our actions – all through wise-cracking humour.

Puffin

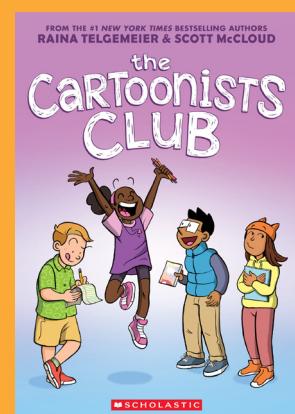


The Cartoonists Club

Raina Telgemeier & Scott McCloud

A lovely graphic novel about creativity, friendship and empathetic adults. Four children come together to form The Cartoonists Club, supported by the school library media specialist Ms Fatima, who teaches them how to cooperate and use their individual skills to overcome challenges.

Scholastic



Higher Ground

Tull Suwannakit

A stunningly illustrated story of a family stranded in a flood and how the grandmother's presence and teachings help the children stay hopeful. We viscerally feel the hardship of their experiences, but it ends on a positive note. Deeply moving.

New Frontier

8



Illustration from PAWS: Gabby Gets It Together © Nathan Fairbairn

TOP TIPS on reading for empathy

- 1. Choose diverse stories** Share books that allow children not only to see their own life experiences reflected, but also introduce them to books set in other countries and with characters of different cultures and facing different experiences. Jump into the story of someone you may never meet in real life and see the world through their eyes.
- 2. Talk about characters** Focus on the characters and their feelings, more than the plot. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers! Wonder together about what the characters are thinking or feeling and what they might do next.
- 3. Help recognise feelings** Use lots of different emotion words when discussing stories. This will help children to understand their own and other people's feelings and why they behave in certain ways.
- 4. Listen deeply** Listening is a crucial part of empathy. Give your full attention as children explore how they feel about the characters.
- 5. Don't forget the pictures** Illustrations are especially good for 'reading' other people – what do the pictures tell us about how the character feels?
- 6. Put empathy into action** Could a book help inspire children to take action to help others at home, in school or their local community? Even small actions can make a huge difference.



Illustration from *This Is Not a Small Voice* © Jade Orlando

How to order the books in this guide

- Find your local independent bookshop booksellers.org.uk
- Order online via EmpathyLab's Bookshop.org page: uk.bookshop.org/shop/empathy-lab

10% supports our mission to bring empathy education to 1 million young people every year

- Contact your usual book supplier
- Borrow the books from your local library

Join the Empathy Education movement

Whether you're a teacher, librarian, caregiver or community champion, there's a way for everyone to get involved! EmpathyLab gives you the tools to turn empathy into action and nurture a love of reading.

Help us grow

If, like us, you believe that empathy is the bedrock from which all positive change springs – whether social, political or environmental, join the Empathy Education movement, and support us to:

- Reach and benefit 1 million children and young people every year
- Train more teachers, librarians, parents and caregivers to supercharge shared reading
- Campaign for empathy development to be included within formal education

Donate today

For less than a cup of coffee per month, together we can make the world a better place for everyone.

Stay up-to-date

To find out more and be the first to hear about our latest news, events and training, sign up to our mailing list [empathylab.uk](https://www.empathylab.uk)



Take part in the Empathy Day Festival

4–11 June 2026

Join a world-class line-up of authors and illustrators to jump into someone else's story.

Featuring empathy-themed creative activities, live and on-demand digital events, toolkits, and much more. From early years to teens, take part for FREE in your school, home or community setting.



Become an EmpathyLab School

Our evidence-based programme helps schools embed empathy as a core value, practiced through reading. Schools report lasting improvements in wellbeing, social and emotional development, community cohesion and reading enjoyment.

Primary, secondary and SEND settings in England, Scotland and Wales are all part of our learning community.

