

Growing


Bright Horizons.
 Early Education & Preschool

Readers Review

Book recommendations to help your child spark a lifelong love of reading

Celebrating

25
years

Preschool-Young School-Age

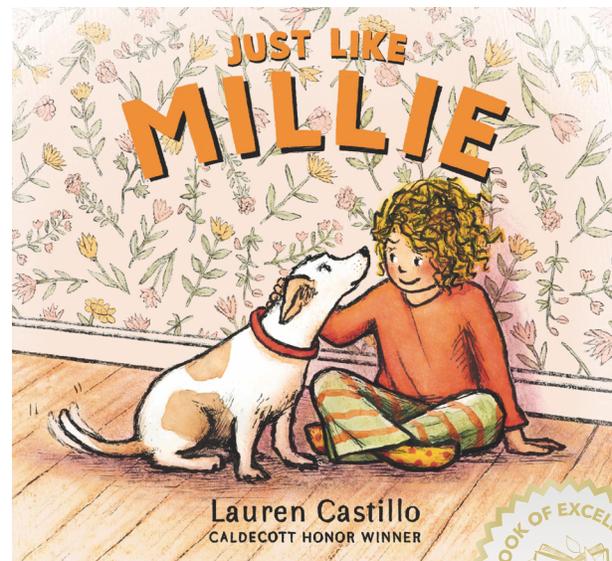
Just Like Millie

Written and illustrated by Lauren Castillo *Just Like Millie* is a tender read-aloud about a shy young girl navigating the challenges of moving to a new town. Overwhelmed by social settings and hesitant to make new friends, she finds comfort and courage through Millie, a sweet rescue dog whose companionship helps her slowly open up to the world around her. Castillo's warm illustrations and heartfelt storytelling beautifully capture how furry friends can be the perfect bridge to connection.

Engaging activities

Create a feelings chart.

Create a list of the different feelings captured in the story's characters (happy, shy, scared, nervous, worried, etc.). Take pictures of your child expressing each of these feelings and create a chart. As you look at the chart, describe the expression and name the emotion. Ask your child to copy the expressions, take turns and say, "Show me happy, surprised, sad, etc."



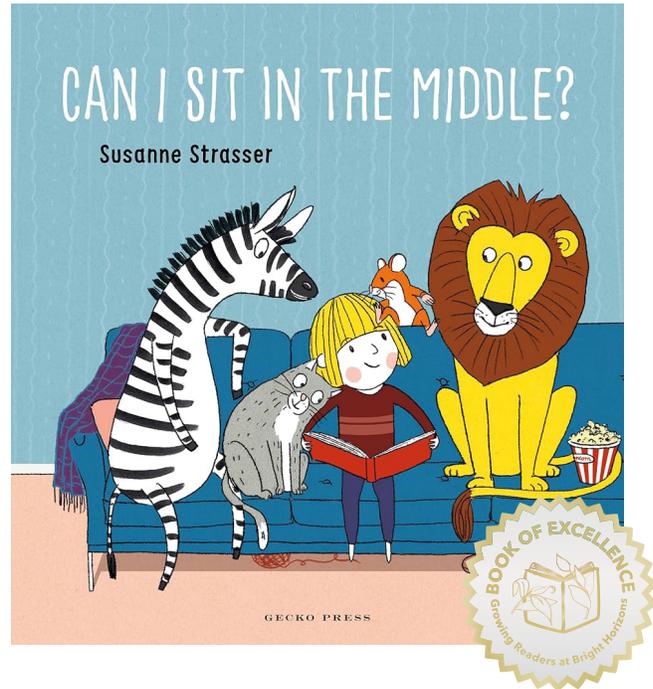
Learn about different body parts.

Help your child gain confidence in social interactions by encouraging them to wave or say hello to other children at the park or school. Afterwards, ask your child to share how it felt to greet someone new. While this activity promotes friendly social exchanges, it's also a great chance to start conversations about stranger safety.

Can I Sit in the Middle?

Written and illustrated by
Susanne Strasser

In this delightfully chaotic story, a group of animal friends gathers around a cozy blue couch, each vying for the perfect spot to enjoy story time. As more animals arrive and settle in, the scene becomes increasingly crowded and silly. With its growing humor and gentle message about making space for others, this book is a joyful celebration of story time and finding fun in imperfect moments.



Engaging activities

Lead an animal sound parade.

From the squeals of the hamster, to the whinny of the zebra, or the lumbering rhino's entrance, each animal has a unique sound. Use animal puppets or point to the illustrations as you make their sounds. Invite your child to add movements for each animal or list other animals to include in your sound parade.

Build a reading fort.

After the chaotic tumble off the couch, the characters create a cozy new space to enjoy their story time. Find a space in your home to create a cozy nook or blanket fort using couch cushions, pillows, stuffed animals, etc., and enjoy your next read-aloud with your child.

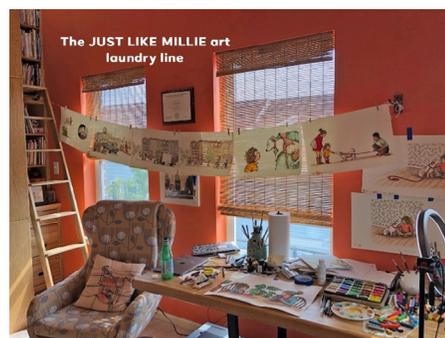


Lauren Castillo

Meet Lauren Castillo, a Caldecott Honor recipient and acclaimed author-illustrator known for her warm, expressive artwork. Growing up in a multicultural family, Castillo's early years were filled with storytelling, art, and discovery. By middle school, she was completely immersed in drawing, filling every blank space of paper with her sketches. After studying illustration at the Maryland Institute College of Art and earning her master's in fine arts from the School of Visual Arts in New York City, she launched her career in children's publishing. She has contributed to several children's picture books, including another one of our Growing Readers titles this year, *This is a Story*.

Her latest book, *Just Like Millie*, draws inspiration from her neighborhood in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and features a heartfelt dog adoption modeled after her own pup, Peanut! In the book, readers are taken on a visual journey through Harrisburg, from cozy coffee shops to lively dog parks. Fans can follow her on social media for behind-the-scenes looks at the real-life landmarks that inspired the book, making it a fun companion for those eager to see the town through her eyes.

Reading news



With her two rescue dogs, Peanut and Keiko, Castillo spends a lot of time in her home art studio crafting stories and illustrations that inspire and share kindness.

Storytelling tips

Model emotional language and learning.

Read slowly and take time to notice the characters' facial expressions and small, hidden details in the illustrations. Try mimicking these expressions with your child and name the emotions they might represent. This helps children connect body awareness with emotional understanding.

When reading *Can I Sit in the Middle?*, you might say, "The lion has one eyebrow furrowed, lips curved down, and an arm resting on the knee. I wonder if the lion feels frustrated because the stork is taking up so much space. Or, perhaps the lion is impatient because they are eager for the book to be read." Label these feelings and invite your child to act out other expressions or help you name them.

In *Just Like Millie*, the young girl says her "face turned hot and [her] eyes turned wet" after meeting new neighbors. Pause and ask, "What might she be feeling? How do you think the others responded—surprise, concern, empathy?" Talk with your child about how new situations can bring up different emotions like joy or anxiety, and how the girl found ways to overcome her fears with Millie's help.

Both books offer opportunities to explore how characters feel and why. Ask your child, "What do you think Millie wanted when she looked at the dog park?" or "Why might the lion want to sit in the middle?" These questions help build empathy and social awareness.



Make reading a joyful part of your child's daily routine.

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