

In the Spotlight

All kinds of treasure

We first met Belinda Ryan in 2012 when she'd developed a pilot program using our picture book, *The Wrong Stone*, for siblings of children who have a life-limiting illness. An Art Therapist with the Women's and Children's Hospital in Adelaide, Belinda works with the Paediatric Palliative Care Unit. This month we spoke to Belinda and discovered her original pilot program is now a fixture with a whole new cast of characters. Move over stones, it's time for pirates!

Having a brother or sister with life-limiting illness is a hugely emotional experience that can leave siblings feeling isolated, guilty, frustrated and anxious. What began as a one-off workshop to help these siblings connect with each other and share experiences has evolved into a biannual event, run by the Unit during every second school holiday. 'This project has become a part of what we do now,' Belinda explains, with children from bereaved and non-bereaved families encouraged to participate.

Part of the workshops' success is due to the strong focus on creativity and storytelling, which Belinda nurtures by coordinating the activities around a particular theme. 'The use of story is really powerful,' she stresses, 'It is such a good way to communicate.' This year, the workshops have taken on a distinctly nautical aspect with Innovative Resources' picture book *Captain Grumpy* chosen as the thematic starting point.

Captain Grumpy, Belinda explains, was ideal because its narrative speaks to many of the emotions siblings experience: isolation, worry and apprehension, and feeling left out as a result of attention given to a sick brother or sister. The picture book could also be adapted in all kinds of ways to support the workshop's five goals: to help siblings express feelings, connect with others going through similar experiences, feel special, develop coping strategies, and, most importantly, to have fun!

In fact, fun was the first order of the day at the Unit's most recent workshop. The first task for the group of sixteen children, aged 7-12, was to get to know each other while working together to create a desert island. Their stock of materials included corks, pinecones, stones and popsicles. 'A couple of kids created rafts,' Belinda recalls. Others spotted 'gems' among the materials and imagined a treasure chest.

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With their desert island complete, Belinda read *Captain Grumpy* to the children, using the story to lead a discussion about what made the children unhappy, the pressures they experienced, and how grumpiness can be the result of many other feelings. A mask-making activity followed with masks created to show feelings rather than characters. 'The masks, for example, bring the things they're worried about to the surface', she advises, and also help the children to acknowledge how emotions can be hidden from the world.

'Then we had a big jam session!' Belinda laughs. In the story, Captain Grumpy's discovery of music is the catalyst for big changes in his life. In parallel with the narrative, the children invented all kinds musical instruments as part of an exploration of coping skills and the things that helped them get through tough times. Tin cans, rain makers, clapstick, shakers made from cardboard tubes and pretend guitars were just a few of the instruments in the orchestra!

The day closed with an affirmations exercise and the children 'created what they would take from the island.' There were also *Strength Card* stickers on hand, and each sibling was given a sheet of stickers to share and gift to the other children. It became the most personal and poignant activity of the day when the children starting putting stickers directly onto each other's chest. Finally, all the siblings received their own copy of *Captain Grumpy* along with a goodie bag.

Thanks to the success of Belinda's program for children, she and her colleagues have now established an art-therapy-based Bereaved Mothers' Group—and plans are afoot for an adolescent program for children aged 12+. Already she has run one workshop with adolescents, which avoided introducing a central theme or narrative in case it was perceived as too juvenile. The feedback was a resounding, though: 'We need a story!' Will that story involve our favourite pirate? Not necessarily, but the tale of *Captain Grumpy* has undoubtedly made its mark. 'It's so simple yet so powerful,' Belinda enthuses, 'The message is right there.'