

DAD, CAN WE DRAW GIRAFFES?

A story about a parent's depression



| | |
|----------------|---|
| Publisher | Mielenterveysomaiset Pirkanmaa - FinFami ry 2022 |
| Strory by | Toivosta turvaa project worker Sanni Tiainen (MEd) Contributions from peers and comments from social work, healthcare and education professionals helped in drafting the story. |
| Illustrated by | Sanni Tiainen |

DAD, CAN WE DRAW GIRAFFES?

A story about a parent's depression

Preface

A parent's substance abuse or mental health problems affect the whole family. A support intervention realised in a timely manner may help prevent the negative effects of the problem. Dad, can we draw giraffes? is part of the materials produced in the Toivosta turvaa (Hope Creates Safety, 2017–2020) project to support families with children. The book contains a story of a child whose parent has depression. The theoretical framework for the story is based on the Effective Child & Family methods and understanding of the factors that protect the child's development when a parent has substance abuse or mental health problems (cf. also the 'Perheiden hyvinvointipuu' tree model for the well-being of families, available in Finnish).

The objective of the book is to help adults who are close to a child to address the matter and discuss the child's experiences, thoughts and feelings related to it with them. The protagonist in the book, Bean, and their experiences and feelings, can help in discussions on the matter. You can ask the child questions either at suitable moments while reading the story or after reading it. We recommend that adults familiarise themselves with the book independently before reading it with the child.

Many thanks to everyone who participated in the collaboration!

Hi, I'm Bean. I'm seven years old. Other members of my family are my big brother, Mum, Dad, and my cuddly toy, Pea. I like fairy tales, drawing and apple cinnamon muffins. Today I'm sad, even though it's my treats day.

I'm sad because Dad doesn't play with me anymore. Dad doesn't even smile anymore. His lips are always straight or the corners of his mouth are drawn down. Sometimes Dad just sits still and stares into the distance. Or he grumbles and acts cranky.

Today, for example, Dad didn't get up and have breakfast with us. He just stayed in bed and was still sleeping when I came back from school. Mum said that Dad was really tired and he didn't want to be disturbed.

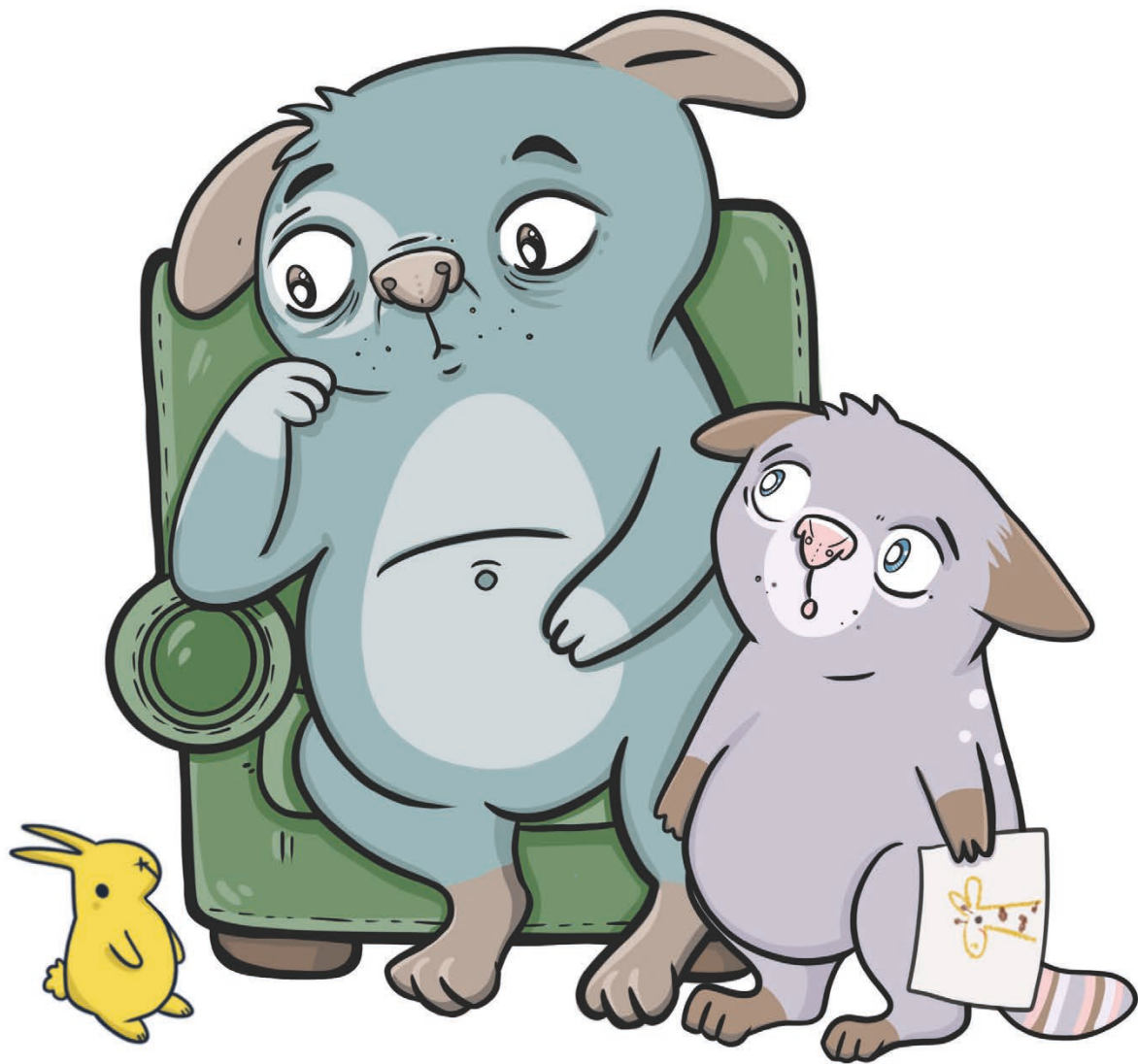


Dad's not always been like that. He always used to play with me. We went for ice cream together, and we drew giraffes.

I don't know why Dad doesn't want to play with me anymore. I wonder if I've done something wrong? Maybe Dad got angry with me because I always played with the phone, even though he said no? Or because I jumped in puddles while I was wearing my new trainers so they got dirty?

Today after school, I tried showing my drawing to Dad. He said it was really nice. But I noticed that he didn't really even look at it, and that was annoying.

What if he just doesn't really like my drawings?

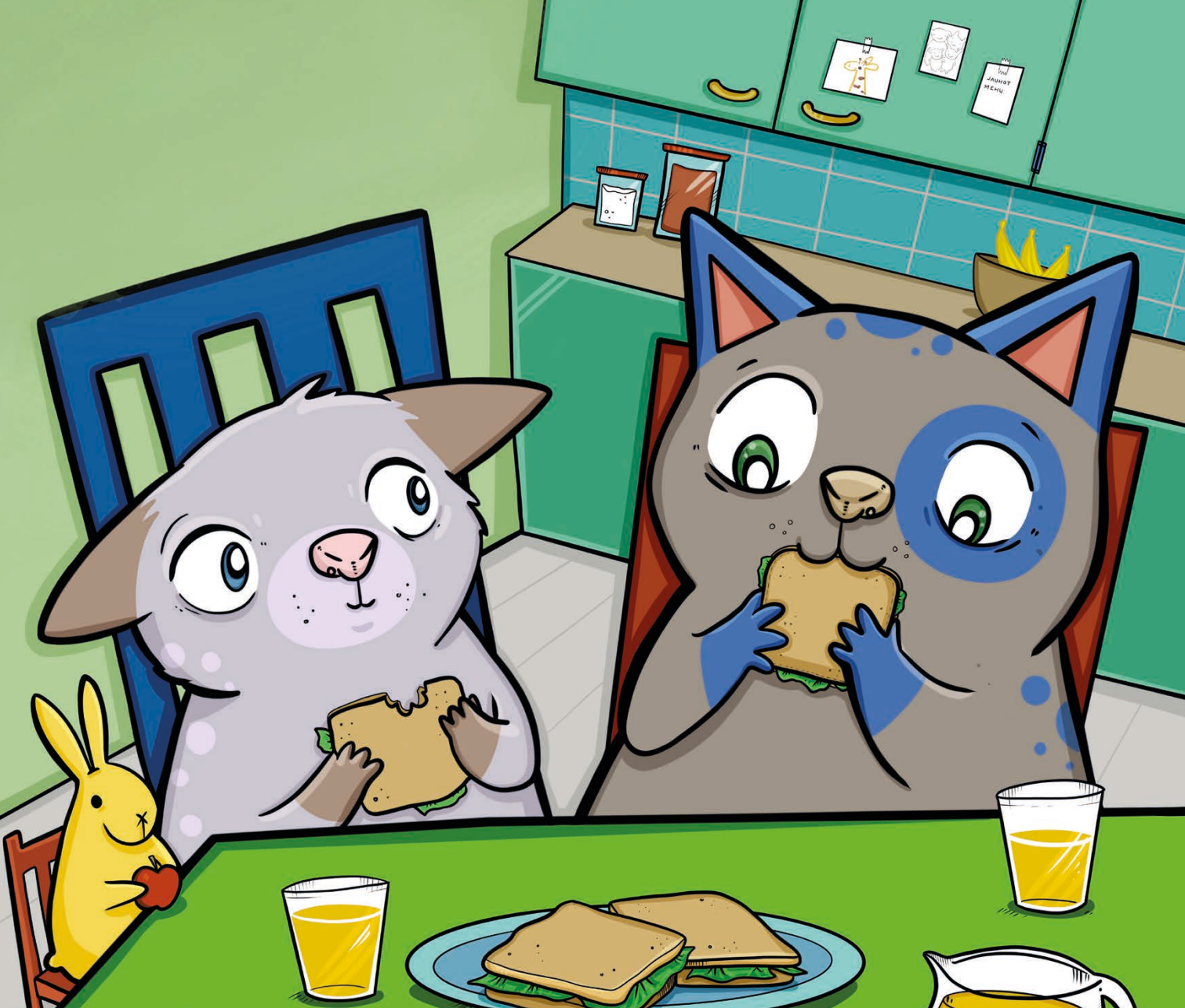


Mum is often busy. She says that she has to do housework. Or make some important phone calls. Mum and Dad argue quite a lot. When they do, Pea and I hide under the blanket and read books about aliens or dragons. Later Mum comes to tuck us in and give us goodnight kisses. That makes me feel safe.



Ompa kiva
leikkiä me löu-
kaamme niin o-
petin perin piti tullen
yhteismuistelu ja pöytä
kuvasta

Like I already said, I also have a big brother. His name is Pod. He likes detective books, video games and lasagne. Pod is already at secondary school and he can help me with my maths homework. Pod often walks home from school with me and makes us a snack. At night, Pod also reads me a bedtime story if Dad is too tired to do it.

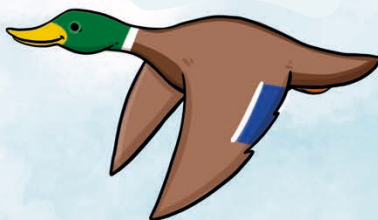


Grandpa visits us once a week. Fortunately, Grandpa hasn't changed at all. He tells us stories about his childhood and teaches me the names of different birds. I already know magpie, sparrow, black-headed gull and mallard. Grandpa says it's a lot.

Sometimes he takes me out for ice cream. Grandpa never gets mad at me if I take a long time to choose the flavour I want. He understands that it's an important decision that can take some time.



MAGPIE



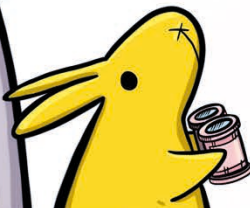
MALLARD



HA
HA
HA

BLACK-HEADED
GULL

SPARROW



Sometimes Dad can get angry if I haven't tidied away my toys. I always try really hard to remember to put my toys away, but sometimes I just forget.

When I'm at my friends' houses it's different to my home. For example, it's a lot more fun to play at my friends' homes. There it doesn't really matter if we accidentally make a lot of noise when we're playing. At home, Dad can't really handle any noise. But how can you play a rally race without being at least a little bit noisy?

I'm afraid that it's my fault that Dad is like this. Sometimes I feel like the worry inside me is a really big lump. The lump doesn't have a beginning or an end, and you can't grasp it anywhere. The lump is really heavy and it feels like something tightening in my chest. I haven't told anyone about the lump.



Today, when Pod and I came back from school, Mum told us that Dad had gone into hospital and we could visit him together.

At the hospital, the nurse told us that Dad was suffering from depression. The nurse said that he could be treated and that he would be OK. Pod asked the nurse if depression was contagious. The nurse told us that we didn't need to worry because depression can't be caught like a cold, for example.

When we saw Dad, he looked the same as he did at home. I asked Dad if depression hurt. Dad said that it didn't hurt but it often made him tired and really sad. Sad like I am if I have an argument with a friend.

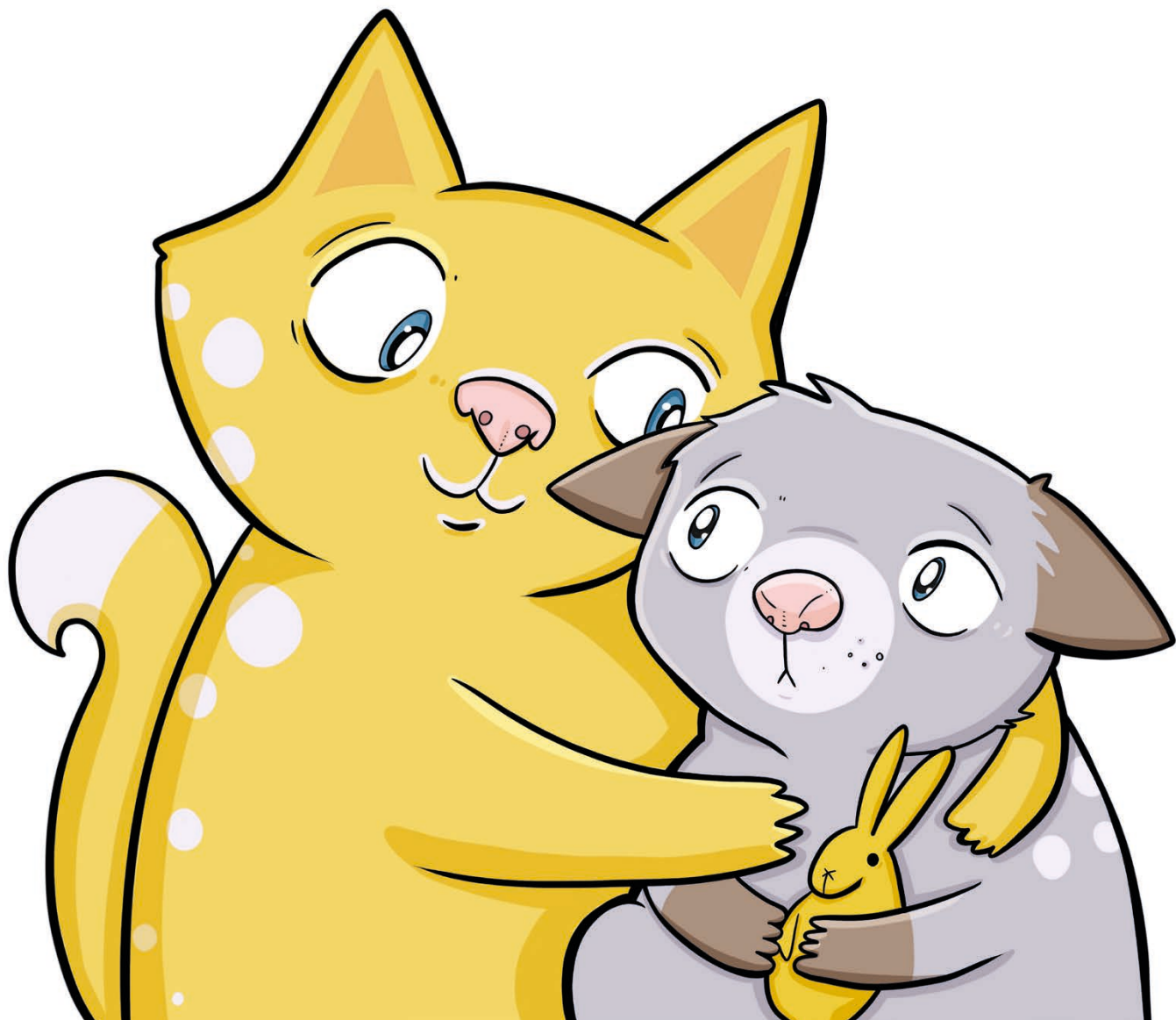
Then I asked Dad if his depression was my fault. Dad said that of course it wasn't. He said it had nothing to do with me, Pod or Mum. Dad said that he loved us all very much, even though he was often too tired to show it because of his depression. I was relieved to hear that Dad's depression wasn't my fault after all.



Now Dad goes to talk to a nurse about the things that bother his mind every week. I, on the other hand, go to a club. I go to the club every Thursday after school. Today I drew a hippo at the club. It's nice to go to a club where there are other kids too, and the teacher is a really nice person. After the club, Dad takes me home. Dad thinks I am getting better and better at drawing. Dad says that as soon as he gets his strength back, we'll continue drawing together. I think that sounds like a good plan.

Now Dad already seems happier most of the time, but he often gets sad and withdraws into his shell. Now I know it's not my fault – it's because of his depression. Sometimes I worry that Dad won't recover after all. When that happens, Mum makes me feel better and tells me that it's perfectly understandable to be worried but that sometimes it takes a long time to recover.

Mum has said that if something bothers me, it will help if I tell someone about it and talk about it with an adult. Mum has also said that even if Dad is too tired to be happy or play with me, it doesn't mean that I shouldn't be happy or do the things that I like. When I talk to Mum, the lump of worries inside me gets lighter and smaller, and slowly melts away.



Last week, we went to the library to borrow some audiobooks that we listen to with Dad before going to bed. That way Dad doesn't need to do the reading. I think it's nice to listen to bedtime stories together.

Pod sometimes comes to listen to the stories with us, even though he says he's too old for that. I think Pod is just bluffing. I'm sure I'll never be too old for stories.



How should I talk to a child about their parent's illness?

1. Consider how the illness manifests itself in the child's everyday life and what it looks like from their perspective. It is important for the child to understand these things.
2. It is important that the child gets to talk about their feelings and possible fears. To start a conversation, it is a good idea to find out about the explanation model that the child has created for themselves. Let the child talk. You can start the conversation by referring to a recent, tangible event to find out what the child thought about it and how they felt and experienced it. After listening to this, you can decide what to tell the child.
3. When talking to the child about the illness, be honest but take the child's age into consideration. State the name of the illness and how it principally affects the patient's behaviour, emotional life and social interaction. You can use everyday metaphors that are easy for the child to understand.
4. Tell the child that the adult's behaviour is not the child's fault. Let the child be themselves and show their own feelings.
5. Tell the child that there are other adults around to support the adult who is ill. Remind the child that they are also being cared for. Talk about who else knows about the illness and how the child can discuss the matter with others. Also agree on who the child can talk to about their worries if they don't want to worry you.
6. It is good to focus the discussion on solutions that will help everyone to get through the illness.
7. Remember to make sure that the child has understood what you told them. For example, you can ask the child what they remember from the conversation.
8. Pay attention to the feelings the child has after the conversation. Remember that one conversation may not be enough. Remember to be patient, keep the conversations short and move forwards at the child's pace. Give the child time to process the matter and show understanding towards the reactions the child expresses.

Sources

Mielenterveysomaiset Pirkanmaa - FinFami ry. Hyvä vanhempi sairaudesta huolimatta.

Pöyhönen, Julia (2018) Vanhemman mielenterveys – miten jutella lapsen kanssa?
www.familyboost.fi/vanhemman-mielenterveys/

Riihonen, Riikka (2019) Miten kertoa lapselle aikuisen mielenterveysongelmista?
www.riikkariihoenen.com/2019/09/05/psykoedukaatio-ja-vanhemmuus/

Solantaus, Tytti (2010) Miten huolehdin lapsistani? – Käsikirja vanhemmille, joita oma päihteidenkäyttö askarruttaa.
(How Can I Care For My Children? A Handbook for Parents Struggling with Drug or Alcohol Use)
Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare

Solantaus, Tytti (2013) Miten autan lastani? - Opas vanhemmille, joilla on mielenterveyden ongelmia.
(How Can I Help My Children? A Guide To Parents Who Have Mental Problems)
Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare



www.finfamipirkanmaa.fi