

# Our Smallest Warriors, Our Strongest Medicine

Honoring Our Teachings  
during COVID-19!



## Introduction

“Our Smallest Warriors, Our Strongest Medicine: Honoring Our Teachings during COVID-19” is a book written for Indigenous (American Indian, Alaska Native, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) children and families to help youth cope with and understand the COVID-19 pandemic.

This book should be read by a parent, caregiver, or teacher alongside a child or small group of children. It is not encouraged for children to read this book independently without the support of a parent, caregiver, or teacher. This book can be read in one sitting or broken up into multiple reading sessions. If you choose to read the story in multiple sessions you could divide it up by the characters, as each of Tara and Virgil’s friends has their own story and teaching to pass on. There is a toolkit online at [cih.jhu.edu/programs/our-smallest-warriors-our-strongest-medicine-honoring-our-teachings-during-covid-19](https://cih.jhu.edu/programs/our-smallest-warriors-our-strongest-medicine-honoring-our-teachings-during-covid-19) that offers support for addressing topics related to COVID-19 and supplementary activities for children to do based on the book.



## The making of “Our Smallest Warriors, Our Strongest Medicine: Honoring Our Teachings during COVID-19”

This book is a sequel to “Our Smallest Warriors, Our Strongest Medicine: Overcoming COVID-19” which was culturally adapted from “My Hero is You,” a children’s book developed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Reference Group on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings (IASC MHPSS RG).

The Johns Hopkins Center for Indigenous Health convened a team of Native American experts in child development, public health, and communications as well as a Native illustrator to write this sequel and create illustrations that represent Indigenous peoples, values, and communities. This book elevates Indigenous storytelling, an important tradition that has supported the well-being and resilience of tribes since time immemorial. This series of stories seeks to reach Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island and portray a sense of communal efficacy, strength, and hope in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has brought new changes and challenges to many of our communities, but we continue to remember that our cultural teachings bring us strength and resilience.

The people listed below contributed to developing and distributing this sequel:

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This book is illustrated by [Joelle Joyner](#) (Meherrin). She is an undergraduate public health student at Wayne State University, free-lance illustrator, and Jingle Dress dancer from Michigan. Notably, her art has been featured in the Kresge Foundation headquarters and in the National Museum of the American Indian magazine.

We would like to express gratitude to the JHU Office of the President and Office of the Provost, as well as the Johns Hopkins Alliance for a Healthier World, UNICEF USA, Indian Health Service, and Casey Family Programs for supporting the original or sequel “Our Smallest Warriors, Our Strongest Medicine” books.

*This book is dedicated to all our relatives whose lives have been impacted by COVID-19 and to our knowledge keepers who carry our traditional teachings now, as well as those who will pass these teachings on to future generations.*

### Johns Hopkins Center for Indigenous Health

Founded in 1991 and based in the Department of International Health of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, the Johns Hopkins Center for Indigenous Health supports public health interventions designed for and by Native peoples. Learn more at [cih.jhu.edu](http://cih.jhu.edu).



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Twins Tara and Virgil just finished online school and are playing basketball while waiting for their parents to come home from work.



The Twins' Mom is a nurse, and she helps people with the coronavirus feel better. Their Dad is the tribal chairperson and helps guide their community.

"Grandma, when will Mom and Dad be home?" asks Virgil.

"Soon, little ones. They're both busy helping to prevent the spread of coronavirus," replies Grandma.



During dinner, the Twins ask their parents why they were late coming home from work.

"We were planning for more coronavirus vaccinations next week," answers Dad.

"What's a vaccination?" asks Tara.

"A vaccination is a type of shot that teaches your body how to fight germs so we don't get sick," answers Mom.

"I don't like getting shots, Mom. They hurt!" says Virgil, rubbing his arm.

"Shots and vaccinations can be painful, but it's important that we protect ourselves, our family, and our community from illnesses like the coronavirus," says Grandma.





As the Twins get ready for bed, they think about what they have done over the past few months.

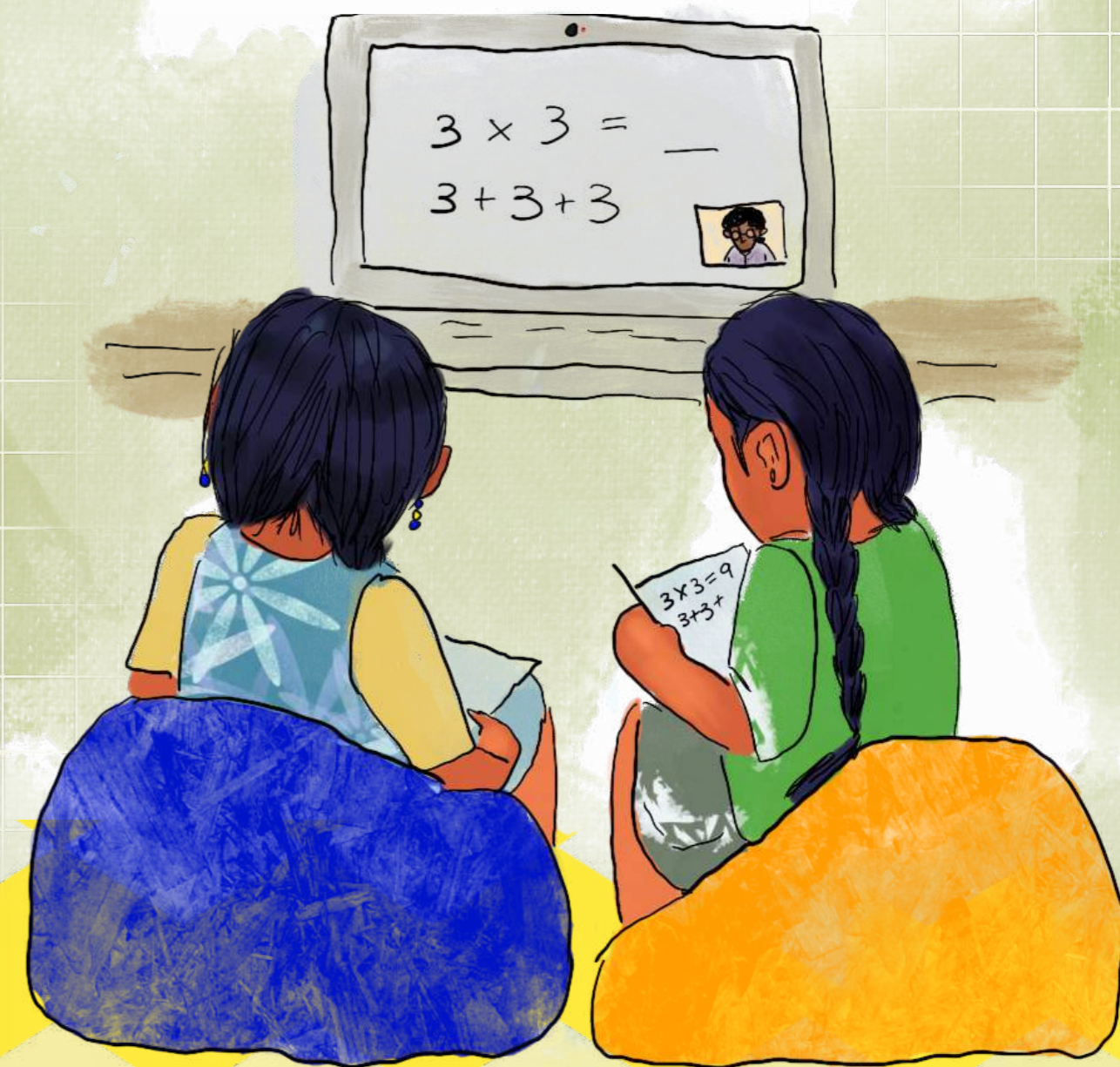
"Virgil, when I go to bed, I like to think about things that make me happy. Like, tonight, I am thinking about how we got to spend time with our family and animals," says Tara.

"Yeah, and I am much better at powwow dancing because I am practicing so much!" says Virgil.



"We've learned so much about different ways to stay safe and protect our community, too!" says Tara.

"Even though we are learning some good things, I still miss our friends. I wonder why the coronavirus makes life feel so hard," Virgil says, with some sadness in his voice.



"Little ones, I know it can be hard not to see your friends, but it's always important that we look for teachings in hard times," says Grandma, hearing the Twins' conversation.

"What's a teaching?" asks Tara.

"A teaching is something you learn so you can live a good life. One day, when you are older, you can pass teachings on to the children you take care of," Grandma says.

"Grandma, I don't understand. What teachings are we supposed to get out of the coronavirus?" says Virgil, feeling defeated.

"That's for you two to figure out," says Grandma. "Sleep well, little ones."





The next morning, the Twins are eating breakfast.

"Do you remember the dream we had a few months ago when we visited our friends with Grandfather Eagle?" asks Virgil.

"Yes!" says Tara, "I sure do miss our friends."

"You know how Grandma was talking about teachings yesterday? I wonder what teachings our powwow friends are learning from the coronavirus," says Virgil.





Later that evening, the Twins have their monthly Zoom call with their friend, Aspen, who lives in a big city to the East.

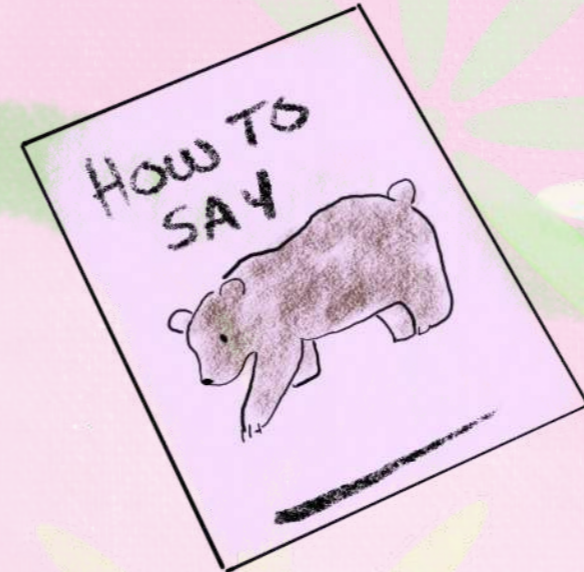
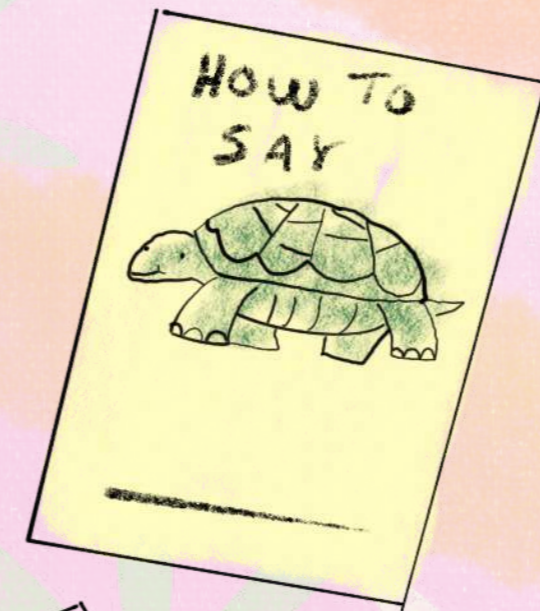


"My family misses going to community gatherings at our urban Native health center. Since my tribe is far away, we haven't been able to go visit our relatives back home," says Aspen.

Aspen continues, "My parents tell me that it's normal to feel sad when I miss my friends. My Dad taught me how caring for others in our community can help when I'm missing certain people."



"Even though we can't always be together, we have ways to be connected."



"One really cool thing is that my older brother, Dakota, has been home from college. I get to see him more, and he is taking online language classes to learn our language. He's even taught me a few words. My favorite word means community."

"Thanks for catching up with us, Aspen!" the Twins say as they wave goodbye.

Later that week, Tara and Virgil receive a letter in the mail from their friend, Daniel, who lives on a reservation in the Southern direction. They begin reading the letter to hear how Daniel has been.



Hi Tara and Virgil,

My dad had COVID-19 a few months ago, which made me feel scared, but he is better now.

I'm going to school two days a week in person and three days online. In-person school looks a little different than it used to – we wear masks and stay physically distant from each other. But it makes me so happy to see my friends again!

During online school I have some trouble focusing, so I make sure I take small breaks throughout the day.

My birthday was last month! My family did a drive-thru birthday party. Seeing all my friends and family drive by made me feel so loved.

While it's been hard at times, I have also had a lot of fun!



The Twins continue to read the rest of Daniel's letter.

*When I feel scared or worried about COVID-19, my Mom helps me. We talk about what feelings I have and what I can do to feel better. After we talk, I feel calmer.*

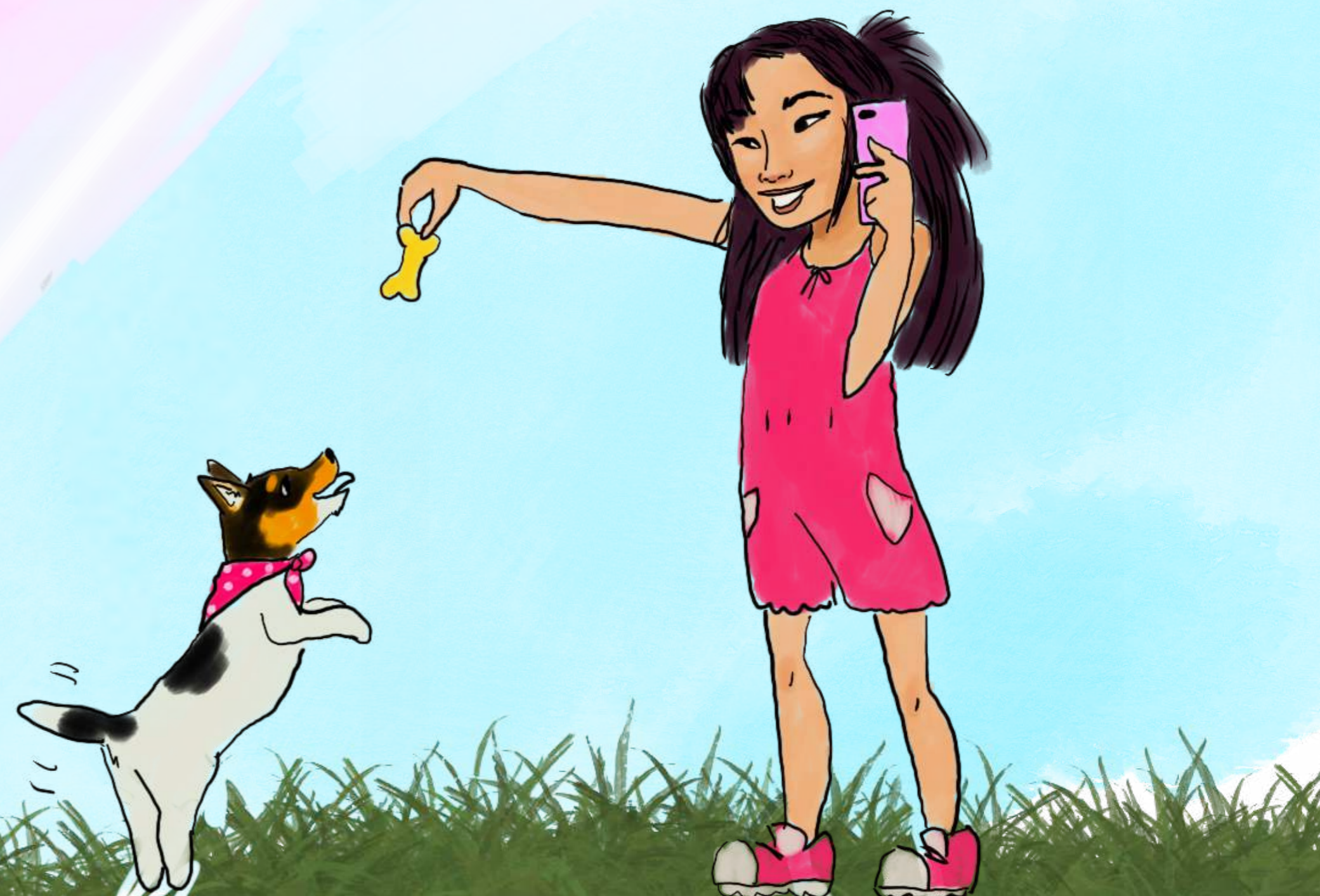
*My Mom also taught me about how we carry the strengths of our ancestors inside of us and that helps us through hard times today. I feel strong like our ancestors.*

*I can't wait to see you both again. Until then, take care!  
Daniel*



The next day, the Twins call their friend Sophie, who lives in the West.

Sophie is playing with her dog, Bear, when the Twins call.



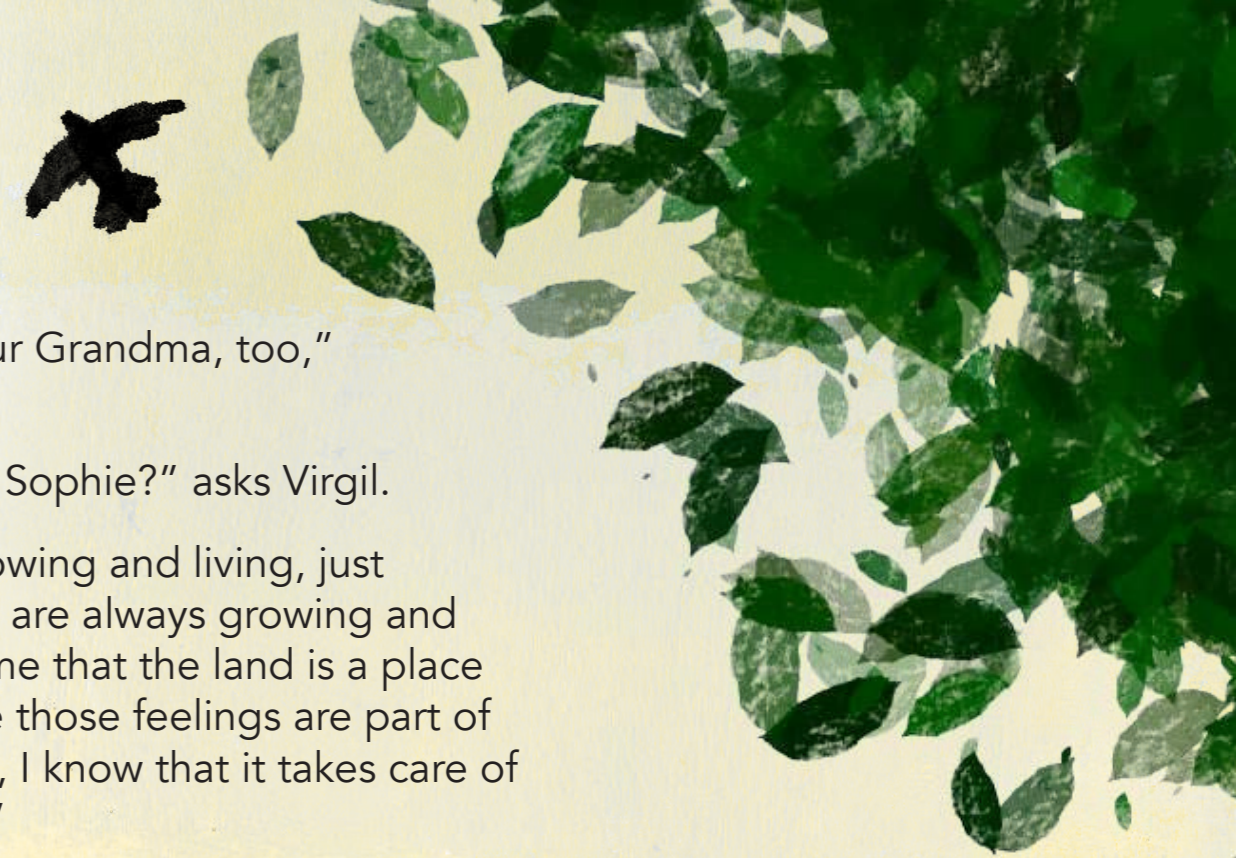


"How are you, Sophie?" asks Tara.

Sophie tells the Twins that she has been feeling sad because her Grandmother died after getting sick from the coronavirus. "My Mom says that it's okay to be sad and miss my Grandma," says Sophie.

"When I miss her a lot, I try to think about all of the teachings I learned from my Grandma," Sophie tells the Twins. "That's why I go outside a lot because my Grandma taught me that we come from the land and to be grateful for the ways the land takes care of our body, heart, mind, and spirit."



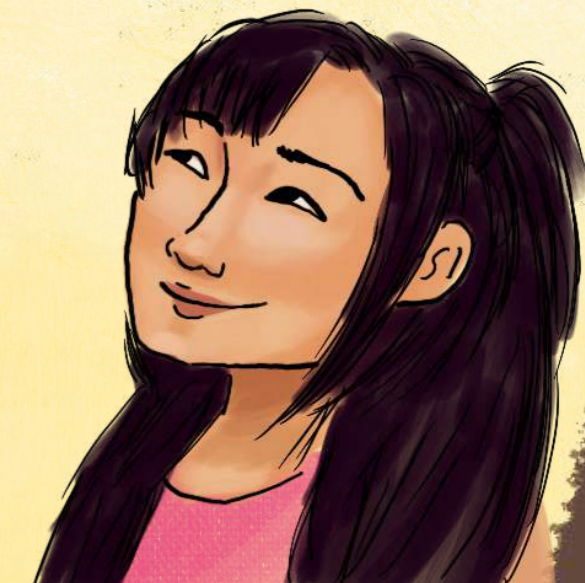


"We have learned about the land from our Grandma, too," says Tara.

"What else did your Grandma teach you, Sophie?" asks Virgil.

"Mother Earth is full of things that are growing and living, just like us," says Sophie. "Plants and animals are always growing and changing in cycles. My Grandma taught me that the land is a place we can go when we feel sadness because those feelings are part of cycles, too. When I connect with the land, I know that it takes care of me just like it provided for my ancestors."

"I learned from my Grandma that going to the land to sing is healing. Sometimes, I see a red-tailed hawk, and I know that it is my Grandma visiting me," Sophie tells the Twins.



The Twins ask Sophie what other activities she likes to do outside.

Sophie tells the Twins about how she has been gathering and harvesting food with her family. "Sometimes we go on walks and collect acorns to eat later," says Sophie. "We also have a garden where I am growing vegetables. I love taking care of the garden, and it helps me feel calm and keeps my body strong."

"Sophie, could you send us some of the seeds you grow with your family?" asks Virgil. "We would love to share our seeds with you, too!" says Tara.

"That would be so fun!" says Sophie, "I have to go help my family water the garden, but it was great to talk to you both, and I'll send some seeds soon!"



The next day, the Twins receive a package in the mail.

"Look, Tara, a package from Jason!" Virgil exclaims as he opens it.

"Let's read the letter before we open the rest of the package," Tara says.





Jason writes that he is helping his older sister, Shiloh, make care packages for Elders.

The packages have traditional medicines like sage, sweetgrass, and tobacco that his family grows in their garden and cedar that they gather on their family's nature walks. They also include hand sanitizer, some snacks, bottled water, and face masks that Jason's mother sews.

Jason writes that helping to take care of others makes him feel happy and stay well.



As Virgil finishes reading the letter out loud, Tara starts to open the package.

Tara pulls out the bundle of traditional medicines as Virgil reads, "Providing traditional medicines helps me feel connected to my community and gives me hope for the future."

"When I feel sad, scared, or worried and need a moment to feel better, I pray as I breathe in the smell of these medicines. It helps me to feel connected to the land and my culture. I hope these medicines bring you two joy and relief when you need it."

Jason ends his letter by writing, "Although times are tough, we always do our best to take care of ourselves and each other."



The next weekend, the Twins sit outside and talk with Grandma.

"Grandma, you taught us that we can find teachings even in hard times, and that it is up to us to think about our own teachings," says Virgil.

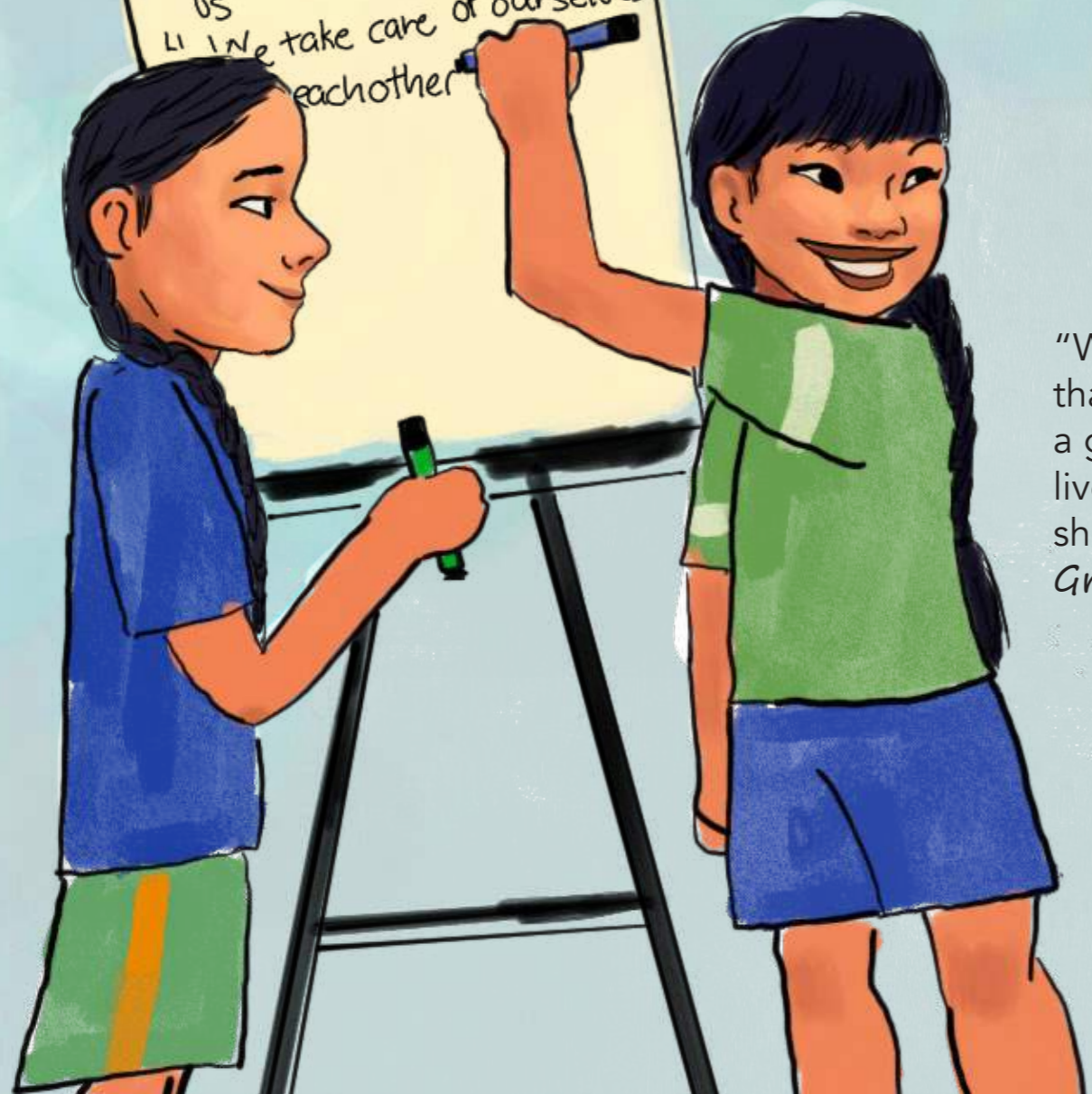
Grandma responds, "Yes, young ones, our teachings help us stay healthy, live a good life, and keep strong."

Tara says, "We learned a lot from our friends Aspen, Daniel, Sophie, and Jason. I can't wait to share what we learned on our Sunday family night."



At family night, the Twins share the four lessons they've learned from their friends:

- 1) We can be creative & adapt to new situations
- 2) It's okay to feel all our emotions
- 3) Lando's protect and support us
- 4) We take care of ourselves each other



"We also learned that being grateful is a good teaching to live by," says Tara as she adds: 5) *Being Grateful* to their list.





# GRATEFUL FOR...

1. Being able to stay in touch with friends
2. FOR LAND ↗
3. for food
4. FOR PETS 🐾
5. for community
6. FAMILY 😊
7. for health

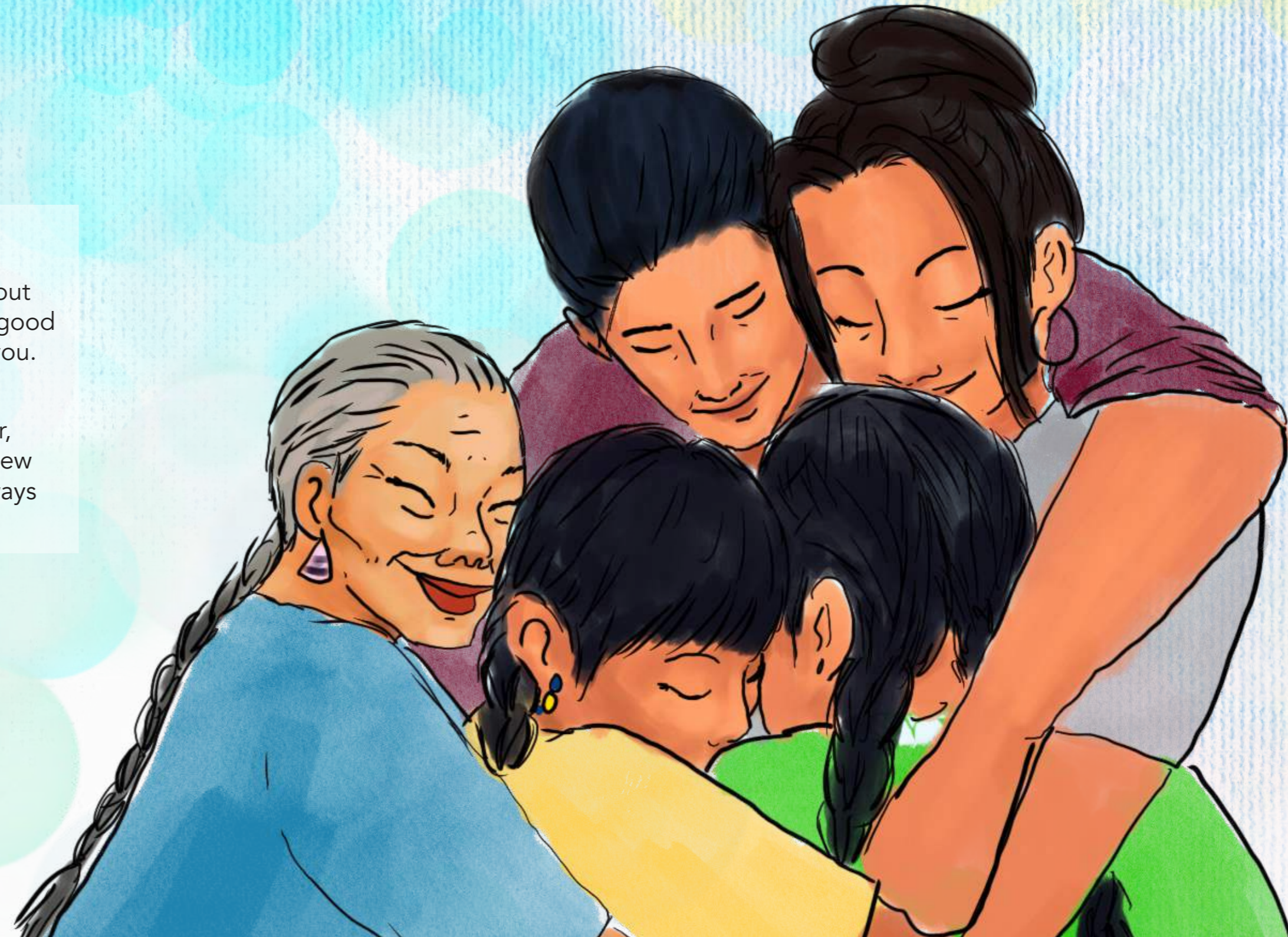
"Even though things have been different since coronavirus happened, we still have so much to be grateful for," says Virgil.

"We've started listing the things we are grateful for before we go to bed every night," says Virgil as the Twins share some of the things they are most grateful for.

After the Twins finish expressing their gratitude, Grandma gathers them in a hug.

"I am so grateful for you two. I think you have also learned an important lesson about the interconnectedness of our world. You have learned lessons about how to be a good relative from so many of your friends, as well as your family, and the lands around you.

As your Mom and Dad have taught you, we have a lot of new lessons to learn from the coronavirus. Our tribal teachings tell us that we should look out for one another, we belong to our lands, and we are strong people. While learning and practicing new lessons, we'll continue to carry on our tribal teachings and strengths that we've always had to future generations."



The Twins thank their parents and Grandma for all of the teachings they have shared with them.

Tara and Virgil have learned that even though times may be tough, there are always lessons to be learned from hard times, and that their teachings can bring them strength.



"I wonder what we will learn next year?" asks Tara.

"Me too," says Virgil.

## Resources

Read on to discover resources related to the story. They include vocabulary words, tips for reading and talking about the story with children of different ages, as well as links and resources for further information about the storybook and COVID-19.



## Vocabulary from the story

Some of the words in this book might be new or more difficult to understand for some children depending on age or reading level. This list can help to introduce and define these words while reading.

### Adapt

To adjust and change to new situations

### Calm

When your mind feels at peace

### Chairperson

Someone who leads a meeting, a group, or a tribe. In this book, the Chairperson is a leader of a tribe. Other tribes may call their leader chief, governor, or president

### Community

A group of people living in the same place, or sharing the same interests and goals

### Connected

Feeling a bond with things or people

### Defeated

To feel like it is too hard to be able to achieve a goal

### Expressing

Showing thoughts and feelings through words or actions

### Focusing

Paying a lot of attention to something

### Generation

A group of people born and living at the same time

### Gratitude

Giving or showing thanks, being thankful

### Harvesting

Collecting plants, fruit, and vegetables to eat or use

### Interconnectedness

The feeling when you have a bond with yourself, your family, your community, your culture, and the land. When all these things are connected with each other

### Protect

To keep something safe

### Strength

To do well and be determined, even in difficult times

### Support

To help something or someone

### Traditional

Something that is made, done, or used, in the same or similar way over a long time by a group of people and passed down to others. Clothing, dances, food, songs, ceremonies, and more can all be traditional!

### Urban

Someone that lives in a city

### Worried

Feeling scared about something that may happen in the future



## Tips for Reading and Talking About the Story with Children of Different Ages

### Children in Early Childhood

One way to help younger children engage or feel connected to a story is to personalize the story. You can do this by changing the names of the characters when you read it to your children. For example, instead of Tara and Virgil, you could use your children's names or names of children they know. If Grandma is not the word that they use to refer to a grandparent, use something that is more familiar to your child. The friends' names in the book can also be changed to familiar names to your child/children. Finally, if you speak your tribal language and see places to add words or concepts into the book in your language, that also can help the child feel more connected to the story.

Young children are comforted when they are spoken to by their caregivers. You can look at pictures, talk about actions, and label emotions. For example, you can say "Look at the grandma smiling, she is happy." or "Look at the children dancing." If you know it, use your Native language when reading with your child.

Young children like to bond with their caregivers. Sit your child in your lap and read the story or look at pictures together. Make frequent eye contact and smile when your child looks at you. Make reading books with your child a daily routine. Enjoy coloring with your child using the coloring pages.

Young children learn to read and communicate in early childhood. Modeling language is important for a child who is learning words and emotions. When reading to your child, label emotions of the characters, talk about your own feelings, and use a comforting voice when reading/talking to your young child.

Young children learn vocabulary and letters from reading books. While reading the story, ask your child Wh- questions such as "What is (name of character) doing in the story?" or "Where is grandma?" Ask your child questions about sounds in words. For example, the "d" sound is in dancing. Highlight the actions in the stories such as playing, gardening, dancing, and learning.



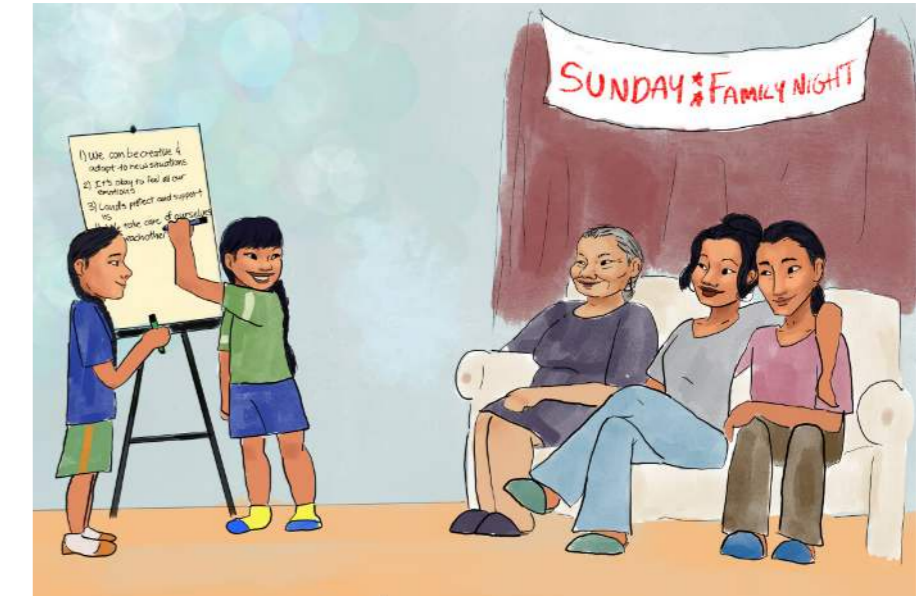
### School Age Children

School age children are learning about their identity. Encourage traditional storytelling and help your child to learn where they are from. Help them to learn their clans, family names, and anything else about their tribe and who they are. When reading the book, ask your child to guess where each child is from. Praise your child when they talk about where they are from or who they are as Native children.

School age children are learning about their emotional support system. Encourage them to identify and talk about their support system including parents, grandparents, friends, and other relatives. Ask your school age children about the characters' support system and use the "My Relations" worksheet to map out your child's support system.

School age children are learning to express their emotions. Always validate your child's emotions by talking to them when they talk about their feelings, just like the grandma did with the twins in the story. Talk to your child about how the twins expressed their emotions. Talk about how you overcome difficult situations. For example, you can tell your child what you do to cope in a healthy way (e.g., take deep breaths, imagine yourself in a safe place, dance, smell flowers or a candle, or others) when you feel nervous or anxious.

School age children are learning to become fluent readers. Incorporate this story into other family routines, such as having your child read the story to you or acting out the story together. You can dance and sing at home. If you have it, you can dress up in traditional or powwow regalia at home. You can tell stories or look at pictures from powwows, ceremonies, and other gatherings with family and friends. Remind your child that your home is a special place.



### Adolescent or Teenage Children

Teenagers are learning more about their feelings and who they can talk to in confidence. You can use the story to talk to your teenager about how they are feeling and who is important to them. Reference the twins in the story and how they checked on their friends. Encourage your child to talk openly about any fears or worries. You can use the My Relations worksheet to help your teenager map out their support system.



Teenagers are learning about the roles they have in their communities. Help teenagers maintain these connections with family and friends through phone calls, FaceTime, videoconferencing, and writing letters. Write letters to family members or make a sign together to celebrate health care workers, tribal leaders, and essential workers.

Teenagers are learning about responsibility and how they can help their family/community. Talk to your teenager about responsibilities they have at home, such as taking out the trash, helping to feed animals, or helping to clean the house. Use the worksheet activities to talk about important public health practices such as handwashing, physical distancing, and using facemasks.

Teenagers are learning self-control. Talk to your teenager about overcoming obstacles. Remind your teenager that difficult times are temporary and to focus on the positive things in their lives. Remind your teenager that it is okay to feel scared, nervous, or frustrated when they are required to distance themselves from their friends and family.

**Please help us understand how this book is helping your family!**

Go to: <http://bit.ly/HonoringOurTeachings>

Or scan this QR code on your phone:



For more information, including resources for addressing topics related to COVID-19, as well as activities such as coloring pages and language practice for children to do based on the storybooks, please visit:

[cih.jhu.edu/programs/our-smallest-warriors-our-strongest-medicine-honoring-our-teachings-during-covid-19](http://cih.jhu.edu/programs/our-smallest-warriors-our-strongest-medicine-honoring-our-teachings-during-covid-19)

How is this book helping  
your family? Scan QR code:  
Or tell us at:  
<http://bit.ly/HonoringOurTeachings>



Get a PDF copy of the storybook, along with printable activities and more at  
[cih.jhu.edu/programs/our-smallest-warriors-our-strongest-medicine-honoring-our-teachings-during-covid-19](http://cih.jhu.edu/programs/our-smallest-warriors-our-strongest-medicine-honoring-our-teachings-during-covid-19)