



TALKING ABOUT FAMILY DIVERSITY — WHY AND HOW

Otis and Alice: A family with two moms?

Classroom activities for cycle 1 - Elementary school

Otis and Alice is a book written in Quebec for children from ages 4 to 8. Through a tender and amusing story, it is intended to help those working with children to deal with the subject of gay parenting in the global context of family diversity. This resource guide which can be used in conjunction with *Otis and Alice* will help you to explore this modern-day issue with children and parents. This guide can also be used without the book or with other books about family diversity.



Why?

Separated families, blended families, multiethnic families, homoparental families—family diversity is a characteristic of our time that cannot be ignored. In schools, daycare, recreation centres, etc., children from different types of families interact. Even if many of them come from traditional family backgrounds, they will eventually come across children of families different from their own.

There are tens of thousands of children living with homosexual parents in Quebec¹. As we know, the identity of young children is closely linked to their families. It is therefore essential that these young people feel that their families

are accepted and respected in society. In order to counteract all forms of prejudice, false beliefs, and hurtful attitudes towards children who live in homoparental families, it is important to educate today's youth about this reality.

Through the transmission of knowledge, schools contribute to the global development of children by helping them to become independent and responsible citizens who are able to adapt to a world that is constantly changing. Schools have an important role to play in addressing family diversity with young children and ensuring that they develop respectful attitudes towards all types of families.

Getting started

First and foremost, it is important to be conscious of your own values and knowledge with regards to family diversity, homoparental families, and homosexuality, in order to communicate suitable information to children. Some may not be sure about what approach to take, while others worry about what questions children or their parents might ask. This resource guide is intended to help you deal with those questions.



¹ Estimate by Daveluy et al. (2000) based on a social and health survey of the *Institut de la Statistique du Québec*, 1998.

Helping... young people to discover and respect difference.

Hearing an adult speak openly and comfortably about difference and diversity is an excellent model for a child. Discussing various family realities teaches children to appreciate difference and that a person can be different from the majority and still be happy. How can we pass on values of acceptance, pride, and respect of self and others to children? We suggest a **learning activity** we call “**The Family Mural**” in the **pink** pages of this guide.

Highlighting... the similarities in diversity.

The book *Otis and Alice* does not go into the specifics of homoparental families. Instead, it shows how day-to-day life in various types of families is similar: welcoming a guest, eating breakfast as a family, tidying the house. How can children be helped to understand that the daily life of families is virtually identical everywhere? We suggest a **learning activity** called “**The Diary of the Family**” in the **blue** pages of this guide.

Acting... to encourage appropriate communication.

When they are very young, children sometimes use slurs such as “fag” or “homo” or even “that’s so gay” as an insult, without even understanding what they are saying. Adults should insist that “that isn’t an appropriate way to talk” and initiate a discussion on how words can hurt. The activities suggested in this guide, based on *Otis and Alice*, can help you prevent or respond to such incidents, which are too often minimized.



Finding more information.

The resources below will be useful in exploring some of the themes in *Otis and Alice*. You can also find numerous books and videos about gay, lesbian, single parent, multiethnic, blended, adoptive and other kinds of families. Information about homophobia and heterosexism can also be found in the resources listed.

Canadian Teachers Federation (CTF)

www.ctf-fce.ca

A number of interesting resources promoting diversity can be found within the CTF's publication catalogue. Amongst these, "Challenging Silence, Challenging Censorship," is a book designed as a professional and practical resource to help educational leaders and policy-makers within K-12 teaching (teachers, administrators, counsellors and teacher librarians), together with public librarians and other community stakeholders, to learn more about how they can take action to challenge and positively change the educational conditions and social climate for LGBT youth and for children from homoparental families.

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)

www.glsen.org

A leading American education organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all students. Established in 1990, GLSEN envisions a world in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. The organisation provides an extensive listing of books for children on family diversity and on gay and lesbian issues.

Les GRIS du Québec

www.gris.ca/lesgrisduquebec

These organizations favour interactive interventions. Volunteer trainers, who are for the most part young gays, lesbians and bisexuals, share their lives and their knowledge about homosexuality and bisexuality in ways that are adapted to teaching young audiences. The teaching method raises awareness about prejudice and homophobic behaviours that occur at school. The organizations work primarily in high schools, youth centres and in youth protection in order to raise awareness about homosexuality and bisexuality amongst youth. In the Greater Montreal area volunteers are available to carry out activities in elementary (Cycle 3) and secondary schools, in both English and French.

LGBT Family Coalition

www.familleshomoparentales.org • info@familleshomoparentales.org • 514 878-7600

Founded in 1998, this bilingual group of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) parents and parents-to-be encourages community, the sharing of information and resources, as well as family activities. The Coalition was responsible for the book *Otis and Alice* as well as this resource and activity guide. A list of books and videos, along with interesting links about LGBT-parent families is available on the web site. The Coalition provides free workshop in English and French, for professionals working in Quebec's schools, to promote diversity and combat homophobia.

Pride Education Network

www.pridenet.ca

A valuable list of resources, videos, books and links regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) youth and homophobia in the schools. Pride Education Network (formerly GALE-BC) also has an excellent teaching guide that includes lesson plans for different age groups.

Quebec Human Rights and Youth Rights Commission

www.cdpcj.qc.ca

The Commission has a mission to promote and uphold, by any appropriate measures, the principles enunciated in the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms. The Commission recently published an important report regarding the issues and needs of the LGBT community, which is especially pertinent to LGBT families. The report is available on the web site. There are also bilingual on-line workshops regarding homophobia in the schools with lesson plans to be used with older children and adolescents.

Otis and Alice by Ariane Bertouille. Illustrations by Marie-Claude Favreau.
Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 2013. ISBN-13: 978-1554552948

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Email: info@familleshomoparentales.org — Web site: www.familleshomoparentales.org

HELPING...

young people to discover and respect difference

[return to the introduction](#)

ACTIVITY

The Family Mural

WHY?

This activity is intended to show the diversity of the different types of families represented in *Otis and Alice*.

WHO?

This activity is designed for children from 4 to 8 years of age. Depending on their age, it could be more or less complex and the pedagogical objectives may vary. It can be tied in with the competencies of the Québec Education Program of the Ministry of Education of Québec (see below).

WHERE?

In the preschool, kindergarten, elementary 1 or 2 (Cycle 1) classroom or in a school or community library.

WHAT?

Depending on your group's needs and circumstances.

- 1 Information:** to respond to questions from one or more children, to encourage the integration of a child living in a homoparental or other non-traditional family.
- 2 Awareness:** to make the children aware of diversity in the composition of families, including homoparental families, and to respect those differences.
- 3 Intervention:** to react to unacceptable attitudes regarding a child who lives in a homoparental or other non-traditional family, to counteract misconceptions and hurtful language with regard to homosexuals or homoparental families.

WHEN?

We suggest broaching the subject of homoparental families in an integrated manner. In the book *Otis and Alice*, the homoparental family is a family like any other (pages 14 and 15). Reading the book (or others like it) and creating the *Family Mural* can be easily integrated into the context of Family Week, Valentine's Day or any other celebration of family, love, diversity or, simply, human relations within the school.

INSTRUCTIONAL METHOD*

Stage 1: Observation of the reality

At this stage, the children are asked to observe what is happening around them. This is the **beginning of awareness**. Children — even very young children — describe differences using rather coarse generalizations. It is also necessary to pay close attention to the children's comments and discussions in order to reduce the effects of false ideas and not reinforce them.

In *Otis and Alice*, apart from the family with same-sex parents, there are several situations that underscore differences in a symbolic manner. For example, the cat Rocket grew up among cows; the mouse Alice and the cat Rocket get along together even though cats and mice are not traditional allies; Alice does not have a high squeaky voice like most mice, but is, instead, a baritone. At the same time, the story stresses the similarities with all other families: they entertain a guest for dinner, they solve problems through discussion, they do their shopping and housekeeping, they play together, etc.

Stage 2: Analysis of the reality

Analysis involves identifying a phenomenon (in this case, the family with same-sex parents) and breaking it up into its essential elements to better understand and explain it. Analyzing is being able to distinguish what belongs to prejudice and what belongs to reality. To do this, the adult must place the child in a **state of awareness** and curiosity.

The proposed activities lead to questioning that can be adapted according to the age of the children. For this period, it is better to discuss one question at a time in a setting conducive to learning and respect. If inappropriate comments are made, adults should intervene and restructure the information to avoid encouraging false and preconceived ideas.

Stage 3: Transformation of the reality

To transform the reality, it is first necessary to **reflect on our ideas and our behaviour**. Children are encouraged to use appropriate behaviour and language towards children living in different family types, including families with same-sex parents. The artistic project created by the children themselves is intended to reinforce and solidify the notion of respect for others, whether or not they are like us.

In the book *Otis and Alice*, intentionally, none of the characters are the victims of homophobic attitudes. However, depending on the age and characteristics of the children, the learning activity can generate a commitment to appropriate attitudes and language, that each child agrees to respect.

Activity

OBSERVATION OF THE REALITY

- 1 The adult reads *Otis and Alice* (or a similar English book) to the children or, if they are able, they read it themselves.
- 2 The adult introduces or concludes the reading by commenting, especially, on the diversity of family situations experienced by the children.
- 3 The adult refers to pages 14 and 15 of the book *Otis and Alice* (see following illustrations). He/she asks the children to identify the different types of families that are represented. Then he/she asks the children to name other types of families, expanding on their suggestions.

ANALYSIS OF THE REALITY

- 1 The adult leads a discussion with the children. He /she encourages them to share their impressions and to note the diversity of types of families. The adult stresses that all types of families are equally valuable.
- 2 The discussion can be guided by certain specific questions, depending on the age of the children: What did you get out of this story? What is a family? What is the most important thing in a family for a child? What is it that brings the members of a family together?
- 3 The adult answers the children's questions in a manner appropriate to their age.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE REALITY

For children, acting and learning are inseparable. To solidify the concept of respect for different types of family, this collective artistic creation can take more or less sophisticated forms, depending on the age of the children.

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MATERIALS

- Old magazines with photographs of men, women, and children of various ethnic backgrounds. Also, photographs of domestic animals.
- Per duo: a sheet of coloured paper, scissors and a glue-stick.
- A large sheet of paper to create a mural.
- The five different family illustrations (included in this DVD-ROM).

[click to view illustrations](#)

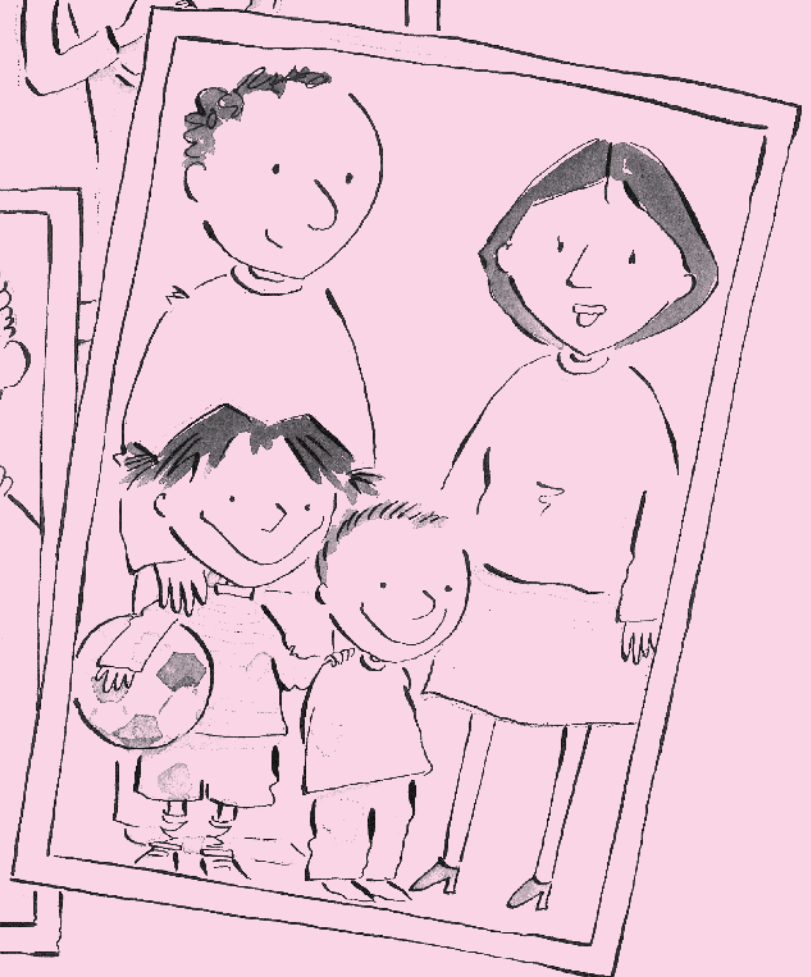
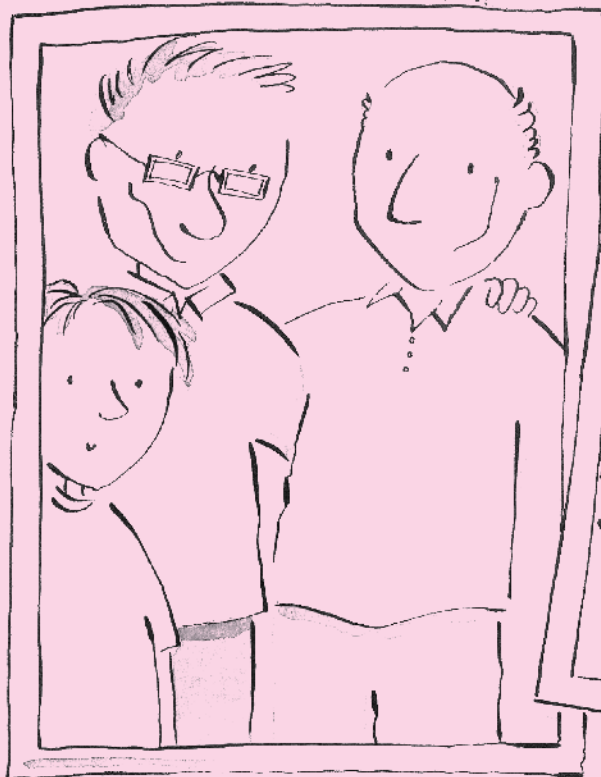
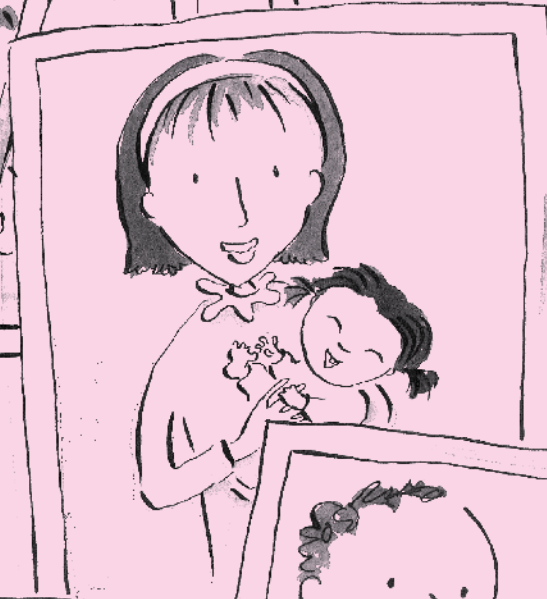
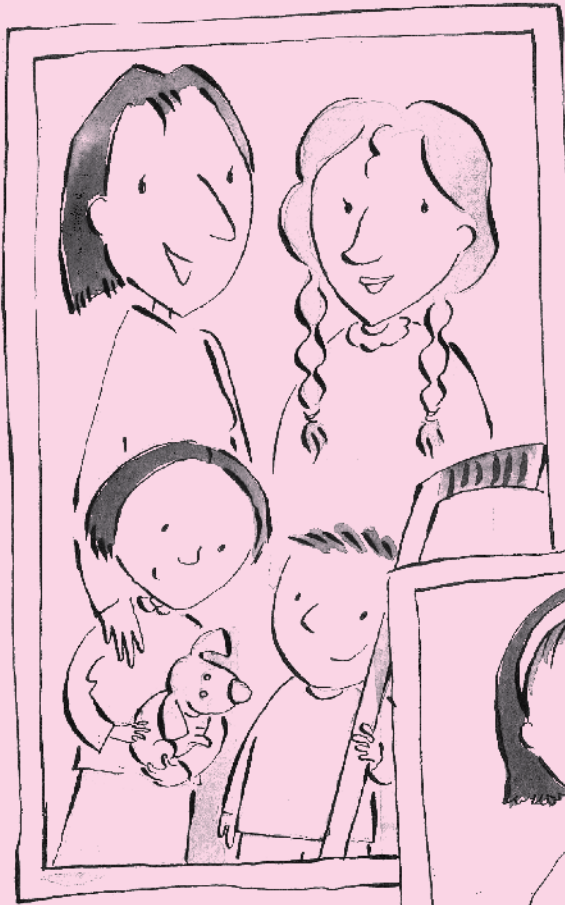
PROCEDURE

- 1 There are five different family illustrations included in this DVD-ROM that are also found on pages 14 and 15 of *Otis and Alice*. You can refer to these pictures before the children create their collage to show that there are all different kinds of families.
- 2 The adult assigns the children, in teams of two, to represent a type of family on a sheet of coloured paper.
- 3 The children browse through the magazines to find characters to represent "their" family, cut them out, and paste them on their sheet of paper.
- 4 Each team is invited to present "its" family to the group and paste it onto the large mural on which the adult has written, "There are many kinds of families where people love each other and feel good together."

The mural created by the children can be left on the wall for several months.

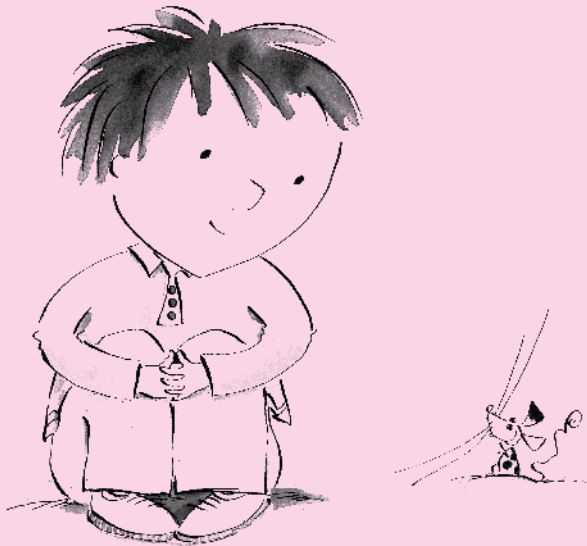
CONCLUSION

The adult stresses that love is the most important thing that binds a family together. He/she points out how important it is to respect all families and to treat them equally.



Links with the Québec Education Program

By adapting the activity to the age of the children, it is possible to tie it in with the Québec Education Program (www.mels.gouv.qc.ca).



AT THE PRESCHOOL LEVEL

Reading of the book *Otis and Alice* and the related learning activity fulfil a basic mandate of preschool education: encouraging the total development of the child.

The six competencies of the preschool program are incorporated in these activities:

- 1 to perform sensory-motor actions
(*fine motor skills*)
- 2 to affirm his/her personality
(*questions/answers*)
- 3 to interact harmoniously with others
(*working in groups*)
- 4 to communicate
(*presentation, hurtful language/appropriate language*)
- 5 to construct his/her understanding of the world
(*differences/family diversity*)
- 6 to complete an activity or project
(*creation of an art work in teams*)

AT THE ELEMENTARY LEVEL (CYCLE 1)

Reading the book, the question period and the learning activity can be integrated into the subject being taught: English, citizenship education, arts, moral education. Also, a number of the cross-curricular competencies are touched on by these activities.

• Intellectual competencies

The children learn to exercise their own critical judgement (*competency 3*) in order to recognise their own preconceived ideas and to use creative thinking (*competency 4*) to be receptive to new ideas.

• Methodological competencies

The creation of an artwork in teams requires the child to adopt effective work methods (*competency 5*) to achieve the assigned task.

• Personal and social competencies

Constructing his/her identity (*competency 7*) involves, in particular, helping the child to accept differences and to be open to diversity. These activities are perfectly suited to that objective.

The activity also requires the child to cooperate (*competency 8*) in a team structure and to communicate ideas and questions. Affirmation of the self while respecting others, constructive openness to pluralism and non-violence — all in all, what is being acquired here is how to live harmoniously with others and be open to the world.

• Communication-related competencies

This learning activity requires the student to prepare and transmit a message to the entire group through an artistic creation. The discussion, listening and formulation of questions here will lead the child to a greater mastery of socially appropriate communication (*competency 9*). The theme of hurtful language helps to anchor the concept in the daily reality of the child.

HIGHLIGHTING...

the similarities in diversity

[return to the introduction](#)

ACTIVITY

The Diary of the Family

WHY?

Through this activity, the similarity of the daily routine of all types of families is highlighted, based on the story *Otis and Alice*.

WHO?

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- 2 The adult introduces or concludes the reading by commenting, in particular, on the similarities of everyday life in most families.

ANALYSIS OF THE REALITY

- 1 The adult leads a discussion with the children. He/she encourages them to share their impressions and to note the similarities in the daily lives of different kinds of families.
- 2 The discussion can be guided by certain specific questions, depending on the age of the children: What did you get out of this story? What do the members of this family do on weekends? Your own family? How is Otis' family similar to yours? What animals do you live with? Do your parents like mice, cats, dogs, goldfish, etc? What about you? Why?
- 3 The adult answers the children's questions in a manner appropriate to their age.

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MATERIALS

- Per duo: a photocopy of the blank page where Otis asks the children to draw a picture of a family (included in DVD-ROM). [click to view drawing page](#)
- Per duo: coloured crayons or markers, scissors and a glue-stick.
- Photographs cut out of old magazines showing elements of daily life illustrated in *Otis and Alice*: stoves, pots and pans, bathrooms, vacuum cleaners, tables and chairs, chesterfields, lamps, pictures, toys, etc.
- The five different family illustrations (included in this DVD-ROM). [click to view illustrations](#)

PROCEDURE

- 1 There are five different family illustrations included in this DVD-ROM that are also found on pages 14 and 15 of *Otis and Alice*. You can use these images, before the children create their collage/ drawing, to show them that there are all kinds of families.
- 2 Divide the children into teams of two and give each team a type of family and one of five day-to-day situations illustrated in the book: entertaining a guest; housekeeping; preparing a meal; playing games; and caring for a pet. More than one team will have the same daily situation but with different kinds of families, some of which will have one or more pets.
- 3 On the blank sheet where Otis asks each child to draw a family, the children paste the elements to illustrate "their" daily situation, then they draw "their" family.
- 4 Each team is asked to present its drawing/collage to the group and to identify the type of family shown. Then, the drawings/collages are bound into a book. The *Diary of the Family* created by the children can be added to the library or exhibited as part of a special activity, either in the school or in the library.

CONCLUSION

The adult stresses the importance of respecting all families and seeing them as being equally valuable. A family is the place where a child feels loved by the adults who care for him or her.



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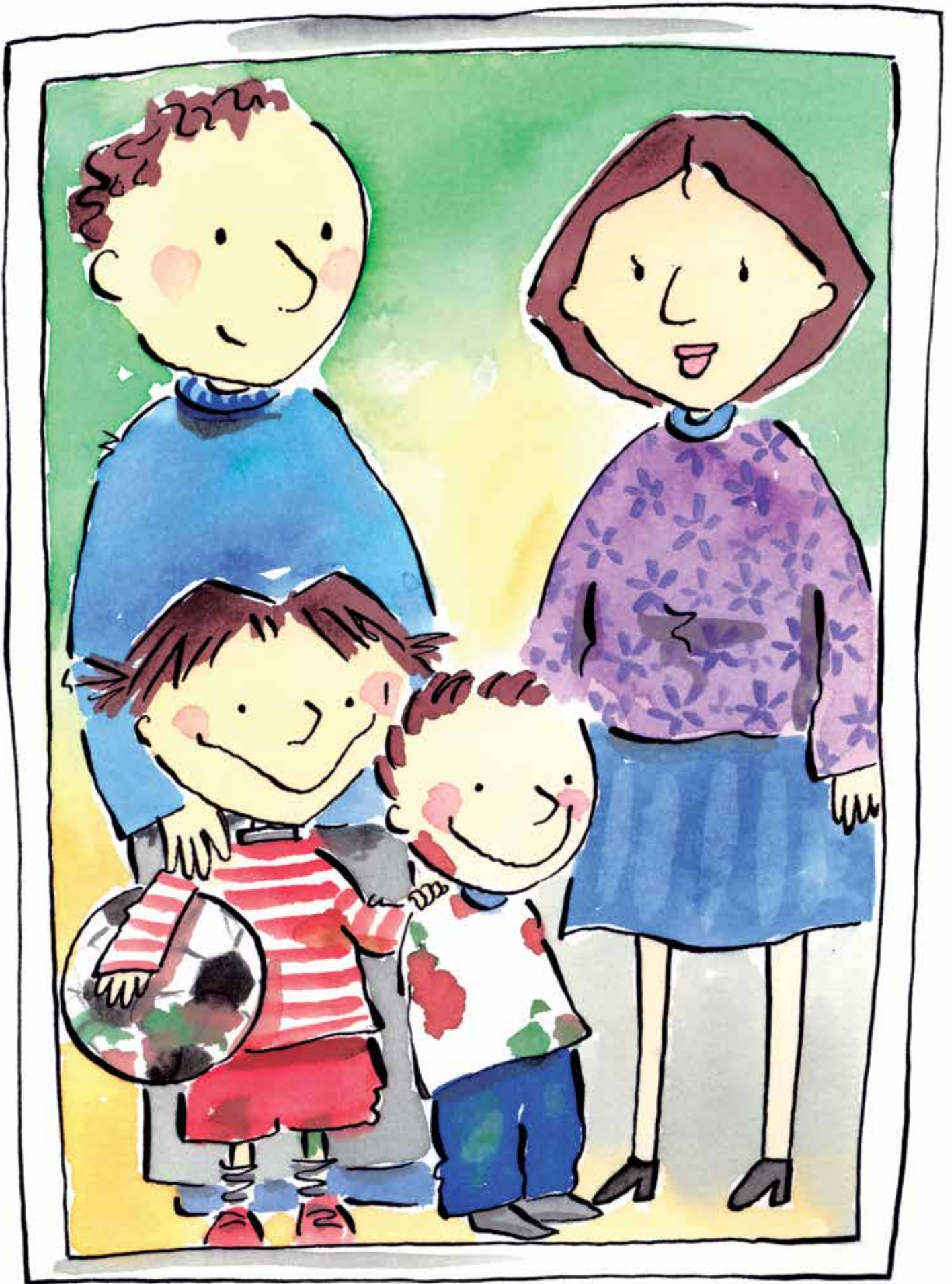
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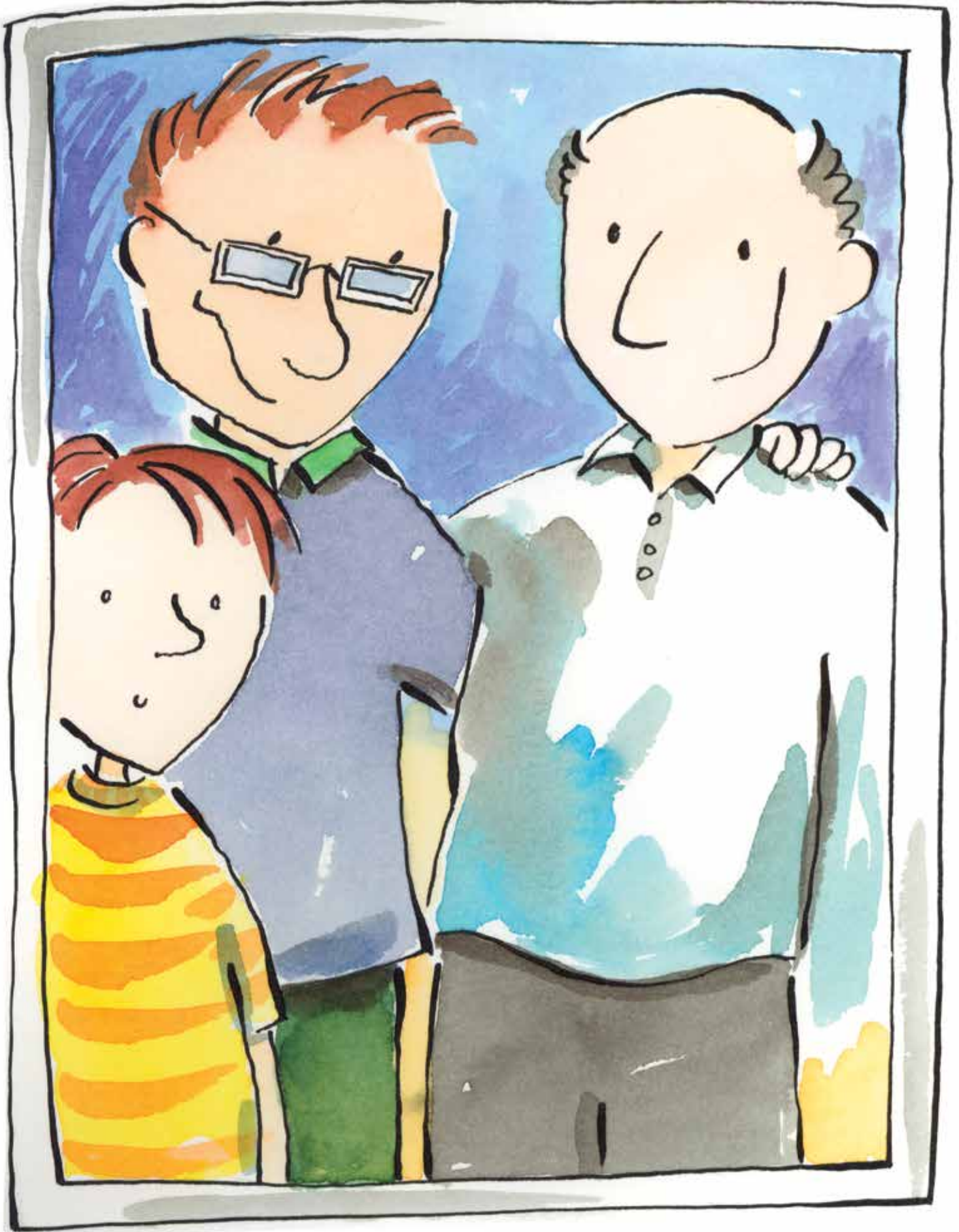
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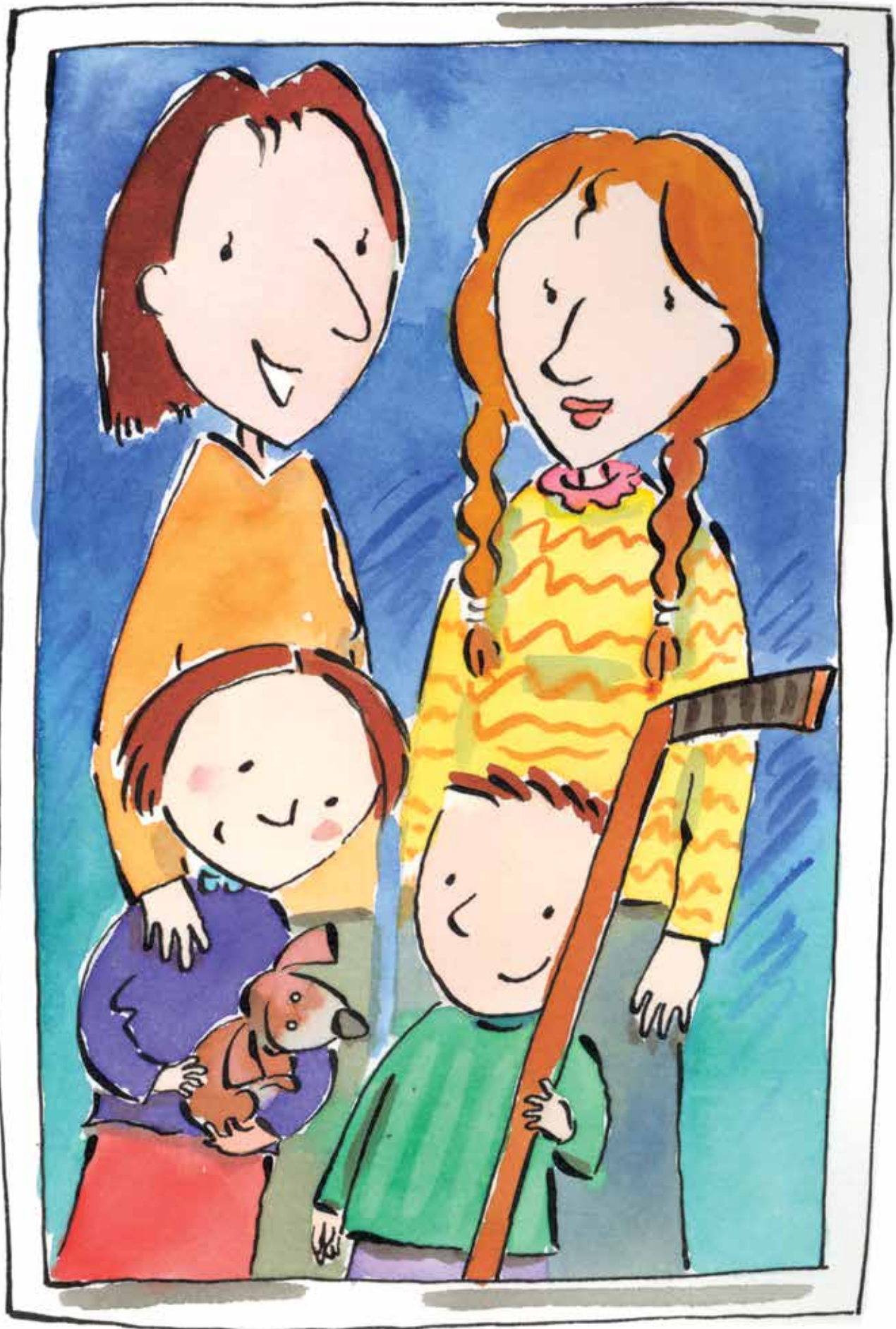
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It's your
turn to draw
a family!