

FEAR TO FAMILIAR:

Helping Kuwaiti Children Understand Hospital Experiences through Stories

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As a child life specialist, I set out on an exciting mission to spread healthcare awareness among children in Kuwait through two children's books I authored about the hospital experience. Written in English with plans for an upcoming Arabic version, these books feature Arabic names and culturally inclusive elements, making them relatable to children in Kuwait and the greater Middle Eastern region. The primary goal of these healthcare storybooks was to familiarize children with the hospital environment and the various experiences and equipment they may encounter. By presenting these scenarios in a relatable and accessible manner, the books aimed to help children feel more comfortable and less anxious about medical settings.

The first book, *Dalia the Bear Goes to the Hospital*, talks about a young bear who wakes up one day and doesn't feel very well. To her surprise, when her mother takes her to the hospital, the doctor tells her she needs to spend the night! Dalia shares what she does while in the hospital, including meeting the child life specialist that works there. The second book, *My Hospital Senses: What I See, Hear, Smell, Taste, and Feel at the Hospital*, follows a dog named Max on a tour of the hospital. Max explains our different senses and what they might pick up in the hospital. Collaborating with UK-based children's book artist Hannah Wood, the books were brought to life with captivating illustrations. Printed in Kuwait, they were specifically designed for children aged



Elementary students at Bayan Bilingual School reading *Dalia the Bear Goes to the Hospital* during their 'We Love to Read' week.

6-9, although they were also suitable for slightly younger and older audiences.

The inspiration for these stories came from my experiences working in local government hospitals. Families often avoided open conversations with their children about medical procedures like shots, blood draws, or hospitalization, fearing it would upset or frighten children. This reticence may be influenced by factors such as a tendency to shield children from discomforting topics, education levels among nomadic and undocumented families, and a lack of awareness. It also stemmed, in part, from a lack of culturally relevant resources—many books addressing visits to the doctor or hospital were primarily from Western perspectives and didn't resonate fully with Kuwaiti families.

Creating these books was challenging. From drafting the story and sketches to finding the right illustration artist and printing company, every step required careful consideration and numerous revisions, with a sprinkle of imposter syndrome, funding delays, and more. Choosing the right characters, images, colors, sizes, paper thickness and then printing and fine-tuning the text and font size were all part of the journey. Another challenge I faced was after publishing on Amazon. Friends gave me feedback to trim the text for young readers, so I pulled the books, creating a shorter version that eventually got printed in Kuwait. I also battled Amazon Kindle sizing and formatting issues, which are ongoing. These hiccups were a big learning curve and a lesson in focusing on regional publications before making them available elsewhere. Despite these obstacles, the thought of helping kids kept me focused and motivated, in addition to the support of my incredible cheerleaders, Boston-based CCLSs Dr. Claire White and Leah Terril.

Several months after publishing, a friend's child fell ill, and she reached out to me about talking to her child about her hospital experience. My children's books on hospital experiences, crafted with culturally inclusive elements and Arabic names, were warmly received by both adults and children in Kuwait, where I had been sharing them as needed. It indicated a growing receptiveness

to preparation and education among newer generations. This notable shift towards greater openness and honesty in discussions, spurred by younger parents gaining awareness of the importance of effective communication strategies, has led to more engaging and informative conversations with children about hard topics such as healthcare, preparing them to face challenges with resilience and regulation. I realized that because the available healthcare storybooks were primarily Western-based, I needed to push past my self-doubt to share my book with the community that was now more prepared to receive it.

I wondered how I could effectively reach a large population of children, and this question sparked the idea for the school campaign. I reached out to educators and administrators, providing copies of the books for story time sessions in elementary schools across Kuwait. I explained that by presenting healthcare topics through engaging stories, children were empowered to understand and cope with medical experiences, fostering cooperation and future medication compliance. After an initial period of silence from schools, the response came flooding in all at once and was overwhelmingly positive. Schools eagerly accepted the offer and happily incorporated the books into their weekly reading sessions and libraries.

Educators were eager to incorporate the books into their curriculum, recognizing the value of healthcare literacy, and the feedback from both adults and children was remarkable. Teachers reported enthusiastic engagement from students, captivated by the stories and illustrations. Parents contacted me to share exciting comments and reactions from their children. The books will hopefully be utilized as valuable educational tools, initiating discussions about healthcare topics in a fun and accessible manner and, equally as important, fostering empathy and understanding among classmates, particularly those with chronic illnesses or medical conditions. By sharing stories of characters facing similar challenges, children can empathize with their peers and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. Photos of teachers, parents, and children enjoying the books

were shared, which helped to spread the word about the importance of healthcare literacy for children.

The reaction from children and teachers were ones of excitement and joy. Kids like Ibrahim exclaimed, "Oh wow, there's a lady in a hijab!" Fatema, who said, "Her name's Dalia!" and "The images and colors are so fun," highlighted the books' cultural resonance and visual appeal. Eleven-year-old Farrah provided insightful feedback to her mother via a message from her reading time at school: "I liked (Dalia the Bear) because it teaches other kids do not panic when they get sick or when they can't go to places (out with their friends) and sort of not get scared of the doctors cause they're gonna help you feel better, so you can go to your friends' houses again." Surprisingly, younger children were also drawn to the books, with a few 3-5 year-olds jumping into reading groups and photo opportunities to point at one of the colorful images on the page. One such preschooler would rush to take a book from the older children and ask for "Dalia!"

Miss Sara Hussein, a Reading Teacher at Bayan Bilingual School, commented, "I'm thrilled to share that our students have thoroughly enjoyed diving into the books. The stories have captivated their imaginations and sparked their love for reading in truly remarkable ways...(and) will not only enrich our 'I Love to Read' week but will also leave a lasting impression on our students, inspiring them to continue exploring the wonderful world of literature."

The positive reception and impact of the campaign highlight the potential for using storytelling as a powerful tool for healthcare education among children, allowing us to break down barriers and normalize conversations about healthcare topics. By introducing these subjects in a familiar and engaging format, the books encourage children to speak about their own experiences and ask questions in a comfortable and supportive environment to help build a future where healthcare literacy is a priority. As local children learn to trust adults and information, they become more receptive to interventions by healthcare teams and child life specialists in

hospitals, fostering a positive and supportive healthcare environment for young patients. Another goal for these children's books is to reflect the profound impact of the child life profession on young patients' experiences, highlighting our contributions to their emotional well-being. I want to inspire fellow Child Life Specialists to publish literature that supports and empowers children during their hospital journeys.

The books are now in the libraries of numerous elementary schools and preschools in Kuwait and a regional bookstore chain. Whether we practice in the field or not, our passion as child life specialists for helping children and families truly enables us to accomplish tasks we never dreamed of. I hope to expand this initiative by reaching more schools in Kuwait and the greater MENA region. For educators interested in participating in future story time sessions or receiving copies of the books for their school libraries, I invite you to reach out. Together, we can continue to make healthcare topics engaging and accessible for children, empowering them to navigate medical experiences confidently and resiliently.



A child admitted into a local hospital reads *Dalia the Bear*. The story follows a young girl bear who wakes up feeling ill one morning and needs to be admitted into the hospital. There, she meets a CLS who explains the hospital experience for her.