

You Can Do Hard Things

Dana Sutton

Nicholas Donovan Mueller, Illustrator

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A supportive mother reiterates her interminable belief in her children in the inspiring picture book You Can Do Hard Things.

In Dana Sutton's encouraging picture book *You Can Do Hard Things*, children learn independence despite their fears.

A mother talks her children through the process of attempting challenges by themselves. Her daughter climbs the monkey bars at the park, even though it's hard for her, and her son faces up to the monsters that he believes live under his bed. Later, as the children grow up, their mettle is tested by important school exams, relationship breakups, and becoming parents themselves. The mother reiterates that they "can do hard things" with each challenge, reinforcing her interminable support throughout.

In each of the computer-generated illustrations, the mother's perpetual soft expression conveys her empathy. Some images are too busy with extraneous details, though. Large swaths of text also impede the book's delivery. More engaging are those images that focus on the family's vibrant, loving home.

The emotions surrounding the scenarios the children face advance in complexity as they get older. The daughter's teenage relationship involves jealousy and secrecy, and the birth of the adult son's first child dredges up feelings of helplessness as he cannot help his wife while she delivers. The book approaches these complicated emotions with maturity, if not depth; the limited space means that each scenario is short on context. The earlier, briefer challenges are more illustrative of childhood courage than the later ones are.

The family's dialogues hold attention, even when the conversations are wordy and veer off track; for example, the mother makes sarcastic remarks about the world ending when her child expresses fears about failing a test. In more complex scenarios, the mother asks open-ended questions like "How are you going to handle it?" to encourage independent and creative thinking. The child who fears that their friend will stay angry at them after they apologize for being mean repeats their sentiments to the point of redundancy, though.

You Can Do Hard Things is a conversation-based picture book in which a mother inspires confidence and independence in her children.

AIMÉE JODOIN (June 19, 2024)

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