

The Tree by the River



**A story about corporal and humiliating punishment
and the need for positive discipline**

How to use this book

Read the story one chapter at a time. Use the questions at the end of each chapter to encourage children to think about the story and how it relates to their own experiences.

RAPCAN
3rd Floor, Waterford House, Waterford Rd, Diep River
ph: +27 +21 712 2330 fax: +27 +21 712 2365
info@rapcan.org.za www.rapcan.org.za



© RAPCAN 2008

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior written permission of the copyright holder.

ISBN 13: 978-0-9802577-1-7

CREDITS

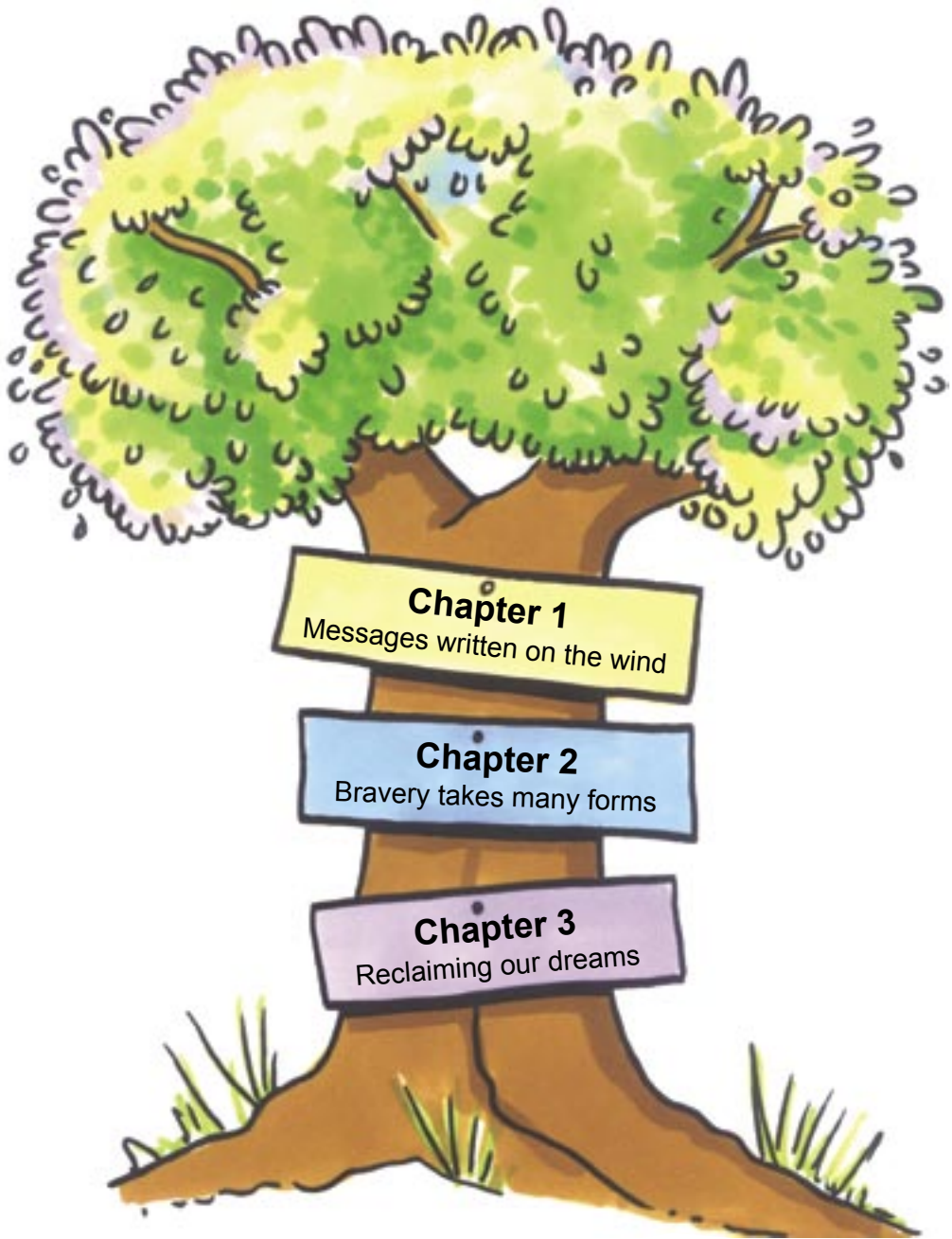
Written by Jill Wenman
Illustrated by Carole Howes
Edited by Lori Lake
Designed by OpenBook

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication would not have been possible without the generous support of Save the Children Sweden, D.G. Murray Trust and Old Mutual.



The Tree by the River



Chapter I

Messages carried on the wind

It had been a horrible day at school and Boniswa decided to walk home, even if it meant being scolded by her aunt for being late. As the school bus drove by, she hid her face from the children looking out of the windows because she had already been burnt by their scorn. As memories of the day surfaced, tears prickled her eyelids and she had to plug the sobs in her throat.

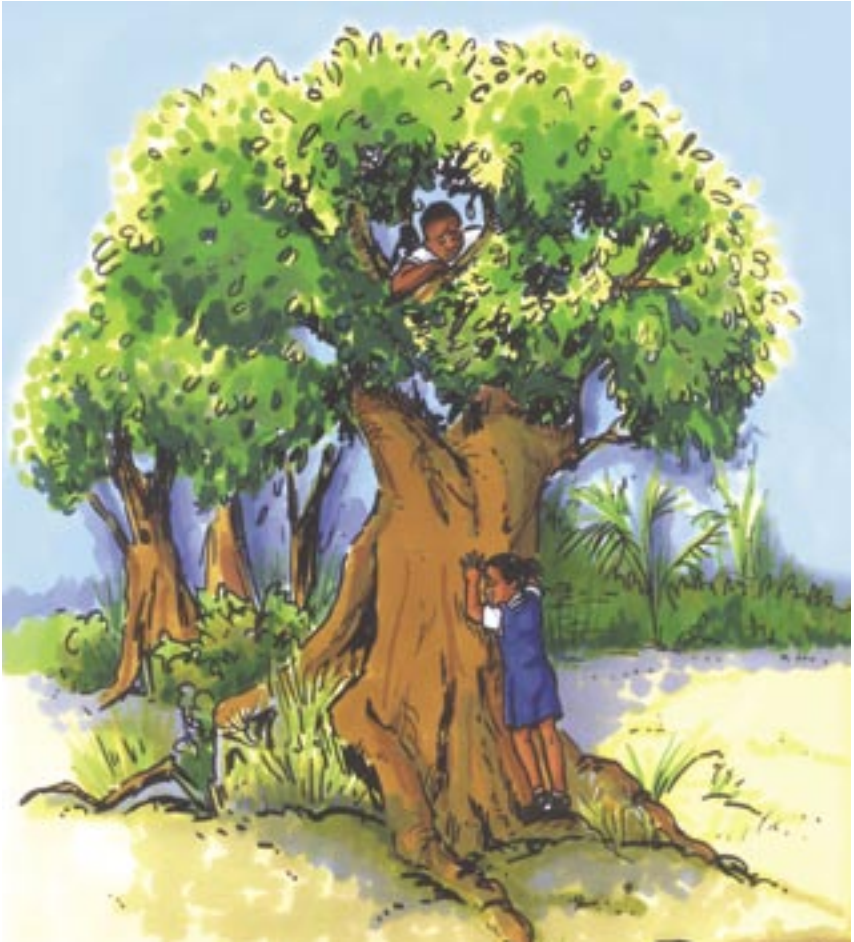
It took her nearly an hour to walk home, but still she was not ready to face Auntie who always seemed angry and tired. What would Auntie say when she read the note from her teacher, Miss Mfeketo? Maybe she should tear up the note and not give it to Auntie? Maybe she should just run away?

How she missed her mom.

She walked briskly along the untarred road. Her feet threw up dust as she walked. She passed women frying meat over open fires at the roadside. The smell was maddening. She stopped at the communal tap and swallowed water to fill her stomach, growling now like a mad dog. Then she put her head down and ran across the bush which was a short-cut to her tree by the river.

It was a large tree with deep roots and a strong, proud trunk. It provided a pool of shade on hot days and birds built their nests high in its branches. This was her special place.

When she was younger, she used to go there with her mother. Her mother would tell her stories and teach her the stories of her



ancestors. Her mother would braid her hair and she would listen. She was a good listener, her mom. She missed that. Most adults are too tired, too busy or too angry to listen to children.

Boniswa broke into a run when her tree came into view. She ran up to it and flung her arms around the trunk. Only then did the sobs in her throat finally break and her tears flowed.

'Mama, Mama! Where are you? I need you!' she cried in pain.

It had been a year since her mother had died and Boniswa had been sent to live with Auntie. Her loving mother had died of a terrible sickness which made her thin before swallowing her in death. Before she had died, she had tried to reassure her precious nine-year-old daughter, whom she would soon leave behind.

‘Boniswa, my child, my spirit will always be with you. Close your eyes and call to me and I will hear you because your words will be carried to me on the wind. I and your ancestors will always be near you in your hour of need. We will be ready to listen and wrap you in our love. Knowing that we love you, will give you the strength to go on, no matter how dark life is.’

So today Boniswa held onto the tree and poured out her troubles to the wind who would carry them to her listening mother.

‘Mama, I was late for school because I missed the bus and Miss Mfeketo punished me. I also shamed you, Mama.’

Boniswa’s knuckles were still red and swollen from the caning but they did not sting like the humiliation of wetting her pants in front of the whole class.

‘She made me stand with my face to the board, and when I begged to go to the toilet, she would not listen.’

The horror of it flooded back. She remembered the pain of her full bladder and the brief relief as the hot liquid ran down her legs and made a puddle on the floor.



She remembered the cruel laughter and the jeers of the class which exploded in her ears. After that came the shrieks of Miss Mfeketo.

‘You filthy child!’ she had screamed. ‘Look at the mess you have made. Are you a baby who is not yet toilet trained? You are a disgrace to yourself and to your family! Shame on you!’

The words hurt more than the slaps across her back. They hurt more than missing her lunch break because she had to wash the classroom floor. They even hurt more than having to wear a sign around her neck for the rest of the day - a sign which read: ‘I am a baby!’

‘Mama, Mama, how will I ever face them all again? How could you leave me alone? If only I had one friend I could go on ... but alone....’

The pain and the loneliness in her pleas seemed to split the silence wide open and shake the tree.

When she finally stopped crying, the girl was exhausted and her eyes were red and swollen. The sun was setting in the sky, and, like the light, her hope was fading.

She moved towards the bank of the river to wash her face before going home to Auntie, who would be angry and frantic by now. In the dusk she tripped and fell hard against the bank which gave way under her weight and she plunged into the dark waters of the river.

She screamed in terror as the cold hands of the river seemed to grab hold of her and pull her into the depths. She could not swim and would surely drown.

Before she lost consciousness, she thought she felt strong arms about her, pulling her up to the surface. Maybe her mother or the ancestors were listening after all and had heard her cries?

Questions to think about:

1. Why was Boniswa so unhappy?
2. How did her teacher punish her?
3. Have you ever been punished liked this?
4. How did it make you feel?

Chapter 2

Bravery takes many forms

When the doorbell rang, Mr Setimela was amazed to find a policewoman on his doorstep with his son, Funda. Funda was wrapped in a blanket but dripping wet and shivering.

‘What is going on?’ he asked in alarm.

‘Your son is a hero!’ said Sergeant Moyaka. ‘He saved a girl from drowning this afternoon.’

Mr Setimela ushered them in and listened in awe to the rest of Sergeant Moyaka’s story:

A young girl called Boniswa, who was in Funda’s class, had fallen into the river. She could not swim and would surely have drowned if his son had not dived in after her and pulled her to safety. Passers-by had phoned the police, who had taken the girl to hospital and had brought Funda home.



Mr Setimela showered his son with praise and made him hot chocolate to warm him up. Later the neighbours came by to praise the local hero for his bravery. That night, when his father came in to say goodnight, he said, “Your mother is no longer with us but she sees everything and she would have been proud of you today, my son. I see a lot of her in you.” Then he kissed his son and turned out the light so Funda could get some sleep.



I see you realize bravery takes many forms.

But sleep did not come easily to Funda that night. He lay awake in bed and did not feel like a hero at all. In fact he hoped that the all-seeing eyes of his mother had not witnessed his cowardice. The events of the day came swimming back to him as he lay there wrestling with his conscience.

After climbing off the school bus that afternoon, Funda had gone in search of birds' eggs. He was raiding a nest high up in the tree next to the river when his blood ran cold and he froze.

It was an almost animal sound of a creature in terrible pain. Hardly daring to breathe, he had looked down through the leaves that hid him from view and he saw it was a girl. The girl, Boniswa, with the sad, dark eyes who had peed in her pants in class.

She clung to the tree as she poured out her sorrows aloud to the spirit of her dead mother. So she had lost her mother too. He knew what that felt like.

As Funda listened, guilt fell over him like a heavy blanket, for he had been one of those who had laughed and jeered at her. He knew at the time it was cruel, but somehow it was difficult to speak against a whole group and challenge one's teacher whose word was law. It was easier just to follow the crowd and fit in.

His mother would have spoken up in his situation. She had been a teacher before she died and had always stood up for the rights of all children. She had spoken out against all forms of corporal punishment. He could hear her voice now when she had addressed a Parents' and Teachers' Association meeting shortly before her death.

'All children are entitled to basic human rights like food, clothing, shelter and security. It is our job to see that our children grow up to be strong like trees — confident that they are loved and valued. Only cowards hide behind excuses and take out their frustrations on others — especially children. It is the duty of every man, woman and child to put out roots of love for our young nation to grow strong

and bear good fruit. It is our duty to resist corporal punishment in all its forms. Because it hurts more than children's bodies. It crushes their spirits. And in my book that is a crime.'

'If I was really brave I would have spoken up for that girl in class today,' thought Funda. 'If I have a lot of my mother in me, then somewhere there must be the seed of her courage in me to be a friend to that lonely girl who has also lost her mother early in life.'

When sleep finally came to Funda that night, he had made three resolutions. He would visit the girl the next day and apologize. He would offer her his hand in friendship and he would summon his courage to speak to Miss Mfeketo about all he knew.

In a dream that night his mother held him in her arms and spoke gently, 'I am now proud of you my son, for I see you realize that heroism takes many forms.'

Questions to think about:

1. Why was Funda's father so proud of him?
2. Why did Funda feel ashamed?
3. Why did Funda's mother say its our duty to resist corporal punishment?
4. Why didn't Funda stand up for Boniswa in class?
5. Have you ever struggled to stand up for what you believe in?

Chapter 3

Reclaiming our dreams

When Marjorie Mfeketo, Boniswa’s teacher, received the shocking news of the child’s near drowning, she went to visit her after school the next day and took her some chocolate. After that, she drove to her best friend’s house. The minute Nothemba opened the door, she could see that Marjorie was upset and needed a friend to talk to. Over a cup of tea it all came out.

‘Nothemba, all my life, all I have ever wanted to be was a good teacher. But nobody told me how difficult it would be to live out that dream.’

‘It is the crowded classrooms and the pressures that we are under that have changed me. I find myself shouting at children and hitting them just to keep control so I can do some teaching.’

‘Everyone seems to want a piece of me — all the kids in the class; the principal and the parents with their endless demands. I want to scream sometimes.

Yesterday I punished a girl for coming late. Then she wet her pants and that was the last straw.’



Marjorie put her head in her hands and wept. Nothemba tried to comfort her friend.

‘Come now, we all have days like that,’ said Nothemba.

‘But you don’t understand. That child almost drowned in the river yesterday. I went to see her this afternoon after school and was struck by how small she looked propped up in bed. When she opened her eyes and saw me, her eyes grew large, and I swear, she gasped in fear. Have I really turned into the kind of teacher I hated at school? How did it come to this? How did all my dreams become ashes?’

The two friends spoke long into the night of what had happened. They spoke of the boy, Funda, who had rescued the girl from drowning and had come to see her at interval and had spoken out against the punishments Boniswa had suffered. Then he had told

her of Boniswa’s terrible, aching despair and her

desperate attempts to communicate with

her dead mother. The conversation

with this earnest boy had

shamed her but it had

also reminded her

of the ideals she

used to have.

‘Marjorie, my

friend,’ said

Nothemba gently,

‘we are not perfect.

We are human and

we make mistakes.



The mistakes of yesterday are in the past. Let us now turn our eyes to the future and see what can be done.'

That night when Marjorie drove home it was 2 a.m. and she was tired but there was a new resolve in her heart.

'No child will ever suffer humiliation and corporal punishment at my hands again! I believe children need discipline to learn but there has to be another way – a way that builds their confidence and does not crush their spirits!'

Marjorie realised that she would not be able to achieve this goal alone. It would have to involve the whole school community to bring about lasting change. The parents, the teachers, the principal, the Education Department and the learners themselves would all have a role to play. She knew these changes would take time, but she was ready to take the first step.

She also owed Boniswa an apology. Her trust would be harder to win, but Marjorie would try.

Questions to think about:

1. Why did Miss Mfeketo find it difficult to be a good teacher?
2. How did she feel when she heard about Boniswa?
3. Why did Miss Mfeketo go to visit her friend Nothemba?
4. Do you have someone you can talk to about your problems?

The Tree by the River

This story book was commissioned by RAPCAN as part of an initiative to promote positive discipline in schools, especially in the Southern African context. The story is aimed at learners in grades 4, 5 and 6. It is also a useful resource for teachers when used in conjunction with the **Activity Book**.

The story is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 tells the story of Boniswa and how she feels when she is punished and humiliated by her teacher. Chapter 2 tells Funda's side of the story. He is a boy in Boniswa's class who laughs at Boniswa in her misery and then has a change of heart. Chapter 3 describes their teacher's point of view as Marjorie Mfeketo reflects on the challenges facing teachers in the school system.

Each chapter is followed by a series of questions designed to stimulate discussion and debate around the issue of corporal and humiliating punishment.

The **Activity Book** uses an exciting blend of art, drama and creative writing to deepen learners' understanding of corporal and humiliating punishment and encourage learners and teachers to actively promote positive discipline in the classroom.

