

FOREWORD BY AMY DICKINSON

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# Dear Highlights



What Adults Can Learn from 75 Years of  
Letters and Conversations with Kids

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# Where the Conversation Began



**W**HEN A CHILD SHARES THEIR INNER THOUGHTS, we are given a gift. It's an honor and a responsibility—even a sacred trust. Through letters, emails, poems, and drawings, hundreds of thousands of kids have engaged with *Highlights* magazine since its inception. They have shared their thoughts and feelings with us as if we were close friends. They write about the various challenges of growing up—difficulties at school, at home, and with peers. They write about their hopes and dreams. They write about their worries and fears—for themselves, for the people they love, and for the larger world. They ask, “What should I do?” “Can you help?” “What do you think?”

Since our beginning, it has been a Highlights tradition to read every letter and respond to every child. This practice has created for us an ongoing, authentic dialogue with children. It became a way to keep our finger on the pulse of kids—to stay attuned to their thoughts and feelings. It has led to our becoming a touchstone for generations of children navigating the ups and downs of childhood.

Our dedication to answering every child’s letter is rooted in the views of the first editor and cofounder of *Highlights* magazine, Dr. Garry Cleveland Myers. A child psychologist, lifelong educator, and particularly astute observer of children, Dr. Myers believed that positive human relationships were a powerful motivator for children. He and Caroline Clark Myers, his educator wife and cofounder, were advocates for conversations with children that allowed adults to hear and understand kids’ perspectives. In his many writings for adults, Dr. Myers urged parents to take pleasure in their children by being “appreciative listeners” and encouraging their kids to share their thoughts more often.

This philosophy of child-rearing was foundational to the magazine. It was apparent in the very first issue in 1946. By writing (for 25 years!) a monthly editor’s message that welcomed kids to each new issue, Dr. Myers set the long Highlights tradition of speaking directly and conversationally with children. In his “Talks with the Editor” feature, which was later renamed “Let’s Talk Things Over,” he laid a foundation of trust and encouraged kids to self-reflect. This space in the magazine reinforced the idea that talking and communicating with people you trust are good ways to handle problems.

In those early years, our mailbag mostly held fan mail from kids, their queries about *Highlights*, and letters to Sammy Spivens—a puppet character in a long-running feature who encouraged kids to reflect on their bad habits.

But over time, we began to receive more and more letters from kids that revealed their thoughts and feelings. They wrote about difficulties in getting along with their friends and siblings, their career aspirations, being teased, caring for pets, societal concerns, and other topics that had a direct effect on them. From time to time, a page of their letters made it into an issue, and we

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began to see that kids were very interested in reading letters from other children. In 1979, we began publishing them in a regular advice column that continues today as “Dear Highlights.”

Throughout the evolution of the magazine over the years, as mail flowed in from kids—thousands of letters, drawings, and poems monthly—members of the editorial staff were specially trained in how to respond to them. No one took lightly the task of answering a child’s letter. Rather, it was considered an honor and a basic tenet of the company’s core beliefs: When a child writes to you, you write back with care and respect.

Eventually, we realized that we possessed a treasure trove of

information about childhood derived from a primary source—kids themselves. We saw research value in our reader mail, and we began to save it all. When the attic of our editorial offices, where the letters were stored, began to overflow, we contacted The Ohio State University. The staff in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library saw the value in our collection of correspondence from children, which included letters, poems, drawings, stories, and science questions. Ohio State also recognized its historical significance, so they agreed to retain the letters in a special collection. Because they were unable to accept the total amount of mail we had amassed, we sent all the letters and emails we received from children, and one drawing and poem for every ten received—mostly from 1981 to the present. This archive was the main source for most of the kids’ correspondence reproduced or excerpted here.

As we pored over the letters in the making of this book, we began to see a pattern that wasn’t surprising: Kids’ concerns have changed very little. Certainly, the world has changed dramatically since we received those first letters from kids, but how children grow has not. For 75 years, kids across generations have written to us about the same fundamental issues, still hoping for adult guidance and encouragement.

Given the consistency we saw in kids’ letters over time, we were surprised to see more change in how we responded. We uncovered some replies that probably were too reflective of the different personalities of the editors who wrote them. Some letters may have called for more empathy than we offered in our briefer replies. We took too long to rephrase our suggestion to “talk this over with your parents” to “talk this over with a parent,” to be sensitive to the growing number of readers living in single-parent households. We struggled—and still do—about our tendency to assume that the child who writes to us

has at least one loving, caring parent or guardian. But we know that's not true for every child. Looking through a present-day lens, we sometimes wished we had answered a particular letter from another era a little differently. Yet, our belief that kids matter and what they think matters is at the very heart of every response. Sifting through the store of replies felt like looking at a

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series of snapshots taken over the decades, revealing both who *Highlights* was and is.

What also remained consistent over time is the authenticity of a child's letter. They have come to us in childish scrawls, with misspellings and grammatical errors—or, more commonly in earlier years, in careful cursive. But, in 2006, for the first

time, the number of emails eclipsed the number of postal letters we received—a trend that continued for about ten years.

Although many kids seem to find emails easier to write and send, we find that postal letters are easier to answer. When a child writes to us with paper and pencil, they sometimes give us additional contextual clues. We might be able to roughly guess the letter writers' age by looking at the handwriting, for example, which greatly helps us formulate a response. Often a child illustrates their letter, and the details in the drawing can offer hints about the problem not expressed in words. Some children forego a written message entirely and just send drawings about an upsetting event or situation. This was especially common after 9/11, when we received numerous drawings of airplanes hitting

the Twin Towers. We responded to these drawings as if they were letters expressing worry or sadness.

Emails offer no such clues. Sometimes they don't even include the child's real name. The brevity and more anonymous feel to these notes make composing a meaningful response even more challenging.

Certainly, the ideal way to connect with kids is through face-to-face communication, which allows us to look them in the eyes and punctuate our response with supportive body language and warm hugs. But for some children, an in-person conversation with a trusted adult isn't possible, hasn't proved helpful, or seems too daunting to initiate. For them, writing a message to us serves.

Most children write to us only once, but some write to us several times. One reader, who found it particularly hard to navigate relationships with family and peers, wrote to us regularly over the course of ten years, beginning from age 7. In 2004, he sent us 33 postal letters—and, later, for a period, a daily email. All told, we sent him more than 200 replies. After a while, he





started to feel a little like family, and today the staff often wonders aloud how he is doing.

While the majority of our conversations with kids cover the common, daily challenges of childhood, some of the letters and emails are about serious or especially sensitive issues. In

these cases, we seek the help of experienced, credentialed professionals, who are more than willing to review our replies. They help ensure that we're sending the best possible advice based on the information we have. As required by law, when kids tell us about abuse or neglect, we report it to the proper authorities. We handle emails in strict compliance with the Children's Online Privacy and

Protection Act (COPPA). The names of the children whose letters are published in this book have been changed to protect their privacy. We've also preserved the integrity of each letter and reply we selected, leaving the original wording and spelling. We've cut text only to shorten when necessary.

In my long tenure at *Highlights*, I personally have read and responded to thousands of letters and emails from children. This remains a favorite part of my work as editor in chief. I am rarely surprised by any letter, but I am still frequently touched. Nevertheless, seeing so many messages from generations of kids bound together in a single volume moves me deeply. This book is a powerful reminder that childhood is a period of heavy lifting for kids. In their

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often brief but always intimate letters, we see how hard they work to develop their character, find belonging, discover their strengths, and build self-esteem.

If the archive at Ohio State is a time capsule, then this book is a tapestry. Pulling from some of the most beautiful threads of our correspondence over the decades, we have tried to weave together the letters, poems, and drawings shared with us into a depiction of childhood that's honest and rich in color and texture. Like the best art, it should stir you. Cause you to reflect. Make you feel the world of childhood.

I also hope this book spurs you to action—to commit to leaning in and listening to kids on their way to growing up. When we *hear* them, we learn how to better serve them. When we respond with thought and care, we model the way we hope they'll show up for others. By doing so, we ensure that childhood is the nurturing, positive experience kids need and deserve. This is how we put children on the path to becoming people who will help create a better world for all. We implore you to listen.