

Helping young children know

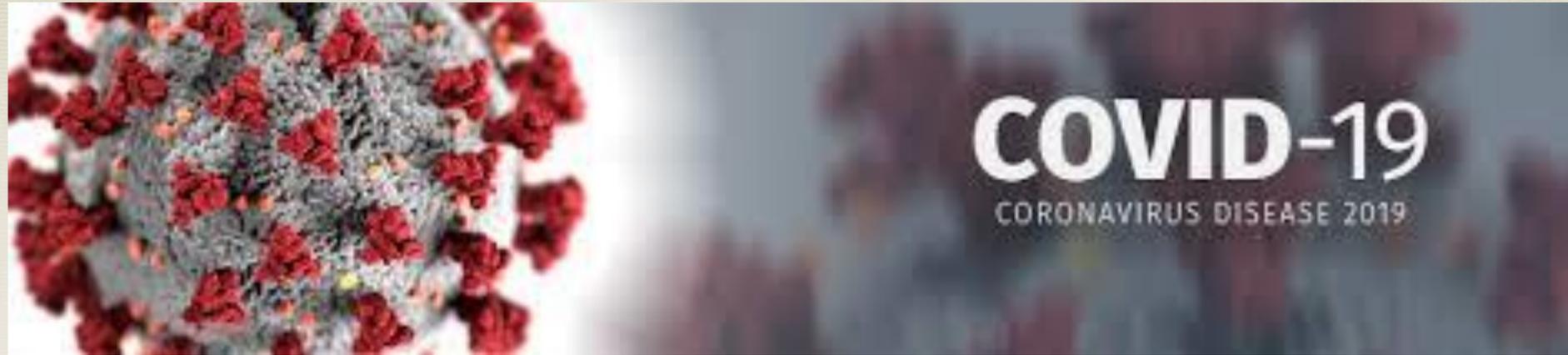
Using real communication to mediate children's distress

MNAFEE conference. Anne R. Gearity. April 14, 2021
gears002@umn.edu

In this workshop

- * Use the information from today's keynote to apply to your children, your students.
- * Think together about how to talk to children so they can use us for comfort.
- * Make sense of experiences so they can use language as mediation of what is happening: The important role of the story.
- * Dispel our own anxieties and uncertainties that keeps us stuck and unable to speak with honesty.

It's still happening



- * This past year, unprecedented challenges for families and children.
- * Stressors - being at home, not being at home, changes, loss.
- * In addition, racial/ cultural tensions/ community crises/ sense of danger.

For many young children,

- * COVID allowed them to stay home with parents— every young child's idea of a holiday!!!!
- * Reduced expectations—reduced demands to perform according to adult time.
- * Increased confusion: parents at home and working/ limited outings/ increased restrictions/ feelings that were (and are) confusing.

We all wish children could be carefree.

- * Role of parents to mediate danger, to protect kids from stressors.
- * Children's "work" is to play, explore, delight in their surroundings.
- * Young children bring limited understanding — often misperceive what is going on. *It must be about me.*



And yet...

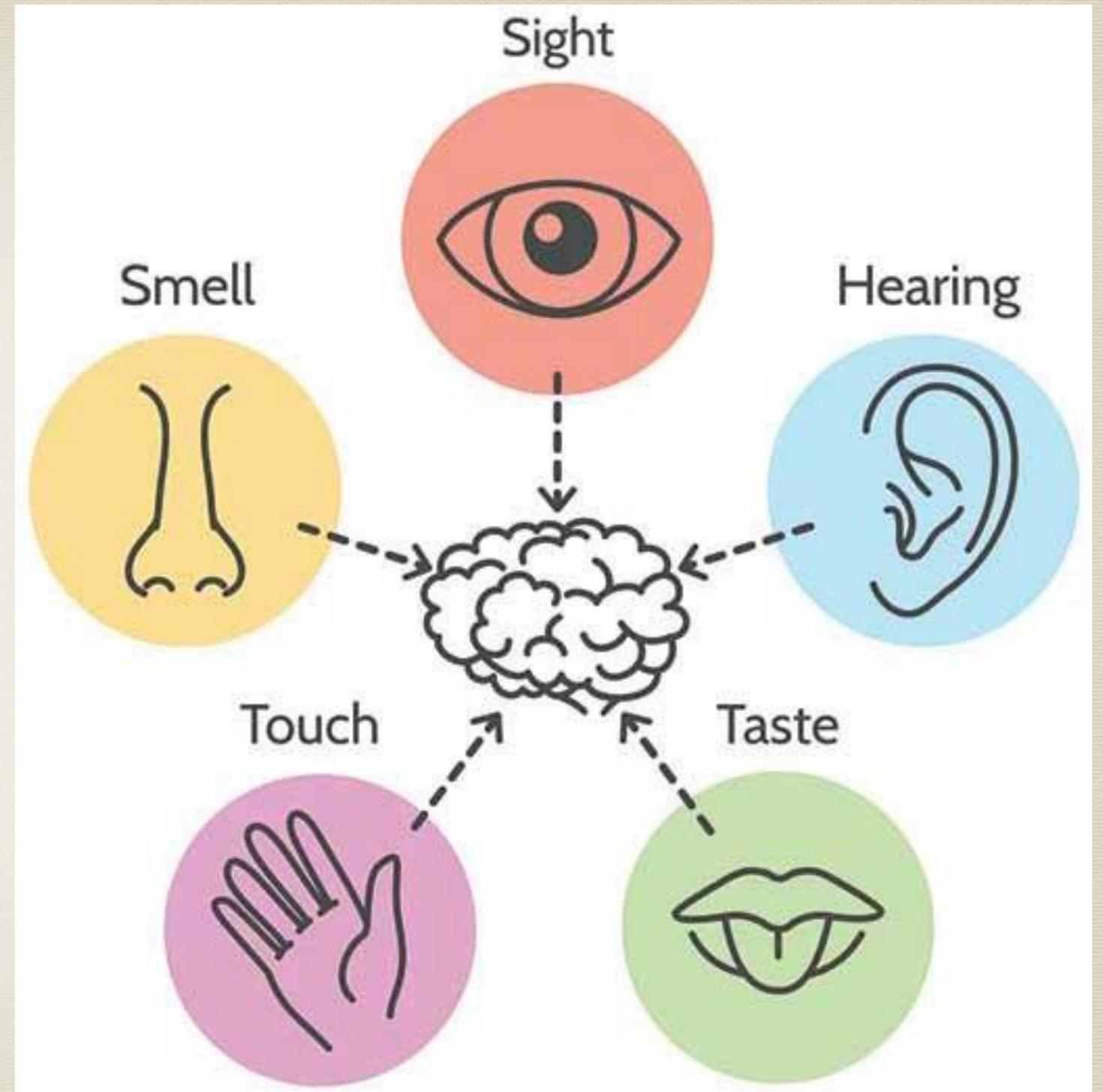
- * They are aware. Human biology is organized to sense changes — and gradually to assess if changes are OK or endangering.
- * Early reliance on patterns.
- * For young children, danger is perceived— felt. How?

Senses

Heightened sensory alertness.

Vigilance to how the adults are/
interpersonal sensitivity.

Awareness of how outside feels/
impact of others.



The importance of adults

- * Adults mediate and translate sensations — is this dangerous, is this safe?
- * We call this matching—caretaking adults intuitively move the energy, to serve both in managing experiences together.
- * Without this adult support, young children become overwhelmed with feelings of danger, stress. They lack resources to manage alone.

Idea #1: children remember

- * It is wishful thinking that young children do not remember. In fact they remember a lot, in their bodies.
- * Our job is to move this from body to mind, to words. We lend them words.
- * Children's brains are processing language long before they can produce language so our words soothe and organize them.
- * We want children to know.

Idea #2: providing the words

- * *What happened?* This process of narrating is one of our most precious capacities and gifts— we just forgot to include the children.
- * How did this belief occur— that we are supposed to protect children from reality? We are to mediate reality.
- * Without our help they are left to make sense alone — and often blame themselves.
- * But words have to work — developmentally matched.

Developmentally matched

- * infants— tone and cadence
- * toddlers— name the feelings, clarify me and you feelings. Also intensity: How big? How long?
- * Preschoolers — facts but not too many, this is how it works. Make sure they understand cause and effect, and your ability to step in to help.
- * School aged kiddos— facts help, details that are organizing helps, but feelings need to be contained.



Idea #3: stories that tame

- * Stories not only provide context — why is this happening? — but move experience from immediate to reflected upon.
- * Reflecting — the ability to know about something that has happened (vs. reacting in ways that maintain distress).
- * Stories allow for beginning-middle-end resolve — the chance of looking back and then looking forward. Time moves in stories.

We make our own stories...and we
borrow

Developmental stories

Most children have fears—likely emerging from their own imaginations.
Mastery is the goal.

THERE'S A NIGHTMARE IN MY CLOSET



written and illustrated by **MERCER MAYER**

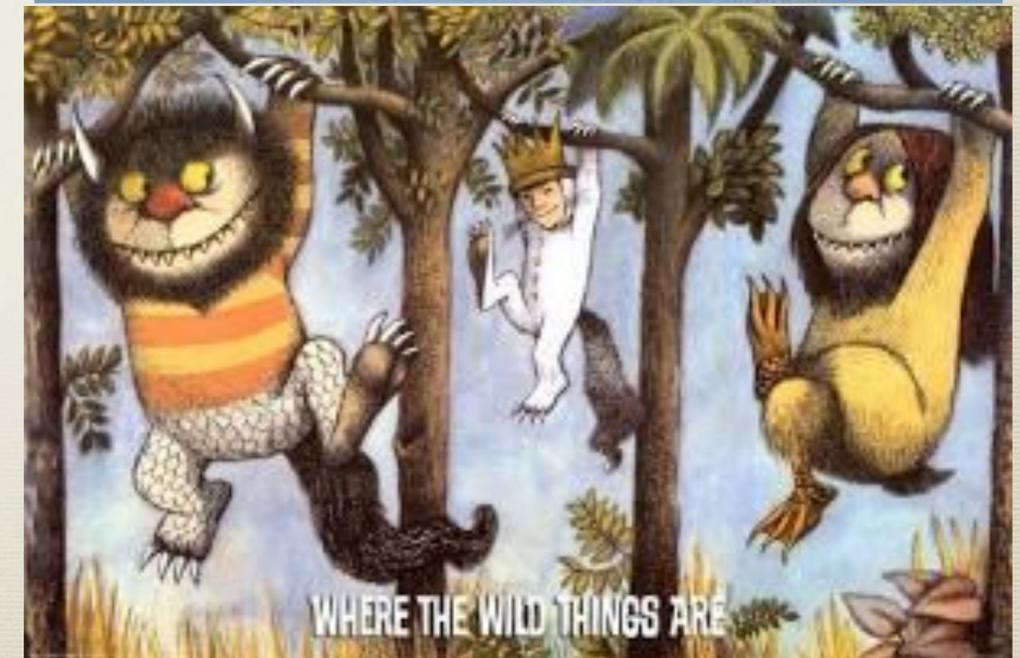
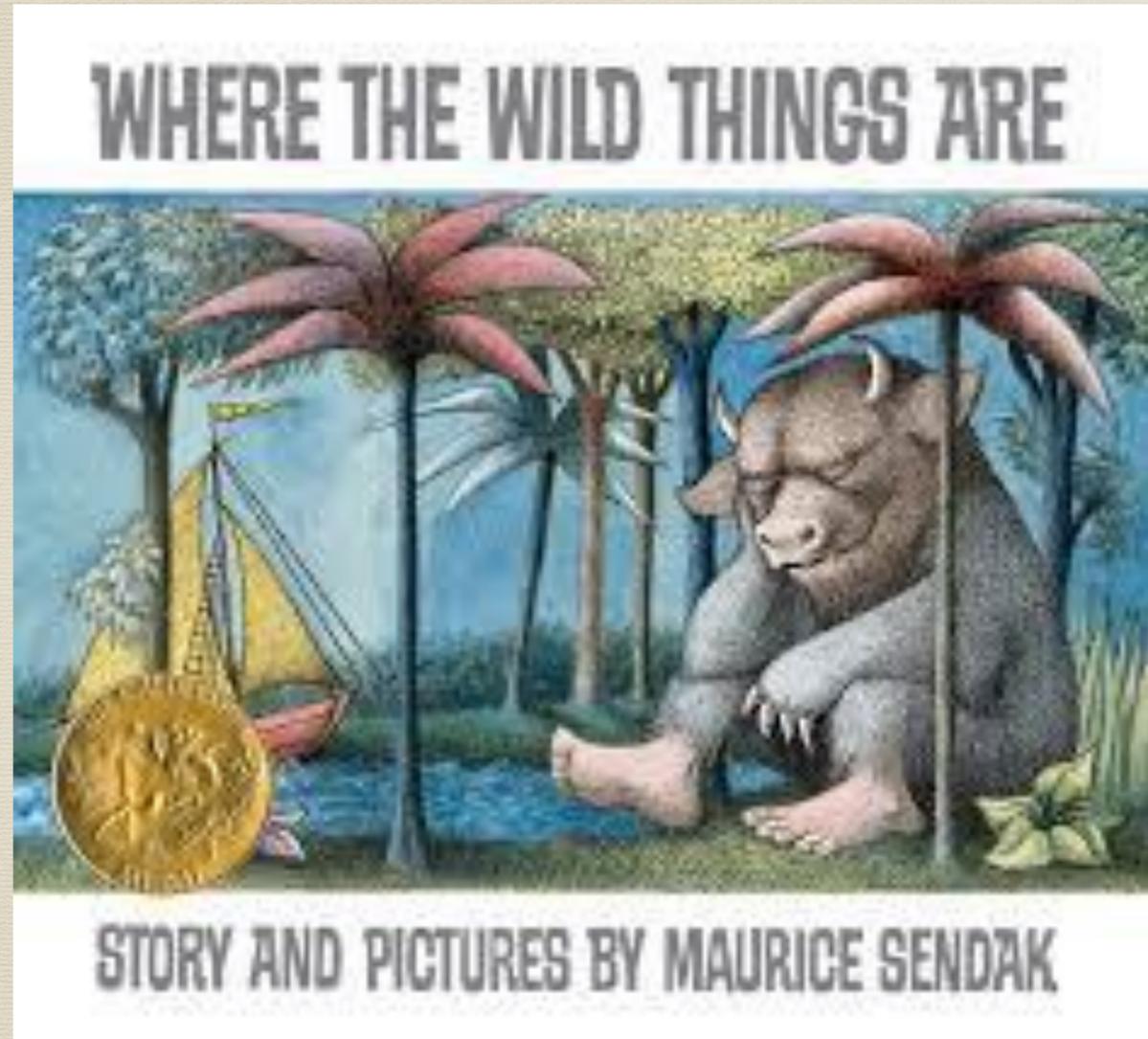
“I shot him anyway...”

Don't cry and wake up mom and dad...



May be more, but no room in my bed

Where the wild things are



Remember, Max was a wild thing...and then tamed all the wild things

Pete the Cat

I Love My
White Shoes



Story by Eric Litwin
(aka Mr. Eric) Art by James Dean

Managing disappointment

Did Pete cry? Goodness no! He
kept walking and singing his song.

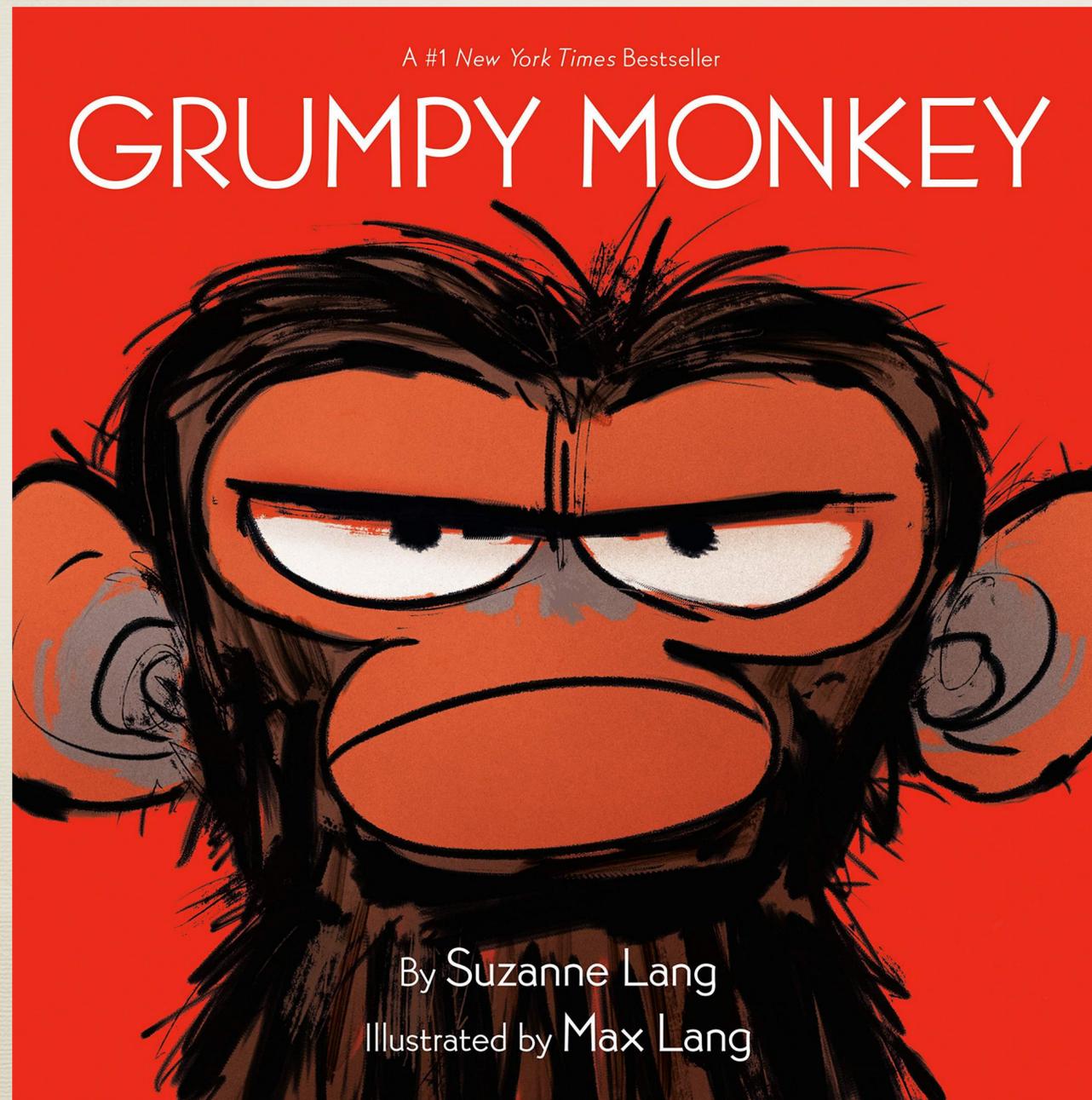


Nature of stress and trauma

- * Renders us powerless/ confused/ fearful/ stuck/ and without time, space escape.
- * We feel better when we can regain power (connect with others)/ make sense of what happened/ find other emotions/ get active again/ and realize that was then and there and it is here and now.
- * Stressors also anticipate happening again — next time/ mastery or not?

Feelings come from inside/ and outside

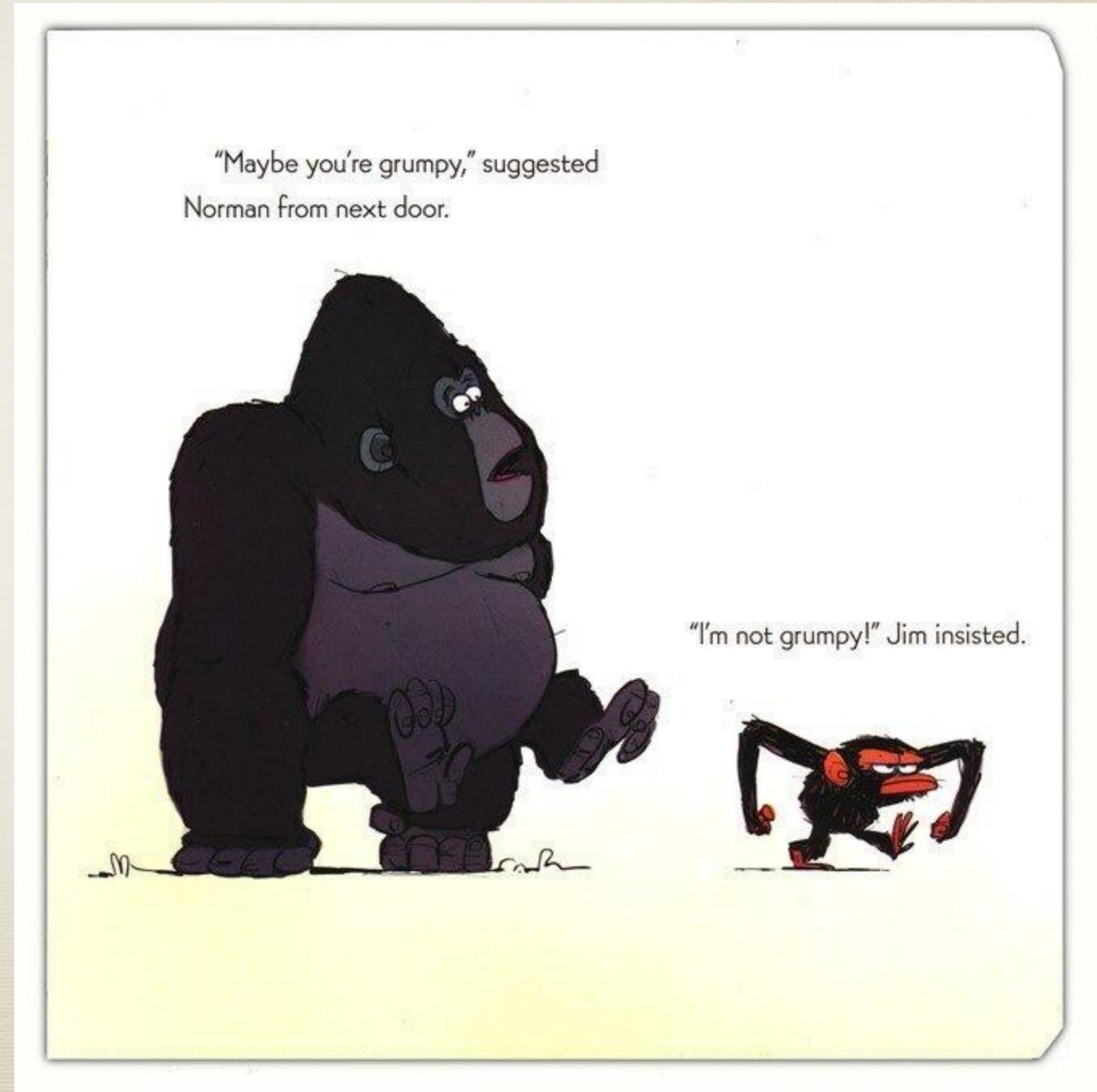
*



* Young children often express fear with irritability.

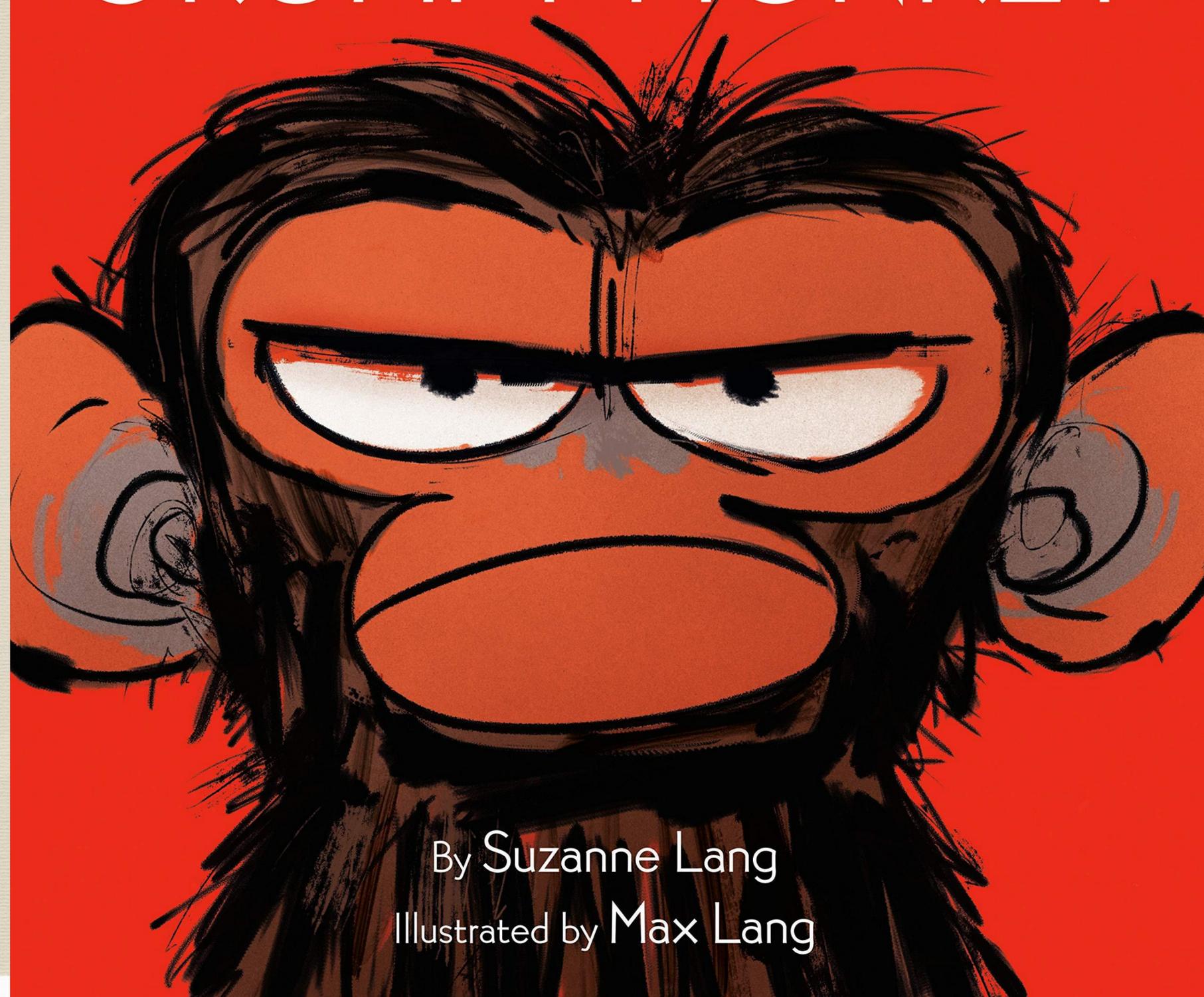
It is as important to manage their own feelings as it is to manage facts.

Grumpy has always been unpopular— why easier than sad?



A #1 New York Times Bestseller

GRUMPY MONKEY



By Suzanne Lang
Illustrated by Max Lang

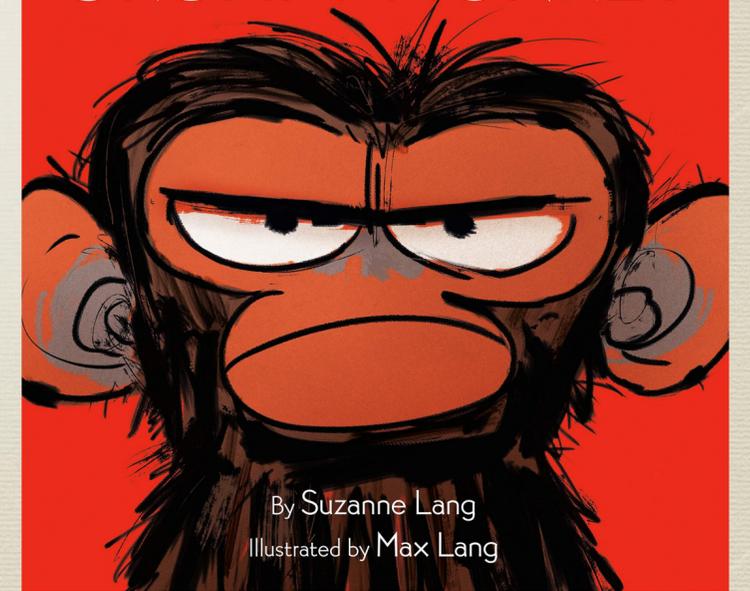
stories

e a

ness.

A #1 New York Times Bestseller

GRUMPY MONKEY



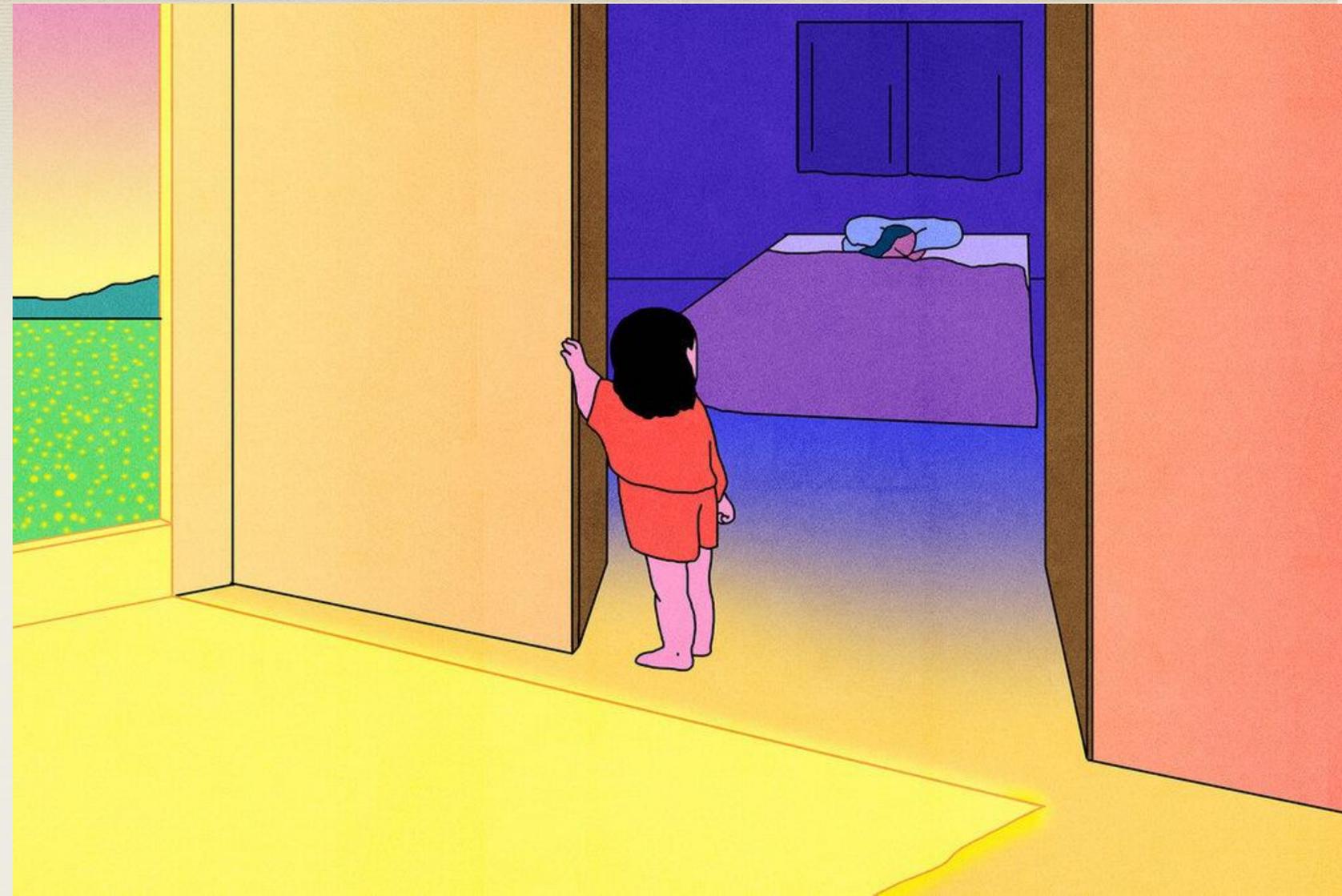
By Suzanne Lang
Illustrated by Max Lang

And when adults are the stressed ones?

- * Being honest is so much better than hiding.
- * We cannot hide our bodies.
- * Naming our distress in language that young children can understand—
- * Reassuring that we can feel badly AND still be there for them.
- * The ultimate fear: losing the adult.

It's alright for children to know—

Words allow children to hold something in their minds as separate from them. We can manage what we know, not what we aren't allowed to know.



So the morals of the story are...

Even very young children can know about feelings, fears, even events that are difficult when they have parents, adults who are willing to mediate and support.

Knowing in words = taming the danger enough that mastery, or managing becomes possible.

The best part of managing is not having to do it alone.

Thanks