

## LEADER'S GUIDE

# SOMETHING BAD HAPPENED

### A Series of Six Creative Books for Healing Post-Traumatic Stress

Foreword by Charles T. Clegg, M.D., Medical Director  
College Hospital, Cerritos, California

Trauma and violence have touched and wounded young lives for generations, but only in recent years have we begun to understand the dimensions of the problem— both in young children and in adults who have carried the emotional scars of childhood experiences into their adult lives.

In the Eighties, mental health professionals began taking a new look at the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome as a result of childhood trauma. We have begun to understand the impact of trauma on young lives— and we have begun to listen to the subtle and direct messages that children in these situations give us. We are, at long last, beginning to heed their cries for help.

Historically, a significant obstacle to understanding the scope and consequences of childhood trauma has been the difficulty in differentiating between a child's reporting of events and his or her recounting of fantasies. Differentiation is still a significant challenge but, these days, more credence is being given to events.

As we face the realities of childhood trauma, we are listening to children in new ways. The SOMETHING BAD HAPPENED series represents a compassionate, innovative and interactive way for children to express their feelings and begin to heal. Children using this series will not only find reassurance from the excellent text, but also find new routes of expression in the illustrations and opportunities for drawings of their own. They will have the opportunity to communicate their own scary thoughts, ways to feel safe and sources of love through art exercises in the books. The child's use of colors, as well as the images in the drawings, can give the therapist vital clues to the child's feelings and progress.

Healing, a renewed sense of safety, growing self-esteem and the reassurance of love are the major themes of the SOMETHING BAD HAPPENED series. These books are a gentle, compassionate and active effort to assist children who are, after all, our future.

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# **SOMETHING BAD HAPPENED**

## **Creative Books For Healing Post-Traumatic Stress**

Written by Debra Whiting Alexander, Ph.D.

### **A NOTE TO PARENTS, TEACHERS AND COUNSELORS**

When a traumatic event touches the life of a child, open discussion about what happened can be difficult. The **SOMETHING BAD HAPPENED** series is designed to facilitate the expression of feelings in children who have been directly or indirectly exposed to crime, violence and trauma. It is intended to normalize a child's reactions and sense of isolation in a supportive and nonthreatening way.

These books are not intended to be used as a substitute for treatment. When a trauma occurs that is outside the range of usual human experience, both adults and children benefit from specialized help from a professional counselor trained in the treatment of post-traumatic stress. A qualified therapist may choose to involve parents in their child's use of this book, so that family communication and understanding is enhanced.

Untreated, a traumatic experience may disrupt the formation of a child's identity and continued development. Low self-esteem may result from a child's need to resist change and appropriate risk taking for fear of further traumatization. An ongoing sense of helplessness and lack of trust contribute to feelings of low self-worth.

### **POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER IN CHILDREN**

In the aftermath of trauma, children may experience a range of physical and emotional post-traumatic stress symptoms including: increased fears, separation anxiety, reenactment of violent themes in play and art, increased withdrawal or aggression, grief, loneliness, tantrums, sleep disorder, feeling jumpy, guilt, avoidance of reminders of the trauma, and regression of age-appropriate behaviors.

Trauma overwhelms a young child's ability to cope. It is common for all age groups to regress to an earlier, safer emotional stage of development. These are temporary changes. It is important to be patient and loving, not punishing. Families who tolerate temporary behavioral regressions seem to enhance resilience in their children to the effects of violence.

Some children may appear to be unaffected by trauma or may show brief, periodic displays of symptoms. Many will need to explore meanings to life and may ask questions related to spiritual concerns. The need for reassurance of safety and security is a paramount concern for all children. Even the very young will respond to a traumatic occurrence with an increased need for physical closeness and comforting.

## CONTENT OF BOOKS

All six books in the SOMETHING BAD HAPPENED series were written from a children's perspective. They are open-ended so that a child's experience can be easily integrated. Each book carries a general theme and healing message.

**#2351 SOMETHING BAD HAPPENED** may be used for children who have had a family member victimized, have witnessed violence themselves, or have suffered as a result of a larger scale community or national trauma. This story normalizes the secondary victim's experience which is often as intense as the direct primary victims who are more easily recognized.

**#2352 IT HAPPENED TO ME** was written for children who have been the direct or primary victim of a crime or trauma. Examples include: sexual abuse, traumatic accident, fire, disaster, physical assault, attempted robbery or kidnapping. Common questions and reactions are explored.

**#2353 ALL MY FEELINGS** was written to foster an empathetic response to a child's inner experiences. It provides acceptance and understanding for a child's full range of emotional reactions and physical sensations following a traumatic event, whether they were directly or indirectly impacted.

**#2354 I CAN'T REMEMBER** encourages unconditional acceptance for a child's inability to recall traumatic memories which are more likely to be repressed. It is helpful to normalize this common response in children.

**#2355 DON'T GO!** assists in developing nonshaming, nonpunitive responses to separation anxiety, and children's increased needs for physical comfort and closeness. These behaviors are normalized as being healthy and necessary to continued development of security and independence following a trauma.

**#2356 THE WORLD I SEE** validates the fear and sense of confusion felt by children growing up in violent homes. The idea of nonviolent forms of expressing anger and the need for family healing are introduced.

## HOW TO USE THE BOOKS

By reading the stories in the series, you can begin to help traumatized children define their fears, and then deal with them in a safe and helpful way.

Each story/coloring book is designed to facilitate discussion about the traumatic experience and may be personalized through the child's own drawings.

## IMPORTANT GUIDELINES

- **PROVIDE CHOICES** for children regarding when and what they will read, color, and discuss. This is an important step to reestablishing a sense of mastery over an experience that was out of their control.
- **JOINING AND ALIGNING** with a child's experience will reduce a sense of isolation. Building a safe and trusting rapport is imperative to the child's ability to explore and express frightening material.

- **DON'T TELL A CHILD** what his or her feelings should be. Maintain a nonjudgmental attitude towards comments, expression of feelings, and ideas about each story. Be especially sensitive to a child's reactions and unique perspective to the event(s). Respectful listening and attending behaviors will acknowledge the importance and seriousness of a child's own unique experience.
- **THE MORE A CHILD UNDERSTANDS**, the less fearful he or she will be. Encourage discussion of the event and its aftermath. Make sure the discussions go both ways so that "lecturing" a child might be avoided. Discussing the story in a respectful way helps establish a healthy, trusting interaction between adult and child.
- **THE PACE** at which you read and color must be left up to the child. Don't try to make a child open up before he or she is ready. Be available, accepting, nonjudgmental and listen. Building confidence is important to a child's developing self-esteem and ability to recover.
- **AS YOU READ** the coloring book out loud together, add information suitable to the child's comprehension and maturity. Clarify ideas that are based on inaccurate information. These might be distorting the child's beliefs about what happened and why. Build from the child's own understanding and according to age level. For example, you may want to ask, "What is your understanding of what happened?" "What do you want to know?"
- **ANSWER ALL QUESTIONS** truthfully, simply and on a level the child can understand. Lying or offering inaccurate information to protect children can impede the recovery process as well as affect their trust in you.
- **BLANK PAGES** appear throughout the text of each story. They are titled so that children may be encouraged to draw and share personal experiences of their own. Art work may be effective in helping children relax inhibitions and face difficult feelings as well as provide clues to unresolved anxieties and coping mechanisms.
- **ENCOURAGE** children to trust and honor their feelings. Give them hope and confidence in their ability to heal.
- **MOST CHILDREN** will continue to need information at each new stage of growth. Parents may be encouraged to remain open to questions when trauma may be revived or reviewed again at different levels of development.
- **REMEMBER:**
  - Changes in behaviors are a normal reaction to being frightened or upset.
  - Give as much reassurance as possible, both emotionally and physically.
  - Simple explanations are best. Be gentle, but tell the truth.

It is my belief that children can grow strong in spite of a tragedy with support and acceptance from the adults around them. It is my hope that this series will provide an additional resource to parents who are themselves in counseling, and to counselors and teachers who are enabling children to experience the pain and sorrow of a trauma in an honest and meaningful way.

Debra Whiting Alexander, Ph.D., L.M.F.T., C.T.C., N.C.C.



**I CAN'T REMEMBER**

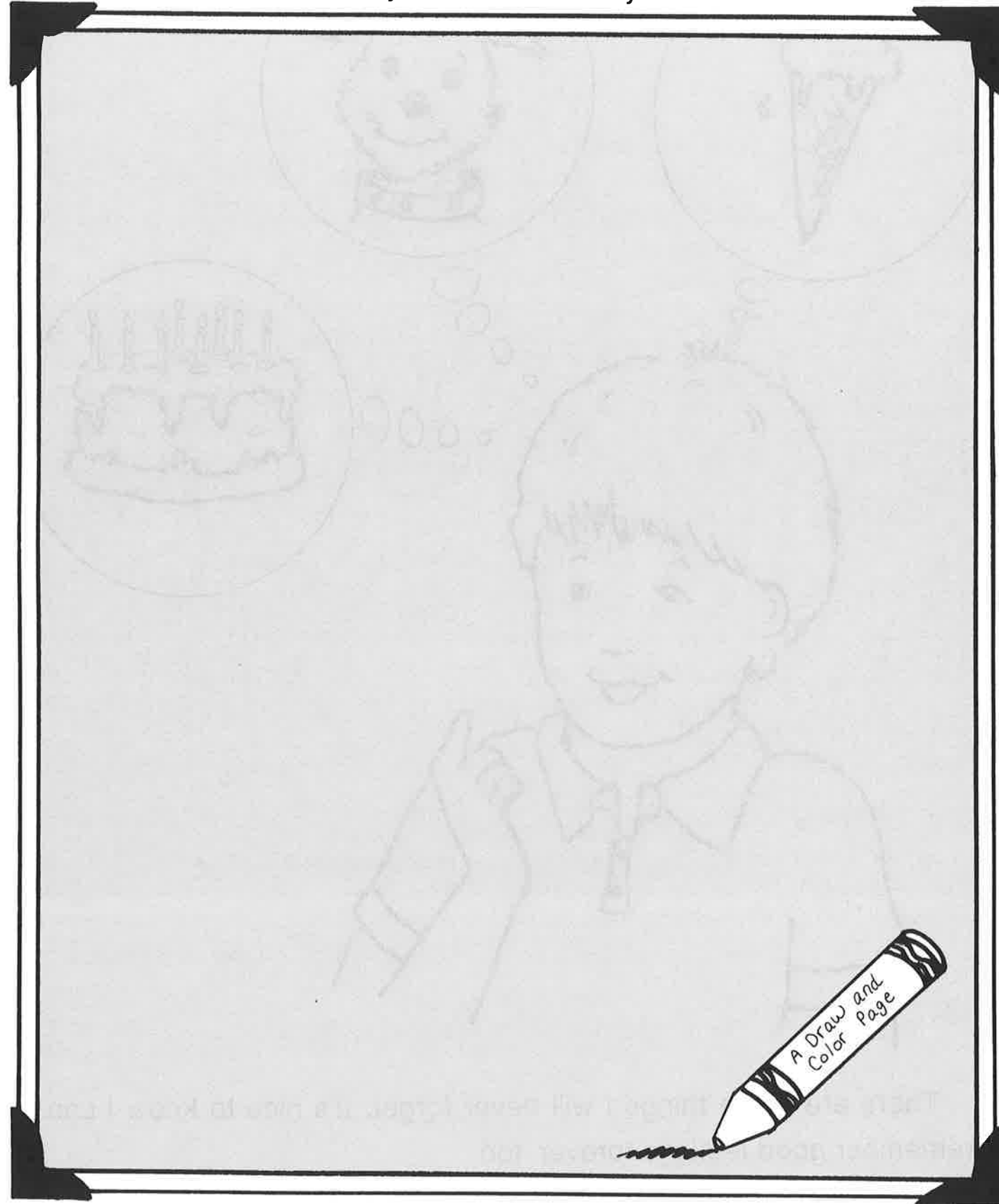


**A CREATIVE HEALING BOOK**

by Debra Whiting Alexander, Ph.D.



My Favorite Memory



# I CAN'T REMEMBER

A Story for Children Feeling the Effects  
of Crime or Trauma

Written by Debra Whiting Alexander, Ph.D.

Designed by Beth Weiner Lipson

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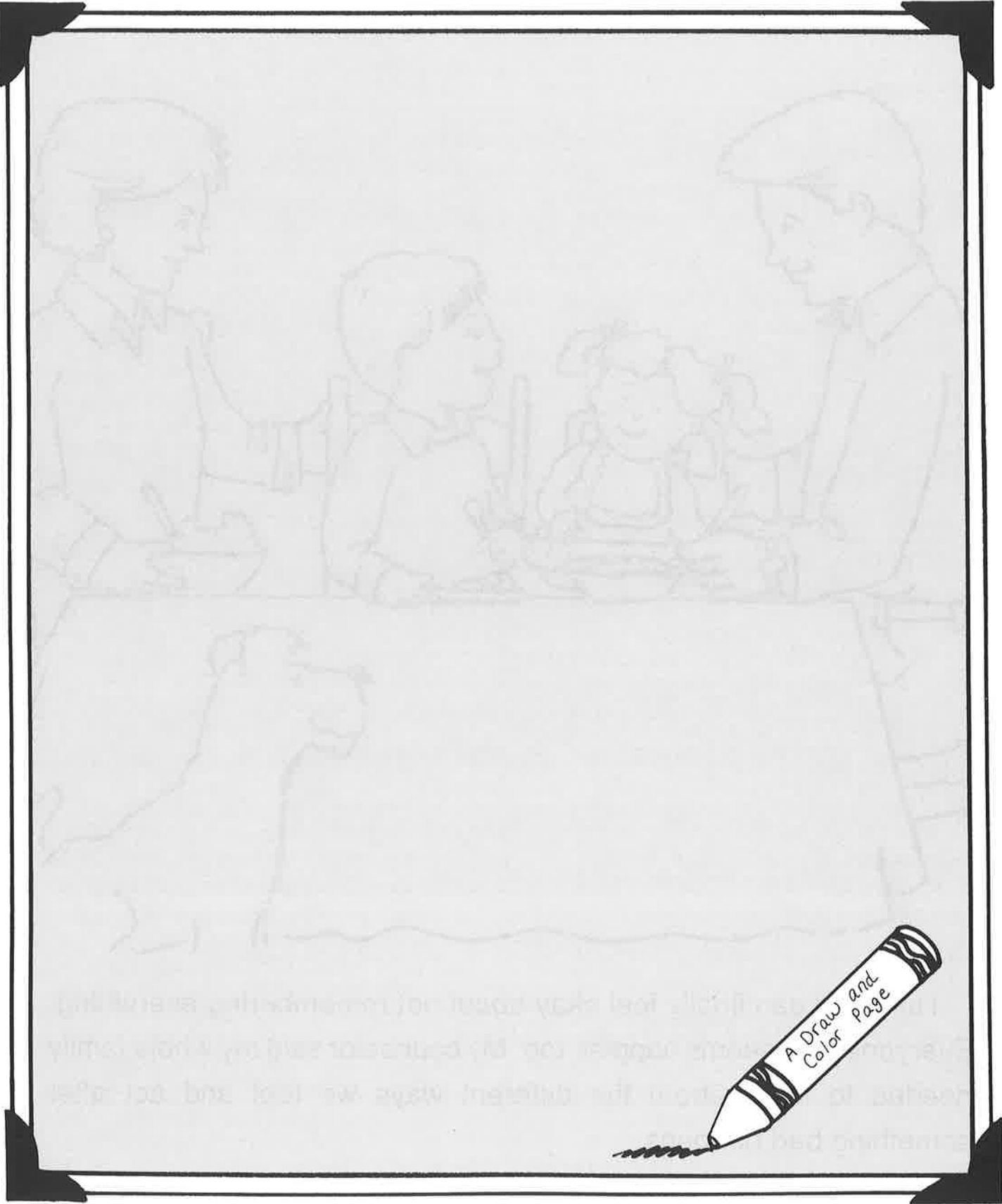
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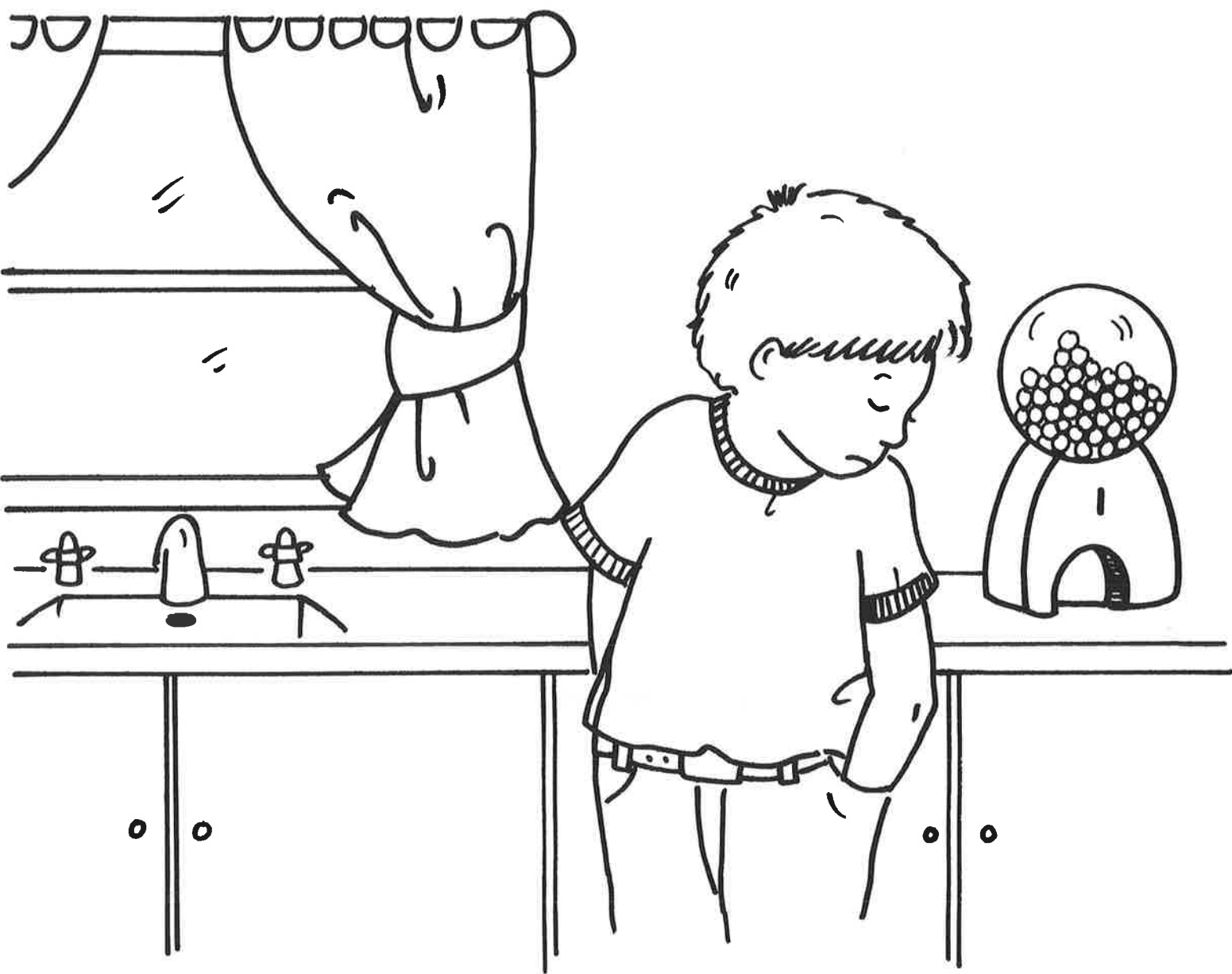


There are some things I will never forget. It's nice to know I can remember good feelings forever too.

How I Think Each Person In My Family Feels



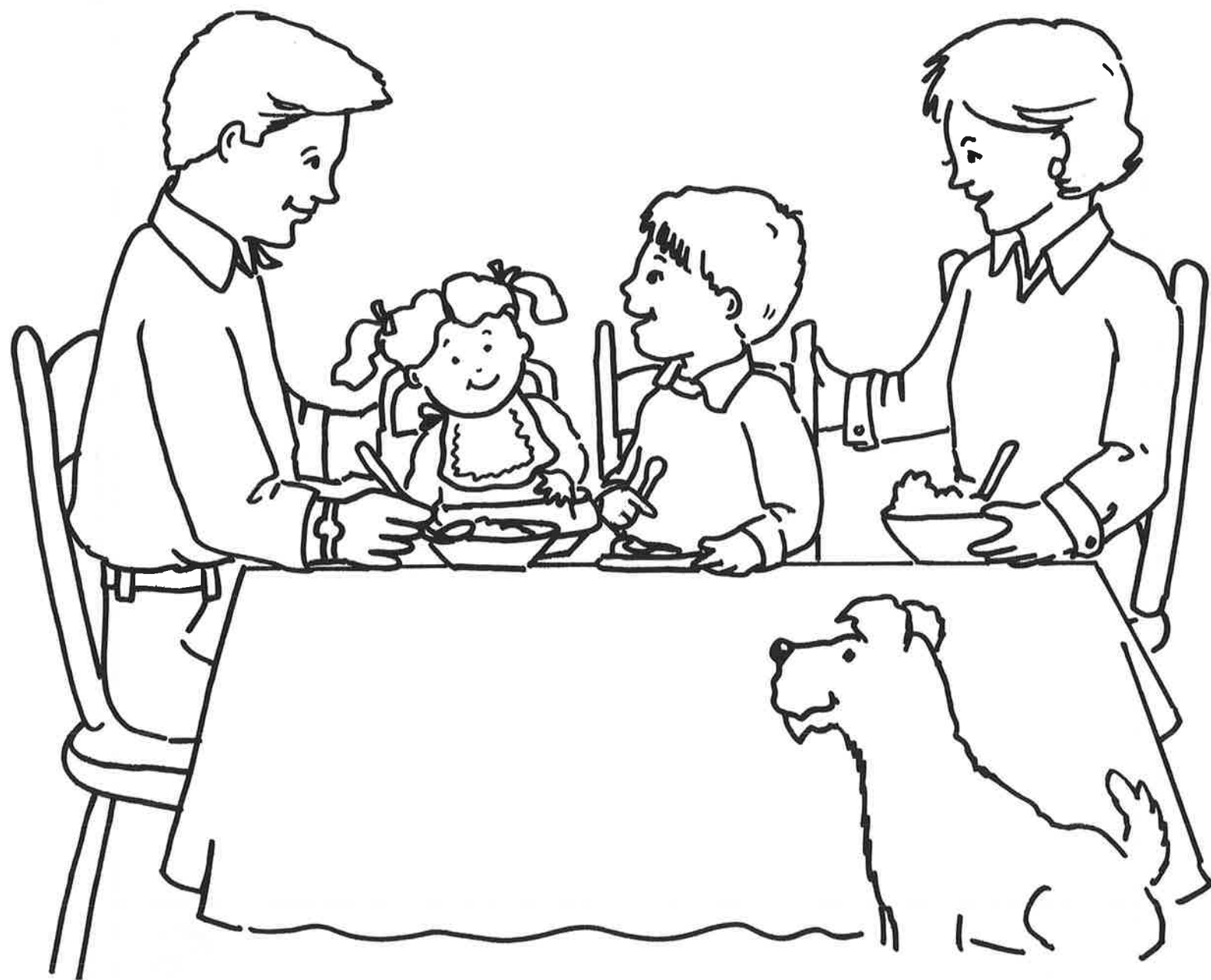
I can't remember.



I know I should remember because I was right there when it happened. But I don't.

Everyone wants me to remember. I can see it in their faces and hear it in their words. They don't look happy with me.

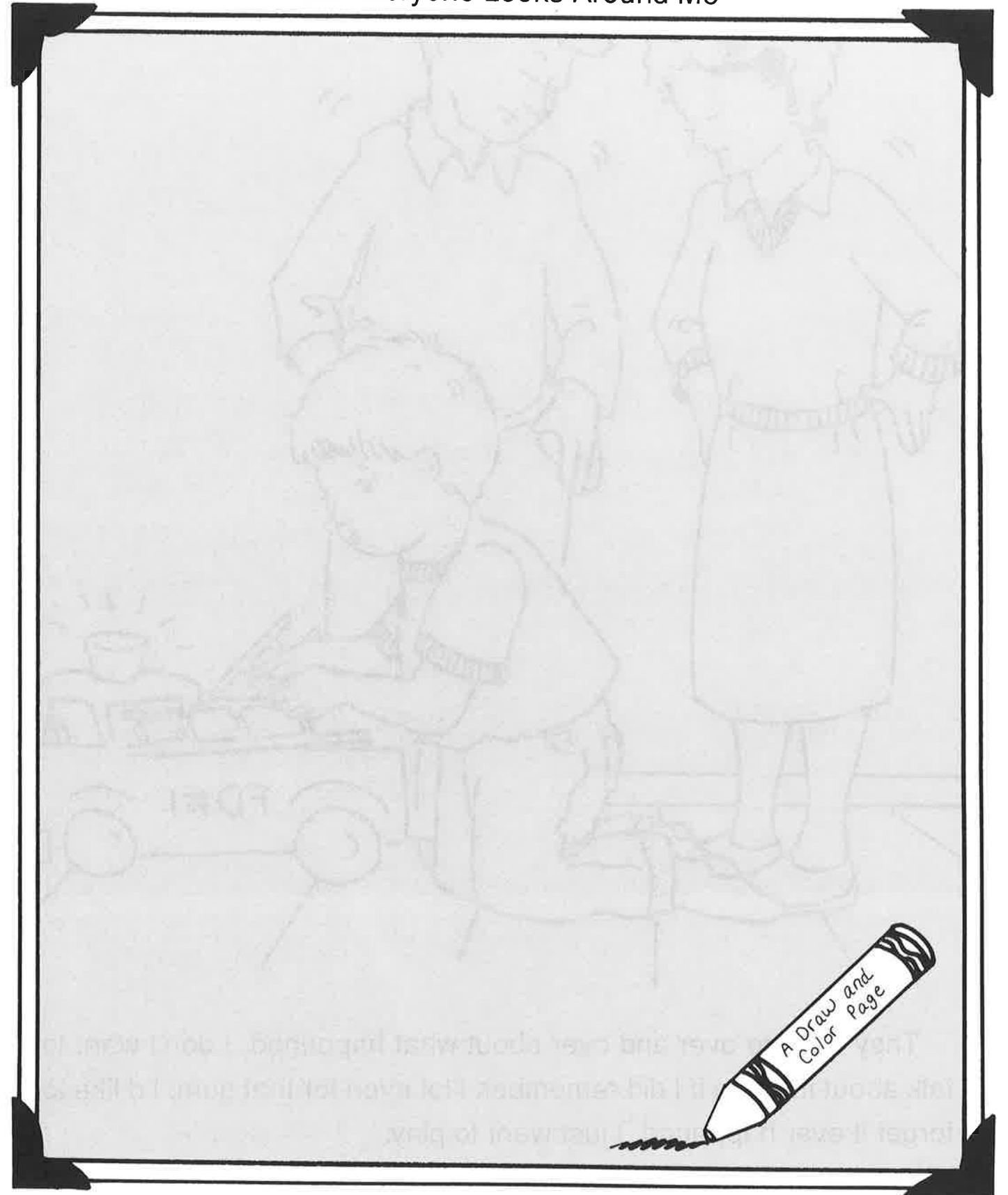
My mom said she would give me my favorite bubble gum if I could tell what happened. I guess now I'll never get that gum again.

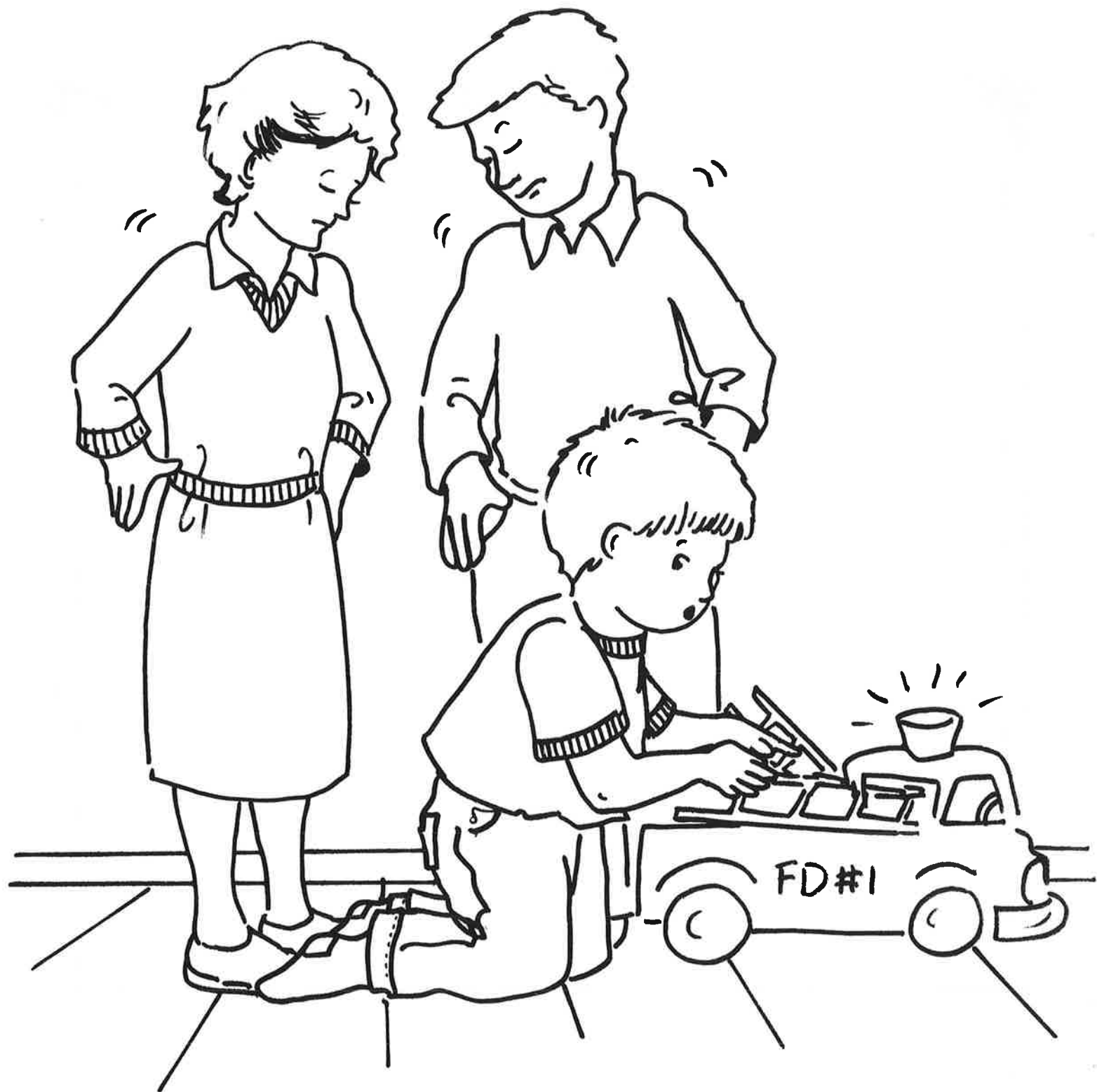


I'm glad I can finally feel okay about not remembering everything. Everyone else seems happier too. My counselor said my whole family needed to learn about the different ways we feel and act after something bad happens.

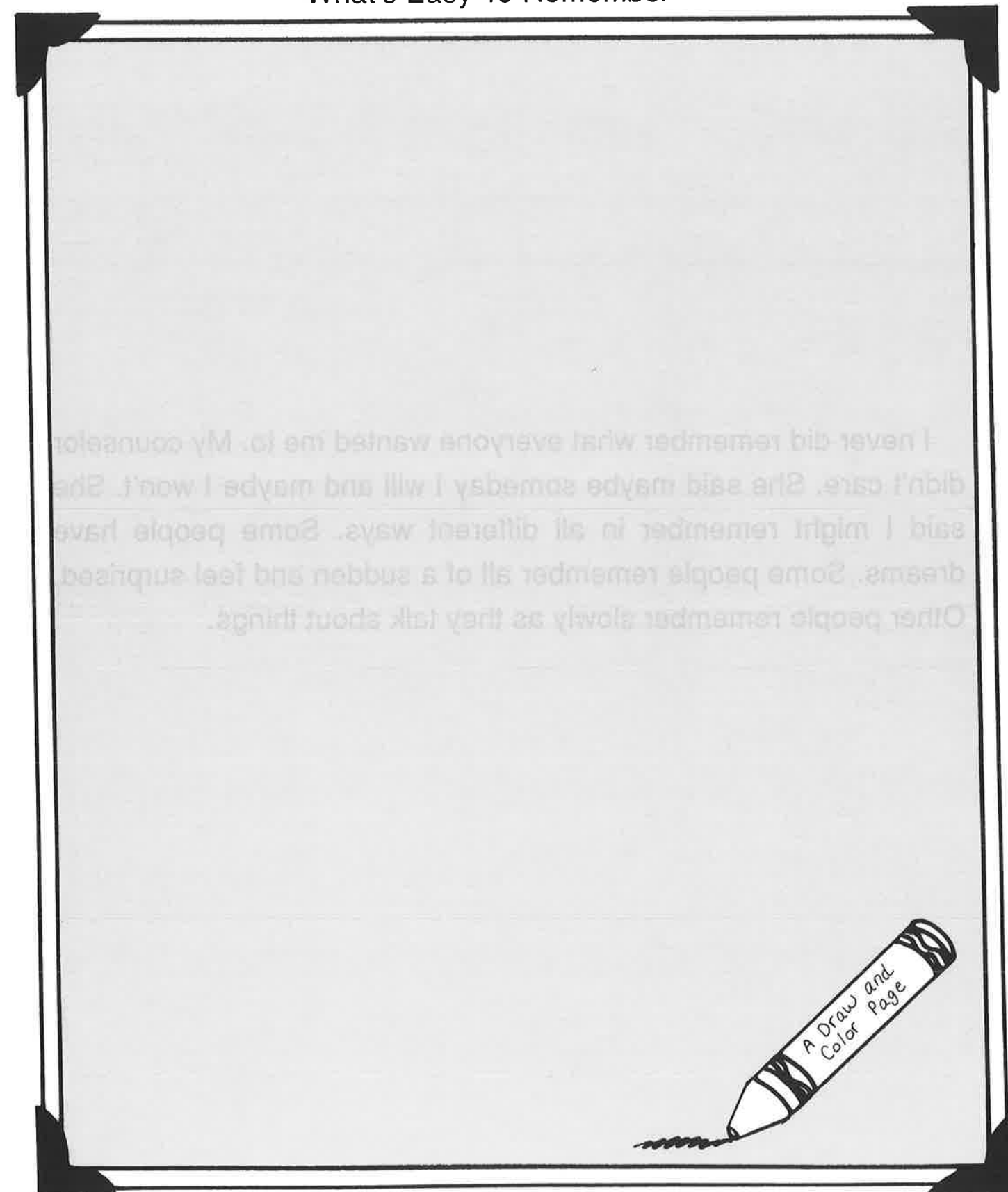
I never did remember what everyone wanted me to. My counselor didn't care. She said maybe someday I will and maybe I won't. She said I might remember in all different ways. Some people have dreams. Some people remember all of a sudden and feel surprised. Other people remember slowly as they talk about things.

## How Everyone Looks Around Me





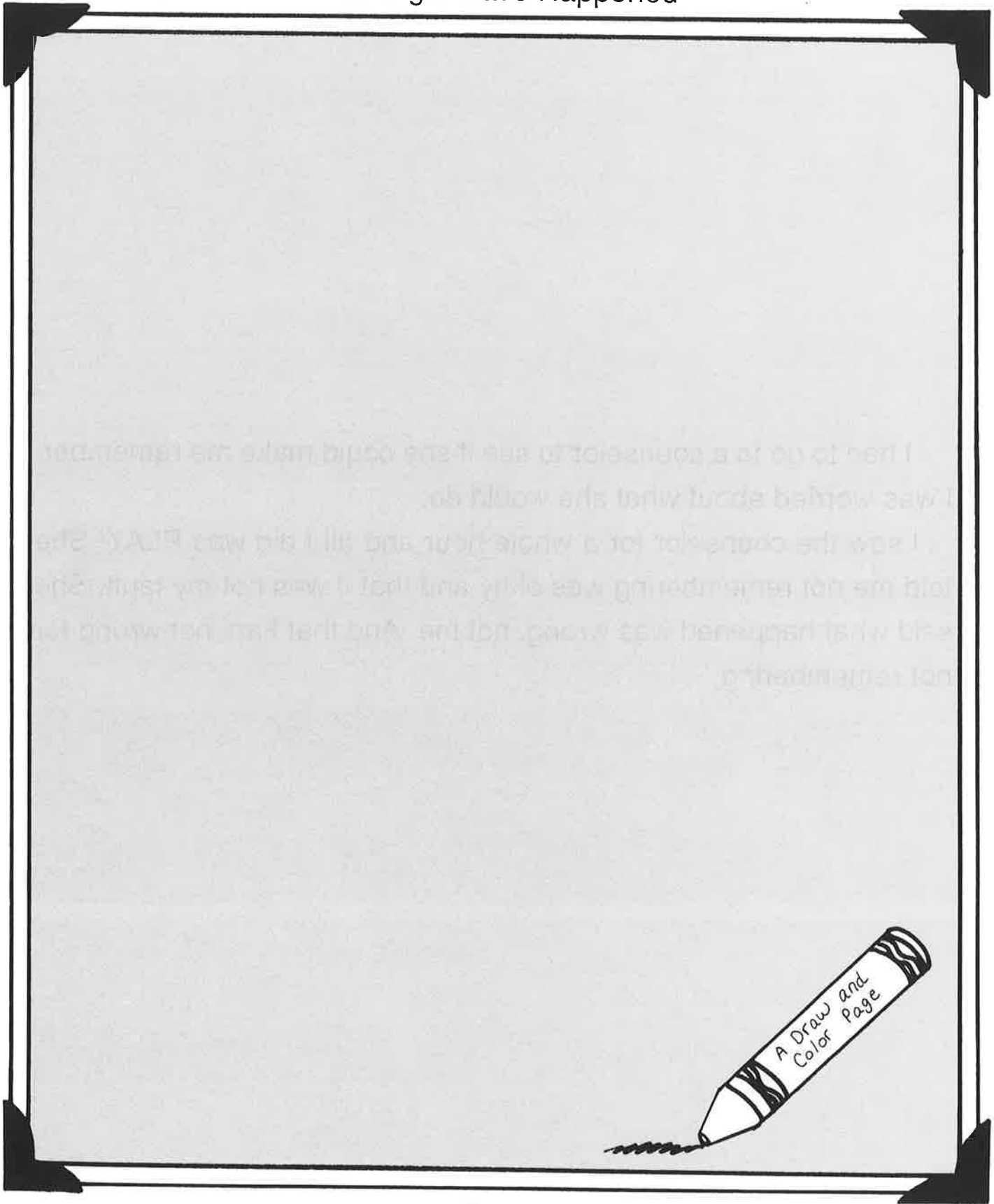
They ask me over and over about what happened. I don't want to talk about it. Even if I did remember. Not even for that gum. I'd like to forget it ever happened. I just want to play.



I saw my counselor for a long time. What I do remember is easier to talk about now.

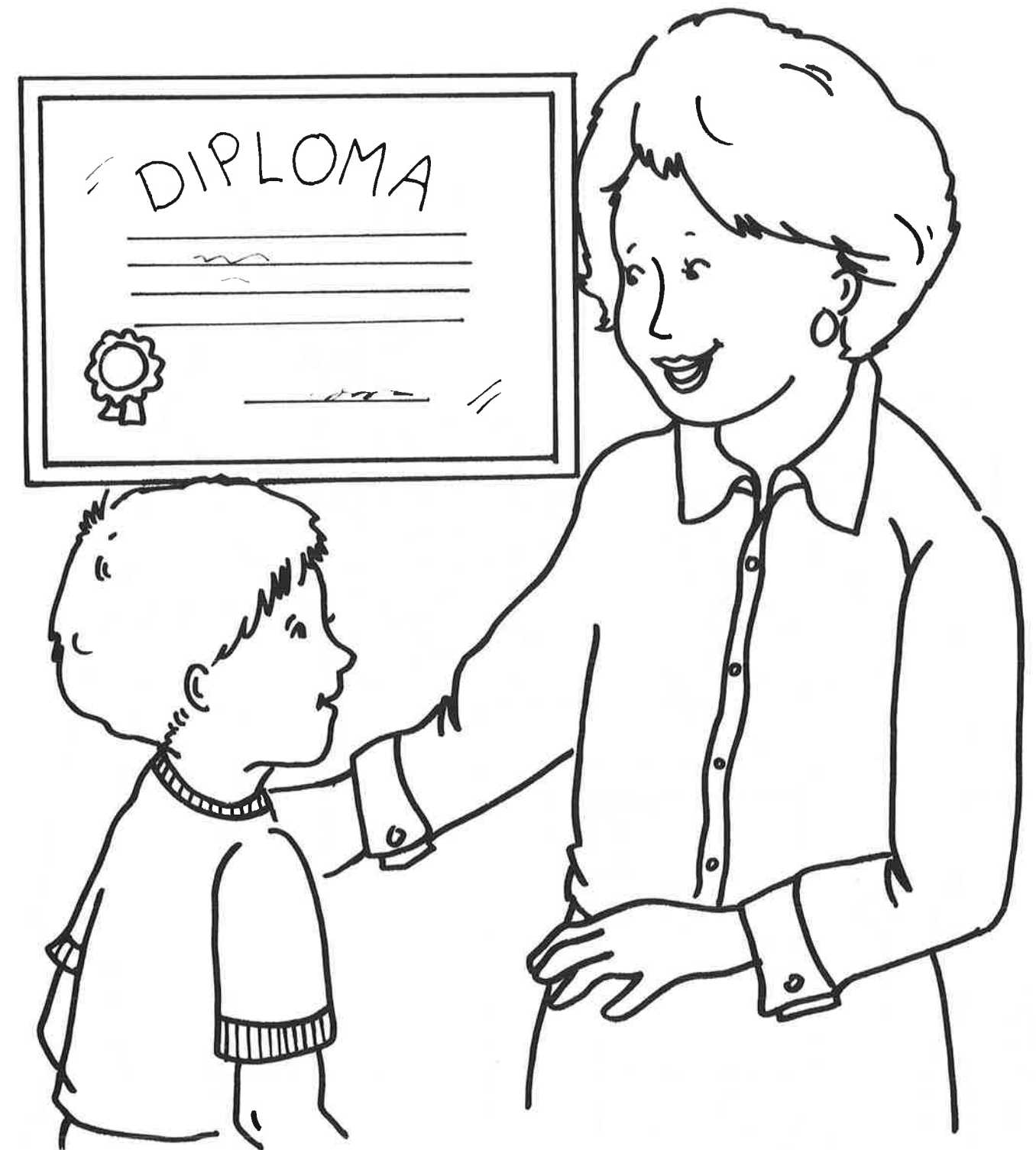


What Might Have Happened



I had to go to a counselor to see if she could make me remember. I was worried about what she would do.

I saw the counselor for a whole hour and all I did was PLAY! She told me not remembering was okay and that it was not my fault. She said what happened was wrong, not me. And that I am not wrong for not remembering.



My counselor said she thinks I am smart! She thinks we take care of ourselves by not remembering some things sometimes. And that is good.