

Book review

Use Your Voice

Pops and Friends help Jess the huntaway find her bark

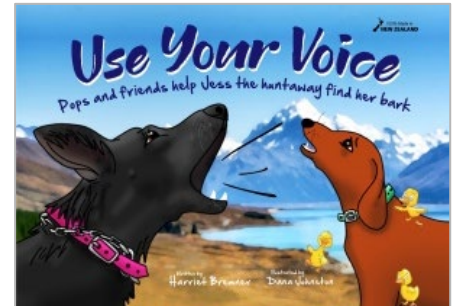
Category: Book Reviews / Children and Youth / Mental Health

Author: Bremner, H., & Johnston, D.

Year: 2020

Publisher: Gurt & Pops, NZ

Audience: For Children and Youth



Summary: Using the story of Poppy and her farmyard friends, this story gives encouragement to kids to speak about how they feel, about their mental health.

I was sent this book soon after moving back to the small rural area where I grew up. And excuse the pun, but the book spoke to me, even as an adult. New Zealand country folk are deeply humble, perhaps shy. The environment plays a massive role in their worlds, and people are renowned for being outwardly-focussed – the weather chatter for example.

Now don't get me wrong, taking notice of what's around us, especially the beautiful things (and in the country there's plenty), is super wellbeing boosting, but it's good to notice what's going on inside for us too – and talk about it.

Rurally, dogs are a fantastic way to depict our worlds and us. *Use Your Voice* uses Jess the huntaway to do just this. Huntaways are the deep sounding barkers, you'll hear them on the hills for mustering or way down the paddock, using their voice to herd stock. The command shepherds use for huntaways is, "Speak Up."

My guess is these observations are the reason Bremner and Johnston created this book, thinking that for rural kids, using our voice is a great message – especially when it comes to how we're feeling. For children, the book is all about validation – the message that it's good to think about what's going on for us and super good to talk about it, is a strong one – loud and clear! Just like our beloved huntaways are told to "speak up", we need to too.

Use Your Voice is so beautifully and distinctly New Zealand farming that I felt I had to find its audience and hear from them directly. Luckily Kereru hub seniors from Carew Peel Forest School were excited volunteers. They know the images of *Use Your Voice* well. Their initial responses to the book have utterly inspired me to think hard about this review from their perspectives, and do it well. It was clear this book was meant for them.

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The book takes us through poor Jess's journey through a tough time when she 'loses her voice.' But with the support and care of Pops the dachshund and other farmyard friends, Jess manages to find her way through her struggles. Special mention of the text tamariki pointed to – when Pops is doing her best to let Jess know she's loved and to return to the things she loves doing:

*Let the sun on your face,
the wind in your ears
and don't forget to let out your tears!*

The whole book says important things, and its rural context makes it all the more meaningful – especially for rural kids. Carew Peel Forest School tamariki were insightful about other aspects of the story they were noticing:

'[It's a] metaphor of the chain tying up Jess – her being worried about life and sad' – Danielle, Year 5

'Great example of how to cope when times are tough' – Ana, Year 6

So it's clear these children, as young as eight or nine, are able to pull meaning from the story, relate to it and understand the strategies they're being offered to manage and cope during challenging times – job done!

It's not often I'm given the opportunity to review books that speak so pertinently to our rural tamariki. This one feels like it hits just the right, thoughtful and engaging note. I'd say it's a probably an A!

Carew Peel Forest School, Kereru Hub tamariki are perfect, rural kids who love running around, helping out, knowing and caring about their environment and reading great stories. They are happily taught and supported by their very cool teacher, Mrs McFarlane.

Anna Mowat has a background in psychology and works as part of the All Right? wellbeing campaign brought about post-Christchurch earthquakes. Here she leads Sparklers, a school and whānau website dedicated to actively teaching tamariki about their mental health and wellbeing in fun ways. She is also the director of Real Parents, a mum, and finds knitting and skiing super tricky.

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