

# My Magic Wand



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I FOUND MY magic wand today. It had been missing for quite a while and I was truly delighted to hold it in my hands again.

I had made it years ago out of a beautiful three-dimensional teal star, some sparkly gold ribbon, and a hanger. I don't remember the circumstances, but I am pretty sure that it was a on a day when I saw a child whom I could see was suffering but could not find comfort for. This was not a rare occurrence in our foster care clinic. I probably needed something to reach a child who was my patient—something that might capture a small spark of their imagination.

At first, I used my magic wand mostly with preschool children. After all, this is the age of magical thinking, so they were the perfect audience. But sometimes, I would pull it out with school-aged children and even adolescents—kids who had been through so much and who had pretty much decided they could not or would not trust another human being, no matter whom—even someone waving a magic wand around in their presence. After all, the important adults in their lives to date had not only disappointed them but had neglected their most basic needs or hurt them emotionally, physically and, occasionally, sexually.

So, I built my magic wand out of stuff I found at JoAnne Fabrics. If Fairy Godmothers shop, they probably shop there. Or maybe at Michaels. Definitely not on-line.

I used my magic wand sparingly. Some days it sat on the shelf. Other days, I brought it with me as I saw patients. Depended on who was on my schedule. The karma of the day. My mood. Little did I know until I had my own starry wand that one needs to be in the right frame of mind to work some magic. Open, ready, totally present. Now I get why fairy godmothers sometimes sound a bit put out.

Sometimes, of course, my wand did not work. No surprise there, as I built it out of stuff from a craft store. It was NOT REAL.

But, the thing is. . .sometimes it did work.

For that to happen, I found that I had to believe in it just a bit. I had to believe in its power to transform a routine doctor's visit with a child into a little bit of healing for the

magic to happen. I had to be totally present in the moment with a child, a little in awe, and not just a little hopeful.

I would say to a child, "I have a magic wand. It's not a real one. (I was not after all in the business of lying to children.) But, if it were real and I could grant you three wishes, what would you wish for?" I sound more like a genie than a fairy godmother with the three wishes thing, but why limit kids to one wish when I couldn't grant them anyway? Or so my reasoning went.

And, often shyly and quietly, they would tell me. . .one thing, two things and sometimes, but almost never, three things. Mostly one thing. I heard the same wishes over and over again from kids of all ages. Kids in foster care often have similar wishes: To live with their family again (although perhaps with a much healthier version than the one from which they were removed). For their mom to be well. For their younger siblings to be safe. To be adopted.

Or, for a video game. Or a princess gown. Or super-powers. They were kids after all.

How cruel was I to ask these children to make a wish on my magic wand when I was powerless to grant it? The asking opened a door through which I could validate their longing to be with their family, or to belong forever in a new family, and their fears that they never would. That what they were feeling was normal, what any child would wish for in their circumstances. That they were a normal kid living in truly abnormal circumstances. That they were very brave for sharing this with me and that I would join them in the hope their wish might come true. It made us partners.

And, often, when the conversation turned to princesses and superheroes it gave us a chance to laugh and dream of the future together. And for me to learn more about video games when those were their deepest longing.

It really was all about finding a way to connect with a child—to open a window of healing—to allow me to engage them in a way that was hopefully helpful and not hurtful. That met them where they were.

The real magic was in being a bit silly while listening attentively and being in emotional synch. Knowing when a child needed to tell me their deepest fear, and when they

needed to discuss magic powers and fantasies to remove themselves from reminders of those fears.

How did the magic wand concept go over with adolescents? It was always interesting. Some teens rolled their eyes. A few laughed. Well, more than a few. A few got very quiet. Most went with the flow. Their wishes were not that different from those of younger kids. Go home. Be adopted. Parents to get better. Siblings to be safe. While they were unlikely to want to become a princess or a superhero, they did sometimes want their own room, video games, a drum set, cool sneakers or some designer clothes. Or the chance to grow up and have a different life than they had had so far or than their parents had.

Our health center's unaccompanied refugee minors wanted a good education and a good job. Yes, the magic wand is an internationally renowned concept. They were grateful to have access to food and decent clothing, a bed, and decent schools. Many wanted a way to give back to their countries of origin and to the foster families who took them in.

I learned a lot from having a magic wand. It was fun but also very humbling. It made me appreciate how fortunate we doctors are, especially us pediatricians. Families honor us by allowing us glimpses into their lives, their values, their cultures—by asking us questions and sharing their concerns. We have the joy, and sometimes the angst, of seeing the future in the faces of the children we care for. We get to crack jokes, be a little silly, all while being well-educated, well-paid, privileged professionals. In every encounter, we have the possibility of a magical opportunity to make a child or parent feel better through a kind word, a humorous remark, sage advice, an acknowledgment of their successes, or just some reassurance. And, we don't even need a magic wand to do that.

Still, I might suggest that each of us think about what tricks of the trade we have developed over time to kindle some magic in our relationships with children and families. And, teach them to the next generation of pediatricians. After all, everyone needs a little magic in their lives, even doctors.