

# Kids Like Me

Children's Stories  
about Obsessive  
Compulsive Disorder

By Constance H. Foster  
Foreword by Marc Summers  
Pictures by Edwin A. Chase

# Foreword

The book you are about to read is about kids. It is a book I wish was around when I was your age. Why? Because it answers many of the questions that were in my mind and would have helped me explain the reasons I was different from my friends.

From almost as far back as I can remember, everything in my world had to be perfect. My clothes had to be folded a certain way, things hanging in my closet had to be just so, the books on my shelf had to be alphabetical and lined up evenly. My shoes needed to be so shiny that I could almost see my face in them, and if there was a mistake on my homework paper and something needed to be erased, if it left the smallest smudge, I'd have to start all over again. I would tell myself that something bad might happen if things were not perfect.

I thought I was the only kid in the world who felt this way, and that I was crazy. So for these reasons, the secret stayed deep inside me.

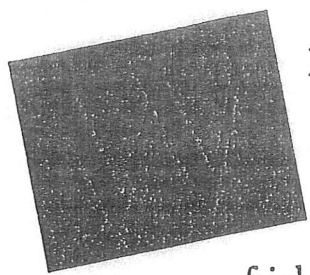
But now, as a grownup, I understand that all these feelings were caused by a chemical imbalance in my brain. I did these things because I had no control over the situation. It is a common disorder called Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, OCD.

Keep in mind, although it may make you different than others you play, work, or live with, everybody in the world has something that makes them unique. It could be something as simple as red hair and freckles, spending everyday in a wheelchair, or not being able to read as quickly as you! It is what sets us all apart. It is what makes you someone special. It is what makes life interesting!

There is a lot to learn about OCD. Some say it is like your brain with hiccups! I hope this book will help you to realize that there are many others who have similar feelings and have to do some of the same things you do to feel comfortable every day. On my television show Double Dare, I used to ask people to take the physical challenge. Well this time, I'm asking you to take the mental challenge and understand that by finding out all you can about your OCD, you can grow up to feel great about yourself and be successful in whatever goals you set for yourself. You may have OCD, but that is only a small part of who you are as a person. You are also many other wonderful things. Be sure to give yourself a chance to find out what they are. Take care!



## Becky's Story



When I was a little girl, it seemed like I was afraid of everything! Now, I know that's not so strange because lots of kids are afraid of things like spiders, snakes, and the dark. As a matter of fact, those are fears that many kids have. But I was different because I was afraid of many other things, too. And do you know what? Most of the things that frightened me you couldn't even see! I was worried about so many things that I used to spend hours trying to find ways to make myself feel better. Not only was this hard to do, but it was also tricky to not let other people know or see what I was doing. After all, I didn't want my friends to think that I was different from them.

It used to take me forever to get out of my house in the morning to go to school. It seemed like I was always in trouble with my fifth grade teacher for being late. But, how could I explain to her that my brain said, "Becky, you have to make sure that all the shoes in your closet are lined up PERFECTLY every morning before you leave your house." Boy, Miss Hammond would have thought I was crazy! So I never said anything to her about how difficult getting ready every morning was for me. Instead, for almost a year, I would spend at least an hour each day trying to get the shoes in my closet to look "right" so I could feel safe to go to school. Until it felt "right" to me, I was stuck there inside my closet fixing shoes.

I never could figure out just what it was that made something that I was doing feel "right." It didn't make any sense to me. It felt just like having a bad itch. If I didn't scratch it I would get uncomfortable. But as soon as I scratched it I would feel "right" again. Or at least until the next itch came along. The problem was that I seemed to get these itches inside my brain!

So anyway, by the time my mom got me to school each day, I was at least two hours late! It was terrible. My mom would be totally frustrated, my teacher would be totally angry, and I would feel totally stupid! The whole class would laugh and say something mean like, "Here's the late Becky Grodberg", which always made me feel even dumber. As if that wasn't bad enough, things would get even worse for me, because by then



I was feeling so stressed out that my brain would get more itches. Like, I'd tell myself that if I could touch the wall with the big map of the United States hanging on it exactly five times, nothing bad would happen to me.

Then last Hanukkah something wonderful happened. All my aunts, uncles and cousins were at our house for dinner. My favorite fourteen-year-old cousin, Sibyl, and I were upstairs in my bedroom. As we were talking, I was lining up all the books on my shelf perfectly by height and then by color. Suddenly, Sibyl said, "Becky, why are you doing that?"

"Heh?" I asked, "What do you mean?" My face blushed bright red at getting caught doing one of my stupid things.

Sibyl didn't seem to even notice my embarrassment. Instead, she said something really amazing. "Do you spend a lot of time trying to get things just right? Because I used to do that, too. For awhile, I also had to touch things a certain number of times to make me feel good. Sometimes, I even had to touch PEOPLE!"

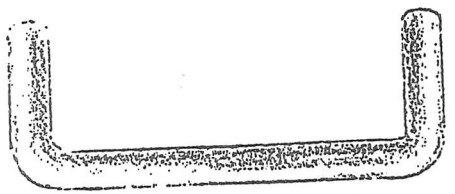
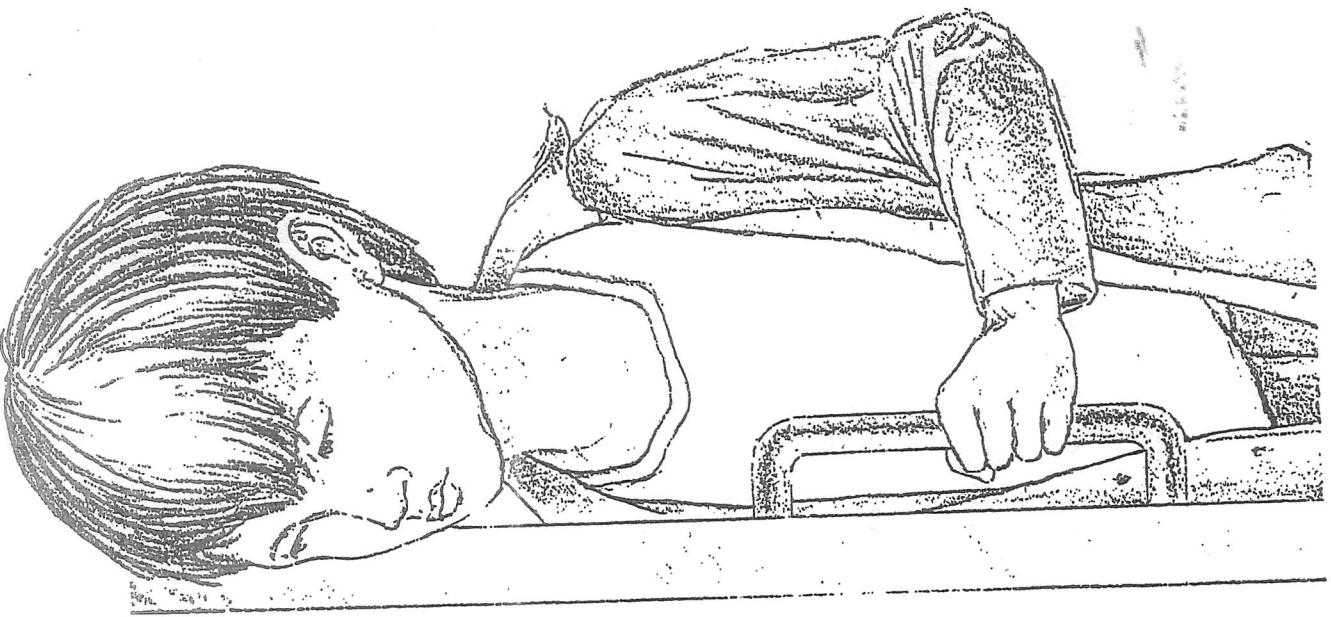
I couldn't stop staring at my cousin! I'd never felt the need to touch people, but I sure understood the rest of the things she said. We talked for the longest time, comparing all the silly things we had done. As soon as dinner was over, we excused ourselves and ran straight back upstairs to talk some more! It was so good to finally have someone to share all my weird feelings with. I couldn't believe that I'd finally met someone who had felt the same way - and to think she was my own cousin!

I learned an awful lot that day from Sibyl. She explained that I had something called Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, or OCD for short. She told me that because OCD is a chemical imbalance in the brain, there are many ways that I can help myself to feel better. Sibyl said that her parents had taken her to a doctor who talked with her, prescribed medication and gave her some hints that could help her when her OCD thoughts got really bad.


Next week I'll be twelve years old and I'm looking forward to it! A lot of things have changed for me in the last six months. My parents took me to Sibyl's doctor. I'm

not late for school anymore and I don't worry about what the other kids will think of me if I act differently. Now I understand that I just have a disorder that I can learn how to help myself with. I've learned something else that's very important, too. No matter what it feels like sometimes, Sibyl and I are not the only kids with OCD. Now I know that there are millions of kids around the world who live with it every day and have great lives!





## Tran's Story



quietly, nine year old Tran sat at his desk in the back of the classroom erasing the last word he'd written. He had to be very careful because he'd already erased this word so many times that the paper was starting to tear. He would have liked to have asked his teacher for a new piece of paper, but he didn't dare. He looked around the room at the other students and realized that they were almost finished with the assignment. He hadn't even written two whole lines yet! Now Tran started to worry. He knew that pretty soon Miss Simpson would ask the class to turn in their papers and once again, he'd be in really big trouble because he had not finished his work.

He sat there feeling slow and stupid and most of all, he felt sad. He knew the reason why he erased so much. He didn't do it because he wanted to - he did it because he felt he had to. Because Tran had OCD, he wanted everything that he did to be perfect. Of course, the part of Tran that wasn't OCD knew he couldn't be perfect all the time - no matter how hard he tried! But the OCD part of him always worried about being perfect in everything. Take this word he was trying to write, for example. It wasn't any big deal - it was just a word. But he couldn't seem to get the 'a' to look just right on the line, so he erased and erased and erased. How could he make Miss Simpson understand how he felt?

Suddenly, she was at his desk reaching for his paper. "I see that you haven't completed your work again, Tran," she said, shaking her head.

When school got out that afternoon, Miss Simpson called Tran up to her desk. "I have a note for your mother. Please see that you give it to her."

All the way home, he wondered what was in the note. He was nervous because by the look on Miss Simpson's face when she handed it to him, he was pretty sure it wasn't good news. By the time Tran arrived home, he felt sick to his stomach.



"I'm home," he yelled, dropping his backpack and running upstairs to his room.

His mother found him a few minutes later lying curled up on his bed.

"Rough day, honey?" she asked, as she pushed the thick, dark hair out of his eyes.

"Miss Simpson sent a note home for you, mom," Tran said. "I guess I've done the wrong thing again," he mumbled unhappily.

His mother left his room and came back a moment later with the letter in her hand. Sitting down beside Tran on the bed, she said, "Why don't you and I read it together?"

"Dear Mrs. Nang," it said, "Tran is not keeping up with his work in the classroom. Although he is very bright, he doesn't seem to be trying. You need to speak with him."

"Well," his mother said, refolding the note. "Tran, do you think you are being lazy about your school work?" "No, mom!" Tran said. "I try so hard, but sometimes things just don't turn out the way I want. Like today, I got stuck on one stupid word because I couldn't make one letter in it look right."

His mom put her arm around his shoulder. "Don't you think it's time to tell Miss Simpson about your OCD and how it can make you act sometimes?"

"I just didn't want her to know, mom," Tran mumbled. "I don't want to be different from everyone else!"

"You know what, Tran?" his mom asked, "you are different from everyone else. The OCD is just a small part of how you are different because it's only a very small part of who you are as a person. I think it's time to help Miss Simpson understand. What do you say?"

Early the next morning, before school started, Tran and his mother visited with Miss Simpson. Tran said it was his OCD, so it was his job to explain it to his teacher. Boy, was he nervous! He told Miss Simpson why he hadn't been able to finish the writing assignment the day before. Then, he took a deep breath, and

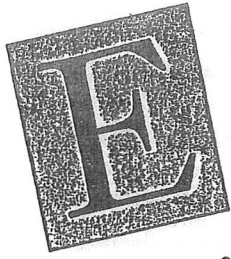
told her about other times he'd been worried and anxious at school. He told her things like how sometimes, no matter how much he had to go to the bathroom, he still didn't dare go out into the hallway until he saw another kid going by. He explained to her that even though he KNEW it was silly, the OCD part of him made him feel like there were bad things out there in the hallway that might "get him."

"I worry a lot," Tran explained to his teacher, the words bursting out of his mouth, "but I try not to show it. I'm so ashamed of the way I am! I hate it when I start doing something, like counting every step, and can't stop. It makes me feel so DUMB!"

"Oh, Tran," exclaimed Miss Simpson, "You are one of my smartest students! I am so glad that you are telling me all about your OCD because now I understand why you have been having these problems with your assignments. You, your mom and I are a team and we all need to work together in order for you to be able to have a good day in school. Now," she continued, "let's talk about what things we can do in the classroom to help when your OCD makes you feel stuck so that you don't get frustrated anymore."



## Alicia's Story



Eight-year-old Alicia was very worried. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't remember how many prayers she had said. Every night, as Alicia got ready for bed, she did the same thing. With each new button of her pajama top that she buttoned, she would say a prayer out loud. There were six buttons, so that meant six different prayers. But tonight she'd gotten confused and now she couldn't remember if she had said all six prayers or just five.

"Time for bed, honey," said her grandmother as she came into the room. "Hop in." She pulled the sheets back for Alicia. But Alicia quickly pulled away from her grandmother. "Not yet, Gram. I'm not finished saying my prayers." Better start all over again, thought Alicia, just to be safe.

Gram gently dropped a kiss on the top of her granddaughter's head and waited quietly for Alicia to finish her prayers.

Something wasn't right, but Gram couldn't figure out what it was or even whom she should speak with about it. She should be happy her granddaughter prayed and wanted to talk to God, but Alicia seemed so very serious about it all. Especially for an eight-year-old girl! Gram needed to speak with someone. She thought of how much Alicia enjoyed having their friend Father Joseph come to their house for dinner. Perhaps she should take Alicia to visit him at their church. Father Joseph spent a great deal of time working with young people. Gram decided that he would be the best person to start with.

A few days later, Alicia and Father Joseph were sitting in the little flower garden beside the church. Alicia liked being with Father Joseph. He was so easy for her to talk with.

"Suppose God were to sit down beside us on this bench, what do you think He'd be like?" Father Joseph asked.

Alicia thought for a moment before she answered. "I think He'd be very stern and angry with me." Father Joseph was surprised, "Why do you say that?"

"Because," replied Alicia, "no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to pray the





right way! I always seem to mess it up.”

“But Alicia,” said Father Joseph, “there is no one right way to pray. We all pray differently and that is just fine with God.”

“It is?” asked Alicia. “Sure. After all, God made us all to be different people, didn’t He?” said Father Joseph. “You see, Alicia, I think of God as a wise and gentle being who understands and forgives us when we make mistakes,” he explained.

“I worry a lot, Father Joseph,” Alicia said, her words coming out in a rush. “I’m afraid that if I don’t pray just the right way, God will get upset with me!”

“I know that, Alicia. But that’s not praying,” said Father Joseph. “When I work at the neighborhood clinic, I often meet other kids who feel the same way you do. Believe it or not, this feeling has a name. It’s called scrupulosity. When you pray,” Father Joseph continued, “it should make you feel good. Scrupulosity doesn’t give you that feeling. Instead it makes you feel anxious, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Alicia sadly, “sometimes I feel that if I don’t pray just perfectly, I will be punished. I don’t like it when I feel that way! What’s wrong with me, Father Joseph?”

“Scrupulosity can be part of what’s called Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. That may be what you have. It can make you afraid that something evil might happen, so you spend a lot of time saying prayers to help keep yourself and the people you love safe. But you know what, Alicia? Your grandparents and I can help you. I will introduce you to a good friend of mine at the clinic who is a doctor. She knows a lot about kids with OCD and scrupulosity and can help you to feel better. How would that be?” he asked.

“That,” grinned Alicia, “would be GREAT!”



## Joey's Story



hoot the ball!" yelled Billy impatiently. "What are you waiting for?"

Ignoring his friend, Joey Martinez carefully bounced the basketball exactly nine more times before he felt good about sending it flying through the hoop and winning the game for his team.

"All right!" Billy slapped him on the back. "We sure beat them today! But Joey, why didn't you just shoot it? I mean, why take that chance right under the basket when you were wide open?"

Joey just shrugged and picked up his ball. He didn't try to explain to his friend that it was something that he just HAD to do or he wouldn't feel right. Besides, he didn't know why he did these things. "Gotta get home, Billy. My dad's waiting for me."

Sprinting through back alleys, Joey made it home just as his father's pickup truck pulled into the driveway.

"Hey, Joey - ready for your doctor's appointment?" Mr. Martinez called, leaning out the window.

"All set," replied Joey, climbing in beside his father.

"I'm a little nervous about seeing a new doctor, Dad," he said. "He won't have to give me a shot, will he?"

"I guarantee you won't have any shots, Joey. Dr. Reese is just going to talk with you." Joey's father reached over and playfully ruffled his son's hair.

"Relax, son, everything will be fine."

An hour later, they were sitting in the doctor's office listening as he explained something called Obsessive Compulsive Disorder to them.

"So you see, Joey," Dr. Reese explained, "it's because you have OCD that you think about death and getting sick so much. Then, to help make yourself feel safe, you do the same thing over and over again."

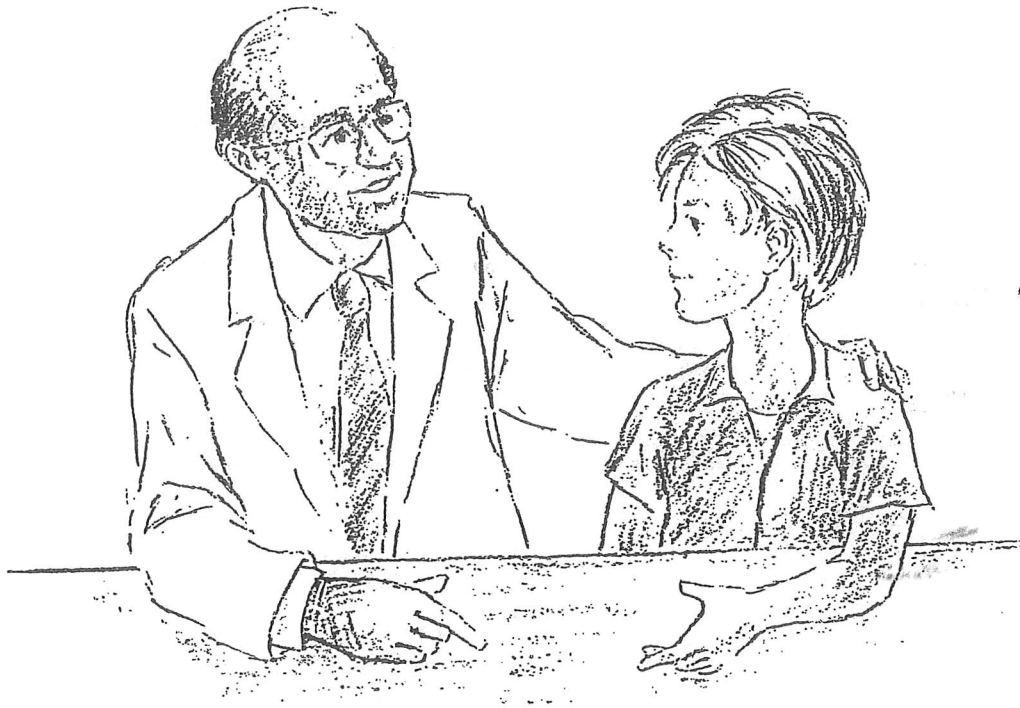
"Am I the only one who feels this way?" Joey asked.

"Oh, no!" Dr. Reese quickly replied. "OCD is a very common disorder."



Many people have it, but each of them seems to have it in a different way. Sometimes, people need to wash their hands over and over again. Right now, your OCD symptoms make you think about horrible things. That's why you worry about so many different things. That's also why you feel that you have to bounce your basketball nine times before you can throw it. But that will change, Joey, because OCD never stays the same."

Mr. Martinez was very relieved. He was concerned because Joey had told him that lately he had been thinking scary thoughts. For example, the other night they were watching the TV news together, when one of the stories was about a car accident. For three days, that was all Joey could think and talk about! He was so



upset that he couldn't even go to school. After that, whenever his dad left the house to go to work, Joey would call him every hour just to make sure he was okay. Then, as quickly as those fears had started, they stopped!

"Joey," continued Dr. Reese, "I'm going to give you a medicine that should help you with your OCD."

But before Joey could answer him, his dad quickly spoke up. "Why does he need medicine? Why can't he just make himself stop thinking all of these bad thoughts?"

"Mr. Martinez, Joey doesn't think about these horrible things because he wants to. People with OCD have a brain chemical that isn't working correctly. Sometimes the medicine can help correct that. If your son had an eye problem and needed to wear glasses to see better, would you tell him not to use them?"

"Of course not!" Mr. Martinez laughed.

"Well, this is the same thing only the problem is not in Joey's eyes but in his brain. So, let's see what we can do to help him not have these scary thoughts anymore, okay?"

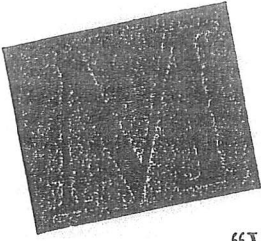
Later that summer, Joey was playing a fast game of one-on-one with his friend Billy.

Shaking his head in amazement, Billy exclaimed, "You've gotten pretty good, Joey! Have you been practicing?"

Laughing happily, Joey tossed the basketball at his friend.

"No," he replied, "I just feel a lot better since I've been visiting my new doctor. Come on, Billy, let's play another game!"

## Marc's Story



arc opened his eyes and peeked out of the window by his bed. What a beautiful day! Jumping quickly to his feet, he realized that today was Sunday. He had a lot to do!

Hastily, Marc ate breakfast with his family while listening to them all discuss their plans for the day.

"What do you say, Marc?" asked his brother eagerly. "Want to play baseball today with the guys?"

Marc hesitated for just a moment before he answered his older brother. After all, he really liked baseball and today was the first warm, sunny day so far this spring. But, no, he had things to do, he told himself. Important things. "I've got stuff to do in our room today," he mumbled as he pushed himself away from the kitchen table.

"You're ALWAYS doing dumb stuff in that dumb room!" yelled his brother as he ran outside to find his catcher's glove.

Marc knew that he had disappointed his brother again. But he couldn't seem to do anything about that right now. Feeling frustrated with himself, he went into his bedroom and shut the door. He'd clean his room, just like he did every Sunday. That would make him feel better.

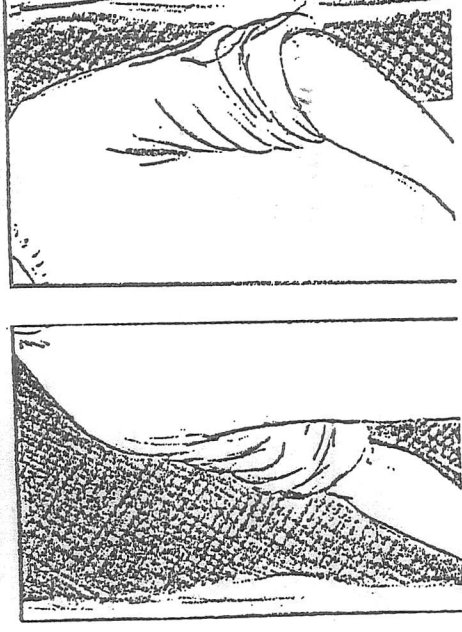
Pretty soon Marc had taken all his books and airplane models off his bookcase and he was dusting each one carefully before putting it back into place. When he had finished, he stood back to look at the bookcase. Something wasn't right. He stared at it for a long time before he finally figured it out. One of the books wasn't lined up correctly. As soon as he fixed that, he felt better. Marc spied his brother's stereo speakers that had been angled for just that right stereo sound. But Marc couldn't stand to look at them because they weren't lined up perfectly. So, even though he knew his brother would be upset with him for it, Marc straightened the speakers out until they were just the way he liked them. Sometimes it was difficult for Marc and his big brother to share the same bedroom. After all, Marc's brother didn't have OCD and that meant he didn't feel the need for everything to be in such order all the time.



Glancing out his bedroom window Marc could see his brother and their friends playing baseball in the field beside the house. He wished that he could go outside and play with them. It was such a nice day and he didn't want to be stuck inside cleaning his room. But no matter how much he wanted to stop cleaning, he couldn't. He didn't understand it. He used to feel good when he cleaned his room, but now it just made him feel stupid. Sighing heavily, Marc turned away from the window and started to tidy out his desk drawers one by one.

Hi there. This is Marc Summers again. That was my story when I was a kid. Now that you have read about Rebecca, Tran, Alicia, Joey, and me, you have had a chance to find out something about OCD. I hope that this book has made you want to learn more about it.

I'll tell you a secret that I have learned. I will always have OCD in some way. But I know that I can learn to use my OCD to help others lead healthy and happy lives. I hope that you will be able to do that, too.



# What is Obsessive Compulsive Disorder?

In the medical world, "obsessions" and "compulsions" have much more precise meanings than they do in everyday life. OCD gets its name because people who have it suffer from constant, unpleasant, uncontrollable obsessions that cause overwhelming anxiety. This causes them to repeatedly act out compulsions, ritualistic behaviors that have no purpose other than to ease the anxiety. These thoughts and actions are so time-consuming and extreme that they can virtually take control of the lives of people with OCD and their families. OCD can leave a child too exhausted to play with friends or concentrate in school.

If your child has OCD, he or she is not alone. OCD is more prevalent than many other better-known childhood ailments, such as juvenile diabetes. Of the approximately five million Americans - that's one in every 50 people - who have OCD, about one million are children and adolescents.\*

The following is a generic guide to help give you an idea of what OCD is and what it isn't. This guide is not a diagnostic tool.

## What's OCD?

- A teenager who has to lather and rinse an exact number of times while showering.
- A child who repeatedly checks that the light switch is in the off position, even though it's obvious the light is off.
- A boy who collects used matches as protection against his house burning down.
- A girl who can't stop skipping over cracks in the sidewalk until she has done it a certain number of times for fear that her mother will be harmed if she doesn't.
- A boy who cannot leave home unless he's tied his shoelaces with loops that are exactly the same size.

\* Rasmussen SA, Eisen JL; Epidemiology and Clinical Features of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, 1990

## What's Not?

- A teenager who spends 15 minutes washing and styling her hair every morning.
- A child who double-checks that the light is off as she leaves the room just as her parents asked.
- A boy who collects pennants of all his favorite sports teams.
- A girl who laughs with friends while skipping over sidewalk cracks reciting, "step on a crack, break your mother's back."
- A boy who enjoys arranging groceries on store shelves as his first part-time job.



*Marc Summers*

“When you have OCD, you need to learn everything about it you can. Only when you have done that will you be able to help yourself feel better and have a happy and productive life. After all, you may have OCD, but that is only a very small part of who you are as a person.

You are also many other wonderful things. Be sure to give yourself a chance to find out what they are. Now I'd like you to meet a few kids who live with OCD

# Kids Like Me<sup>and you.</sup>

*Connie Foster*

A children's rights advocate with Awareness Project Inc., Constance Foster lives on the coast of Maine. She is the author of *Funny, You Don't Look Crazy* and *Polly's Magic Games*.

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