

Before I had children, my mother would often tell me, “You’ll understand when you have kids.” What exactly I would understand, I wasn’t sure, and I felt I was being condescended to, as if I was missing some essential knowledge of the world by not having children. I now have two little girls and I do have a new understanding of a lot of things, like “The Hot Dog Song” and how to change a diaper on a rolling alligator baby. And there are many parts of motherhood that remain a mystery to me. I’m not a perfect mom, but I’m doing my best. Maybe what my mom meant was that I would one day understand that she was doing her best, that all parents everywhere are just trying to do their best. In this season of Mother’s and Father’s Days, here are some wonderful picture books about parents doing just that.

“Saturday” by Oge Mora tells a story that may be familiar to a lot of grownups: you look forward to a special day only to have everything go wrong. A little girl and her mother have all their favorite activities planned for an upcoming Saturday but every one of them gets ruined. At the end of the day the mother feels defeated until she realizes her daughter is happy just spending the day with her.

In “Papa’s Magical Water-Jug Clock” by Jesús Trejo, little Jesús is so excited to help his Papá with his landscaping business one Saturday. He’s put in charge of the magical water jug, which his Papá says is also a clock that will tell them when the work day is over. Jesús excitedly shares water with whoever seems to need it, from a little dog in a too-hot sweater to some peacocks, and uses quite a bit to cool himself. When the jug is empty he tells Papá it’s time to go home, but Papá tells him it’s not even 10 am! This is a laugh-out-loud story of a father and son who just want to spend time together.

“Fred Gets Dressed” by Peter Brown starts with an image many parents know: a toddler with no clothes on. Fred likes to be naked, at least until he realizes he can try on his parents’ clothes. First he explores Dad’s closet but is uninspired by his gray and black ties, jackets, and tee shirts. Then he tries Mom’s closet, which is full of exciting skirts, dresses, and pink! When the grownups find him in Mom’s dress and shoes with a smear of lipstick on his cheek, they decide to join in the dress-up fun and all put on fun outfits, jewelry, and makeup.

“Jabari Jumps” by Gaia Cornwall is one of my favorite picture books and depicts a loving relationship between father and son. Jabari thinks he is ready to jump off the high dive, but when it’s time to climb the ladder he keeps finding reasons to let other kids go ahead. His dad senses that Jabari is nervous and offers some advice, and then celebrates when Jabari faces his fear and takes the plunge.

“Hair Twins” by Raakhee Mirchandani and Holly Hatam is the sweetest story about a little girl and her father and how they bond through their hair. She helps him to put his hair into a joora, a bun on top of his head, and he does the same for her so they can be hair twins. Then we see them playing and laughing at home and at the park, where lots of other kids and their grownups are playing together, too.