

# My Big Embarrassing Elephant

## ACTIVITY KIT AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

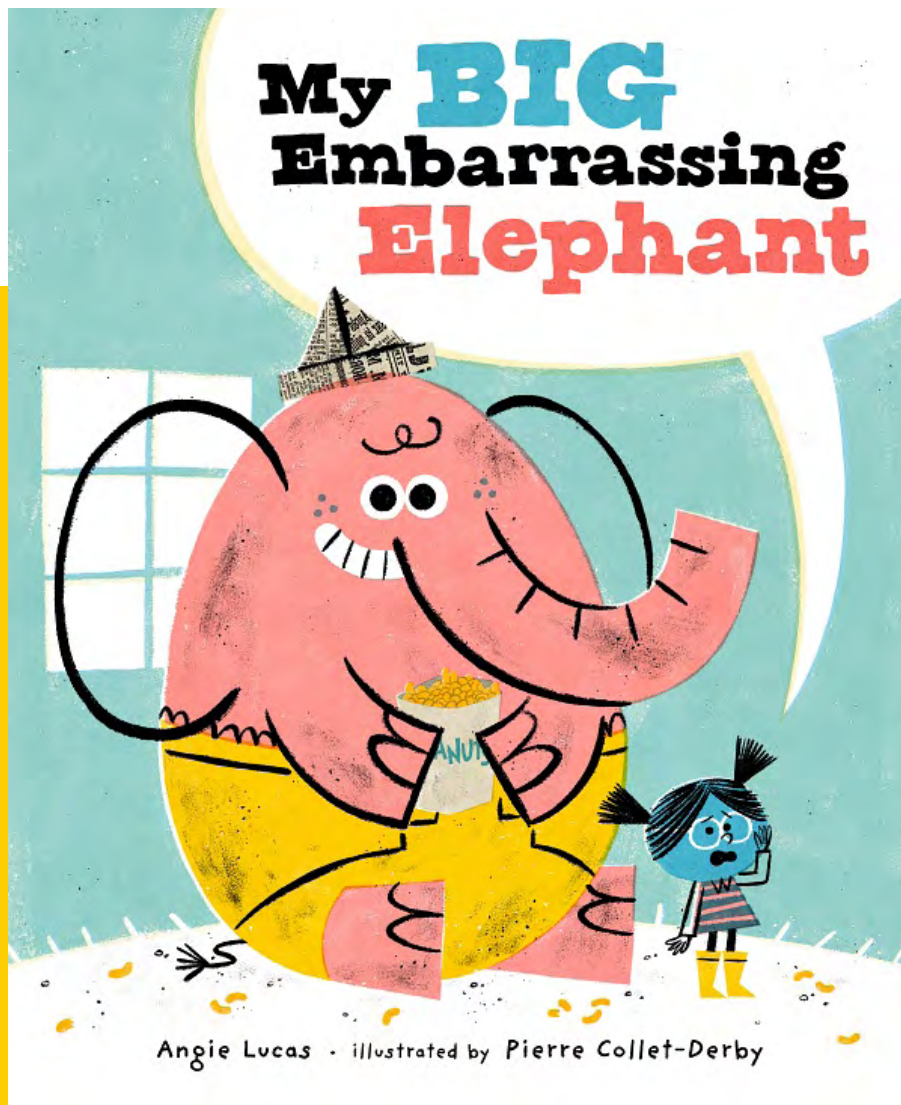
Host a **story time in your classroom, library, bookstore**—or use these activities to discuss the book **at home**. Recommended ages: 4-10 years old, or K-5.

**My Big Embarrassing Elephant** is an illustrated story about a little girl with a big problem. Maya's family tries ignoring it, dancing around it, even sweeping it under the rug. Yet the elephant in the room remains. And Maya is at her wit's end figuring out how to hide it from everyone.

This **humorous**, relatable story has strong **social-emotional learning** themes that can open the door to conversations about **mental health, problem solving**, and the **importance of connection**.

*"The important thing about a problem is not its solution, but the strength we gain in finding the solution."*

—Seneca



Encourage children and parents to download the complete kit if they'd like to try the other activities not included in your event. Find it at <https://marblepress.com/free-resources/>

## How to Use This Guide

Read through this discussion guide and decide which topics and activities would work best for your group. Feel free to print page 18 of this guide for use as a promotional flyer, poster, or invitation. You can take a screenshot or a picture of the poster for use on social media.

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## Social Media Links

WE'D LOVE TO SEE HOW YOUR EVENT WENT.  
IF YOU POST YOUR PHOTOS OR STORIES,  
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## Mini Discussion Guide:

### OVERCOMING SHAME

*“A problem is a chance for you to do your best.” —Duke Ellington*

Read *My Big Embarrassing Elephant* aloud to the group.

**Ask the children** what they think the elephant represents. Some might say “problems” in general; others might mention a specific problem. Be sensitive and affirming if sensitive topics are shared.

Explain that the elephant could mean something different to every single person who reads the story. This is because we all have problems and challenges, but none of them are exactly the same.

- Some problems are big, and some are small.
- Some problems are so embarrassing we feel like we have to hide them, and some problems are already out in the open for all to see.
- Some problems go away quickly, and some problems stick around for what feels like forever.
- Some problems mostly bother one person, and other problems deeply affect the whole family.

**Ask the children** to think of something that’s bugging them in their life, but not to share it aloud. Ask them to think about how that problem makes them feel.

Do they feel like hiding it?

Do they feel so embarrassed that they want to scream, like Maya?

Do they worry how other people will react if they find out about it?



Explain that the reason they feel that way is because of something called shame. Shame is what tells us to hide. Shame is what tells us no one will understand our problem. Shame is what makes us afraid of what other people will think.

## Mini Discussion Guide: Overcoming Shame (continued)

Help the children understand that shame is a normal human emotion, and even though it feels terrible, everybody experiences it. But here's the good news: we all have the power to overcome shame. Here are three tips that can help, adapted from Dr. Brene Brown's writings about *Shame Resilience Theory*:

1. Recognize what you're feeling—when those tell-tale physical sensations arise (see next page), remind yourself, “It’s okay, I’m just feeling embarrassed.” Labeling the emotion puts you in the driver’s seat. Your shame isn’t in charge; you are.
2. Reach out/connect—find a trusted friend, parent, or family member who can hug you, reassure you of your worth, and help you understand what you’re feeling and why. Authentic connection drives away shame.
3. Speak your shame—shame must stay secret and unspoken in order to survive. When you expose it to sunlight, or share what’s bothering you with a compassionate listener, shame loses its power.

**Ask the children** if they noticed these three above strategies in the story. They might mention when Maya’s family finally gives their elephant a name, when Maya accepts Serena’s efforts to befriend her, and when Maya realizes “talking about elephants is a lot better than not talking about them.”

Source: <https://positivepsychology.com/shame-resilience-theory/>



## Worksheet:

### WHAT DOES EMBARRASSMENT FEEL LIKE TO YOU?

Everybody feels shame and embarrassment, but that doesn't mean we all feel it the same way. When you experience embarrassment, where in your body does that feeling show up?

On the figure on the following page (p6), get creative illustrating how embarrassment feels to you. Ideas: you might draw butterflies or a sinking ship inside the stomach area, or a trap door or quicksand beneath the feet, or flames around the ears.

#### What do you feel?

Red cheeks or neck

A hot face

Tightness in the chest or throat

Butterflies in the stomach

A sinking feeling in the stomach

Feeling like you want to disappear or sink through the floor

Ears getting hot

Shoulders hunching, like you want to physically shrink

Mind going blank/buzzing



## WHAT DOES EMBARRASSMENT FEEL LIKE TO YOU?

Color in or draw the sensations you might feel.



## Mini Discussion Guide:

### BENEFITS OF EMBARRASSEMENT

*“How embarrassing it is to be human.”*  
—Kurt Vonnegut

Read *My Big Embarrassing Elephant* aloud to the group.

**Ask the children** if they’ve ever felt embarrassed.

**Ask the children** if they like feeling embarrassed.

**Ask the children** if they can think of any reasons why feelings of embarrassment could be helpful or beneficial.

Explain that while embarrassment is definitely one of the more unpleasant human emotions, it serves an important purpose. Embarrassment is our signal that we’re doing something that might not be acceptable to our group. And in eras past, our very survival depended on our ability to cooperate well together as a community.

**Ask the kids** if they’ve noticed that babies do not get embarrassed. Can they think of any examples?

Possible answers: Babies and toddlers feel perfectly free to scream, cry, and throw temper tantrums whenever the mood strikes. They’ll crawl around with food all over their faces, and they never bother to wipe their noses. They’ll make embarrassing bodily noises with no regard for who’s listening.

**Ask the kids** what the world would be like if every kid and grown-up felt perfectly free to behave the way babies do. Fortunately, once we reach a certain age, it becomes too embarrassing.



Mini Discussion Guide: Benefits of Embarrassment  
(Continued)

Joe Hanson, the host of *Be Smart* from PBS Digital Studios, recorded an entire video on the benefits of embarrassment—while wearing a pickle costume in public, of course. Here are some of the benefits he unearthed in his research.

**What if...**

**...feeling embarrassment means you care about getting along well with others?**

*“According to emotion researcher, Rowland S. Miller, people who are susceptible to feeling embarrassment are more concerned with following social norms and more afraid of rejection.”*

**...feeling embarrassment makes us more sociable and generous?**

*“People who show embarrassment are more likely to engage in beneficial or pro-social behaviors like sharing and cooperating.”*

**...feeling embarrassment helps deepen our empathy?**

*“The empathy we feel from embarrassment motivates us to be better humans and community members. So while embarrassment feels like the end of the world, it actually brings us together.”*

Remind the children that this doesn't mean they need to be feeling embarrassed all the time (see tips on page 4). While embarrassment has its purposes, we all probably feel it more often than we need to.

Explain that embarrassment comes from anticipating other people's negative judgement, and we never really know what another person is thinking. Other people are probably not paying as much attention to us as we think they are; they're too busy being embarrassed for themselves.

Source: [pbs.org/video/why-embarrassment-is-actually-good-for-you-ril95d/](https://pbs.org/video/why-embarrassment-is-actually-good-for-you-ril95d/)





## BUILDING YOUR EMBARRASSMENT MUSCLES

We humans don't just feel embarrassed for ourselves; we also have the ability to feel "vicarious embarrassment" on behalf of other people. And researchers think it might even be good for us!

Enter the Dad Joke. According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, a dad joke is "a wholesome joke of the type said to be told by fathers with a punchline that is often an obvious or predictable pun or play on words and usually judged to be endearingly corny or unfunny. They make you laugh and roll your eyes at the same time."

**Ask the kids** to raise their hands if they know any dads, grandpas, or uncles—or even moms, grandmas, and aunts—who excel at telling "Dad Jokes."

### Here are some examples:

"Dad, did you get a haircut?" "No, I got them all cut!"

"Why do fathers take an extra pair of socks when they go golfing?" "In case they get a hole in one!"

"What do you call a manufacturing plant that makes okay products?" "A satisfactory."

"I don't trust those trees. They seem kind of shady."

"Why couldn't the bicycle stand up by itself? It was two tired."



Grown-ups who tell these kinds of jokes could be doing kids a big favor. According to humor researcher Marc Hye-Knudsen, "By continually telling their children jokes that are so bad that they're embarrassing, fathers may push their children's limits for how much embarrassment they can handle. They show their children that embarrassment isn't fatal. ... In this sense, dad jokes may have a positive ... effect, toughening up the kids who are begrudgingly exposed to them."

This isn't just happening in the English speaking world, either. Hye-Knudsen points out that "the Japanese have a similar concept, oyaji gyagu, which can be translated to 'old men's gags' or 'middle-aged men's gags.' Danish culture has now absorbed the term 'dad jokes' (far jokes in Danish), but the Danes also have two older terms for the phenomenon: onkel humor ('uncle humour') and morfar vittigheder ('grandfather jokes'). The common denominator here is men of a certain age—old enough to have children around them who can scoff and roll their eyes in embarrassment."

**Ask the kids** to share some of their favorite Dad Jokes, and to thank their dads, grandpas, and uncles for them, since they're helping them learn to deal with embarrassment.

Source: <https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/dad-jokes-thats-way-eye-roll>

## Complete Lesson Plan: MANAGING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

*“Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary.”*

—Fred Rogers

**Objective:** Help children understand that we have to take care of our mental health the same way we take care of our physical health. Help them identify the mental health principles found in *My Big Embarrassing Elephant*.

### DISCUSSION—PHYSICAL HEALTH

Write “physical health” on a whiteboard or a piece of paper, with room beneath for a list. Explain that for our entire lives, we each only get one body, so we have to take care of it. Taking care of our bodies—how they look, how they feel, how they function on the outside— is physical health.

**Ask the children** to come up with different things they do to take care of their bodies, and list them on the whiteboard or paper.

Ideas might include:

- Brush my teeth
- Wash my hands (so I don’t spread germs or get sick)
- Eat good foods
- Get enough sleep
- Move my body
- Go to the doctor

**Invite a few children** to come to the front of the room and come up with a physical action to represent each item. (Alternately, you could look up the American Sign Language signs for each item and teach them to the students.)

**Have the children repeat the items** aloud as a group, while performing the accompanying actions.



## DISCUSSION—MENTAL HEALTH

Write “mental health” on the whiteboard or a piece of paper, with room beneath for a list.

Explain that just like everyone only gets one body, we also only get one mind. And we have to take care of it, too. Taking care of our minds and emotions—all the stuff that’s on the inside—is mental health. And it’s just as important as our physical health.

**Ask the children** if any of the items from their physical health list can also help with their mental health. Put a star next to each of those items.

Point out that a few items from the first list are especially helpful with maintaining good mental health:

- Get enough sleep
- Move your body
- Go to the doctor (there are special doctors for mental health)

**Now ask the children** to come up with other ways they can take care of their mental health, and list them on the whiteboard or paper.

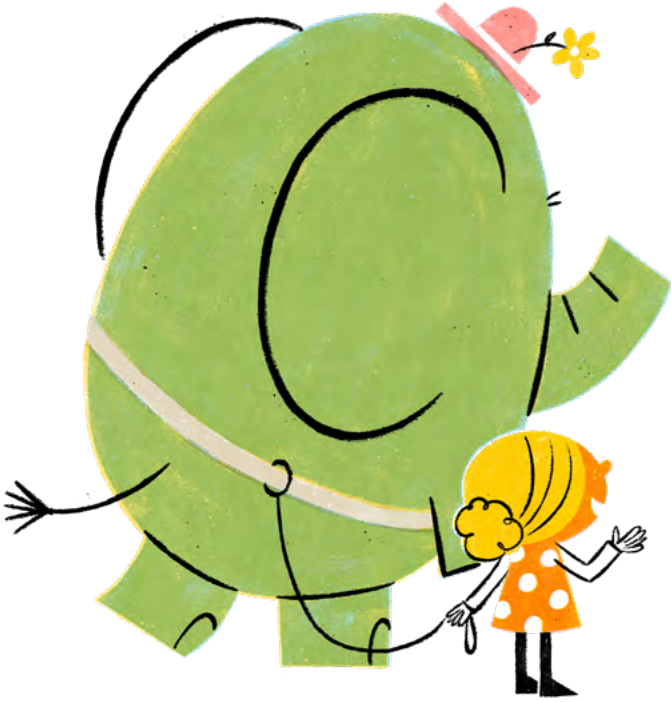
Some ideas include:

- Connect with others
- Make time to play
- Embrace the sunlight (both literally and figuratively)
- Learn to manage stress/emotions (calming techniques, breathing exercises, etc.)



**Invite a few children** to come to the front of the room and come up with a physical action to represent each item. (Alternately, you could look up the American Sign Language signs for each item and teach them to the students.)

**Have the children repeat** the items aloud as a group, while performing the accompanying actions.



## STORY TIME

Read *My Big Embarrassing Elephant* aloud.

**Ask the children** if they can identify any principles of good mental health in the story.

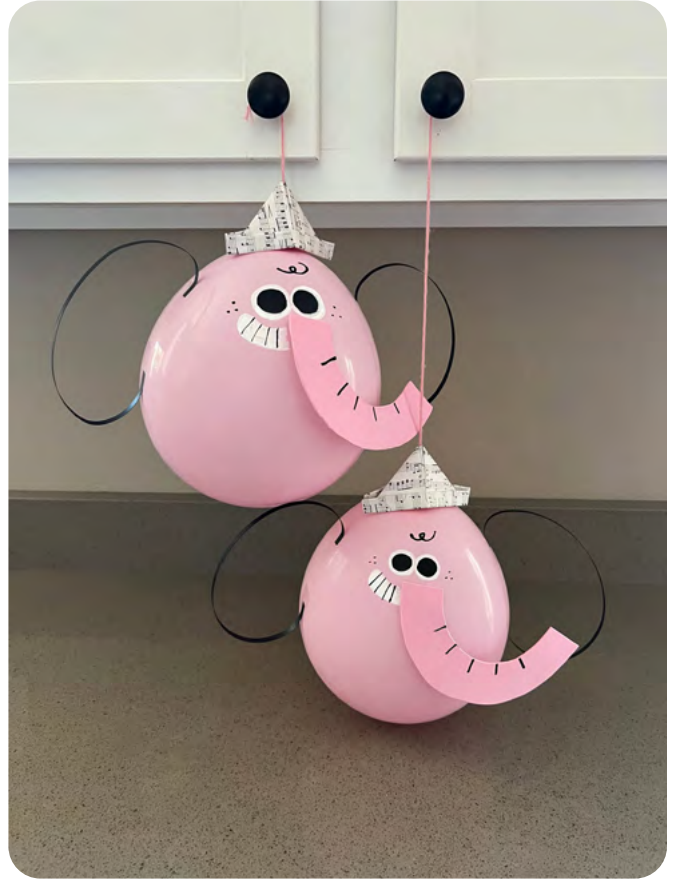
- **Connection:** Once Maya connects with Serena and feels like there's someone else who understands, she immediately feels better.
- **Sunlight:** Thanks to Serena and Elspeth, Maya gets the courage to stop hiding her problem, exposing it to metaphorical sunlight. And she opens the curtains and takes Phil outside to bring more literal sunlight into their lives.
- **Manage stress/emotions:** An important part of learning to manage your stress and emotions is to name the feeling or problem. If you can't acknowledge it, you can't solve it. Giving the elephant a name ("Phil") was an important part of making him more manageable.

## Balloon Elephant Craft

### You will need:

- 1 pink balloon
- 1 pink craft foam sheet, cut into a rainbow shape
- 2 black paper strips, size 12 inches x 1/8 inch
- White acrylic-paint marker\*
- Black acrylic-paint marker\*
- Double-sided patterned paper, size 4 inches x 6 inches
- Scissors
- Clear adhesive tape
- Length of yarn

\* I used DecoColor by Marvy Uchida



## Instructions:

1. Blow up balloon about 2/3 full and tie it
2. Place balloon in a bowl, tied side up, to hold it in place while you work
3. Draw two circles for whites of eyes, allow to dry
4. Draw two black circles for pupils of eyes, allow to dry
5. Trace rainbow shape on foam craft sheet and cut out (to use as trunk)
6. Place clear adhesive tape on one end of trunk and secure in place
7. Draw white mouth shape extending beneath trunk, allow to dry
8. Draw four vertical lines on the mouth for teeth, allow to dry
9. Add freckles, a curl of hair, and creases on the trunk (optional)
10. Tape black strips of paper in place for the ears
11. Fold a small hat from the 4x6 paper (see instructions on page XX)
12. Knot a length of yarn to the tied end of the balloon
13. Cut a tiny hole into the top of the hat
14. Thread the end of the yarn through the hole in the hat
15. Enjoy your balloon elephant



**Optional:** Write a problem you're struggling with on a slip of paper. Roll it up and share it with your elephant by slipping it inside the balloon before blowing it up. Now your elephant can carry your secret with you, until you feel ready to share it with a trusted friend or family member.

## Fold Your Own Slightly-Too-Small Paper Hat

The elephant in the story is wearing a hat that's much too small for him. It's kind of embarrassing, if you think about it, to wear a hat that small. Make a hat that's too small for your head and wear it around the classroom to prove you're strong enough to handle a little bit of embarrassment and stretch those shame resilience muscles!

You can say to each other: "You're wearing a tiny, silly hat? Me too!" and practice connecting in the midst of embarrassment.

Here's how to fold a small paper hat out of a regular sheet of paper:

**You will need:** A regular sheet of paper.

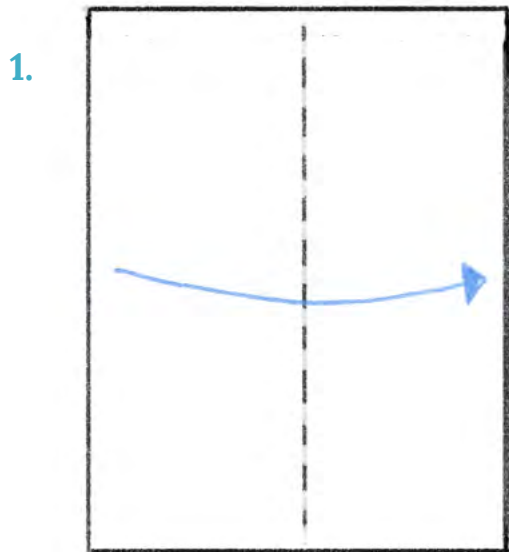
Note: physical newspapers can be hard to come by these days. But if you have one, you can also follow the steps on page 16 to make an oversize newspaper hat, which might look just as silly as wearing a hat that's too small.

*"Some hats can only be worn if you're willing to be jaunty, to set them at an angle and to walk beneath them with a spring in your stride as if you're only a step away from dancing. They demand a lot of you."*

—Neil Gaiman



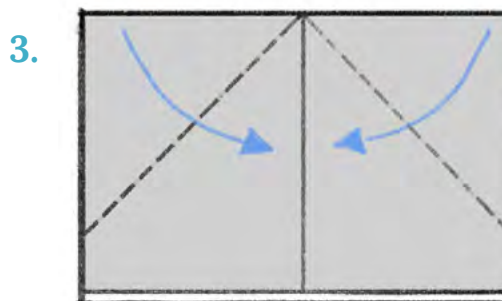
Fold Your Own Slightly-Too-Small Paper Hat (continued)



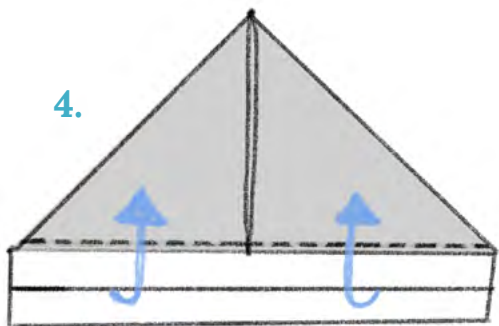
Fold in half widthwise, then open back up.



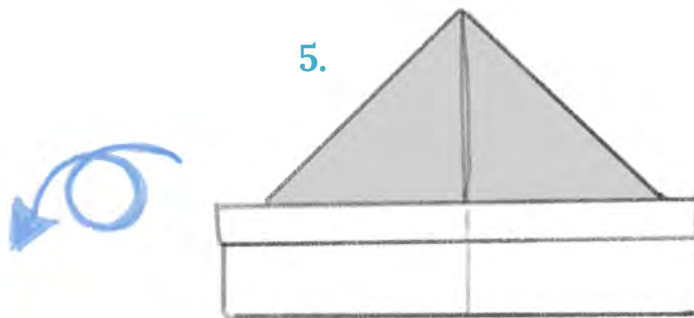
Fold in half lengthwise and position so the folded edge is at the top.



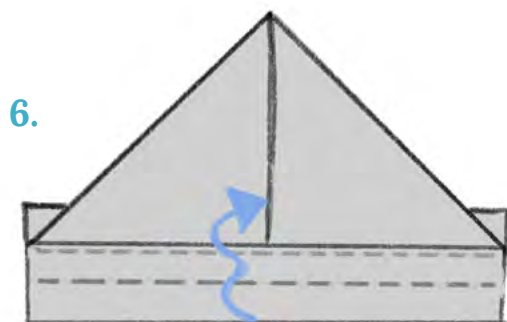
Fold each corner inward so they meet the center crease.



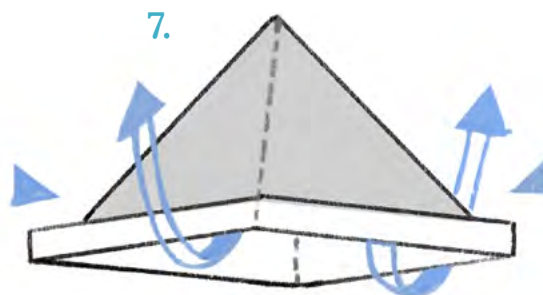
Fold the bottom front flap up to meet the edge of the folded-down corners.



Fold bottom flap up again.

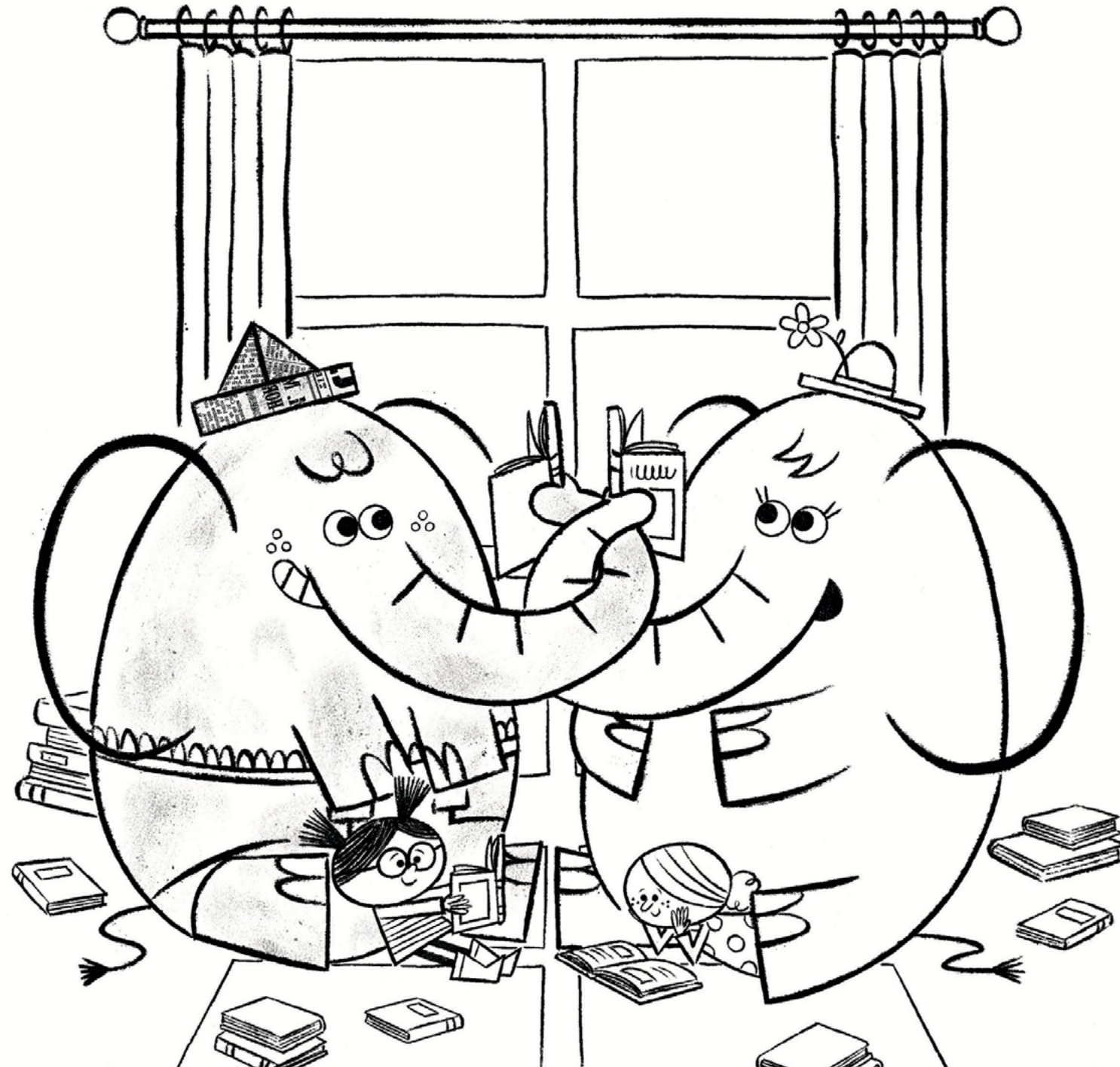


Flip hat over and fold up the bottom back flap up twice in the same manner.



Model your undersize hat and strut your stuff!





# My BIG Embarrassing Elephant

Join us for a story time featuring

# My **BIG** Embarrassing Elephant

Help children understand powerful feelings like embarrassment—in themselves and in others—through a heartwarming story and meaningful activities.



**DATE and TIME:**

**LOCATION:**

**STORY TELLER:**