

# LIFE RULES! – ONE STORY AT A TIME

*An entrepreneurial tale of fatherhood*

Around the world and throughout time, parents and family elders cradled their young children in their arms and told stories that made them feel better when they were sad, brave when they were afraid, or loved when they felt alone. Stories, shared in this way, have always been a powerful way to connect with young children and convey important life lessons across generations. Here is a story of how a New Jersey father used classic children's stories in a unique way to help his young child overcome social and emotional challenges in Kindergarten. Now he is reaching out to help parents and caregivers around the world do the same through KeenOwl Books - a fun, innovative and socially-responsible company. His mission? To help parents and caregivers build a closer relationship with a child while exposing her or him to valuable life skills, passing down family values and building character.



Atreyu couldn't wait for Kindergarten. A bright, social boy, his parents were confident he was ready for school, even though he would be the youngest in his class. They were pleased his school was small: with only ten students in the Kindergarten class, the student-teacher ratio was ideal for learning. Atreyu and his parents anticipated that this would be the beginning of an exciting new time in life.

Shortly into the school year, however, Atreyu began to wonder about things that hadn't concerned him before. Why was he smaller than everyone else? Why couldn't he hold the basketball right? Was there something wrong with him? "The kids weren't cruel or rude to Atreyu, but they made comments about the differences between them," Atreyu's father Sanjay Balasundaram says. "He would come home from school asking why he wasn't like everybody else."

Soon, Atreyu's enthusiasm and engagement at school waned. Since he couldn't handle a basketball as well as the other boys – who had larger hands suited to managing basketballs – Atreyu stopped trying new things, afraid he wouldn't do well. His teacher noted he was no longer putting his hand up in class to answer questions.

Atreyu's parents, rightly so, were concerned. The National Association for the Education of Young People (NAEYC), the premier association of professionals caring for young children highlighted the significance of their



concern, in a recent joint position statement with the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE), “...research has emphasized how powerfully early social and emotional competence predicts school readiness and later success....”

Atreyu’s mother Aparna, a psychotherapist, recognized that her little boy was losing self confidence and knew it was important to do something quickly. Simple reassurance wasn’t enough. As they talked, Atreyu’s parents came up with an idea rooted in Sanjay’s own childhood: stories. Sanjay had grown up hearing many tales during his childhood in India, a culture rich in the tradition of storytelling. Sanjay fondly remembers reading and listening to stories from cultures around the world in the nurturing arms of his parents and grandparents, teaching him about good and bad, right from wrong. This tradition of learning positive values from stories seemed like a good approach to Sanjay and Aparna.

Sanjay set out to find children’s stories that highlighted perseverance, courage, and self-esteem to read to his son. But it was not easy or convenient. “I checked book stores, online and offline, as well as our local public library, and was surprised to find that storybooks highlighting specific life’s lessons were very hard to find,” Sanjay says. “I was sure they existed, and I found a few here and there, but it was a lot more work than I thought it would be. And besides just reading the stories, I wondered if there was more I could do to ensure the positive messages were properly grasped by my son”.

Ready with “The Little Engine that Could” and a couple other books in that genre, Sanjay read to his son, substituting Atreyu’s name for the main character’s name. Sanjay also altered or added details such as places, people and facts from Atreyu’s life that would make the story and its context more relevant. “I put my son into the story so that he was the one resolving the problems. The amazing thing was that within six weeks Atreyu’s behavior and attitudes about himself had changed.”

Atreyu’s teacher also saw the change. “She reported that he was much more confident and asked what we were doing,” Sanjay recalls. “She saw that Atreyu was proud of his academic abilities again, and was making comments like, ‘I’m not that good at basketball, but I can play the piano.’”

Sanjay began to talk to other parents about this experience and discovered that they also wanted similar books, but were not sure how to best locate them. He learned that while parents may have help from schools for academics,



coaches for sports, and teachers for music, they have few resources when it comes to nurturing their children's character, values, and morals in a fun and engaging way.

This prompted Sanjay, who has spent much of his professional career in the high-tech industry, to create KeenOwl Books (<http://www.KeenOwl.com>), a website that offers convenient access to a line of life lesson storybooks that parents, grandparents, and other concerned adults can use to help build a child's character and support their social-emotional growth. Personalizing the stories enhances the power of the life lessons contained in the stories.

“When I talked to child development specialists about my idea, they were very supportive on the concept of personalization - putting people, things, and places that a child knows into a story. Unfortunately, most personalized books on the market for children focus on children as stars or super heroes. They felt this wasn't necessarily good for kids because they aren't always the shining star, and promotes a 'celebrity' attitude, rather than the development of good character traits and life skills. However, they saw great value in personalizing books in which the child would be exposed to challenges, could solve problems, and then work through difficulties successfully. By adding context, familiarity, and relevance to the story, and in turn to its lessons, personalization makes the storybooks more inviting to read and the story's lessons more meaningful and lasting.”

Thus, KeenOwl Books was born. Every book teaches specific values and is personalized for the child for whom it is intended. At KeenOwl.com, the official website for KeenOwl Books, the process to personalize a story is interactive and straightforward. “We had to make it as easy as 1-2-3,” says Sanjay. “Pick – Personalize – Place in Cart.” While personalizing the story, one can preview a few pages of the actual personalized book, make any corrections and then proceed to Checkout.

“Books like these make a mother feel she is doing the best for her kids,” says Andrea, a mother of two from Berkeley, California. “We love reading to our kids, and wanted to expose them to different reading experiences. I really like that the storybooks offer such great lessons. KeenOwl storybooks are a great compliment to any child's library.”

To enhance the reading experience and to support parents, every KeenOwl storybook comes with a Grown-Up Story Guide. Developed collaboratively by a team of child experts, parents and teachers, this guide includes questions and tips designed to help parents adapt the story and its life lessons to their own unique family circumstances.

KeenOwl customers have found that sharing a personalized story with a child creates a rich opportunity to share other



family experiences or history. Sharing a family tale of courage, perseverance or generosity, for example, can foster a child's adoption of their family's values and traditions.

Dr. Robin E. Connors, a Pittsburgh-based mental health consultant and former child therapist, comments on the value and appeal of KeenOwl's personalized life lesson storybooks. "As parents, teachers, and caregivers, we want to help children develop the necessary skills to face life's challenges with grace and strength. KeenOwl Books, through its attractive storybooks, creative personalization approach, and story guides, offers great tools, something parents and others can use to teach core values that contribute to healthy character development."

Grandparents who have ordered KeenOwl storybooks appreciate them for exactly this reason. "Finally," Mrs. Geida of Boundbrook, New Jersey says, "there is something we can do with our grandkids that's both fun and educational, and helps us counter the negative messages they are being bombarded with all the time." She also appreciates how reading the storybooks together creates opportunities for sharing her family's history of immigration from Europe, their traditions, and their values such as perseverance, hard work, and honesty – information so easily lost in the fast-paced culture we all inhabit today.

Sanjay Balasundaram is pleased with these responses to KeenOwl Books and its personalized storybooks. "If I sound passionate about the importance of teaching children good values and about the need to support parents with useful tools to aid this teaching, it's because I am. What could be more important than helping to raise happy, confident, and caring children?"

In the meantime, KeenOwl Books expands, adding stories and services to its repertoire. KeenOwl donates to charitable organizations and causes that work for children and animals around the world, and it engages in business and manufacturing practices that respect and preserve the Earth and the environment. All the books are printed using vegetable dyes and inks, on paper certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (<http://www.fsc.org>), an international body ensuring eco-friendly, responsible paper production. While delighted with the success KeenOwl is experiencing, Sanjay and Aparna's true joy is that Atreyu thrives in his elementary school as he grows into the sort of person they always hoped he would be.

