Sophie’s Story: Writing for Young Diabetics

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I was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes when I was fifteen months old. At the time, my diagnosis at such a young age was a rarity, though this is no longer the case. Type 1 diabetes cases are the rise, especially in children under the age of four (Cody, 2007). Despite being diagnosed with a lifelong chronic disease before I was even two, my situation was what you would consider ideal. My mother was also a type 1 diabetic since childhood, and a registered nurse. She never held back when it came to teaching me about my diabetes. She strove to instill a sense of responsibility in me to care of my own body. Most children who are diagnosed this young are not so fortunate. After the initial diagnosis, the parents receive intensive training on diabetes, but the child’s education is more of an afterthought. This makes sense, as it is essential that parents know how to handle this complex medical condition in order to care for their child, but a major opportunity is missed when it comes to the child’s learning. Diabetes can be scary and difficult to understand, but children have more power to care for themselves than many realize. In order engage these young diabetics in their own care, I wrote a children’s book about living with type 1 diabetes.

My target audience for this project was diabetic children under the age of seven and their families. The goal was to provide them with an educational resource that would involve the child in their diabetes education. The book is intended to help the child understand how their behavior relates to their diabetes, help them identify the tools they use to manage their diabetes, and to personally identify with the protagonist of the story. Picture books have been shown to help children better
comprehend actions and consequences (Rettner, 2012), which is essential in diabetes management. It is important to teach good habits early, and by teaching children how to understand the consequences to their actions as they relate to their diabetes, they will then in turn be more likely to grow into more responsible diabetics throughout their lifetime.

It was very difficult for me to decide what area of diabetes I wanted to focus on for this book. I initially wrote three story lines, and settled on “Sophie’s Low Blood Sugar,” which centered on Sophie’s blood sugar going low during soccer practice and her being responsible and sitting out to take care of her blood sugar. I chose this particular storyline because I remember how difficult it was for me to stop playing with my friends to take care of my blood sugar when I was little. I hated having to watch my friends play while I had to wait, and these moments always felt
very lonely. I think other diabetic children need to know they are not alone when their diabetes interrupts their life and stopping to care for themselves is always the right thing to do.

Storyboards One & Two

After I chose my storyline, I made a storyboard. In the process of doing this, my story changed and evolved to better fit the illustrations I drafted. This was a very rough sketch, but it helped guide me and was a very helpful tool throughout. I then began my illustrations. This was a daunting task. Some illustrations took about an hour; some took as long as six. The software I was using had a bit of a learning curve, but eventually I got the hang of it and was able to complete illustrations more efficiently and with better detail.

When I had a fairly solid draft, I had it reviewed by my fellowship mentor and my pediatric endocrinologist. Both gave me helpful feedback that I included before
printing. My pediatric endocrinologist was very excited about the project and agreed to partner with me by distributing them to the young patients at her clinic.

I was thrilled to finally send the book off to the printers, but I did not realize how complicated it was going to be. What I expected to take maybe a few days ended up taking over two weeks. The first proof I was sent had no text at all, others cut words off the page, or had them inverted. It took seven proofs before I was finally able to approve it for printing, and then after that, half the page numbers ended up off the page and we had to start the proof approval process all over again. After a very long two weeks, they were finally printed, and it was most certainly worth all of the effort. The finished product was beautiful and more than I hoped it would be. It was wonderful to finally have my creation tangible in my hands.
Photo of the printed books and surveys prior to distribution

Within a few days of receiving the books, I printed out short introductory surveys and placed them in all of the copies that were to be distributed. The survey covered basic information and email addresses for a follow up survey. I then drove them to my pediatric endocrinologist's office in Des Moines, Iowa. They had their nurses and diabetes educators distribute the books over the next couple of weeks. I was able to compile a sample of the survey data by the showcase and will be conducting a follow-up survey assessing whether or not the book achieved its goals after the rest of the copies have been handed out. I am hoping to take this idea to a publisher soon and help Sophie continue to educate and encourage diabetic children and help them grow into healthy adults.
This project was very impactful for me. When I little, I wanted to grow up to be an author, and I thought that dream had faded away when I committed myself to a career in the sciences. The Latham Science Engagement Initiative helped me to reignite with those ambitions and connect them with my science expertise. Writing and illustrating a book was a difficult task, but it left me with an overwhelming feeling of accomplishment and I truly hope I am able to continue this project further.
References

