



Buddy the baboon

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Theme: Dealing with disability, being different, and being teased

Appropriate age group: All age groups



Mrs Baboon is very happy. She's happy because one of these days she'll be holding a baby in her arms – her first baby! Four of the female baboons in the troop already have their babies and they are so proud of them.

Soon enough, the great day arrives. Mrs Baboon becomes Mommy Baboon when her little baby is born. Mommy Baboon holds her baby lovingly in her arms but the tears stream down her cheeks. She's not crying tears of happiness. Oh no. She is crying because she feels so helpless and afraid. She doesn't know what to do.

Her precious baby has a crippled arm and the elders of the baboon troop say, "With that crippled arm your baby will always be a weakling. He'll never be able to survive and take care of himself. He'll always be a problem for the troop. You must leave him in the veld for the hyenas to eat." The other proud mothers agree. Even the baby's father says, "It's no good crying. There's only one thing to do."

What should Mommy Baboon do? Should she listen to the others and let her little boy baboon die, or should she try to teach him how to get along in life? What would be best for him? Mommy Baboon loves her baby – she can't bear to leave him to die. She decides to keep him and she names him Dudley. The elders and the other mothers scold her and turn their backs on her. The baby's father says, "Don't expect any help from me."

Mommy Baboon does her best but life is sometimes very difficult for her and Dudley. The other young baboons can hold on tight to their mothers' tummies or ride on their mothers' backs. But Dudley can only hold on with one arm. He keeps falling off and then Mommy has to stop and pick him up and sometimes that puts them both in danger.

The other young baboons love to swing and play in the trees but Dudley can't play with them because of his arm. They always tease him and make fun of him. They call him Dud or Duddy which means good for nothing. That makes him feel really useless. He hides his face and looks the other way, pretending he's not hurt. But when the others aren't looking he finds a hiding place so he can cry by himself.

Dudley's mother can see how he feels and she's always really caring and helpful. Because he can't play with the other young baboons, Dudley spends a lot of time with his mother and the other grownups in the troop. While the young baboons are playing, he helps the grownups gather food. They teach him many skills and clever tricks and he learns how to manage with one arm. He knows where to find the juiciest fruit and berries. He digs up delicious roots and bulbs. He tracks lots of tasty insects – and he becomes an outstanding scorpion hunter. Scorpions are his favourite crunchy snack.

Dudley likes to share his food with the other baboons. He even shares his scorpions with the young ones as a special treat – but they still call him Duddy. His mother often says, "Sticks and stones can break your bones but words can never hurt you", but Dudley still feels hurt when the others tease him. He can't help it.

There's been no rain for a long time and the veld is dry and dusty. The fruit and berries are long gone and even insects are scarce. There is drought in the land. The baboons move far and wide, looking for food. One by one, the big baboons, even the leaders, come to Dudley to ask for food and he always shares whatever he has.

Week after week, the drought gets worse. The water holes are almost empty but there are no rain clouds to be seen. The baboons find less and less food and they become thinner and weaker by the day.

One day as they are all digging for bulbs, Dudley spots a puffadder coiled up on a rock. It's the same colour as the rock, perfectly camouflaged. But he can see the snake is ready to strike – it's watching the baboons with cold eyes and its tongue is darting in and out of its mouth. Like all baboons, Dudley is really frightened of snakes. He's about to run away when young Jo comes running towards him, shouting, "Duddy, Duddy, I want a scorpion snack!" Jo doesn't see the snake and he's just about to step on it. Dudley acts fast. With his one strong arm he grabs the puffadder behind the head, bites its neck, and kills it in a flash!

Jo screams and all the baboons come running. They find Dudley holding the dead snake. They can hardly believe their eyes. Jo says to Dudley in a voice loud enough for the whole troop to hear, "Dudley, I could have been blind or paralysed or even dead but you saved me. You're a hero. I'm sorry we always teased you about your crippled arm. We made fun of you because you look different from us but we were stupid to judge you by your outside. We didn't notice how kind you really are, and how brave. Please forgive us – please give us another chance."

All the other baboons give three cheers for Dudley. His mother smiles proudly. Even his father looks proud. Of course, Dudley is happy to give the other baboons another chance. From that day on, nobody ever calls him Duddy. They call him Buddy because they know he's a real friend. It doesn't matter what he looks like on the outside. True friends see past that!

In the distance the rain clouds gather and the baboons know the rain is coming and will bring new life. It is time for a new beginning for everyone.

? Possible discussion points:

- *Identify differences and different abilities that people have.*
- *Discuss how we can help others who are differently abled.*