

From Grief to Growth: A Child First Clinician's Journey

When Markela Batts was attending graduate school to become a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, she knew she wanted a career in helping children develop, grow and heal. It was during an internship at Amos College where her mentor pointed out that Markela had an innate ability to help people through play. "I became interested in sand tray therapy and play therapy," she recalled.

Before graduate school, Markela continued to explore therapeutic techniques while working in a day treatment program in 2015. There, she often used books as a tool to connect with young kids in the program, using them to explain certain skills or topics she wanted to teach. She said, "There would be times when I wanted a book about a specific topic and had a hard time finding it. So, I started making a list in my journal of the topics and themes missing in children's books."

Over the following years, her list of children's book topic ideas grew as she grew professionally. In 2022, Markela began working at Child First at Family Solutions in Greensboro, North Carolina as a clinician serving children and families and by late 2023, she became a supervisor. "As a clinician through Child First, I carried up to 12 families on my caseload and provided support to the caregiver and child. Now, I supervise four Child First teams, a role that has challenged me to grow as a leader while continuing to collaborate with referral sources to keep the program steady," Markela explained.

Child First is an evidence-based early childhood mental health treatment program that operates in multiple states across the country. It supports families and children in healing from the damaging effects of trauma, chronic stress, poverty, and neglect. Research shows that Child First improves both child and caregiver mental health, promotes school readiness, and significantly reduces risk for child abuse and neglect—leading to dramatic improvements in the health and wellbeing of families.

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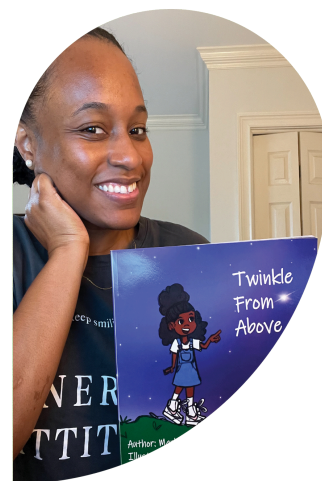
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Markela Batts, Child First clinician turned children's book author, reflects on her journey of helping kids heal through play and storytelling.

Just before starting her role at Child First, Markela experienced profound grief that deeply affected her perspective as a clinician. "Between 2018 and 2020, I lost several close family members," she shared. "When my aunt passed away, I paid tribute to her at her funeral and quoted something she had always told me: 'live your life.'"

Inspired by her aunt's words, Markela finally decided to take her list of children's book ideas and turn it into a tangible way to help families through difficult times. In September 2023, she published her first book, *A Twinkle From Above*. The book is about a child named Ella and speaks to the feelings of grief, sadness, and confusion young children experience when they've endured a loss. The book's dustcover reads, "Ella shares joyful memories of visiting her Grandmother's house. But when something unexpected happens, Ella faces difficult emotions. With the support of her parents, Ella learns to remember and cherish her loved ones even through her sadness."

"In addition to me navigating a personal grief journey, I was working with children aged 3-7 who were grappling with grief," Markela explained. "Their caregivers often struggled to explain death, sometimes using metaphors that only added to the children's confusion." Markela explained how she was a self-starter when it came to the process of publishing a children's book. "Writing the story was the first step," she said. "I started by sketching ideas in a journal and then turned them into slides. I knew I needed visuals to bring the story to life, so I hired an illustrator to transform my stick figures into the images I envisioned."

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Markela taught herself how to use publishing software by watching YouTube tutorials. After plenty of trial and error, she perfected the process. "It was a lot of figuring things out on my own, at my own pace," she said.

The most challenging part of the project was self-publishing *A Twinkle From Above* on Amazon. After several frustrating attempts of downloading and uploading her files, Markela finally succeeded. "It was an incredible feeling to hold a hard copy of my own book in my hands," she said.

The feedback for her children's book has been phenomenal. Markela's colleagues at Child First often take *A Twinkle From Above* on home visits when they believe it will be a useful tool. "When I hear stories of other clinicians and therapists using my book in their work, I can hardly believe it," Markela shared, "I clutch my chest, and tears fill my eyes. This is exactly what I wanted my book to do—to reach those who need it!"

In fact, Markela said the positive support she has received in response to *A Twinkle From Above* has inspired her to write her next children's book. "I'm working on my second book about divorce and separation for kids living in two households. And maybe my third book will focus on anxiety in the classroom."

As Markela revisited her original list of children's book topics from graduate school, she reflected, "My journey began with the understanding that children can develop, grow, and heal through play, and I want to create and share stories that support that."