

EYE EXPERT

You? An expert? But you're not a doctor? You're my mum! You can't be an expert in nystagmus!" Frank was perplexed. In fact, his plex was so perped, it looked like he might explode. He didn't know much about experts, but he knew you had to learn lots to be an expert like a doctor or a plumber or a professor or an electrician.

Frank's mum smiled. She could see this was going to be fun. "Well Frank, you know Amy the orthoptist we see when we go to the eye hospital?"

Frank was still frowning, but he nodded. He was standing by the kitchen table, his hands tightly gripping the back of a chair while his right foot kicked the floor. "Yes, of course! Amy's an expert. She wears a white coat and she knows how to use all whirring, flashing switches and lights in the hospital and knows lots of big words for eyes like, like ..." said Frank, desperately trying to remember some big words.

Frank looked at Northwick for help, but the bear was staring at the floor and humming quietly. Northwick liked big words, but he wasn't very good at remembering them, especially just before lunch when his brain felt particularly hungry. Also, Northwick didn't dare say it, but he thought Frank's mother would probably do very well on a television quiz show about nystagmus.

Frank's mother opened a kitchen cupboard and got plates out for lunch. "Well, this may surprise you, but it was Amy the orthoptist who said I'm an expert when it comes to nystagmus."

Fortunately, Frank was still holding on to the back of the kitchen chair or he would have fallen over. As it was, his foot stopped in mid air and his mouth fell open. "But, but, you're my mum!" repeated Frank loudly. "You

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don't wear a white coat. You don't know how to use all the whirring, flashing switches and lights and stuff in the hospital. You don't know all the big words for eyes!"

Frank's mother put the plates on the table and opened the cutlery drawer. "To be honest, Frank, I was surprised too when Amy said I was an expert. So I asked her to explain what she meant. She said there's more to nystagmus than what happens in the hospital. You're right. I'm no expert in the hospital side of nystagmus. But Amy said I know a lot about nystagmus from seeing you and Northwick every day."

Outstanding

Frank wasn't at all sure that he liked the idea of his mother watching him all the time. On the other hand, he was becoming more and more aware that his eyes did make him different from other children at school. And he did want to understand his eyes better and how they affected him. When he was younger he hadn't realised that he saw the world differently from most other people.



But now he was older, it worried him that he stood out from his friends – and usually not for reasons he was happy about. It was a pain, for instance, that he couldn't always see what was on the board at school. Or – and this hurt him to even think about it – that he wasn't much good at football and probably never would be. Or that other people could see him in the distance long before he could see them. So Frank pulled out the chair, sat down and plucked up the courage to ask his mother to tell him how other people saw the world. And also how that was different from what he and Northwick saw.

Northwick was very glad that Frank's mother served up lunch (even if it was salad) before answering such a big question. The bear found it much easier to listen and think when his brain wasn't screaming at him for food. While they ate, they talked for what seemed like hours to Northwick. Some of what Frank's mother told them he knew already. But some of it was new, or he hadn't properly understood before.

Northwick knew that he and Frank couldn't see as far as other people (and bears). So, that meant they missed a lot of what was going on around them. And sometimes they made silly mistakes because they couldn't see signs or their friends or menus or all sorts of things people (and bears) with ordinary eyes took for granted.

Dropping pennies

But the other things Frank's mother told them about were much more complicated. And even Frank began to see why Amy the orthoptist thought his mother was an expert. Needing more time than other people to see, even when they were close to things, was not only strange, but also very unfair thought Frank.

And Northwick hadn't realised before that other people found it easy to see lots of things at the same time. For him, faces in a crowd, words on a page, shop shelves tumbling full of toys all made his eyes and brain whizz and whirr wildly. That was another thing, Frank's mother explained: they could see even less if they were tired, or upset or hungry. Unlike people with ordinary eyes who could see pretty much the same all day long.

The null zone was especially hard to understand. Frank's mother suggested they think of the null zone like a narrow torch beam where they

could see better, but everywhere else was gloomy. "Or perhaps a search-light?" suggested Northwick. Frank's mother, who was surprised the bear knew what a search-light was, agreed that was also a good way to think about the null zone.

Pudding power

Frank said he understood now why most other boys at school were better than him at football. He couldn't see as far, or as fast, or in so many places at once as they could. His mother saw from the look on Frank's face that this was a shock to him and made him very unhappy. "But," she pointed out with a big smile, "You know more than anyone else in your class about computers, don't you? So you're an expert too. Soccer isn't everything."

Northwick felt sad. He wasn't very good at football or computers. He desperately wanted to be an expert in something. But what? Frank's mother got up and started clearing away the lunch plates. "That's probably enough about nystagmus for one day. Would either of you like some pudding?"

"Ahh," thought Northwick to himself. "Now puddings are something I do know about. I am definitely an expert on desserts."

