

We're asthmatics, what's the problem?



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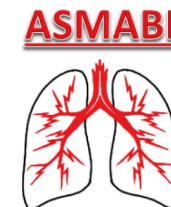
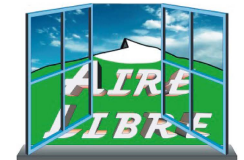
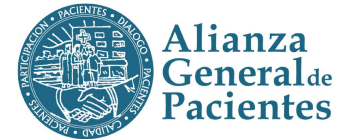
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For all those young people who dare to question their limits.

Asthma is a disease that currently affects some 235 million people worldwide, this being the most common chronic disease among the infant population.

In childhood asthma, as in that which affects adults, the lungs and airways quickly become inflamed when exposed to certain triggers, such as inhaling pollen or having a cold or another respiratory infection. Childhood asthma can cause distressing everyday symptoms which interfere with a child's play, sporting activities, schooling and sleep if it is not treated correctly and kept under control by healthcare professionals.

Playing sport is not incompatible with asthma. It has been proven that doing sport improves respiratory resistance and exercise tolerance in asthmatic children.

Apart from physical activity, there are other practices which help significantly to control asthma: knowing and avoiding the factors which increase the probability of suffering asthma attacks is key. Following the guidelines set out by healthcare professionals regarding treatment, making sure that you always carry rescue medication and also having at least one check-up per year are indispensable practices for keeping asthma under control.

Asthma can be controlled by means of strategies which help to either prevent and relieve the symptoms.

What about you, do you keep your asthma under control?

Patient Relations Department, GSK Spain

“Wake up, son! Come on, it’s time to get up!”

“Good morning, mum!”

I jumped out of bed, had a wash, put my tracksuit on and went straight to breakfast.

“Shall I make your sandwich?”

“No, mum, I’ll make it! I have time!”

“Whatever you prefer, James.”

“I’ll just have milk with a handful of cereal today, if that’s alright? We have an endurance test first thing this morning and I don’t want to do it with a full stomach.”

“Wasn’t that tomorrow, James?”

“You’re right! Today is Ava’s turn and it’s the first time she’s done it. Hopefully she’ll keep up!”

“Of course she will! The first time that you did it, you’d been receiving treatment for less time than she has and you managed very well.”





“Well, I am really looking forward to doing it, but... what happens if I’m short of breath and I have to stop? It’s spring after all...”

“It’s alright, you don’t have anything to worry about. You follow your treatment strictly every day. You rarely have an attack, not even during training sessions or matches; you sleep really well at night...”

“You’re right, mum.”

“Do you remember when you had your first attack and we went to the Accident and Emergency Department? You were only nine years old... You have no idea how frightened I was, James. What worried me the most was that, whatever you had might stop you doing sport, and look at you now! You’re just like any other boy!”

“I remember that it was my second match and that I wanted you both to be proud of me so I started to run, but I had to stop straight away because I couldn’t breathe. We rushed to the hospital. I hadn’t been right for a couple of weeks but I hadn’t said anything to you.”



“And what’s more, the only thing that you asked us on the way was whether you would still be able to play football. We said ‘yes’, without knowing whether it would be true. Later on, when the doctor told us that it was very likely that you had asthma, but that if you followed your treatment you could do as much sport as you liked, all three of us were relieved.”

“I was scared that day too, mum; but now that I’m used to it, it’s not such a big deal.”

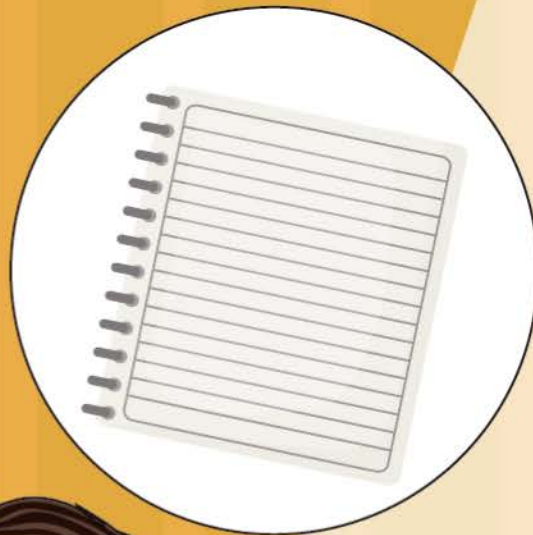
“How quickly time passes. It’s true, James, you manage it fantastically.”

“You see? You don’t have to worry about it being spring. I know you’re going to improve your time, you’ll see,” my mother said, whilst looking at the clock and hastily picking up her jacket.

“I’m off, I’m running late!”

My mum said goodbye and went to work.





I imagine that you're wondering why I am looking forward to tomorrow so much. Well, it's because I would like to improve the time that I achieved in last year's endurance test, which was twelve minutes. It won't be so easy this time as the springtime pollen could provoke an attack.

As my mum says, I am doing everything that the doctor tells me to, so she's right, I have no reason to worry. These days I only have to visit the surgery once a year for a check-up.

By the way! Just in case you hadn't realised, as well as being crazy about football, my other hobby is writing. I just love writing! And do you know what? The best thing is that I am left-handed, the only left-handed person in my class! I love being left-handed!

My friend Ava says that I'll definitely be a writer when I'm older because, according to her anyway, I write very well. What she doesn't yet know is that I've already started writing our story; I must find the moment to tell her! But I'll keep writing in the meantime...



My dad has always told me that I was born with a ball in my hands, because I never went out empty-handed. Ever since I was little, my friends have been coming to play in my street because they weren't allowed to play in theirs. You see, where I live there isn't one of those signs that say: 'Ball games are not permitted'. No doubt my parents bought this flat for that reason alone, so that I could play.

I remember that although I enjoyed playing most things, I always ended up playing football. Nevertheless, my parents refused to sign me up for a team. They tried to convince me to play another sport. They kept telling me that football was very mainstream. I didn't understand what they meant by 'mainstream'. Of course it's mainstream, I thought, everyone wants to play it!





“Listen, James, what about signing up for basketball or volleyball, for example? There are teams at school as well and since there are fewer players, you’ll play more,” my dad said to me, thinking that that would convince me.

“No, dad, I want to play football!”

And so it went on, time and time again, until the next attempt. Meanwhile, I had no intention of giving up. During term time, my dad didn’t let me watch matches with him because they were on very late, but in the school holidays he did, even if they started at ten o’clock at night. I loved it!

Suddenly, one day, as if by magic, they changed their minds. There was only a week to go before school started. To start with, when they called me, I was a bit worried because when mum and dad call me at the same time, it usually means that I'm about to be told off.

"Yes, what's going on?" I asked them as I sat down, resting my foot on a football.

"Nothing. Here, James, this is for you. Your mother and I have thought long and hard about it. Open it carefully."

"But it's not my birthday! What is it?"

"Open it!" mum replied.

I unwrapped that strange present, slowly tearing the paper into a thousand pieces. I took out a ball-shaped voucher which said:

"Voucher valid for one enrolment in the school football team"

"Wow! For me? Seriously? Thank you! You're the best parents in the world!"



I started the fourth year of primary school so excited that I felt older just because I played for the school team. Nearly all of my friends signed up too. I say 'nearly all' of them because Ava, who is my best friend and who also loves football, didn't enrol. I didn't know what was the matter with her then. She told me that there wasn't anything wrong, just that she got tired easily and couldn't run.

We trained three days a week. The coach told us that he would try us out in all of the positions during the first few days and then he would decide where each of us would play. My favourite position of all was as a forward, so when it was my turn to play up front I made a big effort to do well. I loved breaking free, running towards the goal and scoring with my magic left foot.





I remember that on the day our coach told us the team line-up, there were still three positions to assign when my turn came. I was so nervous that I shut my eyes tightly, crossed my fingers and probably even my toes. I thought that by doing that he would say what I was hoping to hear:

“And you, James, it’s clear that you’re passionate about football. You play pretty well in all positions, but you’re particularly outstanding in one of them. You run like the wind and your left foot scores amazing goals... which have made you one of the team’s forwards! Congratulations!”



I opened my eyes, full of happiness, when he said, “...and your left foot scores amazing goals...” and I even jumped with joy when I heard that I was to be a forward.

“Great, I’ve done it!”

From that day onwards, I trained as if I were a professional footballer. I ran faster and faster and never failed to score in a match. Time passed extremely quickly, I could not believe that I had already been training for two months. But as my mum says, not everything can be perfect, and it was then that the problems started.

I didn't know what was happening to me, but I was no longer performing as well in training sessions because I soon felt tired. I couldn't run for very long and was slower than before. I couldn't breathe properly and noticed how I ran out of breath. I had coughing fits and, in the end, I had to stop because otherwise I couldn't breathe.

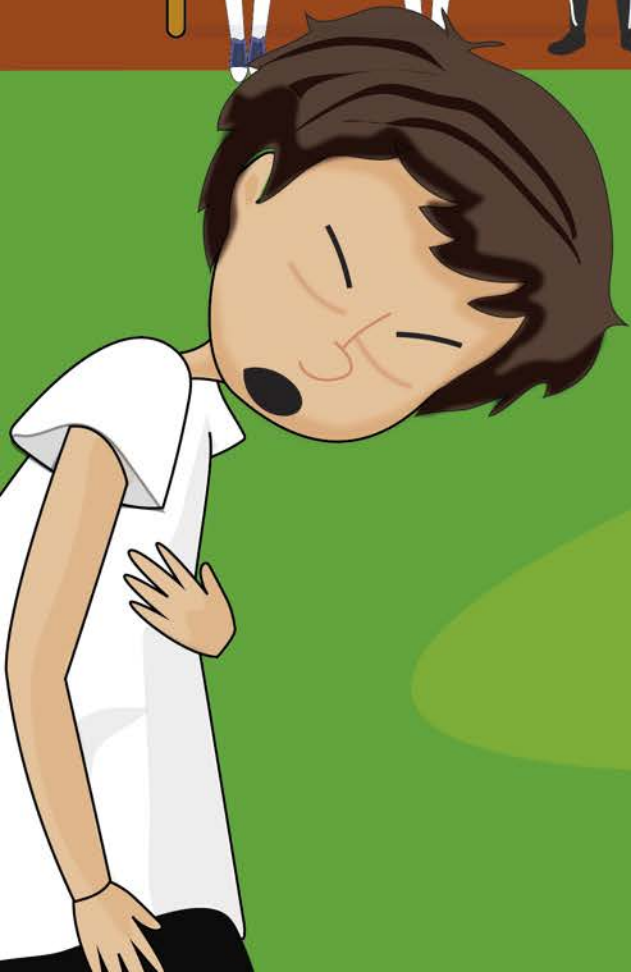
I didn't say anything at home because I thought it would pass. I thought that if I told my parents, they would have me taken off the team. So I hid it as much as I could in training sessions but, not being able to run like I had at the start, meant that I also stopped scoring goals.





“James, is there something the matter, are you alright?”

“Yes, coach, I’m fine. I’m just tired, I didn’t sleep well last night,” I replied, short of breath and avoiding eye contact.



That weekend, there was a match at school and of course my parents were coming to watch me. I saw the coach speaking to them and assumed that he was telling them something about me. I tried to forget about it and focus on the match. I wanted them to be proud of me. The only thing I wanted was to play well, run like I had before and score. But it wasn’t to be.

The match started and I ran at full pace for about ten minutes. I had to slow down because I couldn’t breathe. I was out of breath and a whistling sound was coming from my chest. In the distance, I could see the panic on my parents’ faces as they looked on. I couldn’t keep going. I stopped. The coach made an immediate substitution and we rushed to the hospital.

“Relax, James, breathe. One, two, three... Come on, again, breathe. One, two, three...”

My mum sat with me in the back of the car in order to calm me down. I was still hardly able to breathe.

“We’re nearly there, one, two, three... How long has this been happening for? Why didn’t you tell us, James? No, don’t answer now, we’ll talk later. Richard told us that you’ve been struggling for the last two weeks.”

“W...w...will... I... st...st...still...be...a... a...able...to...pl...pl...play...foot...ball?”

“Of course you can, James!” my dad replied.





When we arrived, my dad picked me up in his arms so that I didn't have to take a single step. We were lucky because when they saw how bad I was, they attended to us straight away. They immediately connected me to something that would give me oxygen. I can't remember how long I had that mask pressed to my face. What I do remember is the feeling of relief that came over me once I gradually stopped hearing the horrible wheezing sounds coming out of my body, and started to breathe properly again. "I'm not feeling quite so bad, thank goodness I'm better!" I thought.

In the distance, I could hear the doctor telling my parents:

"There's no cause for alarm. James had a severe attack. It looks like asthma. You should make an appointment with your doctor for next week. They will request that he does some tests to find out what is causing these attacks. Once he is diagnosed, he'll be able to lead a normal life so long as he receives the right treatment.

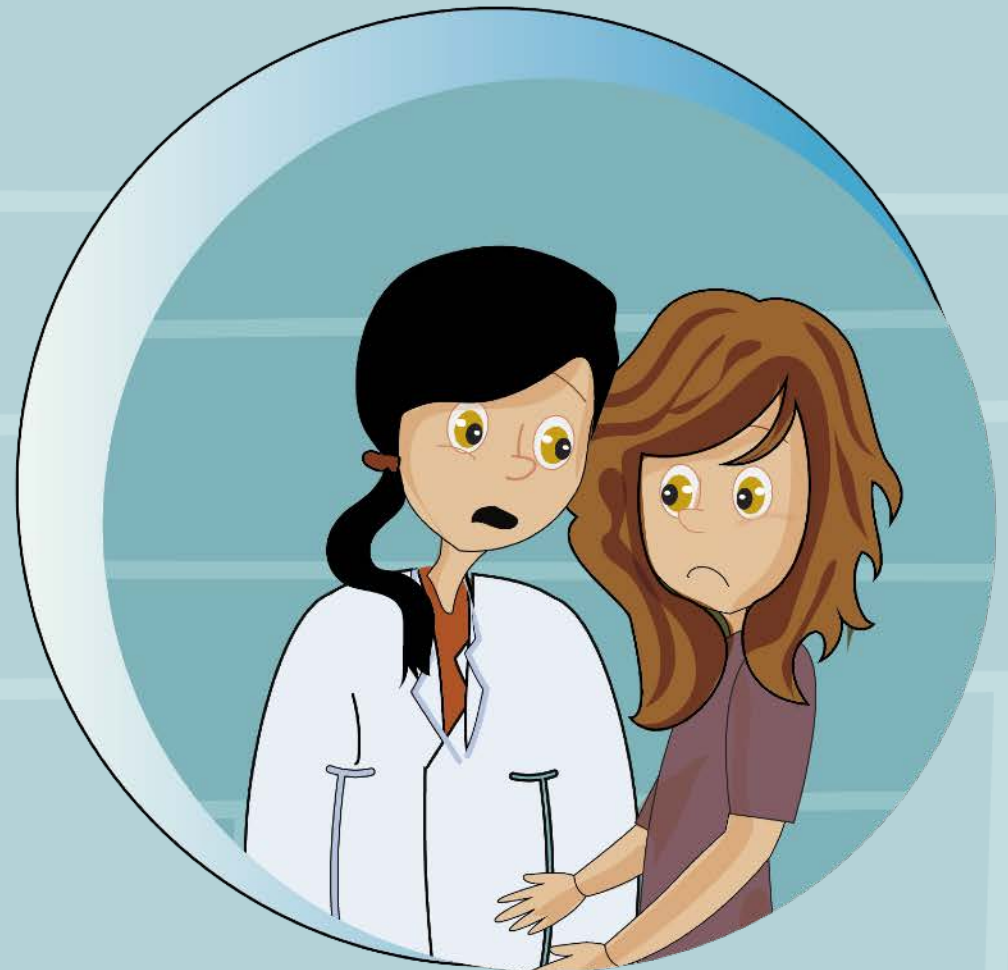
My mum, who thought that I could not hear her, asked the doctor quietly:

“A normal life, are you sure? Look, my son is very sporty. He loves playing football!”

“Asthma and sport are compatible. In fact, doing sport will help him to improve his respiratory resistance. Don’t worry! He’ll be able to play football and anything else he wants to.”

Looking at my mum’s face, I’m not sure whether she properly understood the first thing that she said. But when she reassured her that I could keep playing football, she relaxed and her normal expression returned.

When I had fully recovered, we went home, not talking much about what had happened. My dad said that he would go to the doctor’s appointment with us.





I spent the remainder of the weekend resting at home. My friends were very happy to see me at school the following Monday. I told them how quickly the doctor had restored my normal breathing, and when they asked me whether I could continue playing football, I answered them almost convinced:

“Of course! The doctor told me that with treatment I can play and do sport as usual.”

Just as we had been told at the hospital, my doctor referred me for asthma testing and I had to do that thing where they prick you with a needle in your arm in order to find out what you are allergic to. When we went back the next day, my arm still full of sore pinpricks, she explained:

“James, come and sit down with me.”

“What’s the matter, doctor?”



I remember that she ruffled my hair affectionately whilst reassuring both me and my parents with her smile.

“Well, James, among other things, you are allergic to pollen. Do you remember when you told me that when you were little you used to go to the olive groves with your grandfather, and that the last time you had to leave because your throat and nose became very itchy?”

“Yes, doctor, and I couldn’t stop sneezing, could I, dad?”

“That’s right, son.”

“Well, James, it was because you are allergic to pollen.

“Perfect!” my dad replied.

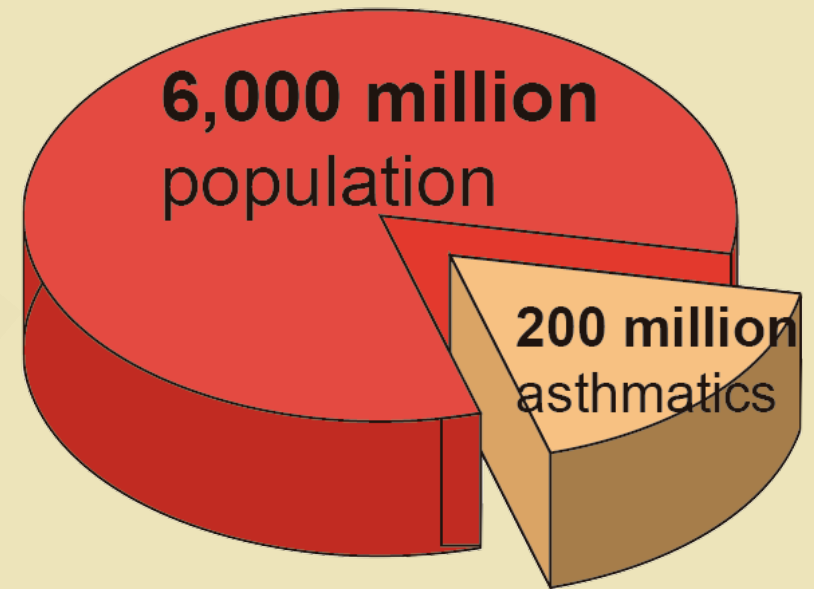
“Great! I get it..., because I have hayfever, if I run around a lot I might have trouble breathing?”

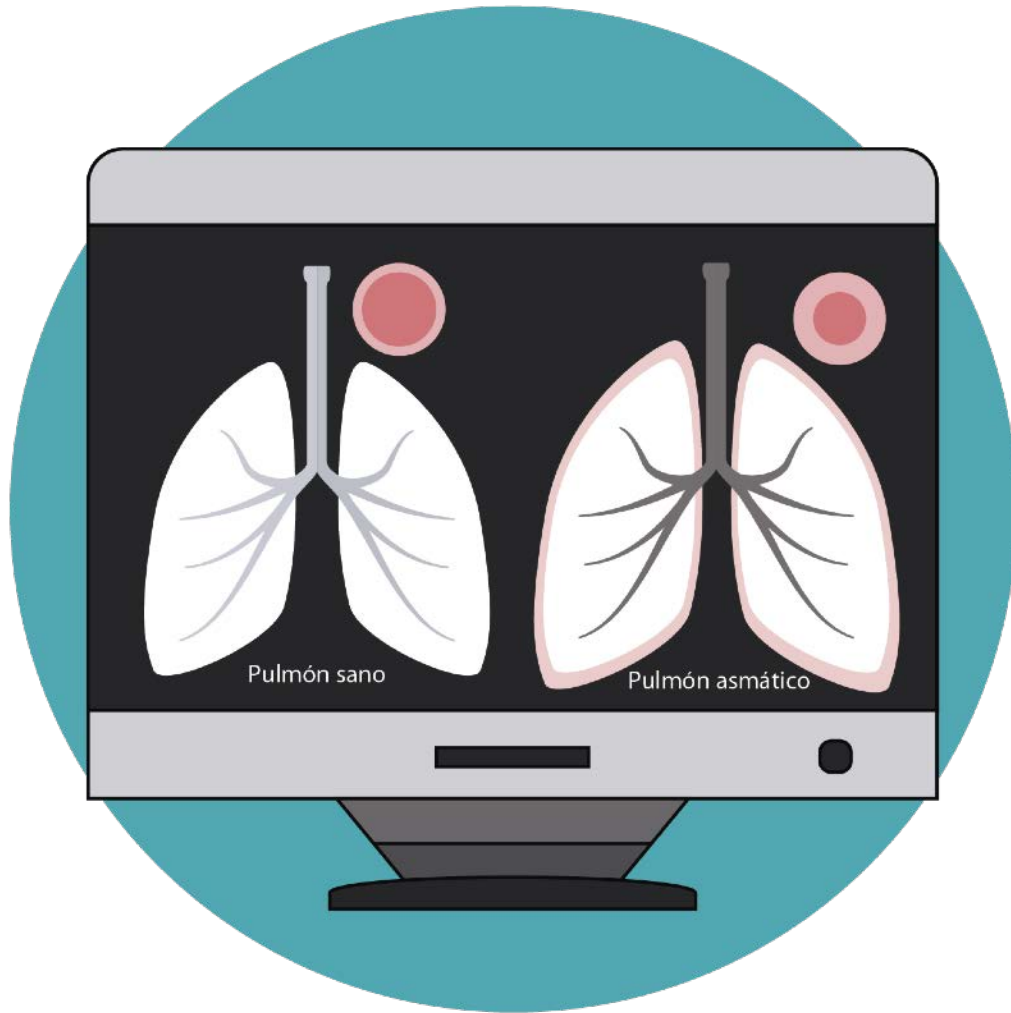


“The thing is, James, , in addition to having hayfever you also have asthma.”

“That’s what the other doctor said! But what does it mean?” I asked her.

“Nowadays, being asthmatic is quite normal, James. So normal in fact, that there are more than three hundred million asthmatics in the world. The bad thing is that asthma is a chronic disease; in other words, you will have it for life. But that said, there will be days when you feel so good that you will think that you no longer have it.”





Then the doctor turned her computer screen, opened the folder marked 'Asthma' and showed us a few photos.

“Look at these lungs. The ones on the left are those of a person without asthma. Those on the right are those of an asthmatic person. Can you see that they are inflamed? And that the airways are narrower? They are so narrow that the air cannot get through properly, which is why you start gasping. Why do they become inflamed? Well for some people, like you, James, it's due to pollen; for others, it's dust, smoke or other substances that are in the air. Some people even have asthma because their own bodies produce the inflammation.

The problem is that there is not just one kind of asthma, there are many. Our mission, James, is to detect which type of asthma each person has so as to give you all the appropriate treatment that will help you to live as if you didn't have it. Does that make sense?”



“More or less,” I answered pensively.

“Let me explain it better by using an example. Imagine that you need clothes so you go shopping. Tell me, do you choose a large or a small T-shirt?”

“Well, whichever fits me, or... sometimes, one that is a bit big so that it will still fit me the following year, right?”

“The things that occur to this boy!” said my mum, who was slightly embarrassed.

“That’s right, young man, I did the same thing!” she explained, winking at me. Then she went on:

“Well, asthma is similar to clothes, James. In the same way that we all buy clothes depending on our bodies, each asthmatic person needs a different treatment depending on their type of asthma. Let’s say that we are a kind of tailor and that we have to make you a made-to-measure suit, do you understand?”

“Yes, how cool! And are you going to make my suit now?”

“Of course! In fact, I’ve already started. I will see you every three weeks and that way you can tell me how things are going.”

When the doctor was sure that we understood her, she turned back to the monitor and continued with her explanations.

“Look, do you see these photos? They are of two inhalation devices.





My doctor took a device out of her drawer and explained to me in detail what I would have to do. I looked at it without taking my eyes off of it. Then she gave it to me and showed me how to use it.

“You’ll soon see how easy it is to use. It is important to remember that you must never forget to do it.”



“I’m sure that you’ll do it very well.”

That day was very important for me because I started to understand what it was about my lungs that made me asthmatic.

After that, I went to the surgery every three weeks. I had used it so well that I hadn't had a single attack.

The doctor went over all of the steps once again in order to make sure that I was doing everything properly and then she asked me:

“What's the matter, James? Are you sure that you're clear about everything?”

“Yes, but the thing is that up I haven't told my school friends anything because I'm worried that people might laugh at me...”

“You know Asthma is a very common disease, not only in adults, but also in children like you. If people laugh at you, you just say: “Yes, I'm asthmatic, what's the problem?”

“Alright,” I replied, feeling reassured.





Several weeks after that appointment, my friends and I had arranged to meet to play a match at playtime. Then, I decided that the best thing to do would be to tell the maths teacher that I was asthmatic, before going into the classroom.

“I know, James. The other day we had a very interesting workshop in which, among other things, we were told about asthma and the asthmatic students that we have. And there are a lot of you!”

“Yes.”

Winking at me, he went into the classroom.

When playtime came around, I was a little nervous. Suddenly, Paul and Mark came up to me.

“James, we heard that you have got asthma. We don’t really know what it is, but does it mean that you have to stop playing football?”

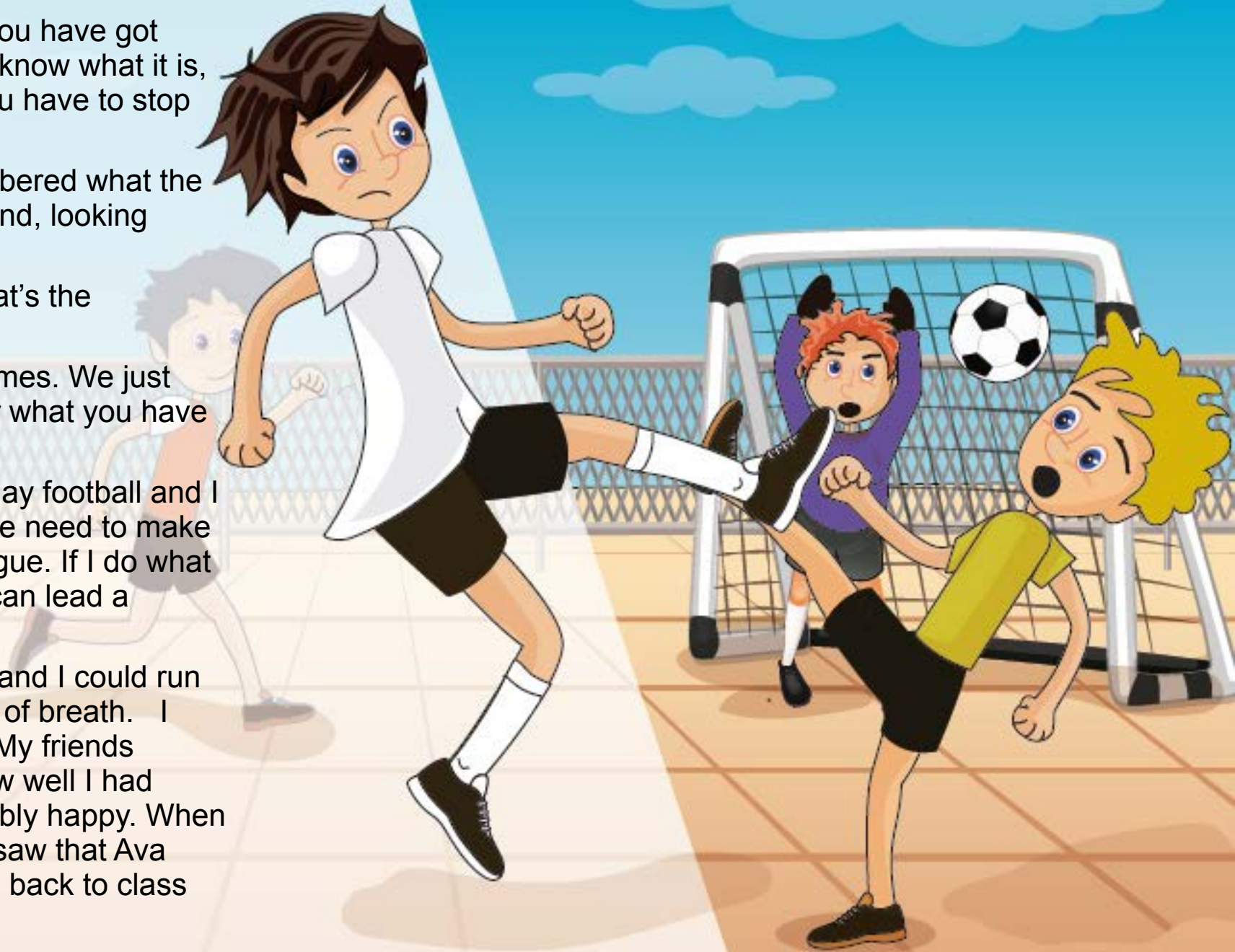
It was then that I remembered what the doctor had said to me, and, looking straight at them, I said:

“Yes, I’m asthmatic, what’s the problem?”

“There’s no problem, James. We just wanted to know whether what you have is serious.”

“Don’t worry. I can still play football and I will score all the goals we need to make sure that we win the league. If I do what my doctor tells me to, I can lead a normal life.”

Then we started to play and I could run fast, without running out of breath. I even scored two goals. My friends congratulated me on how well I had played and I was incredibly happy. When playtime had finished, I saw that Ava was waiting for me to go back to class together.





“You played really well, James! I’m so envious!”

“Thanks, Ava. I saw you watching us. Why didn’t you play with us?”

“Well, I wanted to tell you, but I was embarrassed...”

“Tell me what...? I don’t understand, Ava, you are my friend. Tell me quickly, we’ve got to go back into the classroom.”

“Well, I’m asthmatic too, James. I was diagnosed before you. But I can’t run or do sport like you can...”

“Seriously? Now it makes sense! But, why?”

“I don’t want to tell anyone that I have asthma because I don’t want people to laugh at me. What’s more, since I sleep so badly at night, I don’t have the energy to do anything the next day.”

“Well, I’m not embarrassed anymore, Ava. Yes, we are asthmatic, what’s the problem?” If you sleep badly at night, it’s because your pyjamas are either too big or too small!”

“What on earth are you talking about?” asked Ava. She hadn’t understood a thing!

“I mean that something isn’t working, I’ll explain it to you later. I’m going to go back into the classroom. Wait for me when we finish and I’ll tell you on the way home, alright?”



I remember that that day, Ava and I arrived home a bit late because we were talking for a long time. Since I had told her about my conversations with my doctor in the past, I focused on the thing about her pyjamas. Afterwards, since she had never told me anything about her asthma, she began to tell me about it in detail.

“When they told me that I would have it for the rest of my life, I panicked. I thought that if I didn’t use the inhaler, nothing would happen. The only bad thing would be that I couldn’t play sport. So, in the beginning, I didn’t take using the inhaler very seriously. Now I think I’m following my treatment well, but nevertheless I’m still sleeping badly at night and I’m tired all day long, I have no idea why.”

“Do you know what, Ava? I think that you should tell your doctor everything that you’ve just told me. It’s very important that you are honest with him. You can’t go on like this, can’t you see that your asthma is controlling you?”

“Yes, maybe, but...”

“But what? When you have your made-to-measure suit, it will be you that controls your asthma and then you will be able to do sport without any problems.”

“If only! You’re right, maybe I’m not doing such a good job.”

After that day, Ava and I talked almost daily about our asthma. The best thing is that since she started to go to the surgery every two weeks, by the third appointment her doctor had managed to tailor her made-to-measure pyjamas and she finally began to sleep properly.

“I feel good at last and have energy to do everything.”

“That’s great, Ava! You see? Now you can play football!”

She was so happy that she barely let me speak.



“And another thing, I’m not embarrassed to say that I’m asthmatic anymore! I used to make up excuses in PE and I pretended I wasn’t feeling well to get out of running and to avoid doing the endurance test, which, by the way, I have next Wednesday. Twelve minutes of running! I don’t know if I’ll manage it. When do you have it?”

“Of course you can do it! I have it the day after you. Let’s see how it goes...”

“You’ll be fine, you’ve already done it several times and you kept going really well. This will be my first time.”

“I know, but this time it’s more difficult because it’s spring and there’s a lot of pollen.”

“That’s true, I’d forgotten about that, you’re allergic to pollen as well!”





When mum had gone, I made a ham sandwich and left home thinking about how important the day was for Ava. If she managed to run for twelve minutes it would be a sign that she was at last learning to live with her asthma. I knew that she had it after playtime, so I found her to wish her luck.

“You’re asthmatic, do you really think that’s going to help you? You can’t run!”

“Yes, I’m asthmatic, what’s the problem? Of course I can run!”

I smiled as I heard her saying our phrase and I left without saying a word. She had already said all that there was to say. We had agreed to walk home together so that she could tell me how she had done.

“I can’t believe it, I did it, James!”

“Congratulations! Isn’t it great?”

Ava was so happy. She chatted about the endurance test in detail for the entire walk home. She even completed the test in a better time than the girl that had been laughing at her. As I listened to her, I tried hard to hide my nerves. It was my turn the following day!

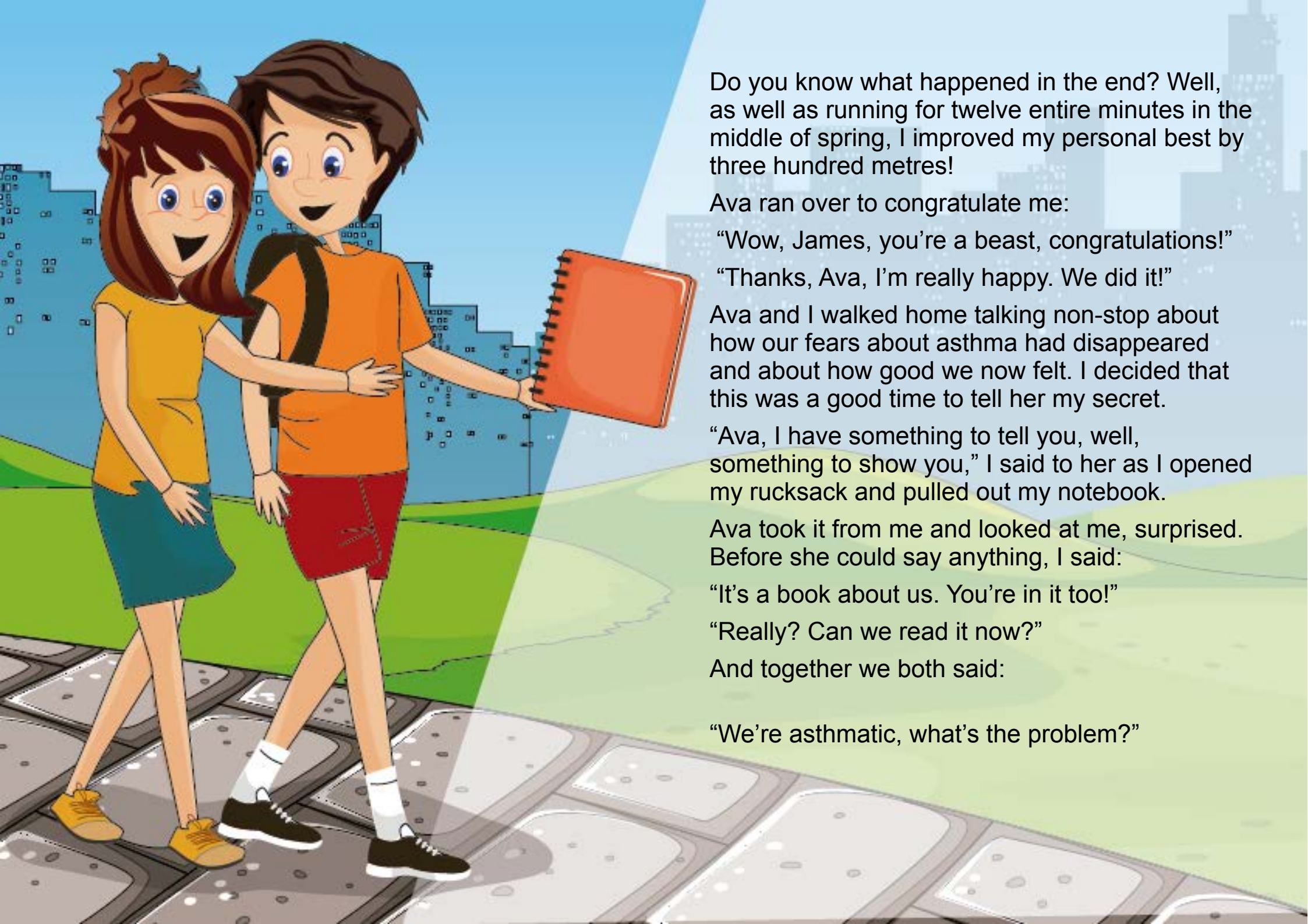
“Wake up, son! Come on, it’s time to get up!”

“Good morning, mum! Today it really is my turn!”

I jumped out of bed, had a wash, put my tracksuit on and after having just a little breakfast. I picked up my football and left the flat repeating to myself over and over again:

You can do it!





Do you know what happened in the end? Well, as well as running for twelve entire minutes in the middle of spring, I improved my personal best by three hundred metres!

Ava ran over to congratulate me:

“Wow, James, you’re a beast, congratulations!”

“Thanks, Ava, I’m really happy. We did it!”

Ava and I walked home talking non-stop about how our fears about asthma had disappeared and about how good we now felt. I decided that this was a good time to tell her my secret.

“Ava, I have something to tell you, well, something to show you,” I said to her as I opened my rucksack and pulled out my notebook.

Ava took it from me and looked at me, surprised. Before she could say anything, I said:

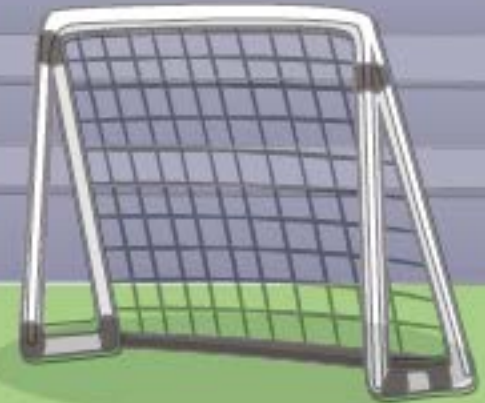
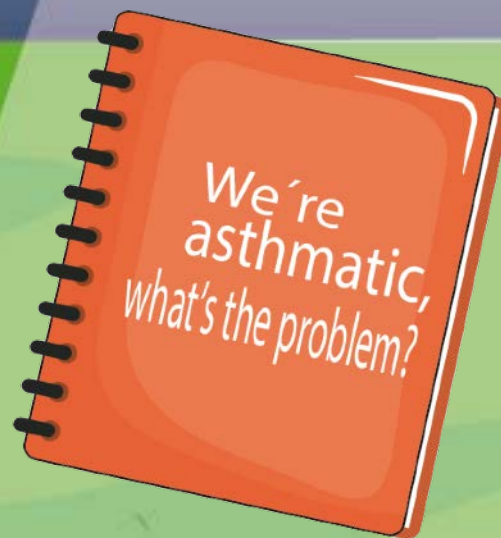
“It’s a book about us. You’re in it too!”

“Really? Can we read it now?”

And together we both said:

“We’re asthmatic, what’s the problem?”

THE END



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