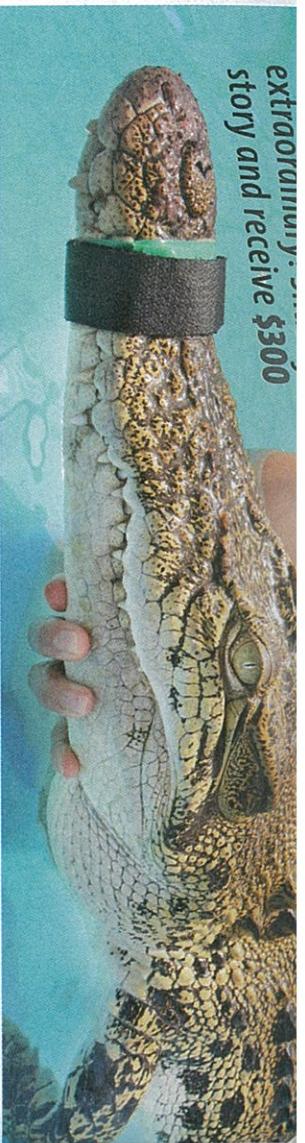


bringing indoor spaces, trees and tapoles. But as I got a bit older I veered away from the creepy critters for another type of small creature – kids. I was a primary school teacher and I loved it.

But when a friend asked me to look after their pet snake, I fell in love with reptiles all over again. After that I got a pet snake of my own, Monty Python. The good thing about reptiles is they are quiet, they don't take up a lot of room and they don't shed any fur. Sure, you can't cuddle up with them but you can't exactly hug a goldfish either!

Ten years ago, I combined my passion for teaching with my

extraordinary...
story and receive \$300



love of scaly pets by starting my own business called Roaming Reptiles. I would bring all sorts of native creatures to birthday parties and fetes, educating kids in an interactive and fun way. But first I decided to get myself some new colleagues – crocs!

I have a special room at home that all my reptiles live in. But feeding them definitely isn't for the faint-hearted. The snakes eat mice and my three crocs will eat any meat I throw at them. We've had some run-ins. One night a farnished flatmate chased

me out to the backyard and onto a table. I stayed there for ages wondering how to distract him long enough to make a dash for it. Eventually, I gave him a shove with a stick and he stalked off. Another time, a croc and I got far too close for comfort,

granting me 45 staples and a three-day hospital stay. But even that didn't lessen my love for crocs. Reptiles bring me so much fulfillment, both personally and professionally. It's extremely rewarding seeing a child's face light up with fascination for our beautiful native animals.

My reptilian friends may not be everyone's cup of tea, but I ask you to give them a chance. They may be snappy but they make me truly happy. ●

Tracey Sandstrom, 49, Geelong, Vic

My daughter's ALLERGIC TO EATING



Me and my brave little girl, Bella

For years when my daughter Bella, now nine, was growing up, she looked small for her age. Strangers on the street stared at her, but they didn't know just how ill my poor little girl was.

At 18 months, Bella was diagnosed with eosinophilic oesophagitis, or EoE. The doctor explained a type of white blood cell had infiltrated the lining of Bella's oesophagus, causing inflammation and tissue damage.

Almost all food triggered her EoE, making her regurgitate or choke. The only thing she'd been tolerating was drinking elementary formula. The lack of nutrition made her weak, tired and pale. Sadly, there's no cure for EoE.

Over the next few years,

we tried Bella with different foods and found she had severe allergies to milk, egg and fish. A medication that coated her oesophagus meant she could manage pureed meat, but it wasn't pain-free. Rice and potato-based products were fine, but the psychological damage of food causing Bella pain had already been done. Just getting her to try something new was a struggle.

The condition also affected Bella socially. Even smelling certain foods made her sick, so she spent most of her school lunch breaks on her own. It was heartbreaking. My husband Jason and I felt utterly helpless.

In 2009, I started a charity called AUSEE and built a website where others could come for information and support. Later, I wrote a kids' book called *Meet Arabella*, which is my girl's story. I hoped it would help

kids understand the illness.

Last year we made the decision to get Bella a feeding tube, which would pump her full of nutrients on a regular basis. Although Bella can't enjoy the taste of food, the tube has made her a totally different person. Seeing her putting on weight and bouncing with energy for the first time nearly brought us to tears! She can even play with her friends at lunchtime now, which is fantastic.

Still, we hope Bella won't be on the feeding tube forever. We're going to continue doing more food trials to see if her tolerance has increased. I just want my child to be happy, and thankfully Bella's on the right path. She's healthier, both inside and out. That's all any parent could ask for. ●

Sarah Gray, 33, Mount Colum, Qld
For information and support on EoE, visit www.ausee.org.

I hope the book helps others understand EoE

