

ADL EDUCATION LESSON PLAN

Words That Heal

**Using Children's Literature to
Address Bullying**

In This Issue

Children’s literature can be an effective tool for addressing the growing concerns about physical, verbal, and relational bullying in schools. Though bullying has been traditionally dismissed by some as “just a part of growing up,” most educators today understand that it is a pervasive problem with damaging effects on all members of the school community.

The use of literature to address bullying can benefit students of all ages by improving their ability to understand and cope with problems, helping them to develop personal and social judgment, and increasing social sensitivity, empathy, and respect for others.

This issue of *Curriculum Connections* provides educators with background about bullying in U.S. schools, an extensive bibliography of selected children’s books that deal with bullying, and strategies for selecting literature that is appropriate and effective for classroom use.

Discussion Guides

In addition, this issue of *Curriculum Connections* offers the following instructional activities based on a variety of books that can be used in kindergarten through high school to increase empathy and help students to respond constructively to bullying that they observe or experience in their communities.

- The Name Jar (grades Pre K–1)
- Say Something (grades 2–4)
- Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog (grades 3–5)
- The Revealers (grades 6–8)
- The Skin I’m In (grades 8 & up)

Extension Activities

At the end of each discussion guide are extension activities to either increase empathy and/or the awareness of bullying or teasing. Although the extension activities are associated with a specific book/discussion guide, some of them may be used independently of the book.

Additional Resources

For additional book suggestions that explore the topic of bullying and allyship, see the book round-up [important Books to Explore Bullying and Ally Behavior](#) and our [Monthly Featured Books](#), a collection of books which includes books and book discussion guides about bullying and allyship.

Contents

Correlation of Lessons to Common Core Standards

Using Children’s Literature to Increase Empathy and Help Students Cope with Bullying

Discussion Guides

The Name Jar (Grades Pre K–1)

Say Something (Grades 2–4)

Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog (Grades 3–5)

The Revealers (Grades 6–8)

The Skin I’m In (Grades 8 & Up)

Extension Activities

Music and Movement: Stand Up Song
The Name Jar Extension Activity

Circle Time/Art Time: What’s In a Name?
The Name Jar Extension Activity

Say Something Extension Activities

Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog Extension Activities

The Revealers Extension Activities

The Skin I’m In Extension Activities

Additional Resources

Annotated Bibliography of Children’s Fiction on Bullying

Correlation of Lessons to Common Core Standards

Content Area/Standard	The Name Jar	Say Something	Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog	The Revealers	The Skin I'm In
Reading					
R.1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.	X	X	X	X	X
R.2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.	X	X	X	X	X
R.3: Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.	X	X	X	X	X
R.4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.	X		X	X	X
R.5: Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.			X	X	X
R.9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.					X
R.10: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.			X	X	X
Writing					
W.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.			X	X	X
W.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.			X	X	X
W.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.				X	X

W.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.			X	X	X
W.6: Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.				X	
W.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.			X	X	X
Speaking and Listening					
SL.1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.	X	X	X	X	X
SL.2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.				X	
SL.5: Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.				X	
Language					
L.1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.			X	X	X
L.2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.			X	X	X
L.4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.			X	X	X
L.5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.			X		X

Using Children’s Literature to Increase Empathy and Help Students Cope with Bullying

Come, and take choice of all my library, and so beguile thy sorrow...

—William Shakespeare, from *Titus Andronicus*

Overview and History of Bibliotherapy

In ancient Greece, the door of the library at Thebes bore the inscription, “The Healing Place of the Soul.” For millennia, people have recognized the therapeutic value of literature. It is only over the last century, however, that an explicit practice has developed for using directed reading in the solution of personal problems. In a 1916 article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Samuel Crothers coined the term *bibliotherapy* when he combined the Greek words for book and healing to describe the “new science” of treating illnesses through literature. At that time, bibliotherapy was limited to hospital library services, where it was used to treat the mentally ill, help soldiers cope with wartime traumas, and to aid in the healing of disabled veterans. In 1946, Sister Mary Agnes published the first study on using bibliotherapy with children, and soon teachers began to use the technique as part of classroom instruction.

While bibliotherapy is often used as a clinical treatment, its principles can be effectively adapted by educators in a preventive or developmental rather than curative capacity, such as to address a community problem or to increase empathy and compassion among students. In her ground-breaking work during the 1950s, Caroline Shrodes defined bibliotherapy as an activity “...that lies within the province of every teacher of literature in working with every child in a group. It does not assume that the teacher must be a skilled therapist. ...Rather, it conveys the idea that all teachers must be aware of the effects of reading upon children and must realize that, through literature, most children can be helped.”¹

Benefits of Bibliotherapy

The use of literature to address a problem or issue, or stimulate thinking about values has a variety of benefits for students of all ages. Stories that are realistic, developmentally appropriate, and relevant to students’ lives can provide emotional support by letting children know that they are not alone in their feelings or the first to encounter a particular problem or challenge. By talking about characters rather than themselves, students can discuss sensitive issues openly and take comfort in group expressions of compassion without exposing their private fears or troubles. Such facilitated dialogue can help improve students’ ability to understand and cope with problems, to generate constructive resolutions, and to develop personal and social judgment. Examining multidimensional problems and issues can also stimulate critical thinking in ways that increase social sensitivity, respect for others, and the ability to take a variety of perspectives.

[View a detailed chart of the Benefits of Bibliotherapy.](#)

Overview of Bullying in U.S. Schools

Children’s literature can be an effective tool for addressing the growing concerns about physical, verbal, and relational bullying in schools. Though bullying has been traditionally dismissed by some as “just a part of growing up,” most educators today understand that it is a pervasive problem in school communities. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, for the year 2021-2022, 19% of students between the ages of 12 and 18 reported being bullied in school. This includes being the subject of rumors, being called names, insulted, pushed, excluded, threatened, etc. During the 2021–22 school year, 12 percent of students reported that they were bullied repeatedly or expected the bullying to be repeated and that the bullying was perpetrated by someone who was physically or socially more powerful than them and who was not a sibling or dating partner. Identity-based bullying is any form of bullying related to the characteristics unique to a youth’s identity.²

Online communication and technology are neutral entities and can be used positively and negatively. However, there are some youth who are misusing Internet and cell phone technology to bully and harass others, and even to incite violence against

them. According to a study by the Cyberbullying Research Center, approximately 54.6% of young people reported experiencing cyberbullying in their lifetimes.³ According to the 2020 study of the Cyberbullying Research Center about tweens (ages 9-12) and cyberbullying, among the 1,034 tweens who responded to the survey, 816 (nearly 80%) had some exposure to bullying in all its forms: as a target, aggressor, or witness. Fifty-seven percent had been targeted in one environment or another. Half of tweens said they had been bullied at school while 15% had been cyberbullied.

Those who are bystanders to bullying may also suffer from feelings of helplessness and may develop poor coping and problem solving skills.⁴ Some studies show that even students who bully may demonstrate poor social and emotional adjustment, social isolation, lack of success in school and involvement in other problem behaviors, such as drinking alcohol and smoking.⁵

Notwithstanding these perceptions, research on the impact of anti-bullying programs demonstrates that school-based interventions can result in significant reductions in bullying when they include changes to school and classroom climate to increase awareness about bullying, increase teacher and family involvement, provide support to those who are bullied and form strong social norms against bullying.⁶ Khosropour and Walsh found that, in response to the question, "What do you think should be done about bullying in schools?," the most frequently mentioned strategy among students was "education/discussion."⁷

Selecting Children's Literature that Addresses Bullying

Students want their teachers to discuss the issue of bullying and to demonstrate concern and support for those who are impacted. Children's literature can be an effective and non-threatening way to initiate dialogue on this topic, to promote constructive resolutions and to change social attitudes.

In recent years, there has been the emergence of a body of children's literature on bullying and a variety of social issues, so it is possible for educators to find materials that speak to the particular needs of their students. Great care must be taken, however, in selecting and presenting literature that deals with the issue of bullying. As noted in the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication Digest, "a poorly written novel with stereotyped characters and simplistic answers to complex questions is probably worse than not reading anything at all...."⁸ Burnett⁹, Huck, Helper, & Hickman¹⁰, Ouzts¹¹, and Rudman¹² recommend that literature to help children cope with problems should have the following features:

- Be well written and appropriate to the child's developmental level.
- Provide stories using language familiar to children that is realistic in terms of their life experience.
- Honestly portray the condition and future possibilities for the characters.
- Share stories that portray a diversity of characters and situations.
- Explore the process of working out problems.
- Demonstrate clear channels of communication and responses to children's questions.
- Offer situations which generate genuine enthusiasm in the reader.

Literature that addresses bullying will be most helpful to children when it portrays fully developed characters along all parts of the social spectrum rather than one-dimensional or clichéd personas. Books, for example, that depict all targets of bullying as "brainy nerds" and all aggressors as "dim jocks" help to perpetuate stereotypical archetypes and make it difficult for the majority of students between those margins to see themselves in the stories' characters.

Similarly, bullying occurs in a variety of social contexts and in many forms, including physical harassment, verbal intimidation, exclusion, ostracism, gossip and rumors. Educators who employ literature to address the problem of bullying may wish to present a range of books that explore these different contexts and avoid formulaic storylines that are irrelevant to students' lives.

The way in which bullying is managed and resolved is a critical and often problematic component in many children's books. The following types of solutions represent common themes that may satisfy children's fantasies about retribution or happy endings, but which in reality are ineffective or unlikely to occur.

- **Vengeance:** Though most people imagine themselves exacting revenge at some time in their lives, stories that focus on retaliation undermine community values—such as non-violence—and ignore the power dynamics that exist in most schools (which make it unlikely that socially isolated students would stand up to more popular or aggressive peers).
- **Suspension or Expulsion:** Studies show that as many as one in five students admit to bullying their peers periodically, which makes severe punishments such as suspension or expulsion unrealistic. According to the Stop Bullying Now! project of the Health, Resources and Services Administration, the threat of such punishments may actually discourage children from reporting bullying that they observe. The project also reports that children who frequently bully their peers are at risk of engaging in other problem behaviors and are more likely to be helped by exposure to pro-social role models at school rather than by removal or exclusion.¹³
- **Peer Mediation or Conflict Resolution:** Mediation situations in which students are brought together to work out a problem are helpful to friends who have had a playground spat or disagreement, but may be traumatic for children who are forced to face their tormentors. Bullying is a form of victimization, not conflict. Mediating a bullying incident may send the inappropriate message that neither party is right or wrong, and may further victimize rather than help the target.¹⁴

[View examples of Constructive Responses to Bullying.](#)

Using Children’s Literature to Address Bullying

Stories that offer empowering and realistic ways to cope with and respond to bullying can activate a process of dynamic interaction between readers and literature that take students through the following stages:¹⁵

- **Identification:** Students identify with characters and/or events in the story.
- **Catharsis:** Students become emotionally involved in the story and express their feelings in a safe and structured setting, through discussion, writing, artwork, or other activities.
- **Insight:** Students imagine possible solutions to the issues presented in the story, and become aware of ways that their own problems might be addressed or solved.

Early childhood education professor, Susan Miller, proposes the following guidelines for taking students through these stages and for developing constructive solutions to community problems:¹⁶

- **Identify:** Determine and discuss the problem. It should be meaningful, interesting, and appropriate for children.
- **Brainstorm:** Encourage children to think about possible solutions. Listen to and respect all of their ideas. Keep a record of the solutions suggested in case the children want to try more than one.
- **Select:** Help children examine the advantages and disadvantages of various solutions and then choose one that seems workable.
- **Explore and Implement:** Let children gather the necessary materials and resources and then, if it is feasible, implement the solution they select.
- **Evaluate:** With the children, observe and discuss whether the solution to the problem was successful. If appropriate, help the children think of changes in the solution implemented, or encourage them to explore new solutions.

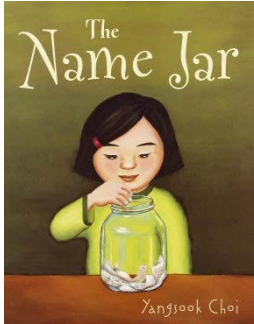
In order to engage students in this work, it will be necessary to set guidelines for safe and respectful communication, and to promote group guidelines that encourage students to behave toward one another with support and compassion. In such an atmosphere, students can be engaged through small and large group discussion, writing, role play, art work and other activities to move from literal interpretations of books to analyses that have personal meaning and real-life applications. In this way literature can serve as a bridge that connects students to new ways of seeing themselves and others; to new coping mechanisms and social possibilities; and to their shared humanity with one another. As James Baldwin wrote, “It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive.”

- ¹ David Russell, and Caroline Shrodes, "Contributions of Research in Bibliotherapy to the Language Arts Program," *The School Review*, 58(1950):335-342, 411-420.
- ² S. Robers, J. Kemp, and J. Truman, *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2012* (DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2013).
- ³ S. Hinduja, and J. Patchin, [Lifetime Cyberbullying Victimization Rates](#) (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2013).
- ⁴ Tonja R. Nansel, Mary Overpeck, Ramani S. Pilla, W. June Ruan, Bruce Simons-Morton, and Peter Scheidt, "Bullying Behaviors Among US Youth: Prevalence and Association With Psychosocial Adjustment," *JAMA*, 285(2001):2094-2100.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Shirin C. Khosropour and James Walsh, "That's Not Teasing-That's Bullying: A Study of Fifth Graders' Conceptualization of Bullying and Teasing," Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Seattle, WA, April 10-14, 2001).
- ⁷ Nola Kortner Aiex, "Bibliotherapy," in [ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication Digest #82](#). (Bloomington: IN: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Indiana University, 1993).
- ⁸ Jeanie Burnett, "Opening the World to Children: Using Books to Develop Problem-Solving Strategies," Paper presented at the Annual International Conference of the Association for Childhood Education (Portland, OR, April 9-12, 1997).
- ⁹ Charlotte S. Huck, Susan Hepler, and John Hickman, *Children's Literature in the Elementary School* (Forth Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1993).
- ¹⁰ Dan T. Ouzts, "The Emergence of Bibliotherapy as a Discipline," *Reading Horizons*, 31(3):199-206.
- ¹¹ Marsha K. Rudman, *Children's Literature: An Issues Approach*, 3rd edition revised (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1995).
- ¹² Take a Stand, Lend a Hand, Stop Bullying Now, a project of the Health, Resources and Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.stopbullyingnow.org.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ David Russell, and Caroline Shrodes, "Contributions of Research in Bibliotherapy to the Language Arts Program," *The School Review*, 58(1950):335-342, 411-420.
- ¹⁵ Susan Miller, *Problem Solving Safari: Blocks* (Everett, WA: Totline, 1997).

Discussion Guide for Grades Pre K–1

The Name Jar

Summary



The Name Jar tells a story of a new country, a new town and a new school for Unhei (pronounced “Yoon-hye”). So what about a new name? Having just arrived from Korea with her family, Unhei is anxious about making friends and worried that no one will be able to pronounce her name. Instead of introducing herself on the first day of school, she decides to pick a new name. The only problem is that she doesn’t know what name to choose. Her classmates try to help her by making a name jar and suggesting names, but it mysteriously disappears. This book will spark a lively discussion about names, culture, immigration and whether it’s more important to “fit in” or be yourself.

The Name Jar © 2001 by Yangsook Choi
2003, 40 pages, Grades Pre K–2, Dragonfly Books

Learning Outcomes

- Being sensitive to teasing around names
- Noticing unfairness
- Taking a stand

Requirements

- [The Name Jar](#)
- Puppets or dress-up clothes

Procedures

1. Read the book *The Name Jar* while sitting very close to the children. Place the book in a position easily seen.
2. After reading the story, have children use puppets to re-tell the story *The Name Jar*.
3. Have a class discussion using the following questions:

Discussion questions about the story:

- What happened in this story?
- Why do you think the children on the bus teased Unhei (pronounced “Yoon-hye”) about her name?
- How do you think Unhei felt?
- Why didn’t Unhei want to tell her new classmates her name?
- When Unhei tells her mother she doesn’t want to be “different,” her mother says it is good to be different. What does her mother mean? Have you ever felt different? How did it feel?
- How do you think Unhei felt when Mr. Kim told her about her name?
- Why do you think Unhei decided to keep her Korean name?

Discussion questions for asking connections to self and others:

- Has anything like what happened to Unhei ever happened to you? What did you do?
- Has anything like this ever happened to someone you know? What did she or he do?
- Have you ever been teased about your name or teased someone about their name? How did you feel?

Discussion questions for expanding understanding:

Vocabulary

Brave
Identity
Name master
Neighborhood
Nervous
Relieved
Teased

- Why do people tease, use name-calling or bully other people?
- What are things you can do to stop teasing, name-calling and bullying?
- What are things you can say to stop teasing, name-calling and bullying? (Offer language like “I don't like when you say/do that. You hurt my feelings.” Or “That’s not right; Unhei’s feelings are hurt when you say/do that.”).
- What are things you can do to be safe from bullying?
- What are things we can do as a class to stop teasing, name-calling and bullying?

Extension Activities

See the extension activities that follow for ideas on ways to increase awareness about teasing, name-calling and bullying using *The Name Jar*.

Music and Movement: Stand Up Song

The Name Jar Extension Activity

Learning Outcomes

- Noticing unfairness
- Taking a stand

Materials

- Musical instruments such as tambourines, maracas, drums, and so on

Procedures

1. Begin a discussion with children about Unhei's hurt feelings. Talk about what she did/said to the children when they teased her. Follow up with a discussion of times when their feelings have been hurt. Ask "Have your feelings ever been hurt because someone made fun of you? What did you do? Have your feelings ever been hurt because someone told you that you couldn't play with them? What did you do?"
2. Ask children to think of things they can do if someone is hurting their feelings. As in the focus activity, offer language such as, "I don't like it when you say/do that. You hurt my feelings" or "That's not right. Unhei's feelings are hurt when you say/do that."
3. Tell children that they can learn a song that will remind them what they can say when their or other people's feelings are hurt. Teach children the following song, sung to the tune of *Mary Had a Little Lamb*.

We know what to do and say,
do and say,
do and say,
We know what to do and say
If someone hurts another.

It's not right to act that way,
act that way,
act that way,
It's not right to act that way,
That's what we'd tell each other.

4. Discuss with children what might have happened if Unhei's class knew a song like this.
5. Distribute the musical instruments and let children play along as they chant the song.
6. Have children make up a dance to go along with the song.
7. To prompt children, you can softly sing the song when situations occur where feelings are hurt.
8. Ask children's family members to help translate the song into languages spoken by children.
9. Encourage children to make up their own songs about taking a stand for themselves and others.
10. Help children make a chart of feelings based on real situations that occur in the program.

Adapted from The Miller Early Childhood Initiative of A World of Difference® Institute *Bias Free Foundations: Early Childhood Activities for Educators* (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 2001).

Circle Time/Art Time: What's In a Name?

The Name Jar Extension Activity

Learning Outcomes

- Respecting self
- Respecting others
- Taking a stand

Materials

- For *Circle Time Component* – No materials needed
- For *Art Time Component* – Paper, crayons, markers, paste, feathers or decorative materials for name tag

Procedures

Circle Time Component

1. At circle time, show children how you can say your name and clap out the syllables. Show children how to say Unhei's name and clap out the syllables.
2. Taking turns, ask each child to say and clap his or her name. When everyone has had a turn, go around the circle again. This time everyone should chant and clap each child's name.
3. Talk with children about the similarities and differences in children's names, for example, "Kenya and Kevin, your names both begin with the letter K." Help children to see how special their names are because they are chosen just for them. You might say, "Sarah, your family chose a special name for you. When I hear or say the name, Sarah, I will always think of you."
4. Say your name again, and tell about something that you like to do. Invite children to take turns doing the same.
5. Then have children introduce the child next to them by saying the child's name and what he or she likes to do.
6. Repeat the activity at another time. Remind children that their names are special. People feel proud of their names because their names describe them. You might say, "People like to be called by their real names. Sometimes people use other names—names that hurt. Has anyone ever called you a name that hurt? What happened? How did you feel? What did you do?"
7. Let children practice standing up to a name-caller. Give them words to say such as, "I don't like it when you call me that. It isn't nice, and it hurts my feelings. Don't call me that name again."
8. Repeat the activity as new children enter the group, or when name-calling situations arise.

Art Time Component

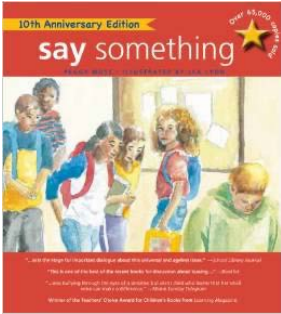
1. Reread and show the children the part of the book in *The Name Jar* that shows Unhei writing out her name in English and Korean on the chalkboard.
2. Help children write down their names on drawing paper.
3. Give them art materials such as crayons, markers, paste, feathers, or other decorative materials to use to decorate their names. As children work, talk about their names and how special they are. Encourage children to decorate their names in ways that describes how special they are.
4. Create a Name Wall in the room and hang each name along with a picture of each child.

Adapted from The Miller Early Childhood Initiative of A World of Difference® Institute *Bias Free Foundations: Early Childhood Activities for Educators* (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 2001)

Discussion Guide for Grades 2–4

Say Something

Summary



A young narrator describes different examples of bullying that she witnesses at school and on the bus, but remains silent. One day, when her friends are absent, she must sit alone in the cafeteria, and several students make jokes at her expense. In addition to feeling angry about being treated this way, the girl is frustrated with the other students who look on sympathetically but say nothing. She is then able to empathize with other victims. The next day, she approaches a quiet girl who is often teased and finds a new friend. Resources at the end of the book help parents and teachers to talk with children about teasing and bullying, and find ways to stop it at school.

Say Something © 2004 by Margaret Paula Moss, Illustrated by Lea Lyon
2013, 32 pages, Grades 2–4, Tilbury House Publishers

Requirements

➔ [Say Something](#)

Questions for Discussion and Writing

After reading *Say Something*, use the questions below for small or large group discussion, or to guide reflective writing.

- At the beginning of the book, the storyteller talks about students in her school who get “picked on all the time.” Why do you think these students get picked on? How do you think they feel?
- How does the storyteller feel about this situation? What does she do?
- Are there students in your school who get picked on often (no names, please)? Why do you think some people pick on them?
- How does it make you feel when others get teased or bullied? What do you do when this happens?
- How did the storyteller feel when the other students taunted her?
- When the other kids laugh at her, the storyteller wishes she could disappear. Have you ever felt like “disappearing”? What happened to make you feel that way?
- How does the storyteller feel when the kids at the next table just watch her getting teased, and she can tell they feel sorry for her?
- The storyteller’s brother says that the kids at the next table “didn’t do anything.” Do you agree? Should those students have gotten involved in some way?
- Have you ever watched another student get teased or bullied? Did you get involved in some way? What are some safe and helpful ways you could have gotten involved?
- At the end of the story, why does the storyteller sit next to the girl who “always sits alone”? How does this make both girls feel?
- What does it mean to be an ally to someone else? Are there things that you can do to be an ally to someone who is picked on or bullied at your school?

Suggestions from the Author for Teachers and [Students](#)

Part I: For Teachers

Before reading the book to the class:

1. Preview the book. Know how the story goes and be prepared for a discussion with the kids afterwards.
2. Sometimes kids want to know more about the two girls after the story is over. It's okay to spend a little time speculating about that, but ultimately it's important to lead the kids into a discussion of their own experiences with the book's big issue—teasing in school and how to stop it.
3. It's a good idea to let the group know about me, Peggy Moss. Kids are interested to learn that my job has been to work with kids and teachers to stop bullying in schools so kids can feel safe and they can learn. I have also worked as a civil rights prosecutor.

After reading the story aloud, lead a discussion:

4. Begin the discussion by asking a “brainstorming” question: Ask “Do kids in our school get teased or picked on?” Make it clear that you aren't interested in finger-pointing—“I don't want you to tell me any names.” Brainstorm with the kids about the types of things that kids get teased about. For example, ask if kids get teased because of what they wear, their body size (tall/fat/short, etc.), how they smell, how much or how little money they have.
5. Then ask, “How do you think it feels to get teased?” Have the kids be specific. “Do you feel sick to your stomach?” “Like running and hiding?” Really build a group consensus about how bad bullying feels.
6. Ask the group, “Do you think you can focus on learning at school if you are being teased?”
7. Ask, “What can you do or say to stop teasing when you see teasing or bullying behavior.” As closure you may want to say the following:

One of the most important things that experts have discovered is that it is kids who are the BEST people to get teasing to stop! It's not your teachers or a parent, it's you and your friends who can make a difference.

Kids bully because they think it is cool, but if you or your friends tell them otherwise, then you take away their power. You can make bullying uncool.

Never be afraid to ask an adult for help. That's why we are here.

Source: “For Teachers-Some Tips from Peggy Moss.” Reprinted with permission from the [Tilbury House website](#).

Part II: For Students

Now that you have read *Say Something*, take a few minutes to think about your school, and answer these questions. Keep in mind that it can be an emotionally challenging conversation because some students may be actively engaged in bullying situations (either as a target or aggressor) and could be triggered by the conversation. Be mindful of what's going on in your classroom around bullying as you decide which of these questions to ask:

1. **Do kids at your school get teased? If “Yes,”** think about how. In most schools, students are teased about being “different”—which means almost everyone gets teased at one time or another. We get picked on because of the shape of our bodies, the color of our skin, our clothes, our grades, our gender, or our religion. **If “No,”** think about the question differently. Do some kids get left out? Do they sit alone at the lunch table every day? Do they spend their outside time alone? Are they picked last for every school game or not included at all? If there are students in our school (and in most schools there are) that have days like this, consider answering “yes,” and look at the discussion above.
2. **What do kids get teased about at your school?** Kids get teased for all kinds of reasons. What do kids in your school get teased about? If you really think about it, some of the answers might be longer than you'd expect. Here's what we've heard:

Kids get teased because they need extra help in class. Kids get teased because they are smart, work hard, or get good grades or special praise from the teacher. Kids get teased because they don't wear the right clothes because they are old or worn or dirty or too new or clean. Kids get teased because of the way they smell, how much money they have, where they live, the color of their skin, if they have an accent, the way they walk, or because they can't walk or see or hear as well as other kids.

3. **How do you think it feels?** How do you think teasing makes kids feel? Really think about this one, because some of the answers might surprise you. If you don't know how it feels to be teased, ask someone who knows. I did. Here's what I found out:

I got teased in the back of the classroom for months because of my religion. Nobody did anything about it, so the kids who teased me started to push me around outside. Then one afternoon, one of the kids threatened to kill me. I never felt safe at school after that.

Kids saw where I lived when I got on the bus. Two boys on my bus made fun of my house and my clothes and called me names. I decided to walk to school every day, even though it took a really long time. I was late almost every day.

I cried. Okay? I cried every single day after I got home from school. But if you asked me then, I would have said, "Teasing doesn't bother me. I can handle it." That's what I would have told you.

I think about it all the time. I sit in math class thinking about how I am going to get to science class without getting teased or pushed into a locker. I can't concentrate on school.

4. **Do you think YOU could make a big difference for kids in your school?** Here are three things you could do to help make sure every student at our school feels safe.

- Tell a teacher, the principal, or another trusted adult. Particularly when teasing gets aggressive, it's important for you to let someone know, before anyone gets hurt.
- Say something to the person who is getting teased. Students in schools where there has been violence say that if you want your school to feel safer, "you should sit with the kid who sits alone at lunch." Teasing and bullying are cowardly acts-committed by kids who want peer approval-YOUR approval. They don't get it. They bolt.

I'm shy, and if a kid is bigger than I am, I won't say anything to the bully. But I've walked up to kids who are getting teased and said, "Hey, you want to come to lunch with me?" The bully usually just walks away.

I saw a kid getting teased in the hall. I said, "Hey, how you doing?" and the two of us walked away together. That's all. He said, "Thanks." We're not best friends, but I'm pretty sure he'd stick up for me if he saw me getting teased.

- Say something to the person who is bullying. But don't put yourself in harm's way. In the halls, on the playground, in the cafeteria, often just a quick word or two will make the teasing or the mean-spirited joke stop. "I don't want to hear about it... Knock it off... Cut it out... That's so 10 minutes ago..." Each of us has our own way of saying: I don't want that talk in my school. You are the only person who can make it stop. Me? I say, "Oh, nice one." Or, "Yeah, that's cool." Or, "Grow up." Usually whoever is teasing stops.

5. **Are those things easy to do, or hard? Why?**

It's hard because I might get teased, too.

I don't want to be a goody-goody.

I'm scared-I might get hurt.

I don't think they mean anything by it.

6. **Even if it's hard, give one reason why you should say something anyway?**

- Because you'll almost certainly save a day, and you might save a life.** Almost every act of hate violence that takes place at a school starts with words. Before a student is physically hurt, he or she endures months of name-calling and teasing. When no one steps up to stop the teasing, the bullies get bolder, sometimes with disastrous results.

- **Because you can make teasing UN-Cool.** Most bullies tease because they want peer approval. They want YOU to think, “That’s so funny... He's such a hot-shot... She’s so tough...” But teasing isn’t cool. It's low. You know that. If nobody laughs, the joke is over.
- **Because teasing will happen to you.** Because it happens to all of us. You're going to want someone to speak up for you. So show them how it's done.

Source: “Teachers Take Note-Our Suggestions for Your Students.” Reprinted with permission from the [Tilbury House website](#).

Extension Activities

See the extension activities that follow for ideas on ways to increase awareness about bullying and encourage ally behavior using *Say Something*.

Say Something Extension Activities

Follow up your reading of *Say Something* with one or more of the extension activities below, which can help to increase awareness about bullying and encourage ally behavior.

“Say Something” Campaign

After reading the story, introduce the idea of a class or school-wide campaign to “Say Something” when teasing or bullying occurs. Work with students to identify interventions and strategies that are helpful and appropriate (view examples of [Constructive Responses to Bullying](#)). Next divide students into small groups and challenge them to come up with a slogan and logo or graphic for the campaign. Allow each group to present its ideas, and then help the class to settle on a final concept. Allow students to create posters and decorate the classroom with the final slogan and graphic. Hold follow-up discussions at least once each week where students can share instances of teasing or bullying that they may have encountered and how it was handled. Read additional [stories and literature](#) that reinforce positive ways of responding to and intervening in bullying situations. If there are opportunities to take the campaign school-wide, publicize it at a school assembly and through the school newsletter or website. Work with colleagues to implement the campaign in their classrooms, and train responsible students to read stories and lead discussions with their peers in younger grades.

One Person, Many Roles

Help students to explore the roles that they have played in the past when teasing or bullying has occurred. Distribute the worksheet, [One Person, Many Roles](#), to each student and ask them to spend 5–10 minutes filling in each square (with words or pictures). Tell students that you will not be collecting the worksheets or asking them to show it to others, and encourage them to be completely honest. When students have finished, introduce the vocabulary that corresponds with each square (A-target; B-aggressor; C-bystander; D-ally). Ask for volunteers who would like to share one of their squares with the class. Ask each volunteer why s/he chose that particular square, how it felt to be in that role, and what was positive or negative about the way s/he responded in that particular situation. Help the class to see patterns in the way different students have behaved when teasing or bullying occurs. Highlight constructive responses to bullying that come up, and reinforce the importance of being a friend and ally to peers who are the targets of bullying.

Acting as an Ally

Help students to explore safe and realistic ways in which they can act as an ally to peers who are the targets of name-calling and bullying. Read the scenario, [The New Girl](#), to the class and ask students how the story makes them feel. Introduce the term ally and ask students to define it (someone who helps, supports, or speaks out on behalf of someone else). Ask if anyone in the story acted as an ally to Jane. Label a sheet of chart paper, “Acting as an Ally,” and divide it into two columns titled “Risks” and “Benefits.” Ask what risks Stephanie took when she spoke out in defense of Jane (e.g., losing friends, being teased herself). List students’ ideas about the risks of acting as an ally. Ask students what benefits may have come from Stephanie’s behavior (e.g., the teasing stopped, Jane felt supported, Stephanie felt proud, both girls made a new friend). List students’ ideas about the benefits of acting as an ally. Tell students that although there are risks involved in acting as an ally, there are always safe ways that we can help others. Ask students to suggest high-risk and low-risk ways that students in the story might have acted as an ally to Jane. Divide the class into groups of four and provide each with the [Pyramid of Alliance](#). Instruct each group to brainstorm low, moderate, and high levels of alliance. Allow each group to share their ideas and hang the pyramids on a bulletin board. Reinforce the importance of finding ways—small or large—to act as an ally to others when name-calling or bullying occurs.

One Person/Many Roles Worksheet

(Bullying version)

<p>BOX A: TARGET</p> <p>Describe a time when someone's words or actions hurt you.</p>	<p>BOX B: AGGRESSOR</p> <p>Describe a time when your words or actions hurt someone.</p>
<p>BOX C: BYSTANDER</p> <p>Describe a time when you saw teasing or bullying take place and you did not help. Why do you think you didn't help?</p>	<p>BOX D: ALLY</p> <p>Describe a time when you helped someone who was being teased or bullied.</p>

The New Girl

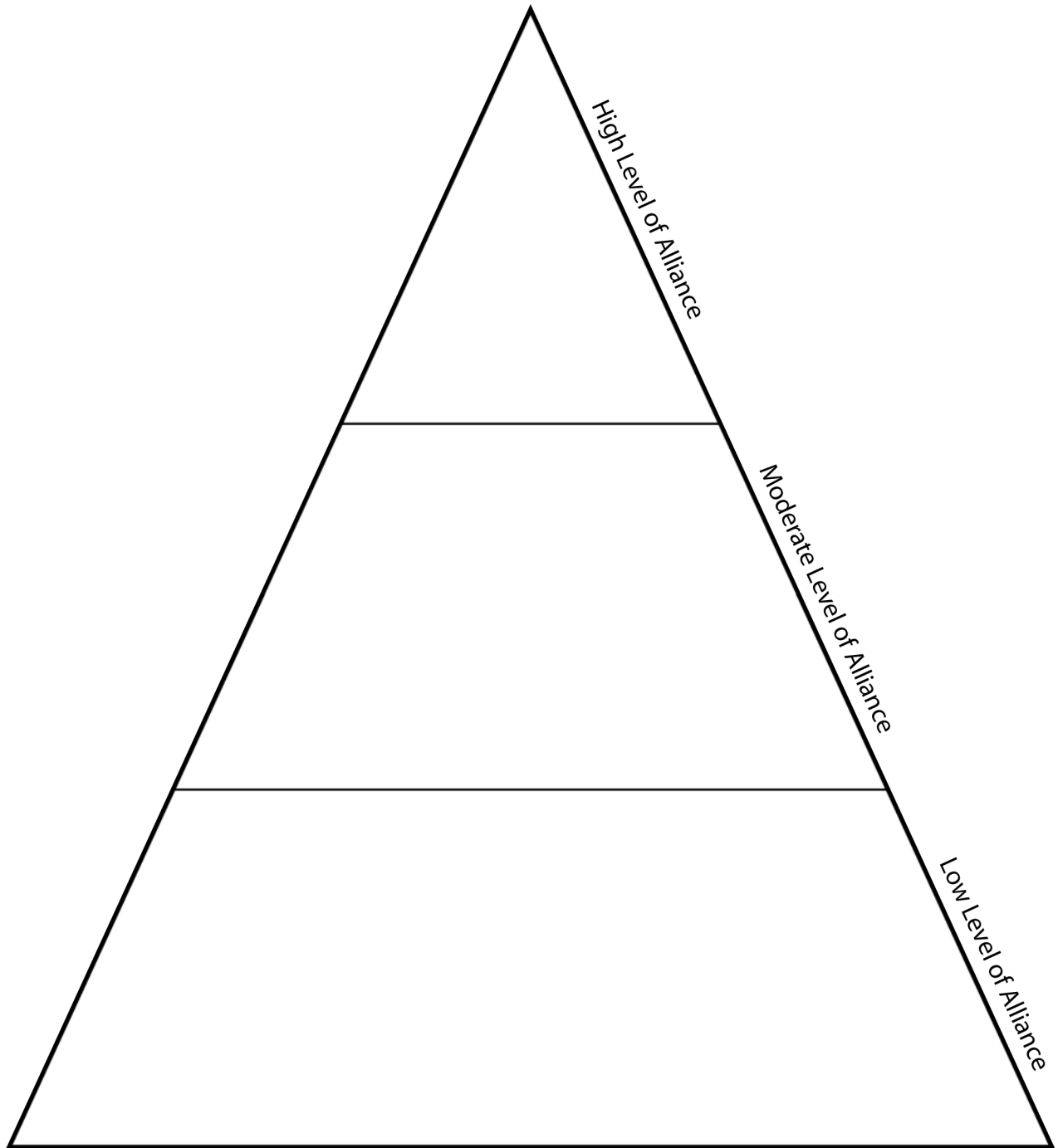
Jane was new to the school; her family had only recently moved into the area. Because Jane and her family moved a lot, she was used to starting over in new places, but even so it was always hard to meet new friends and get used to new teachers. It was also difficult for Jane to keep up with her studies because she had to care for her brothers and sisters when she came home from school while her parents worked.

As Mr. Borden introduced Jane to the class, some students in the back of the room began to giggle. One student whispered loud enough for others to hear, "Look at that outfit! Does this girl get her clothes from charity, or what?" Others joined in the laughter. Jane knew the laughter because she had heard it many times before. She knew the kids laughed at her clothes because they weren't the latest style, and when they found out that her parents were farm workers, she would be nicknamed "lettuce picker." It had all happened before. Mr. Borden paused for a moment while the giggling stopped and then continued by saying, "Let's all make Jane feel welcome."

As the day continued, Jane felt anything but welcomed. There was a group of girls who giggled every time they looked her way, and when it was time to divide into small groups to work on an assignment, no one in the group even talked to her; in fact, everyone acted as if she was invisible. When lunchtime came, everyone began running to the cafeteria. A few of the girls who had been laughing at Jane all morning, brushed by her and one of them said, as if to no one in particular, "Hope she knows there's no free lunch program at this school." This seemed to be the funniest thing the other girls had ever heard, but as they laughed and continued walking, one of the girls, named Stephanie said, "C'mon, leave her alone, she hasn't done anything to us."

Pyramid of Alliance

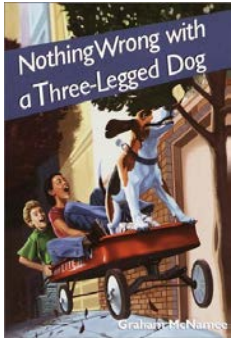
(Ally Version)



Discussion Guide for Grades 3–5

Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog

Summary



Keath and his best friend Lynda are in the fourth grade. Some kids call Lynda “Zebra” because her mother is black and her father is white. And Keath is “Whitey.” “He’s vanilla in a chocolate school” where Toothpick, a bully, has it in for him. Lynda and Keath both love dogs. Dogs don’t care about what color is the right one. Dogs don’t hate anybody. Their favorite dog is Leftovers, Lynda’s three-legged beagle. When he got hurt, his first owners gave up on him, but Lynda and Keath turn him into a winner, a pooch that shows Keath that sometimes it’s good to stand out, to be special, and that even when you look different, there are ways to fit in.

Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog © 2000 by Graham McNamee

Cover illustration by Craig White

2001, 144 pages, grades 4–6, Yearling (an imprint of Random House Children’s Books)

Requirements

➔ [Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog](#)

Prompts for Writing and Discussion

Provided below are questions, [by chapter](#) or [by theme](#), related to the themes of bullying and bias that can be used for small or large group discussion, or to guide reflective writing.

[By Chapter]

Chapter One

- How does it make you feel when Keath and Lynda are called names because of their skin color?
- Why do you think some people feel threatened by racial differences or hate others because of their race?
- Keath uses sarcasm or humor to deal with Toothpick’s taunts. Lynda ignores it when she is called a zebra and thinks about the beauty of the real animal instead. Do you think these are effective ways to deal with bullying?

Chapter Two

- Larry explains that Ryan attacked Keath so that he wouldn’t be “the lowest worm on the food chain.” What does he mean by this?
- Does someone always have to be on the “top” or “bottom” when it comes to social life at school? What changes would help to make things more equal or balanced?

Chapter Three

- How do Keath and Larry “stand out” in their school? What makes kids “stand out” in your school?
- Is it a good thing or a bad thing “to stand out” in some way? How do those who are different get treated?
- Describe a time when you wished you could be a chameleon like Keath and blend into the background. Do you think that “disappearing” would have solved all of your problems?

Vocabulary

Ambushed
Camouflage
Detention
Menace
Predator
Prey
Race
Runt
Suspended/suspension

Chapter Six

- Keath describes Toothpick as a “predator.” What is a predator? Why do you think Toothpick behaves like one?
- Why is Keath the main target of Toothpick and Blob? Is there anything he can do to change this?
- Why does Keath wish he was a golden retriever? Have you ever wished you were something or somebody else?

Chapter Eight

- Keath says, “Toothpick saw me staring. So I know I'm dead now. Because I saw him when I wasn't supposed to.” Why was Keath not “supposed to” see Toothpick? Why does Toothpick feel so threatened by what Keath saw?
- Keath decides to face Toothpick and “get it over with.” Lynda says he'd be safer among the crowd and with teachers around. Which is worse, getting hit or waiting for it to happen?
- How do you think Keath felt when Lynda offered to go with him to face Toothpick? Has a friend ever stuck by you in a similar way? How did it feel?

Chapter Nine

- Keath struggles with the idea of moving to another school, where there would be no Toothpick but also “no Lynda, no Hairy Larry, no dog walks after school.” Do you think that transferring schools is the best solution to Keath's problem? What other choices does he have? What would you do?

Chapter Twelve

- Why does Keath feel like a “freak”? Have you ever felt this way about yourself?
- How does Keath's dad help him to feel better? Who can you turn to for support when you're feeling badly about yourself?

Chapter Fourteen

- Lynda resists being defined by her skin color. What can you do in your own school or community to avoid judging others by appearance and to get to know them as people?
- What are some safe and helpful ways to respond when you hear racist comments or observe racism in your school or community?

Chapter Sixteen

- Why did many of Lynda's relatives refuse to attend her parents' wedding?
- Have you ever encountered prejudice? How did it make you feel? How did you respond?
- What do you think it took for Lynda's grandmother to show up at the wedding when the rest of her family said it was wrong?

Chapter Seventeen

- Keath says, “That's the thing about Larry, he can take any insult and shrug it off...” What does it take to “shrug off” an insult? How can you learn to ignore nasty comments and not take them personally?
- Do you think it was right for Larry to hit Toothpick? Are there times when it is okay to fight?
- Keath wishes he could “be as brave as Larry.” If we are afraid to fight or choose not to, does that make us weak? Is fighting the only way to be brave?
- What does Larry mean when he tells Keath he's “gotta have some flash”?
- What's hard about being truly yourself when that means being a little different from everyone else?
- What rewards come from being yourself? How do you think you can build the courage or confidence to be a little different sometimes?

Chapter Nineteen

- How did Keath's father stick up for his friend, Freddie? How do you think this made Freddie feel?
- Keath's father explains that the bully never came after him because he "had nothing he could pick on." In what way did Keath's dad have a special responsibility to be an ally?
- How did Freddie make his bully "invisible"? Why was this an effective strategy? Can you imagine using this strategy when people say mean things to you?
- It's easy to feel hurt or embarrassed when you are teased or bullied, but what does such behavior say about the person who is doing the bullying? How can this keep you from feeling badly about yourself?

Chapter Twenty-two

- How do Lynda and Larry support Keath when Toothpick bullies him? How does it feel when others support or stand up for you?
- How can you show friendship or support to someone who is being teased or bullied?
- What are some safe and helpful ways to get involved when you observe bullying?
- Keath says, "I'm glad someone's speaking up for me, but I'm just getting a bigger audience for my knockout." Are there times when it's better to be left alone? When is the attention worse than the problem itself?

Chapter Twenty-three

- Keath feels safe after he talks to his dad. Who makes you feel safe when you have a problem?
- What adults can you turn to in school to help you deal with teasing or bullying?
- Is getting help from an adult the same as "tattling"?

Chapter Twenty-four

- How does Leftovers fit in with the other dogs even though he only has three legs? How does Keath fit in even though he is the only white student in his school?
- How do you fit in at your school, even with your differences?

[By Theme]

Click on one of the following themes of bullying and bias. In each theme, the quotes or passages from *Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog* are followed by questions that can be used for small or large group discussion, or to guide reflective writing. All page numbers refer to the August 2001 paperback edition of the book.

- [Standing Out and Fitting In](#)
- [Racial Bias](#)
- [Coping with Bias and Bullying](#)
- [Responding to Bullying](#)
- [Being a Friend and an Ally](#)

Theme: Standing Out and Fitting In

"...And when you get Toothpick or Blob looking around for somebody to smack, you don't want to stand out. Like Larry. Like me." (Page 13)

"...Like the chameleon,' I tell them. 'If I could just change colors when I need to. I mean, then there would be no problems.' ...'if you're the right color, you fit in.' ...I mean, it's not possible to change colors, but if it was, everything would be perfect. Like the lizard, I could disappear in the leaves, camouflaged. Except the leaves would be the kids at school, and the lizard would be me." (Page 14)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- How do Keath and Larry “stand out” in their school? What makes kids “stand out” in your school?
- Is it a good thing or a bad thing “to stand out” in some way? How do those who are different get treated?
- Describe a time when you wished you could be a chameleon like Keath and blend into the background. Do you think that “disappearing” would have solved all of your problems?

“You gotta have some flash,” Larry told me one time. ‘If you look and walk and talk like everybody else, what good is that? How you going to even recognize yourself in the mirror if you look like everybody?’ ...‘You gotta stop trying to be like the Invisible Man...or some day you’ll look in the mirror and you won’t even be there.’” (Page 96)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- What does Larry mean when he tells Keath he’s “gotta have some flash”?
- What’s hard about being truly yourself when that means being a little different from everyone else?
- What rewards come from being yourself? How do you think you can build the courage or confidence to be a little different sometimes?

“...Leftovers is happy hopping along on his three legs. And the other dogs don’t seem to mind. So I guess he does fit, in his own way. If you look at my class photo, you’ll see my white smiling face in a crowd of brown smiling faces. What doesn’t fit? If you asked me a couple of weeks ago, I would have said it was me. But now I don’t know. Maybe I can be like Leftovers and fit in in my own way.” (Page 134)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- How does Leftovers fit in with the other dogs even though he only has three legs? How does Keath fit in even though he is the only white student in his school?
- How do you fit in at your school, even with your differences?

Theme: Racial Bias

“At school they mostly call me Whitey. My best friend is Lynda. Some call her Zebra, which is kind of a nice name, only the kids who say it mean it in a bad way. Lynda is Zebra because her mother is black and her father is white.” (Page 1)

“Look around, Keath. Hardly anybody else looks like you. Face it, you’re vanilla in a chocolate school.” (Page 27)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- How does it make you feel when Keath and Lynda are called names because of their skin color?
- What are some safe and helpful ways to respond when you hear racist comments or observe racism in your school or community?

“I don’t know why Toothpick and Blob hate me so much. But I know if I looked like everybody else, I wouldn’t be their main target...I go back to the dog books. Dogs don’t hate anybody. I want to be a golden retriever when I grow up.” (Page 28)

“Some kids look at me and say I’m black, then some say I’m more white than black, or not black enough. It’s stupid. Maybe I’m just Lynda, you know?” (Page 81)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Why do you think some people feel threatened by racial differences or hate others because of their race?
- Lynda doesn’t want to be defined by her skin color. What can you do in your own school or community to avoid judging others by appearance and to get to know them as people?

Theme: Coping with Bias and Bullying

“So how’s school,’ Dad asks...‘School’s okay,’ I say. ‘It’s just I’m practically the only white kid there. I’m like a freak.’ Dad frowns. ‘That kid still bugging you?...You let me know if he starts roughing you up again,’ Dad says. ‘...And you’re not a freak. Don’t call yourself that. There’s no such things as freaks, only different kinds of people.’” (Pages 64–67)

“My best friend is Lynda. Some call her Zebra...because her mother is black and her father is white. Real zebras are beautiful...So Lynda says when they call her Zebra she thinks about the horse with the Mohawk, and the name doesn’t burn so bad.” (Pages 1–2)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Why does Keath feel like a “freak”? Have you ever felt this way about yourself?
- How does Keath’s dad help him to feel better? Who can you turn to for support when you’re feeling badly about yourself?
- What strategy does Lynda use to stay positive when she is called names? What can you imagine or think about to keep from getting upset when others are being mean?

“...Freddie was different...He did this trick...Freddie made Dan invisible. ‘Can’t see him. Can’t hear him,’ Freddie used to say...He didn’t make like he heard at all. It used to bug me that Freddie didn’t fight back. But he said, ‘I used to let it wreck me, but look who’s saying it.’ I said, ‘So it doesn’t bug you anymore?’ ‘Yeah, it does,’ Freddie said. ‘But I try to remember who’s saying it.’” (Page 109–110)

“...I can see how it hurts. It’s not easy to make the other guy invisible...When someone starts calling you a name, what they’re really saying is: ‘I’m a jerk.’ You know, in those foreign movies when you read the words translated into English at the bottom of the screen? Well. Life should have subtitles like that. Because then, when someone says Ghost or Whitey, you could just read the subtitles and see what they’re really saying: ‘I’m a jerk. An idiot.’” (Page 110)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- It’s easy to feel hurt or embarrassed when you are teased or bullied, but what does such behavior say about the person who is doing the bullying? How can this keep you from feeling badly about yourself?
- What strategies can you use to help you ignore or tune out mean behavior from others? How can you make them invisible?

Theme: Responding to Bullying

‘What kind of sandwich you got there? May-o-naise sandwich?’ Toothpick says...He’s totally in my face now with his needle nose...‘Yes,’ I say. ‘It’s a white bread mayonnaise vanilla honky sandwich.’ ...Wham! I see sparks for a few seconds...I rub the back of my head. Yeah, it was worth it.” (Pages 3–4)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Do you think that using sarcasm or humor is a good way to deal with taunting or bullying?
- In what situations is this a good strategy and when is it risky?

“Toothpic’s been keeping an eye on me from the other side of the cafeteria...I know what I have to do. ‘I’m going outside for a minute,’ I tell Lynda. ‘What? Are you crazy? The second you step out, he’s going to get you. In here you’re sort of safe, with the crowd. He won’t do much with the teachers around.’ ...‘It’s going to happen sometime. Sooner or later. I can’t take him staring at me all the time like this. Got to get it over with.’” (Page 41)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Why does Keath face Toothpick instead of remaining safe “with the crowd”?

- Which is worse, getting hit or waiting for it to happen? Does Keath have any other choices?

“Toothpick’s smile turns to shock as Larry barrels into him headfirst, hitting him right in the gut...That’s the thing about Larry, he can take any insult and shrug it off. But don’t mess with his hair...I wish I could be as brave as Larry. He never takes any crap, even though he’s only about the same size as me.” (Page 95–96)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Keath says, “That’s the thing about Larry, he can take any insult and shrug it off...” What does it take to “shrug off” an insult? How can you learn to ignore nasty comments and not take them personally?
- Do you think it was right for Larry to hit Toothpick? Are there times when it is okay to fight?
- Keath wishes he could “be as brave as Larry.” If we are afraid to fight or choose not to, does that make us weak? Is fighting the only way to be brave?

“There’s always some loser yelling names at the other kids...Usually the other kids get crushed by the loser with the big mouth. But Freddie was different...He did this trick...Freddie made Dan invisible. ‘Can’t see him. Can’t hear him,’ Freddie used to say...He didn’t make like he heard at all...After a while I just started doing what Freddie did, made Dan invisible. And that killed Dan, because he really wanted the attention...Dan still mouthed off, but since nobody was paying him any attention, it got to be like he was talking to himself.” (Page 109–110)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- How did Freddie make his bully “invisible”?
- What effect did this strategy have on Freddie’s bully? On the other students?
- Can you imagine using this strategy when people say mean things to you?

Theme: Being a Friend and an Ally

The quotes below show different ways that the people in Keath’s life act as friends and allies when bullying occurs. Which strategies do you think are the most and least helpful? Which ones can you imagine trying? What additional ways can you think of to support or help others?

“Toothpick’s been keeping an eye on me from the other side of the cafeteria...I know what I have to do. ‘I’m going outside for a minute...I can’t take him staring at me all the time like this. Got to get it over with.’...I can see Lynda is thinking about arguing, but then she just shakes her head. ‘Do you want me to come with?’ ‘No,’ I say. Better to be squashed in private. ‘If you’re not back in five minutes...,’ Lynda says.” (Page 41)

“Lynda comes over and looks at the picture with me. ‘Most of the relatives from Dad’s family wouldn’t come to the wedding...because...they said it was wrong...for a black person to marry a white...But see right there?’ She points at one of the two little white faces in the crowd, smiling in the front row. ‘That’s my dad’s mother. She showed up.’” Page 89–90)

“In sixth grade I had a friend named Freddie Wong,’ [Dad] says...‘A Chinese kid. He was...well, pretty fat. And some of the kids were brutal in bugging him about it...Dan used to say stuff like Freddie Wong ate his weight in won tons every day...I told Dan he was an idiot. Told him his mother must have used his head to clean the toilet, he was so ugly. Dan never came after me. I had nothing he could pick on.’” (Page 108–109)

“The door to the cafeteria swings open. ‘Hey, leave him alone!’ It’s Lynda...‘Come on, man. Leave him,’ a new voice says. It’s Hairy Larry...I’m glad someone’s speaking up for me, but I’m just getting a bigger audience for my knockout.” (Page 122)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- How do Lynda and Larry support Keath when Toothpick bullies him? How does it feel when others support or stand up for you?

- How can you show friendship or support to someone who is being teased or bullied?
- What are some safe and helpful ways to get involved when you observe bullying?
- Keath's father explains that a childhood bully never came after him because he "had nothing he could pick on." In what way did Keath's dad have a special responsibility to be an ally?
- How do you want teachers and other adults to help when bullying occurs? What types of involvement would you consider not helpful?

Extension Activities

See the extension activities that follow for ideas on ways to increase awareness about bullying using *Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog*.

Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog Extension Activities

Follow up your reading of *Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog* with one or more of the extension activities below, which can help to increase awareness about bullying.

Vanilla in a Chocolate School

In Chapter Six, Lynda describes Keath as “vanilla in a chocolate school” because he is the only white student. Ask students if they think this is a reason for Keath to be singled out for negative attention. Suggest to students that we are all unique or different in some way. Have students reflect on a way in which they are different and write a short poem or essay entitled, “_____ in a _____ School” (e.g., “Quiet in a Noisy School,” “Jewish in a Christian School,” “Deaf in a Hearing School”). Ask for volunteers to share their writing with the class. Emphasize that when we come across differences, we have an opportunity to ridicule or to celebrate them. Ask for examples of ways that students can celebrate rather than make fun of differences. Post their ideas and their writing on a bulletin board.

Metaphorically Speaking

In the story, Keath uses a variety of animal metaphors to describe bullying situations. Define the term [metaphor](#) with your students and challenge them to find an animal metaphor in the story that relates to bullying (see examples below). In small groups, direct students to either illustrate the example they have chosen or role-play it. Have each group share their artwork and role-plays with the larger class, and use them as a springboard for discussing what it feels like to be the target of bullying. As a follow-up, ask students to come up with a metaphor that reflects a role they have played when teasing, name-calling or bullying occurred. Use these metaphors to validate students' feelings and to help them see how they might shift their roles in the future where necessary to become better friends and allies.

Metaphor

A figure of speech in which a word or phrase meaning one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a similarity between them. For example, “It’s raining cats and dogs” or “She’s swimming in money.”

Examples of Animal Metaphors

Lynda is zebra because her mother is black and her father is white. Real zebras are beautiful. They're these African horses painted white with black stripes, and they have Mohawk hair that runs from the top of their head down their neck and stands up straight. So Lynda says when they call her Zebra she thinks about the horse with the Mohawk, and the name doesn't burn so bad. (Chapter One)

“Ryan’s like the **runt of the class**,” Larry told me. “You’re the only one he had a chance at beating in a fight. So I guess he got tired of being the **lowest worm on the food chain**. Now he’s second to last.” (Chapter Two)

“I was thinking how that would be the most perfect thing...**Like the chameleon**,” I tell them. “If I could just change colors when I need to. I mean, then there would be no problems.” ...“if you’re the right color, you fit in. But the right color keeps changing, so it’s better if you can change too. One day you’re brown, one day you're green.” ...I mean, it’s not possible to change colors, but if it was, everything would be perfect. Like the lizard, I could disappear in the leaves, camouflaged. Except the leaves would be the kids at school, and the lizard would be me. (Chapter Three)

Predator is a crazy name for a beagle. If I had to **call anybody Predator, it would be Toothpick**. He’s got those eyes that can catch any movement a small creature might make. A small creature like me. And just when you think it’s safe, he’s swooping down on you with his claws out. (Chapter Six)

Dogs don’t hate anybody. **I want to be a golden retriever** when I grow up. (Chapter Six)

If life was a TV nature special, **Toothpick would be a gorging lion** feeding on his prey, warm blood dripping from his chin. No, hold it. **Toothpick would be a cheetah**. Real thin, real fast, real mean. Lynda would be a zebra, white with chocolate-ripple stripes. And me? **I'd be a little blond mouse** hiding in the tall grass, sniffing the wind for any danger. (Chapter Eight)

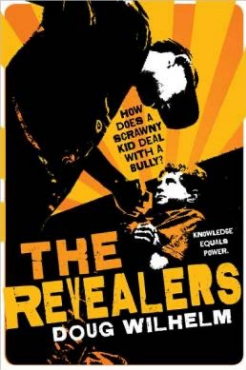
Helpful or Harmful?

Keath and his peers use a variety of methods-some helpful and some harmful-to cope with and respond to bullying. Divide the class into five groups and assign each group one of the [Strategies for Responding to Bullying](#) (excluding the Questions for Discussion) from the story. Instruct group members to reread the section of the book in which their scenario takes place, and to discuss the pros and cons of the strategy used. Gather the class and create a large chart with four columns labeled "Strategy," "Pros," "Cons," and "Helpful or Harmful?" After listing each of the five strategies discussed in small groups and the pros and cons of each, ask the class to decide if that tactic is "Helpful" or "Harmful." If time allows, ask students to generate additional strategies for responding to bullying (it doesn't matter if they are used in the story) and to decide whether or not they are helpful or harmful approaches. Encourage students to consider the range of alternatives they have so that they can make constructive choices when confronted with bullying.

Discussion Guide for Grades 6–8

The Revealers

Summary



Seventh-grader Russell describes Parkland Middle School (known by its student body as “Darkland”) as “an obstacle course of kids alert for someone they can pound on or ridicule.” Tired of the bullying that they experience on a daily basis, Russell and two classmates—Elliot and Catalina—start an unofficial e-mail forum at school in which they publicize their experiences. When other students write in with similar stories, it becomes clear that the problem at their school is bigger than anyone knew. *The Revealers* (as the forum is known) sparks awareness and begins to make a positive change in the school atmosphere, but just when the tide seems to be turning for the better, an act of revenge by a few students still bent on bullying others threatens the underground rebellion that has the whole school talking. This suspenseful story of computer-era underground rebellion offers fresh perspectives on some of the most enduring themes in fiction for young readers.

The Revealers © 2003 by Doug Wilhelm
Jacket art © 2003 by Michael S. Wertz
2011, 240 pages, Grades 5-9, Square Fish

Requirements

➔ [The Revealers](#)

A Conversation with the Author

[Read “The Story Behind *The Revealers*” and a Q&A with author, Doug Wilhelm.](#)

Prompts for Writing and Discussion

Click on one of the following themes of bullying and bias. In each theme, the quotes or passages from *The Revealers* can be used for small or large group discussion, or to guide reflective writing. In most instances, the quotes or passages are followed by suggested questions to help guide you. All page numbers refer to the first edition (hard cover) of *The Revealers*.

- [Feeling like an outsider/the importance of “fitting in”](#)
- [Cliques, social hierarchies, and cruelty in middle school](#)
- [Assumption that bullying is natural or normal](#)
- [Different types of bullying](#)
- [Impact of exclusion and bullying](#)
- [Bystander behavior](#)
- [Copying with bullying](#)
- [Making your personal experiences public](#)
- [Strategies for responding to and stopping bullying](#)

Theme: Feeling like an outsider/the importance of “fitting in”

“...when seventh grade started I found out I was out. It was like everyone else took a secret summer course in how to act, what to say, and what groups to be in, and I never found out about it.” (Page 3)

Vocabulary

Assumption
Brutalize
Clique
Compassionate
Courageous
Dominate
Establishment
Exclude
Harass/Harassment
Humiliate
Impunity
Infraction
Innovative/Innovator
Isolated/Isolation
Mock
Persecuted
Predator
Ridicule
Sarcastic
Strategy
Stature
Stereotype
Target
Tormentor
Victimize
Vulnerable

"I wanted people to say, "Hey, Russell! Sit with us!" But I'd open my mouth and what would come out would be loud and clanky and wrong. And they would give me that quick, flat, puzzled stare that is the stock weapon of the cool seventh grader and seems to ask, "What species are you, exactly?" And I would go away thinking I was hopeless." (Page 3)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Russell describes feeling "out" and "hopeless." Do you think he is the only seventh grader who feels this way? What feelings and experiences might Russell have in common with his peers?
- What makes you feel awkward sometimes? What triggers the "stare" in your school that Russell talks about and that seems to ask, "What species are you?"

Russell: *[To his mom about Elliot and Catalina]* The thing is, they're kind of nerdy.

Mom: Why do you say that? Aren't they just people?...What makes someone nerdy? I never got that.

Russell: ...People just know they don't fit in.

Mom: Well, how important is fitting in? I mean, really? (Page 40)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- What motivates us to put people into boxes such as "nerdy," "cool," "in," or "out"? How do such categories impact us?
- Have you ever made someone feel "out" in your efforts to feel a part of the group?
- What would it take to break down the social "pecking order" that exists at your school so that no one would feel that they "don't fit in"?

Theme: Cliques, social hierarchies, and cruelty in middle school

"Middle school...was basically a place you tried to survive...Everybody was rushing around and you hardly knew anybody, and there were predators. Even some of the kids you knew started turning into them. Plus, a lot of kids at our school were changing and making these tight little cliques, and if you didn't fit in somewhere you could be in trouble." (Page 9)

"...the whole place is an obstacle course of kids alert for someone they can pound on or ridicule. If you have no hope of being accepted in a cool clique, or any clique for that matter, you're safest if you can manage not to get noticed at all." (Page 10)

"You know how there's always one kid in school who's the dirty one, one kid who's the smelly one, one kid who throws the ball over the backstop...and one kid who it's okay for anybody, absolutely anybody, to trash? In our school that last kid was Elliot...I wasn't really sure why he was the one, but the fact was that in Parkland School seventh grade, no matter who you were, Elliot Gekewicz was lower on the social scale than you." (Page 17)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Russell describes middle school as a place with "predators" that you "try to survive." Can you relate to his experience? How was your transition to middle school similar or different?
- Why do you think fitting in to "tight cliques" or groups is important to people? What types of people are considered "cool" at your school?
- Why are some people singled out for "ridicule" at school? What changes in your school community would help to lessen cliquish and "predatory" behavior?

Theme: Assumption that bullying is natural or normal

"...people assume these sorts of incidents are a fact of life at your age. We tend to say, 'Oh, well, kids will be kids.' It's almost like we assume that cruelty and violence are part of growing up. I wonder why we assume that?" (Page 108)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Do you think that teasing and bullying are just a "fact of life" that must be tolerated, or is it possible to do away with

this type of behavior?

- What would it take to change people’s assumptions about bullying and to make compassion rather than cruelty the norm?

Theme: Different types of bullying

“For some reason, sometimes when you are new or different in some way, people decide to tell lies about you. I don’t know why...I’m somebody people have been telling untrue things about.” (Page 63)

“Girls at this age can be really vicious, and so vulnerable. I almost think it’s more serious business than you boys with your physical stuff.” (Page 67)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- People often think of bullying as physical harassment, but telling lies and spreading rumors can also be bullying. What other forms does bullying take? Which are most problematic at your school?
- Do you think one form of bullying is worse than another? What do all types have in common?

Theme: Impact of exclusion and bullying

“The new girl stood up. People started whispering. “I am from near Manila. In the Philippines,” she said, and sat down. The whispers turned into giggling.” (Page 27)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- How must it have felt for Catalina to be laughed at and whispered about on her first day in a new school?
- What motivates people to treat those who are different as outsiders?
- What would it take at your school to make those who are new or different feel welcome?

“...not getting noticed was all I wanted, starting the day I got singled out by Richie to be the new target of his personal psychological terror campaign...When I woke in the morning I didn't want to get up...By the time I walked into school, my stomach was caving in...I didn't want to turn around. I didn't want to be alone and I didn't want to be in crowds either...I started getting stomachaches every morning and bad headaches...every afternoon. I didn't tell anybody.” (Pages 10–12)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- What does it feel like to be the target of bullying? How does it affect you physically and emotionally?
- When harassment is not just a one-time incident, but a daily occurrence, how does it take control of your whole life and impact your ability to do school work, make friends, participate in activities, etc.?

Theme: Bystander behavior

“I had known Elliot since we were in kindergarten, and I had seen a lot of stuff happen to him. I never really joined in, but I never tried to stop it either, not that I could have.” (Page 17)

“...everyone knows about feeling alone...If a few people persecute somebody, most of us pretend it isn't happening, right? We don't want to see it.” (Pages 85–86)

“I think people ought to realize that stuff like this goes on every day...The rest of you are all part of it-because you let it go on and maybe you think it's funny, or you think it only happens to geeky outsiders and kids who are smaller or fatter or skinnier or don't have so many friends or so much money as you. So tell me-what happens when you don't have so many friends one day, or you don't have so much money, or something bad happens to you?” (Pages 91–92)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Why do you think Russell watched Elliot get bullied for years, but never did anything to help? What causes us to “not see” bullying or to “pretend it isn’t happening”?
- Are those who don’t get involved partly responsible for bullying even though they are just bystanders?
- What do you think prevents students at your school from standing up for others? What would it take to create an atmosphere of support?

[After a nasty note is delivered to Catalina] “Come on,’ I said...’Do you like to see people getting treated...like you get treated?...let’s just go talk to her.” (Page 31)

“...We came looking for you ‘cause we think it sucks...We’re duckbills, too...We’re kind of like the plant eaters in a swamp of killer reptiles...” (Page 36)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- What motivated Russell and Elliot to reach out to Catalina?
- Have you ever shown support to a peer who has been ridiculed or bullied? Why or why not?

Theme: Coping with bullying

“I used to think it meant something bad about me, that she acts that way. Now I think a person like that just needs someone to plot against. She needs enemies. But really, so what? The whole world is not Parkland School.” (Page 128)

“I used to feel so all alone because of this guy, like I could never be okay or have any friends again. Then when I started reading *The Revealer* I realized that this stuff happened to a lot of kids in my grade (sixth). We had a discussion in English about it, and I made friends with two other kids. Now we stick together, and because we are together the troublemakers do not give us much trouble anymore.” (Page 157)

Theme: Making your personal experiences public

The following quotes reflect each character’s initial feelings about making students’ personal experiences of bullying public through an internet forum.

Elliot: “So why shouldn’t we help other people broadcast what’s happened to them? Maybe they won’t be so scared anymore either.” (Page 102)

Russell: “It’s like one of those trashy daytime talk shows...maybe we could make people famous for five minutes because they’re victims. Everybody could read their stories and say, Whoa, their lives are pathetic! And then what? Either these kids get their arms and legs ripped off because they’ve told on somebody, or a few kids feel sorry for them and everyone else just laughs.” (Page 102-103)

Catalina: “It’s funny, but ever since we sent out my story, people have been treating me differently. It’s like they see me now. Before I was...invisible. I didn’t mean anything to anybody.” (Page 103)

Leah: “...Lots of kids didn’t know these things were going on...I think this is going to make a big difference...If people can’t do rotten things in secret anymore, they probably won’t do them...you’re changing the atmosphere...middle school kids won’t do things if they’re not cool to do. Right?” (Page 139)

Russell’s Mom: “People need to tell their stories. Don’t you think? We don’t always get the chance. And here you’re giving it to them.” (Page 177)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Which of the perspectives above do you most agree with? Why?

- Elliot and Catalina point out that making their stories public can make others feel less afraid and invisible. Russell worries that such sharing could bring pity, retribution, or ridicule. Do you think the benefits of being open outweigh the risks? Why or why not?
- How do you think a public forum for people to share their personal stories would go over in your school? Would you participate in such a forum? Why or why not?

Theme: Strategies for responding to and stopping bullying

Each of the following quotes or excerpts from *The Revealers* reflects a strategy for responding to or stopping bullying. Which strategies do you think would be most or least effective in your school? Which ones can you envision trying? What other positive responses to bullying can you think of? Consider the following questions as you reflect on the passages below:

- Do you think that bringing incidents of bullying into the open and talking about them candidly would help to reduce the problem?
- Do you think that confronting or standing up to those who bully is something that most students could do? Would it help if they could?
- When should adults be told about incidents of bullying and turned to for help?
- How can keeping a diary or journal be a useful strategy for those who are bullied?
- How can those who are bullied find support among their peers?
- What can you do to be an ally to those who are picked on?

“Our hypothesis is that bringing bullying and harassment incidents to light among the whole student body in a school will result in these incidents happening less often, and being less severe.” (Page 194)

[Discussing survival strategies for smaller, weaker dinosaurs] “[they] traveled in herds, mostly. They’d keep the young, small, and weak ones in the middle...I had this sudden mental picture of a whole bunch of kids-skinny kids, little kids, gawky kids, fat kids, kids with funny hair, kids with thick glasses, kids who trip over cracks in the sidewalk. They were trooping through the halls together, all wearing white T-shirts that said: NERD HERD.” (Page 25)

Russell: “I keep trying to walk a different way home, but he always finds me when he wants to. I just wish I knew why. Why does he pick on me?”

Catalina: “Why don’t you ask him?”

Elliot: “Yeah! Like a scientist. Maybe you can figure him out.” (Page 38)

Mom: “That boy’s got a lot more problems than you do. And one of them’s about to be me.

Russell: Mom...Don’t call. Don’t do anything...It’ll just make a mess...Everybody’s going to know about this...And if my mom comes in yelling or does whatever...”

Mom: “I’m sorry...I’m not doing nothing. If one adult did this to another, he’d be in jail. Why should it be different for kids?...A kid like that is going to keep on doing the same things...unless someone calls him on it...I’m going to call the principal...I just think she should know.” (Pages 45–46)

[After Elliot convinces Russell to write down what happened to him] “I didn’t really feel like it...but I...looked at the screen and started to type...It felt kind of good, writing that, I [thought] the next day.” (Pages 47–48)

“Casually they surrounded him. Blanchette slapped him hard on the shoulder; Elliot stumbled and Blanchette grinned...Elliot reached in his jacket pocket and pulled something out...The three Rots were just standing there looking when Elliot swung this thing overhand, and it came down and smacked Burke on the forehead.” (Page 56)
“...I stood up to ‘em...They might think twice before harassing me again.” (Page 80)

“Stand up to people, you get respect.” (Page 99)

Extension Activities

See the extension activities that follow for ideas on ways to increase awareness about bullying using *The Revealers*.

The Revealers Extension Activities

Follow up your reading of *The Revealers* with one or more of the extension activities below, which can help to increase awareness about bullying.

Administer a Bullying Survey

In *The Revealers*, three students who are the targets of frequent bullying administer a bullying survey to the student community to learn more about their peers' experiences. They find that 67% of the students at their school have been involved in a bullying incident, that 48% have been involved in more than five incidents, and 23% in more than ten incidents. Work with your students to administer a survey in your school and compare the results to the fictional data compiled by the characters in the story. The results of your survey can be used to stimulate classroom discussion, and can also be made public in order to raise awareness and generate some solutions to the problems that are identified.

Create an Online Forum

The Revealers underscores the power of digital media to reduce isolation and foster communication. Work with your students to create a moderated online discussion or blog about their experiences with bullying, exclusion and social hierarchies at school. While it is important to create an uncensored, student directed space, it is recommended that clear guidelines be set for using the forum and that an adult be involved in monitoring the postings and ensuring a safe web environment.

Sponsor a "Community Read"

Research shows that increased teacher and parent involvement is an important part of efforts to reduce bullying. One way to increase awareness and foster involvement is to organize a "community read," in which students, staff and families are invited to read *The Revealers* together and then attend a community event to discuss the issues raised in the story and identify ways that they can work collaboratively to reduce bullying in their community.

A Conversation with the Author of *The Revealers*

Doug Wilhelm

The Story Behind *The Revealers*

*There are three stories of where *The Revealers* comes from and how it was made. They connect.*

First, I was a very geeky seventh grader. I was tall, skinny, and awkward. Like Russell in the book, when I started seventh grade in a big new school, I found that I didn't fit in anywhere, and that everything I said-everything!-seemed to come out wrong.

Then one day I said something stupidly wise to an especially scary eighth grader. He kicked one wheel of my bike, one afternoon when I walked it past him downtown. I said, "Oh gee thanks-the spokes were out of line. I think you fixed them."

Like Russell in the story, I rode away thinking maybe that wasn't so smart. And the next time this boy saw me, in a store downtown, he took me outside and punched me in the stomach.

*The opening scene in *The Revealers* draws closely on that experience. The bully in my life didn't start to stalk and terrorize me, as Richie does to Russell in the book-but I remembered very clearly how it felt to be as scared of someone as Russell becomes.*

The second story behind the book involves my son, Bradley. Brad is now a strong, tall football and basketball player in high school. But when he was in second grade, one day he told me that he and two friends had a secret laboratory in their school, where they would lure bullies and dissect their brains. Brad and his friends wanted to know why certain kids picked on other kids, and if they could find a way to get them to stop.

*Brad's story was partly fiction and partly true-no kids' brains were missing that year, but he and his friends really were trying to figure the bullies out. This gave me the idea for *The Revealers*.*

To research the book, I talked to middle schoolers at several schools in Vermont, where I live, to learn their experiences of bullying and harassment and how they felt about them. I visited several classes. I explained that I was working on a story about bullying, then asked the kids to each write me the story of one true experience they had had-whether as a bully, a receiver of bullying, or an observer. Almost every kid had at least one story to tell. Then I worked with those kids and their stories, to help them improve their stories as pieces of writing. I came away with a pile of true stories, in middle schoolers' own words.

I didn't use any of those true stories in my book, but I did read them closely. I drew on them for ideas, for a better understanding of the various ways that kids (especially girls) bully, and for impressions of how kids might write about their experiences. I also talked with teachers, principals, and assistant principals about bullying and similar behaviors in their schools.

From these three sources of experiences, ideas, and inspiration, I developed my novel. And that's the story behind the story.

Q&A with Doug Wilhelm

Where did the characters in your book come from? Are they real people?

Russell

Russell's first experience with the bully, Richie, is based on something that happened to me, when I was in seventh grade. In some ways, Russell is like I was, then. He's bright but he says awkward things that can be funny but definitely are not cool. He means well but doesn't fit in, and he doesn't have many friends. I was like that.

But Russell is not like me in other ways-mainly in how he reaches out to two other seventh graders, Elliot and Catalina, who are also isolated and friendless. I didn't do that. I wish I had. When kids today ask me how they can deal with being bullied, I

often encourage them to find a friend. Find someone you can hang out with, and talk with. The most vulnerable kids, I think, are the ones who-like Russell, at first-are the most alone.

Elliot

Elliot is also like I was, in some ways. He's also bright, yet he's someone whom it's okay for anyone else in his school to pick on and humiliate. He gets lost in an interest-in his case, dinosaurs-that sort of replaces reality, for him. I was somewhat like that, especially with reading. In middle school, I read all the time. I probably exaggerated this in thinking up Elliot. Elliot is not like I was in that he's small, quick, and birdlike, while I was tall, skinny, and awkward. I'm sure other people I've known influenced my ideas about Elliot, but I'm not sure who they were!

Catalina

Catalina is not based on any specific person, but she has a quality of quiet strength that I have seen and admired in many women I have known. When things get really hard, and the boys are ready to give up, Catalina doesn't let them. She's shy and aloof, in this new school where some people are treating her in a confusing way-but inside, behind that, she's very strong.

Richie

I have been surprised to find that for many young readers, Richie is their favorite character in *The Revealers*. He's certainly the most complicated! People ask me why Richie acts the way he does. I can only say: read the story carefully, and draw your own conclusions. There are clues! But I think that, as a reader, you deserve to have your own relationship with a book, and your own understanding of each character.

I was bullied by more than one boy, in my middle-school years, and I think that in making up Richie, I remembered some of the ways those boys acted. But, again, he's not based on any one person. I just had a sense of him as someone who can only relate to other people by being violent, or by threatening to be violent. Why is he that way? What do you think?

Bethany

As the ruler of the clique of cool girls who torment Catalina, Bethany is based on a number of powerful middle school girls I have observed. I try to watch the way middle schoolers act, the way they establish themselves. Some are powerful, and it's interesting to watch the ways they try to keep and use and protect that power. So Bethany is a character based on my observations.

The Jock Rots

Everyone has known boys in school who are great at sports, or otherwise cool and popular, and who seem to enjoy making life miserable for less popular kids. They seem to do it for fun. I think Jon Blanchette, in the group that Elliot calls the Jock Rots, is like that. I definitely knew real boys like Jon!

As for Burke Brown, he's darker, more angry. Who knows why some people are angry? They may have their reasons, in their lives, but we don't always know what those reasons are. That's how Burke is to me. Basically, I think these boys are cruel to certain kids, like Elliot, not because they're mean by nature but because their kind of cruelty is tolerated in "Darkland" Middle School. They think it's cool.

Big Chris, who is with the Jock Rots at first but then turns against them, grew as a character in the rewriting of the story. At first he was more someone in the background-but my editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux thought he was interesting and should be developed more. As I worked to do that, Big Chris became more interesting to me, too. Along with a couple of other "supporting characters" in the book-Jake and Allison-I really came to like Big Chris. To me, he's a follower who discovers his conscience and decides to stand up for what he feels is right. I think that decision probably changes Big Chris's life. What do you think?

Why did you focus on the topic of bullying in your book?

Partly because I had an idea for a story that I liked, which involved some kids trying to investigate why the bullies in their lives act the way they do.

Also, I was bullied pretty severely when I was in middle school, and I never forgot how that felt. I remembered being so scared

to go to school in the morning, and then even more scared to come out of school at the end. I remembered the feeling in my stomach, and getting headaches every afternoon-as Russell does in *The Revealers*. I remembered feeling so isolated, because at that time in my life, I was.

I survived that time, and became a very tall grownup and a professional writer, but I always remembered those experiences, and how they made me feel. When I started working on *The Revealers*, I drew on those memories. I don't think you can write a novel to solve anyone else's problems, or to tell them what to do-but I do think you can hope to write a story that connects with other people, and that might help them feel that they're not alone.

Most kids who are harassed feel isolated, but Russell, Elliot, and Catalina find strength in coming together, pursuing a "scientific approach," and ultimately, creating "The Darkland Revealer"—their e-mail bulletin. How did you conceive of this?

Being bullied can be so isolating. For me as a middle schooler, it was like living in darkness. I thought the idea of three kids taking a scientific approach to investigating the bullies in their lives could become a tale about coming out of that darkness, and about shining a light on what goes on inside so many young people's lives.

It took me a while to develop that idea into the whole novel. How did I get the notion of the kids in the book using their school's new computer network to tell the truth? Well... I knew that Dartmouth College, where I do some work as a writer, has a computer network that links up every student and faculty member. They were among the first colleges to develop a network like that. I also visited a school in Vermont that has a local area network, and saw how people used it. I was observing how often kids today use e-mail and instant messaging to communicate-and in my own work as a professional writer, I was often sending and receiving files attached to e-mail messages.

I just put those things together, and the story unfolded as I worked on it. I never have a book all mapped-out when I start.... I like to discover what's going to happen as I go along from day to day.

I wanted the kids in *The Revealers* to be using their minds and their creativity to change their situations of being bullied. As my story grew, I started to see how they could not just change their own situations-they could actually try to change the culture, the atmosphere, in their whole school. "Darkland" School starts as a place where bullying is tolerated, excused and ignored. What Russell, Elliot and Catalina do opens people's eyes to the kinds of damage that bullying can do, and how widespread it really is in their school. Again, I thought of this as taking something that has been hidden in darkness, and shining a bright light on it.

So to me, *The Revealers* isn't just about bullying or violence... it's about what can happen if you bring something out of darkness, into the light.

What did you notice about the roles of parents and teachers in dealing with this problem? In the book, even well-meaning parents and teachers seem to be unable to help, and Mrs. Capelli is in denial.

A lot of that came from my reading of books and articles about bullying. Research has shown that, while bullying happens pretty much everywhere, it tends to be at its worst in schools where the people in charge don't do much about it, make excuses when it happens, and try to ignore it whenever they can.

Is Mrs. Capelli, the principal who doesn't want to know about the problem in her school, a realistic character? I certainly don't mean that all principals, teachers or parents try to deny or ignore bullying. There are many, many adults, like the teacher Ms. Hogeboom and Russell's mom in the story, who see what happens and feel deeply about it, though they often don't know how to help or make a difference.

But I also learned that one of the biggest "bullying problems" is that so many grownups who could make a difference pretend, instead, that this stuff isn't happening or that it doesn't really matter. So I think Mrs. Capelli is realistic. A national expert on bullying recently told me that, in his experience, there are all too many Mrs. Capellis in our schools, even today.

In general, whether the adults in *The Revealers* are well-meaning or in denial, there is a communication gap between them and the kids. When the teachers or Russell's mom talk, the kids may hear them, but they're almost never directly listening...and sometimes, as in Ms. Hogeboom's social studies class, the kids are talking on a level that the adult doesn't even know exists. That came through naturally, as I wrote the story, and I think it is natural.

I would especially point to the scene, in the big-crisis part of the story, where Mr. Dallas, who runs the school computer network, thanks Russell for talking things over with him—yet Russell hasn't said a word! It was just Mr. Dallas talking, then thinking he and Russell had had a conversation. I think if we adults want to understand and help kids who are going through bullying, or any other problem in their lives, we have to start by asking them questions and really listening to what they say. Much too often, we think we've had a good conversation with a young person when it's really just been us talking at them.

I include myself in this! I do it, too. My son would certainly tell you so!

Bullying is an issue every generation faces. What is unique about this generation? Are larger world issues having an impact?

That's a great question that is hard to answer. I'm no psychologist, but I think kids basically bully for one of two reasons: because inside themselves they're scared, or just for the hell of it, because it's tolerated by adults and they think it's admired by other kids. The kids who are scared may feel that way because of something that's going on in their home or their family, or because this is a complex and often scary world to grow up in. I think these are especially frightening times for kids. There's a lot of violence and sense of threat that kids experience, read about and/or see on TV. In many ways it's hard to feel safe.

It's really important, again, that we try our best to pay attention to the young people in our lives. Anyone who feels listened to, and feels there is someone they can trust and talk to, is less likely to hurt other people as an escape from his or her own fear.

The kids who torment or humiliate other kids just because they think it's fun, like the Jock Rots in the story, tend to do this when they know it's tolerated, or they even feel it's encouraged—they believe it makes them cool. Again, I think the more we shine a light on behaviors like bullying, so that everyone sees what they really are, the less tolerated and accepted they will be. There's always going to be a certain amount of casual cruelty in the world. The key thing is to resist letting it become organized, accepted cruelty.

People are more and more aware that bullying isn't just a harmless phase of growing up. Grown-up bullies seem to be everywhere, these days... and a strikingly large portion of young people who've been involved in school shootings, like the Columbine killers, were severely bullied in their schools. I personally think awareness—just paying attention—is the most important thing. People are paying a lot more attention to bullying these days—and as someone who was bullied growing up, I hope this new attention will help a lot of kids feel less alone.

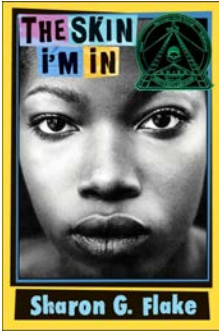
I hope *The Revealers* will do that, too. When I hear that it has, I feel tremendously gratified by that.

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Discussion Guide for Grades 8 & Up

The Skin I'm In

Summary



Seventh-grader Maleeka Madison is tormented by other students because of her dark skin. When Maleeka sees her new teacher, whose skin is blotched from a rare skin condition, she thinks she has finally met someone who is worse off than her. As she watches Miss Saunders refuse to accept the taunts of children, Maleeka begins to explore her response mechanisms to the cruelty of her peers. In rethinking how she defends herself, Maleeka learns that she too often judges people by their appearances. This novel explores the ways in which people's own insecurities can affect how they are treated along with how they behave.

The Skin I'm In © 1998 by Sharon G. Flake
Cover photograph © 1998 by Mark Havriliak
2007, 176 pages, Grades 8–12, Hyperion Books for Children

Requirements

- [The Skin I'm In](#)
- [Definitions Related to Name-Calling, Bullying and Bias](#) (optional)

A Conversation with the Author

[Click here to read an excerpt from a live chat with Sharon G. Flake.](#)

Prompts for Writing and Discussion

Click on one of the following themes of bullying and bias. In each theme, the quotes or passages from *The Skin I'm In* are followed by questions that can be used for small or large group discussion, or to guide reflective writing. All page numbers refer to the First Jump at the Sun paperback edition (2000) of *The Skin I'm In*.

- [Self-esteem and Identity](#)
- [Colorism and Skin Tone Bias](#)
- [Our Self-perceptions and Others' Perceptions of Us](#)
- [The Relationship Between External Features \(e.g., hair, clothing\) and Self-image](#)
- [Surviving and Coping in a Hostile Environment](#)
- [Peer Pressure and Coercion](#)
- [Responding to Bullying](#)
- [Standing Up for Oneself](#)

Theme: Self-esteem and Identity

"...To tell the truth, [Miss Saunders] was a freak like me. The kind of person folks can't help but tease. That's bad if you're a kid like me..." (Page 1)

"...See, I got a way of attracting strange characters. They draw to me like someone stuck a note on my forehead saying, losers wanted here." (Pages 1–2)

"Some of us is the wrong color. Some is the wrong size or got the wrong face. But that don't make us wrong people, now does it?'...'Shoot, I know I got my good points, too.'" (Page 119)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Why does Maleeka consider herself a “freak” and a “loser”? In what way does she identify with Miss Saunders?
- Maleeka describes herself as “the kind of person folks can’t help but tease.” Do you think her negative attitude toward herself influences the way others treat her?
- In what ways do we all internalize judgments about our appearance? How do these feelings affect our self-esteem and identity?

“Now what’s your name?,” [Miss Saunders] says... ‘Maleeka, Maleeka Madison-the third,’ I say smacking my gum real loud. ‘Don’t let that fancy name fool you,’ John-John butts in. ‘She ain’t nobody worth knowing.’” (Page 2)

“Seems like people been teasing me all my life. If it ain’t about my color, it’s my clothes...It’s bad enough that I’m the darkest, worse-dressed thing in school. I’m also the tallest, skinniest thing you ever seen. And people like John-John remind me of it every chance they get. They don’t say nothing about the fact that I’m a math whiz, and can outdo ninth graders when it comes to figuring numbers. Or that I got a good memory and never forget one single, solitary thing I read. They only see what they see, and they don’t seem to like what they see much.” (Pages 4–5)

“[Caleb] stared at me half the year. I thought he saw what everybody else saw. Skinny, poor, black Maleeka. But Caleb saw something different. He said I was pretty. Said he liked my eyes and sweet cocoa brown skin...” (Page 13)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- What do you think Maleeka was thinking and feeling when John-John said, “She ain’t nobody worth knowing”? How do others’ comments impact our feelings about ourselves?
- Why do people often focus on weaknesses and negative qualities instead of the positive attributes that we all possess?
- Why did Maleeka automatically assume that Caleb saw the worst in her? What does it say about Caleb that he was able to see beyond the negativity of his peers?

Theme: Colorism and Skin Tone Bias

“My skin starts to crawl before [Miss Saunders] even opens her mouth. ‘Maleeka, your skin is pretty. Like a blue-black sky after it’s rained and rained,’ she says...When she’s far enough away, John-John says to me, ‘I don’t see no pretty, just a whole lotta black.’ Before I can punch him good, he’s singing a rap song. ‘Maleeka, Maleeka-baboom, boom, boom, we sure wanna keep her, baboom, boom, boom, but she so black, baboom, boom, boom, we just can’t see her.’” (Page 3)

“Malcolm is fine. He’s got long, straight hair. Skin the color of butterscotch milkshake. Gray, sad eyes. He’s half and half-got a white dad and a black momma. He’s lucky. He looks more like his dad than his mom.” (Page 17)

“I didn’t used to mind being this color. Then kids started teasing me about it. Making me feel like something was wrong with how I look...I stare at myself for maybe twenty minutes in Daddy’s mirror. I don’t get it. I think I’m kind of nice-looking. Why don’t other people see what I see?” (Page 42)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Why do you think Maleeka is ridiculed for being dark-skinned in a school that is predominantly African American? Where do you think such attitudes about skin tone come from?
- Why does Maleeka feel that Malcolm is lucky he looks more like his white father than black mother? Do lighter skinned black people enjoy certain advantages within their own communities and/or the larger society?

“[Sweets] goes to the school across town, the school for smart girls with attitudes...The school is so big. So clean. So fancy. And them girls...they looked like they come out of a magazine. Long, straight hair. Skin the color of potato chips and cashews and Mary Jane candies. No Almond Joy-colored girls like me. No gum-smacking,

wisecracking girls from my side of town. That didn't bother Sweets none. She says she deserves to be in that school as much as anyone. 'You got the right color skin,' I said... 'It's not about color,' she said. 'It's about how you feel about who you are that counts...I'm as good as the queen of England, the president of the United States, and ten movie stars, all rolled into one. So they better let me in that there school or else' ...I guess Sweet's attitude paid off. They let her into that high-toned school." (Pages 39–40)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Why do you think Maleeka “changed her mind” about attending the better school? How do her feelings about her color and appearance play into this decision?
- Why is Sweets able to see past color and stand confident? What does it take to remain self-assured in the face of prejudice and cruelty?

Theme: Our Self-perceptions and Others' Perceptions of Us

“[John-John] says his face tells the world he doesn't take no stuff. That people better respect him, or else. I never see nothing like that in John-John's face. He looks more scared than mean. I guess there ain't no accounting for what folks see in their own mirrors.” (Page 18)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- What do you think your face says to the world? What qualities do you think you project and how do you think others perceive you?
- Is the face you project consistent with your own feelings about yourself?
- How do our own self-perceptions often differ from what others see in us?

“‘Why do you hate me?’ I ask, looking right at John-John...He says since the first time he met me, I acted like I was better than him...Says it was back in second grade when I first moved to the Heights. I walked into class that day with my new pink polka-dotted dress on and black patent leather shoes. The teacher told me to sit in the desk next to his. I said I didn't want to. I wanted to sit in the one up front, next to Caleb. ‘That half-white punk,’ John-John says...‘I didn't even know Caleb back then,’ I say. ‘I wanted to sit up front ‘cause I couldn't see the board....You hated me all these years for something I didn't even do.’ John-John looks at me like I'm dirt or something...I think about what Daddy once said about not seeing yourself with other people's eyes...Then it hits me. John-John McIntyre is jealous of me. But why?” (Pages 63–66)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- How can others' perceptions and assumptions about us lead to conflict? What can we do to avoid these communication gaps?
- Do you agree with Maleeka's assessment that John-John is jealous of her? What might he see in Maleeka that is different from what she sees in herself?

Theme: The Relationship between External Features (hair, clothing) and Self-image

“...I'm like Superman when I get Charlese's clothes on. I got a new attitude, and my teacher's sure don't like it none.” (Page 4)

“I think if I was wearing my own clothes I would feel like two cents next to [Miss Saunders]. But I'm in Char's stuff, so I'm holding my own.” (Page 77)

“I tell Sweets I'm gonna cut my hair...People gonna see I ain't who I used to be...I don't tell Sweets or Momma the real reason that I'm doing this. That I want a new look like that model in the magazine, so that maybe people will start to see me differently and treat me differently.” (Page 43)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- How does Maleeka expect that her new clothing and hair style will change things for her? Do others treat her any differently as a result of these changes?
- Can external features such as clothes, hair, make-up, etc. actually improve one's self-confidence? Do these things ultimately affect the way that others view us?

"After that Char started bringing clothes to school for me...But even those hundred-dollar pants suits...can't make up for the hurt I feel when she slaps me with them mean words of hers." (Page 15)

"I don't get it. I look good. I know I do...I go to the bathroom...I look in the mirror and start crying. 'You know, Maleeka,' I hear myself say, 'you can glue on some hair, paint yourself white, come to school wearing a leather coat down to your toes and somebody will still say something mean to hurt your feelings. That's how it goes at this school.' ...[I] lean close to the mirror on the wall, and think of Daddy. 'Maleeka,' he used to say, 'you got to see yourself with your own eyes. That's the only way you gonna know who you really are.'" (Pages 48-49)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- What lesson does Maleeka eventually learn about the importance of external appearances?
- What does it take for us to look beyond our external appearances and really get to know and appreciate ourselves? How can we strive in this direction?

Theme: Surviving and Coping in a Hostile Environment

"I didn't want to go to school after a while, but Momma said I had to. So I came up with a plan. I went to Char and said if she would let me hang out with her, you know, kind of look out for me, I would do her homework and stuff...She gave in after a while, and kids started leaving me alone." (Page 15)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Do you think that Maleeka's plan to trade homework for protection is a good one?
- Does the torment that Maleeka experiences justify her decision to cheat?
- Is there anyone else that Maleeka could have turned to for help?
- What does Maleeka sacrifice emotionally in order to gain Char's assistance?

"Lately it's hard to know where Akeelma's thoughts begin and mine end. I mean, I might be starting off with her talking about how she is scared with the smallpox spreading around the ship and killing people. Then I end up the same paragraph with Akeelma saying she's scared that maybe people will always think she's ugly. But I'm really talking about myself. I'm scared people will always think I'm ugly." (Page 96)

"'See you later, Midnight,' [John-John] says to me. I can feel myself getting mad, my fists balling up at my sides. Then I remember a poem about midnight that I seen in one of those poetry books at the library. The words of the poem come tumbling in my head, and I start to smile." (Page 133)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- How does Maleeka's journaling assignment turn into a way for her to deal with her feelings? How can reflective writing be used as a way to cope with one's problems?
- Maleeka uses a poem as a way to anchor herself and deal with her anger. What other strategies can you think of for coping effectively when you are on the receiving end of cruel behavior?

Theme: Peer Pressure and Coercion

"You got to go along with Char if you want to get along with her. You can't be all sensitive. That's what Char says."
(Page 12)

"I know Char's plan ain't gonna mean nothing but trouble for me. But I got to go along, anyhow. Nobody ever turns their back on Char. Not unless they're tired of living or something stupid like that." (Page 136)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- What tactics does Char use to coerce her peers into "going along"?
- Why does Maleeka decide to vandalize Miss Saunders' classroom, and act against her conscience and better judgment? What alternatives does Maleeka have in this situation?
- In your experience, do peer pressure and intimidation play a role in the way that students behave and treat one another? What would it take for you to rise above such pressure and do what you know is right?

[After being relentlessly teased on a bus trip to Washington, D.C.] "I looked at Caleb. He gave me the goofiest smile and said, 'Sorry, Maleeka...' and moved to the front of the bus with his boys. They slapped him five. Everybody laughed and clapped. I sat there with a frozen smile on my face like that stupid Mona Lisa. Till this day, I don't know nothing about Washington, D.C., just that I don't ever want to go there no more." (Page 14)

"...I write: Why bother with that smelly bathroom if no one else cares about it? Caleb writes back: You have to take a stand when things aren't right. I look at him and wonder why he didn't take a stand last year when we was on the bus, and everybody was making fun of how black I am." (Page 107)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- How did it affect Maleeka when Caleb deserted her on the bus?
- In the story, Caleb prides himself on "taking a stand when things aren't right" and takes actions considered strange by his peers. Why do you think he is unable to stand up for Maleeka on the bus?
- Have you ever been in a situation where you neglected to take a stand against bullying or cruelty because of what others might have said or thought?
- Have you ever been an ally to someone who experienced bullying or cruelty? How did it feel to intervene? What do you think your actions meant to the person you supported?

Theme: Responding to Bullying

"Bad things happen around here to people who can't keep their mouth shut." (Page 29) "I ain't no squealer. Never was, never will be." (Page 131) "Least you're keeping your mouth shut...Squealing on your friends ain't even cool." (Page 153)

"You would think after beating those boys off John-John, I wouldn't be afraid of nothing or nobody. But I'm scared like nobody's business...[but] I don't have no choice, I gotta tell." (Pages 159-160)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Do you think Maleeka was right for telling the truth about Char's and the twins' involvement in the vandalism incident?
- When should you report an incident or seek help from an adult? When should you keep a confidence or secret?
- Are there consequences among your peers for "squealing" or "tattling"? What does it take to speak up anyway when you know it is the right thing to do?

"...I spend a lot of time trying to fit in here at McClenton Middle School. I ain't letting nobody ruin it for me, especially no teacher." (Page 2)

“So you see, I got my own troubles. I don’t nee no scar-faced teacher making things worse. But I got this feeling Miss Saunders is gonna mess things up for me real bad.” (Page 5)

“He’s my color, but since second grade he’s been teasing me about being too black. Last year when I thought things couldn’t get no worse, he came up with this here song. Now, here this woman comes talking that black stuff. Stirring him up again.” (Page 4)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Are there times when you think it is worse for a teacher to intervene in a situation than to ignore it? Do adults sometimes act with the right intentions but make things worse?
- What do you want adults in your school to do when teasing or bullying occurs? What would make you feel most safe and supported?

“‘You cleaned the boys’ room?’ I’m frowning up my face...‘Disgusting...Ain’t nobody at this school crazy enough to clean the bathrooms.’...But Caleb, he does seem crazy sometimes. He and his dad go feed the homeless on weekends, and once a month Caleb volunteers at the senior citizens home. Last year, he even got the school to hold a neighborhood cleanup day...‘You should’ve asked the janitor to help.’ ‘He’s doing his job,’ Caleb says. ‘It’s the rest of us that aren’t doing ours.’...I write: Why bother with that smelly bathroom if no one else cares about it? Caleb writes back: You have to take a stand when things aren’t right.” (Page 107)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Why does Maleeka see Caleb’s acts of kindness and service as “crazy”? Would these acts be considered “weird” in your school?
- How might helping others and community involvement affect the way you feel about yourself? How might it change your perspective on your peers or social situation?
- Do you agree with Caleb that “you have to take a stand when things aren’t right”? What are the obstacles to taking a stand? What are the opportunities that exist?
- What would it take to change students’ expectations in your school so that compassion was the rule instead of the exception?

Theme: Standing Up for Oneself

“Up till now, I just took it. The name calling. The pushing and shoving and cheating off me. Then last week something happened...That’s when I made up my mind. Enough is enough. I deserve better than for people to treat me any old way they want. But saying that is one thing, making it happen is something else.” (Page 5)

“Up till now, I just took it. The name calling. The pushing and shoving and cheating off me. Then last week something happened...That’s when I made up my mind. Enough is enough. I deserve better than for people to treat me any old way they want. But saying that is one thing, making it happen is something else.” (Page 5)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- What do you think was the turning point for Maleeka? What brought her to the point where she felt that she deserved better than the bullying she had endured?
- Have you ever resolved to make a change, but had difficulty following through? What small steps can we take to stand up for ourselves and improve our situations?

“Liking myself didn’t come overnight...I took a lot of wrong turns to find out who I really was. You will, too...It takes a long time to accept yourself for who you are. To see the poetry in your walk...To look in the mirror and like what you see, even when it doesn’t look like anyone else’s idea of beauty.” (Page 19)

“You gotta love yourself, baby. If you don’t, who will?” (Page 71)

“Call me by my name! I hear Akeelma say, and I scream it out, too. ‘Call me by my name! I am not ugly. I am not stupid. I am Maleeka Madison, and, yeah, I’m black, real black, and if you don’t like me, too bad ‘cause black is the skin I’m in!’” (Page 167)

Questions for Writing or Discussion

- What did it take for Maleeka to finally stand up against Char? Can you imagine yourself standing strong in a similar situation? Why or why not?
- Sometimes we associate with people or situations that are bad for our self-esteem. What things can we do to increase our self-acceptance and help us feel comfortable with the “skin we’re in”?

Extension Activities

See the extension activities that follow for ideas on ways to increase empathy using *The Skin I’m In*.

The Skin I'm In Extension Activities

The extension activities below use *The Skin I'm In* to help students increase empathy and cope with bias and bullying.

Shades of Bias

A prominent theme in *The Skin I'm In* is the teasing and bullying that Maleeka experiences because she is dark skinned. While racial bias is a common theme in literature, it is rare to read about bias based on skin tone either within or from outside the African American community. Use the following readings to engage students in a discussion of the conscious or unconscious bias that exists around skin tone.

- *Get Back (Black, Brown and White)* by Big Bill Broonzy
- Skin Tone Bias: Focus on the Research
- *Harlem Sweeties* by Langston Hughes

The blues song, [Get Back](#), confronts Jim Crow racism by playing upon the old saying, “if you’re white, you’re alright; if you’re brown, stick around; but if you’re black, get back.” Ask students to consider why Broonzy differentiates between black and brown when he sings about the impact of segregation and racism. Ask students if they have observed differences in the way light and dark skinned people are perceived or treated in the contemporary U.S.

Next, read [Skin Tone Bias: Focus on the Research](#), and discuss the stereotypes that exist around skin tone and the consequences of this bias on society.

Finally, have students read Langston Hughes’ [Harlem Sweeties](#), which is a tribute to the varied and beautiful shades of color exhibited by African American woman. Ask students to consider ways to recast negative perceptions of skin tone difference to appreciate the natural variation that exists within all racial groups.

What Does Your Face Say to the World?

In Chapter 4, Miss Saunders asks the class to respond to the question, “What does your face say to the world?” Instruct students to write an essay or poem, or create a self-portrait that answers this question. Have volunteers share their work with the class and discuss the ways in which our self-image corresponds or conflicts with others’ perceptions of us. Follow up this discussion with the “Impressions” extension activity.

Impressions

Divide students into pairs (preferably so that each student is partnered with a classmate s/he doesn’t know very well). Instruct students to make a list with the following information about their partners based solely on their impressions (and no verbal communication): (1) Favorite hobby or activity; (2) Type of music s/he listens to; (3) Job/profession s/he wants as an adult. If you add other items to the list, make sure to choose categories that are not too personal or controversial, and encourage partners to record responses in a way that maintains an atmosphere of respect and safety. After students have completed their lists, have them share with their partners to find out how accurate they were. Discuss the following questions as a class:

- Were your impressions of your partner accurate? What were they based on?
- Were you surprised by your partner’s impressions of you? Does your face say to the world what you think it does?
- What are the dangers of making assumptions about others? How can they lead to stereotypes and other negative behavior?

Seeing the World through Different Eyes

In Chapter 5, Miss Saunders asks the class to pretend they're teenagers living in the seventeenth century and to write a diary chronicling their experiences. She wants her students to know what it feels like to live in somebody else's skin and to see the world through somebody else's eyes. Assign students to interview someone who lives in a "different skin" than they do. This may be someone of a different race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age group, religion, someone who is differently abled, etc. Ask students to write a report that highlights the ways in which the perspectives and experiences of their interview subject are different from their own. Discuss with students the ways in which "seeing the world through different eyes" can increase our empathy toward others and reduce prejudiced or exclusionary behavior.

Using "Anchors" to Remain Grounded

In Chapter 24, Maleeka's temper begins to flare when she is called an insulting name. She is able to center herself and release her anger by remembering the words to a poem that have a special meaning to her. Maleeka uses the poem as an "anchor"—a way to ground herself, remind her what is most important, and keep control of her dignity. Ask students to identify an anchor that they use or might use in the future in the face of bullying or negative behavior. Anchors may be a physical object (such as a photo or a piece of jewelry), an inspirational quote, a meaningful song, a mental image, a friend, or anything else that helps them to remain positive. Students can be encouraged to describe, visually depict, or physically display their anchors in class, and to describe strategies for keeping positive and composed when teasing or taunting occurs.

Get Back (Black, Brown and White)

by Big Bill Broonzy

Big Bill Broonzy (1893–1958) was probably the most important Chicago blues artist of the Thirties and early Forties. When he recorded *Black, Brown and White* in 1949—which was a powerful attack on racism—most record companies refused to distribute it. Two years later, French writer-critic Hugues Panassié and record company officials in Paris helped him get it in circulation.

This little song that I'm singin' about,
People, you all know that it's true,
If you're black and gotta work for livin',
Now, this is what they will say to you,
They says: "If you was white,
You's alright,
If you was brown,
Stick around,
But if you's black, oh, brother,
Get back, get back, get back."

I was in a place one night,
They was all havin' fun,
They was all buyin' beer and wine,
But they would not sell me none.
They said: "If you was white,
You's alright,
If you was brown,
You could stick around,
But as you's black, hmm, hmm, brother,
Get back, get back, get back."

I went to an employment office,
I got a number and I got in line,
They called everybody's number,
But they never did call mine.
They said: "If you was white,
You's alright,

If you was brown,
You could stick around,
But as you's black, hmm, hmm, brother,
Get back, get back, get back."

Me and a man was workin' side by side,
Now, this is what it meant:
They was payin' him a dollar an hour,
And they was payin' me fifty cent.
They said: "If you was white,
You'd be alright,
If you was brown,
You could stick around,
But as you's black, oh, brother,
Get back, get back, get back."

I helped win sweet victories,
With my plow and hoe,
Now, I want you to tell me, brother,
What you gonna do 'bout the old Jim Crow?
Now, if you is white,
You's alright,
If you's brown,
Stick around,
But if you's black, oh, brother,
Get back, get back, get back.

Skin Tone Bias: Focus on the Research

A 2002 study by Keith B. Maddox and Stephanie A. Gray of Tufts University found that both black and white populations instinctively categorize black people by their skin tone, and both are aware of the stereotype that dark-skinned black people are inferior.

In the first part of the study, subjects were shown pictures of light- and dark-skinned black people, along with neutral statements. The subjects were then asked to match the faces with the statements. In the second part of the study, the subjects were asked to list the traits they believed to be commonly associated with light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks.

The study found that light skinned black people were more likely to be described as intelligent, attractive or wealthy, while dark-skinned blacks were more apt to be described as poor, criminal or tough/aggressive.

The study-which offers some of the first scientific evidence about how racial stereotypes operate in society-was carefully designed to focus on skin tones, resulting in scientific evidence that showed racial bias and prejudice are related to the lightness or darkness of a black person's skin, rather than other features such as hair texture, lip fullness, or nose width.

Kendrick T. Brown, a professor at the University of Michigan, has reviewed other studies that show a significant relationship between skin tone and level of education, personal and family income, rate of unemployment, occupational prestige, and self-esteem. "The effects of skin tone are not only historical curiosities from a legacy of slavery and racism," conclude the Tufts researchers, "but present-day mechanisms that influence who gets what in America."

To learn more, read:

["Cognitive Representations of Black Americans: Reexploring the Role of Skin Tone"](#) by Keith B. Maddox and Stephanie A. Gray, Tufts University, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28(2): 250-259.

["Consequences of Skin Tone Bias for African Americans: Resource Attainment and Psychological/Social Functioning"](#) by Kendrick T. Brown, University of Michigan, *The Program for Research on Black Americans, African American Research Perspectives* (Spring 1998).

Harlem Sweeties

By Langston Hughes



Langston Hughes, February 29, 1936
Carl Van Vechten, photographer

Have you dug the spill	Persimmon bronze
Of Sugar Hill?	To cinnamon toes.
Cast your gims	Blackberry cordial,
On this sepia thrill:	Virginia Dare wine—
Brown sugar lassie, caramel treat,	All those sweet colors
Honey-gold baby	Flavor Harlem of mine!
Sweet enough to eat.	Walnut or cocoa,
Peach-skinned girlie,	Let me repeat:
Coffee and cream,	Caramel, brown sugar,
Chocolate darlie	A chocolate treat.
Out of a dream.	Molasses taffy,
Walnut tinted	Coffee and cream,
Or cocoa brown,	Licorice, clove, cinnamon
Pomegranate-lipped	To a honey-brown dream.
Pride of the town.	Ginger, wine-gold,
Rich cream-colored	Persimmon, blackberry,
To plum-tinted black,	All through the spectrum
Feminine sweetness	Harlem girls vary—
In Harlem's no lack.	So if you want to know beauty's
Glow of the quince	Rainbow-sweet thrill,
To blush of the rose.	Stroll down luscious,
	Delicious, fine Sugar Hill.

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A Conversation with the Author of *The Skin I'm In*

Excerpt of Live Chat with Sharon G. Flake (July 18, 2002)

Sharon G. Flake is the author of *The Skin I'm In* (the 1999 Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award for New Authors winner) and *Money Hungry* (a 2002 Coretta Scott King Honor book).

NYPL: Perhaps you've read about Maleeka Madison or Raspberry Hill? Maleeka is so desperate to be accepted at school that she will do anything to be part of the "in" crowd. Raspberry is starved for money so she and her mom won't ever have to live on the streets again. Both Maleeka and Raspberry are heroines in books by today's guest author, Sharon Flake. In just a few moments you will be able to ask Ms. Flake about her books, "The Skin I'm In" and "Money Hungry" and find out from her the stories behind her books.

Student: What inspired you to write ["The Skin I'm In"]?

Sharon Flake: I have a beautiful dark-skinned daughter, and when she was little I started telling her stories about incredible dark-skinned girls who did wonderful things. And, as a black woman I know that if you're dark in our communities, people don't always say nice things about you, so I wanted to deal with that issue. So no, it's not about my daughter, who was 7 when I wrote this book. That's why I wrote it, just to help people learn to like themselves, no matter what other people say.

Student: Does "The Skin I'm In" reflect your own experiences as a teenager?

Sharon Flake: Yes, and no. Yes in the sense that when I was in middle school I felt very small and insecure and, like Maleeka, I didn't think I was pretty or smart enough. I would stay in my house a lot, and read books and watch TV rather than going out. Even though I got fairly good grades, that's just the age when you get messages from the people around you—especially others the same age—that you don't have it going on; that there's some problem with you. So in that respect me and Maleeka are alike. That has stayed with me for a lot of my life. I still have insecurities. There's a chapter in the book where Maleeka and Charlese destroyed a classroom. That also happened in a class when I was in school, although they didn't do as much as damage as Maleeka and Charlese did, but I still got called down to the office. But that's as close as it came to what Maleeka went through. In my life I think I sometimes feel too much, and so I can relate to what my characters are going through.

Student: Why do you think Maleeka was friends with Charlese? Couldn't she see she was being used?

Sharon Flake: Yes. Maleeka knew she was being used, but she thought it was the best she could do to get what she wanted, which was to be like everybody else. To dress the way they dressed. To be popular like everybody else, or at least hang out with the popular kids. Sometimes even grown-ups do the wrong things for what they think at the time are the right reasons. But usually that just ends up making a big mess out of everything, which Maleeka found out.

Student: Is it your experience that teens can rise above their surroundings?

Sharon Flake: Yup, absolutely! Sometimes life is hard, and that could mean that you're poor, and you live in an area that's not nice, or it could mean that you're rich and you live in the suburbs, but your parents don't pay you any attention. But no matter what, there are usually people around you—a teacher, a rabbi, a preacher, a friend—who will help guide you and give you some good advice if you're willing to listen and work hard. Sometimes young people just need to know they're here on the planet for a purpose. It might not be to be an author, or a doctor, but to be a really loving mother, or a man on the street who decides he really wants to lead the boy scout troop. Young people have to know, even when times are hard, that they're here to do some important business.

Student: Who was your childhood hero or idol?

Sharon Flake: To tell the truth, it could just be my bad memory, but I don't remember having one! I really didn't particularly to my knowledge. My mom and my dad. My father is so very smart, and I still call him up to ask him about things. If it's the Middle East he'll tell me the history of the region, and how everyone ended up fighting. And my mom, who scrubbed floors for

a living when we were growing up. As a writer, Langston Hughes who writes about black people, giving them a lot of dignity and wisdom, and I think that's what I do with my characters. I don't think you always have to look outside your own family or your church or your neighborhood for your heroes.

Student: How does an upcoming storybook writer get started, or what steps must I take first?

Sharon Flake: When I was in college I had a professor who said "Writers write." And I always thought that was the dumbest thing I ever heard. But since I got published I know what he means. I have a lot of people who tell me they want to be an author, but they don't write. Or they finished a manuscript 3 years ago, and it's in a drawer. And I thought "Oh, writers don't TALK about writing. They write." So my advice is to write. Write short stories, and if you don't finish one, that's okay, start another one. Take a photo from a magazine, and write about what's happening to that person in the photo. Just make it up! A lot of young people talk about being published, and I just say this is America; everyone can be published once. But if you want to be published more than once, and have a career in writing, you need to learn to do it well. Go to the library and get books about writing. How to tell build a plot. How to write dialogue.

Student: Do you think that your books have universal appeal, or can they only really be understood by African Americans?

Sharon Flake: I think the surprise to me as an author was how universal people see them. I received an email a couple of months ago from a college student in Japan who had picked up "The Skin I'm In" in London, and loved it. I get black boys who loved both books, which surprises me because most of my characters are girls. I hear from white girls and women, Asian college students. Somebody's picked on all of us, apparently.

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Benefits of Bibliotherapy

Benefits to Individual

- Releases emotions and relieves emotional pressures
- Helps to develop self-awareness and an enhanced self-concept
- Encourages examination of moral values and stimulation of critical thinking
- Fosters awareness that we are not alone in our feelings or the first/only one to encounter a particular problem

Benefits to Group

- Increases sense of belonging and reduces anxiety through the sharing of common experiences
- Provides an outlet for students who are reluctant to seek help individually
- Increases empathy and the ability to take the perspectives of others
- Leads to better understanding of group norms and expectations
- Extends awareness beyond one's own family, community, and background

Usefulness in Problem Solving or Conflict Resolution

- Introduces ways in which others have encountered and resolved problems
- Generates multiple solutions to a problem
- Helps children to discuss problems more freely
- Provides information needed to solve problems
- Helps individuals plan realistic and constructive resolutions to problems
- Encourages teachers and children to work collaboratively to solve problems

Positive Behavioral Outcomes

- Improved ability to understand and cope with problems and issues
- Increased social sensitivity, empathy, and respect for others
- Improved personal and social judgment
- Increased understanding of human behavior and motivations
- Increased ability to transcend or seek help for personal challenges and problems

Constructive Responses to Bullying

Targets of bullying are depicted...

- Walking away from or avoiding settings and situations in which bullying occurs.
- Ignoring negative comments and behavior.
- Seeking out trusted adults at school for help.
- Trying to stand confident and using I-statements to stop the negative behavior.
- Looking to others who have had similar experiences for friendship and support.
- Seeking activities and relationships that make them feel good about themselves.
- Expressing feelings in a diary or journal.
- Talking about experiences and feelings with trusted family members, teachers, counselors, or friends.

Bystanders/Allies to bullying are depicted...

- Avoiding laughing or joining in when bullying occurs.
- Telling the students who are bullying to stop.
- Encouraging other bystanders to be supportive.
- Saying something kind or supportive to the target of bullying.
- Inviting the student who is being bullied to walk, sit, work or socialize with them.
- Encouraging the target to talk to a trusted adult about what happened and offering to accompany them.
- Telling a trusted adult at school what has happened.
- Talking to an adult at home about what has happened.
- Acting as an ally online.

Aggressors of bullying are depicted...

- Reflecting on their reasons for participating in bullying behavior.
- Reflecting on their values or the type of person they wish to be.
- Taking the perspective of the students they are bullying and thinking about how they might feel.
- Thinking about and trying out alternative ways of addressing their feelings and impulses.

Adults are depicted...

- Encouraging students to speak to a trusted adult about bullying they observe or experience.
- Demonstrating concern for and listening empathetically to students who have been bullied.
- Telling students who have been bullied that they are not to blame.
- Providing protection and support to those who have been bullied.
- Following up and investigating bullying incidents immediately.
- Discouraging revenge or retaliation when bullying occurs.
- Administering appropriate consequences to students who engage in bullying.
- Helping students understand similarities and differences and exploring issues of bias and bullying in the classroom.
- Teaching students how to be safe and how to seek help when they are in danger.
- Implementing bullying prevention programs and class discussions in school.
- Talking with each other (parents, teachers, counselors, etc.) about ways to help students who have been bullied.

Annotated Bibliography of Children’s Fiction on Bullying

Below is a list of suggested books grouped by grade level. Additionally, ADL’s **Books Matter: The Best Kid Lit on Bias, Diversity and Social Justice**, an online bibliography of recommended children’s books about bias, bullying, diversity and social justice, represents the best anti-bias and multicultural literature for educators and parents of children ages 0-12. [Browse](#) a comprehensive listing on books related to Bully Prevention and Awareness.

EARLY CHILDHOOD (Preschool to Grade 1)

Be a Bridge by Irene Latham and Charles Waters

Rhyming verse describes different ways in which readers can "be a bridge," from welcoming a new student and listening respectfully when someone else is talking to standing up to bullying and comforting a classmate who is upset. (2022, *PreK-2, Carol R. Hoda Books*)

I Walk with Vanessa by Kerascoët

This simple yet powerful wordless picture book tells the story of one girl who inspires a community to stand up to bullying. The book explores the feelings of helplessness and anger that arise in the wake of seeing a classmate treated badly and shows how a single act of kindness can lead to an entire community joining in to help. (2018, *PreK-2, Schwartz & Wade*)

Jacob’s New Dress by Sarah Hoffman and Ian Hoffman

Jacob loves playing dress-up, when he can be anything he wants to be—a pirate, a bird, a firefighter. But he also wants to just be himself and wear his favorite thing... a dress! This heartwarming story speaks to the unique challenges faced by boys who don’t identify with traditional gender roles and promises to spark discussions of gender, identity and self-confidence. (2014, 32 pages, *Grades PreK-2, Albert Whitman and Company*)

Lola and the Troll by Connie Schultz

Lola is a happy kid who loves recess and her imaginary dog, Tank. There’s just one problem: the neighborhood kid who bullies. He hides behind a troll costume and says mean things to everyone who walks by, including Lola. Soon she starts wearing her hair differently, walking on her tippy toes to add a few extra inches to her height, and even putting cornstarch in her shoes because he said her feet stink! But when Lola’s mom takes her to her favorite place, The Bee’s Sneeze bookstore, the owner, Ms. Sneesby, reminds Lola that she loves her curly hair, her bright smile and her big eyes. And most importantly, Ms. Sneesby reminds Lola that she is brave. (2024, *Grades PreK-2, Razorbill*)

The Name Jar by Yangsook Choi

It’s a new country, a new town and a new school for Unhei (pronounced “Yoon-hye”). So what about a new name? Having just arrived from Korea with her family, Unhei is anxious about making friends and worried that no one will be able to pronounce her name. Instead of introducing herself on the first day of school, she decides to pick a new name. The only problem is that she doesn’t know what name to choose. Her classmates try to help her by making a name jar and suggesting names, but it mysteriously disappears. This book will spark a lively discussion about names, culture, immigration and whether it’s more important to “fit in” or be yourself. (2003, 40 pages, *Grades PreK-2, Dragonfly Books*)

The Recess Queen by Alexia O’Neill

Mean Jean is the playground bully. All of the children are fearful of her and nobody ever questions her leadership. When a new student, Katie Sue, comes to school, she unknowingly does all of the things that Mean Jean forbids. When Mean Jean attempts to set the record straight, Katie Sue pulls out a jump rope and asks Mean Jean to play with her. She does, and the social environment of the playground is improved for everyone. (2002, 32 pages, *Grades PreK-2, Scholastic Press*)

The Smallest Girl in the Smallest Grade by Justin Roberts

Sally notices everything—from the twenty-seven keys on the janitor’s ring to the bullying happening on the playground. One day, Sally has had enough and decides to make herself heard. And when she takes a chance and stands up to the bullying, she finds that one small girl can make a big difference. (2014, 40 pages, Grades PreK-1, Putnam Juvenile)

Stand Tall, Molly Lou Melon by Patty Lovell

When Molly Lou Melon starts at a new school, the class bully, Ronald, teases her for being short, having buckteeth and a voice that sounds like “a bullfrog being squeezed by a boa constrictor.” Molly remembers what her grandmother told her and she feels good about herself, which helps her overcome the bully’s taunts. (2001, 32 pages, Grades PreK-2, G.P. Putnam’s Sons)

LOWER ELEMENTARY (Grades 1–3)***Alley Oops*** by Janice Levy

Named for that “alley oops!” moment when a child experiences the empowerment that comes from doing the right thing, this story relates the aftermath of bullying from the perspective of the bully. J.J. Jax has been tormenting an overweight boy, Patrick, who is now afraid to go to school. After Mr. Jax tells J.J. a story about when he acted as a bully and how sorry he feels now, J.J. bikes over to Patrick’s house to talk things over. J.J. is surprised to discover how much he and Patrick have in common, including the sport of arm-wrestling. Trounced at the table, J.J. is impressed with Patrick’s “hammer hand” and decides to become his manager. The boys’ shared interest in arm-wrestling becomes the conduit for resolution and budding friendship. (2005, 32 pages, Grades K-3, Flashlight Press)

Benjamin and the Word by Daniel A. Olivas

While Benjamin waits for his father to pick him up from school, he doesn't hear the screams of the kids playing dodge ball on the playground. The only thing he hears is, “a word. The word.” Earlier that day, Benjamin beat his friend James while playing handball, and James retaliated by calling Benjamin “the word.” When confronted with James’ epithet, Benjamin sets off on a poignant journey to understanding and forgiveness. This book is bilingual—English and Spanish. (2011, 32 pages, Grades K-2, Pinata Books)

Big by Vashti Harrison

This book traces a child’s journey to self-love and shows the power of words to both hurt and heal. With spare text and exquisite illustrations, this emotional exploration of being big in a world that prizes small is a tender portrayal of how you can stand out and feel invisible at the same time. (2023, Grades K-3, Little, Brown Books for Young Readers)

Each Kindness by Jacqueline Woodson

Chloe doesn’t really know why she turns away from the new girl, Maya, when Maya tries to befriend her. And every time Maya asks if she can play with Chloe and the other girls, the answer is always no. So Maya ends up playing alone. And one day she’s gone. When Chloe’s teacher gives a lesson about how even small acts of kindness can change the world, Chloe is stung by the opportunity that’s been lost. How much better could it have been if she’d just shown Maya a little kindness and opened her heart to friendship. (2012, Grades K-3, Nancy Paulsen Books)

I Didn’t Stand Up by Lucy Falcone

First, they went after Jalal. But I'm not Black. So, I didn't stand up for him.

Then they went after Mariana. I was born in this country. So, I didn't stand up for her.

This book looks at common circumstances of bias and bullying that children encounter through the eyes of the bystander, until they become a target. (2019, Grades K-3, Clockwise Press)

The Invisible Boy by Trudy Ludwig

Meet Brian, the invisible boy. Nobody ever seems to notice him or think to include him in their group, game or birthday party... until, that is, a new kid comes to class. When Justin, the new boy, arrives, Brian is the first to make him feel welcome. And when Brian and Justin team up to work on a class project together, Brian finds a way to shine. (2013, Grades 1-3, Knopf Books for Young Readers)

Lunch Every Day by Kathryn Otoshi

Every day Jimmy takes ‘Skinny Kid’s’ lunch at school. No way will he be caught dead standing in that FREE LUNCH line. Even when he’s called into the principal’s office, Jimmy just shrugs. “Yeah. Whatever.” Until a surprising act of empathy and allyship stops him in his tracks. For a split second a door cracks open into Jimmy’s heart. Who knows? Maybe he’ll just kick that door right open.

My Secret Bully by Trudy Ludwig

Monica and Katie have been friends since kindergarten. Monica loves being around her when she’s nice. But there are times when Katie can be just plain mean. Monica doesn’t understand why but learns she is a target of relational aggression. She gets a little help from her mother. (2005, 32 pages, Grades 1-4 Tricycle Press)

Nobody Knew What to Do by Becky Ray McCain

In this short but powerful book, a boy tries to figure out what to do when he repeatedly witnesses a classmate being bullied. Though frightened, the boy decides to tell his teacher. When the bullies start up again, the boy and his classmates band together with the student who is being harassed until adults intervene and help. (2001, 24 pages, Grades K-3, Albert Whitman & Co.)

Wings by Christopher Myers

Wings is the retelling of a myth that highlights the beauty and perils of being different. Ikarus Jackson is very different: he has wings and he can fly. But at school, his wings attract too much attention, and kids think he is “showing off.” One girl realizes he must be lonely and resolves to step in and stop the hurtful words coming his way. (2000, 40 pages, Grades K-3, Scholastic)

UPPER ELEMENTARY (Grades 3–6)**Because of Mr. Terupt** by Rob Buyea

It’s the start of fifth grade for seven kids at Snow Hill School, each with different school and social-related issues. Only Mr. Terupt, their new and energetic teacher, seems to know how to deal with them all. He makes the classroom a fun place, even if he doesn’t let them get away with much ... until the snowy winter day when an accident changes everything—and everyone. (2011, Grades 3-6, Yearling)

The Boy at the Back of the Class by Onjali Q. Raúf

There used to be an empty chair at the back of Mrs. Khan’s classroom, but on the third Tuesday of the school year a new kid fills it: nine-year-old Ahmet, who is a refugee from Syria. The whole class is curious about this new boy—he doesn’t seem to smile, and he doesn’t talk much. But after learning that Ahmet fled a war and was separated from his family along the way, a determined group of his classmates band together to concoct the Greatest Idea in the World—a magnificent plan to reunite Ahmet with his loved ones. (2019, Grades 3-6, Delacorte Books for Young Readers)

Confessions of a Former Bully by Trudy Ludwig

After Katie gets caught teasing a schoolmate, she’s told to meet with Mrs. Petrowski, the school counselor, so she can make right her wrong and learn to be a better friend. Bothered at first, it doesn’t take long before Katie realizes that bullying has hurt not only the people around her, but her as well. Told from the unusual point of view of the child engaging in the bullying rather than the target, the book provides children with real life tools they can use to understand, identify and do something about bullying. (2012, 48 pages, Grades 3-6 Dragonfly Books)

Jake Drake, Bully Buster by Andrew Clements

A fourth grader looks back over his years in school and his early experiences as a “bully magnet.” He relates how, in second grade, he came up against a Super Bully who made his life miserable. When the boys were paired up to do a Thanksgiving project, Jake was forced to do all the research. Then, moments before their class presentation, Jake discovered that Link was terrified of public speaking. Although briefly tempted to take revenge, he instead agrees to let Link be a silent participant while he gives the oral presentation. (2001, 80 pages, Grades 2-4, Simon & Schuster Children’s Publishing)

Milton’s Dilemma by Patricia Gatto, John De Angelis

Milton struggles to fit in, but is teased by the school bullies. With the help of a mischievous gnome, he learns the difference between right and wrong and the consequences of his actions when he vows to take revenge. (2004, 32 pages, Grades 2-5, Providence Publishing)

Mr. Lincoln's Way by Patricia Polacco

Eugene "Mean Gene" Esterhause, the school bully, picks on students, gives his teachers a hard time, and uses racist slurs. Mr. Lincoln, the beloved school principal, is determined to reach the boy, and asks him to help attract birds to the new school atrium. "Mean Gene" is enthusiastic, but continues making racist remarks. As the story unfolds and a bond develops between the Caucasian student and his African-American principal, it becomes apparent that "Mean Gene" learned his hatred at home. (40 pages, 2001, 40 pages, Grades 2-4, Philomel Books)

My Brother Bernadette by Jacqueline Wilson

Bernard is not thrilled with the idea of going to summer camp. Early on, Bernard tangles with the bully Big Dan and earns the hated nickname Bernadette. Eventually he finds a safe haven in the clothing design class. Bernard's grandmother has taught him some basics about sewing, and he has a flair for design. Pretty soon he creates a jacket, draws an admiring crowd and lets these kids know that his name is Bernard. When Bernard designs the costumes for the end-of-camp play, he shows that brains and skillful fingers can overcome the bully's brawn. (2002, 48 pages, Grades 2-4, Crabtree Publishing Company)

My Secret Bully by Trudy Ludwig

Monica is bullied, not by the class thug, but by her close friend Katie. This book explores relational bullying, a phenomenon that is often ignored. In her tightly knit group of friends, Monica is the victim of Katie's hurtful words and gossip. But Monica's mother gives her advice that helps her cope successfully. (2003, 32 pages, Grades 2-5, White Cloud Press)

The Night the Bells Rang by Natalie Kinsey-Warnock

Mason is the victim of bully, Aden Cutler, and often takes his frustration out on his own younger brother. But an unexpected act of kindness from Aden, followed by his death in World War I, makes Mason reevaluate his treatment of his sibling and his perceptions of his tormentor. (2000, 80 pages, Grades 3-6, Puffin)

Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog by Graham McNamee

Keath and his best friend Lynda are in the fourth grade. Some kids call Lynda "Zebra" because her mother's black and her father's white. And Keath is "Whitey." "He's vanilla in a chocolate school" where Toothpick, a bully, has it in for him. Lynda and Keath both love dogs. Dogs don't care about what color is the right one. Dogs don't hate anybody. Their favorite dog is Leftovers, Lynda's three-legged beagle. When he got hurt, his first owners gave up on him, but Lynda and Keath turn him into a winner, a pooch that shows Keath that sometimes it's good to stand out, to be special, and that even when you look different, there are ways to fit in. (2000, 134 pages, grades 4-6, Yearling, an imprint of Random House Children's Books)

Posted by John David Anderson

In middle school, words aren't just words. They can be weapons. They can be gifts. The right words can win you friends or make you enemies. They can come back to haunt you. Sometimes they can change things forever. When cell phones are banned at Branton Middle School, Frost and his friends Deedee, Wolf and Bench come up with a new way to communicate leaving sticky notes for each other all around the school. It catches on, and soon all the kids in school are leaving notes—though for every kind and friendly one, there is a cutting and cruel one as well. In the middle of this, a new girl named Rose arrives at school and sits at Frost's lunch table. Rose is not like anyone else at Branton Middle School, and it's clear that the close circle of friends Frost has made for himself won't easily hold another. As the sticky-note war escalates, and the pressure to choose sides mounts, Frost soon realizes that after this year, nothing will ever be the same. (2017, grades 3-6, HarperCollins Publishers)

Say Something by Peggy Moss

A young narrator describes different examples of bullying that she witnesses at school and on the bus, but remains silent. One day, when her friends are absent, she must sit alone in the cafeteria, and several students make jokes at her expense. In addition to feeling angry about being treated this way, the girl is frustrated with the other kids who look on sympathetically but say nothing. She is then able to empathize with other victims. The next day, she approaches a quiet girl who is often teased and finds a new friend. (2004, 32 pages, Grades 2-4, Tilbury House Publishers)

Shredderman by Wendelin Van Draanen

Nolan Byrd is a small but intelligent fifth grader, whose “dorky” ways earn him the nickname of “Nerd” from Bubba Bixby, a seemingly unstoppable bully who cheats, lies, steals, and terrorizes little kids. Tired of Bubba’s relentless tormenting, Nolan anonymously launches shredderman.com, an online forum that chronicles the bully’s transgressions. The name Shredderman is inspired by the compliment Nolan’s math teacher writes on a quiz, “You shred, man!” (2004, 144 pages, Grades 3-6, Alfred A. Knopf)

Wonder by R. J. Palacio

August (Auggie) Pullman was born with a facial deformity that has prevented him from attending a mainstream school—until now. He’s about to enter fifth grade at Beecher Prep, and if you’ve ever been the new kid, then you know how hard that can be. The thing is Auggie’s just an ordinary kid, with an extraordinary face. But can he convince his new classmates that he’s just like them, despite appearance? Using compelling character and story development, this book explores bullying, bias, difference, friendship and empathy. (2012, 320 pages, Grades 3-7, Random House)

Grade 6 and Up

Atticus Weaver and His Triumphant Leap From Outcast to Hero and Back Again by Alexandra Powe Allred

A young wheel-chair bound boy—named for Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*—contemplates life in junior high and his status as an “outcast” among his peers. While the rest of the school celebrates Kevin Thurston as the “hero” quarterback, Atticus knows better. He’s a bully. Only when Kevin Thurston does something to hurt the most popular girl in school does everyone see Kevin for who he really is. But is he really guilty? There are plenty of twists and turns as Atticus turns “hero” to save his enemy from a crime he didn’t commit. (2003, 204 pages, Grades 6-10, Perfection Learning)

The Best at It by Maulik Pancholy

Rahul Kapoor is heading into seventh grade in a small town in Indiana. The start of middle school is making him feel increasingly anxious, so his favorite person in the whole world, his grandfather, Bhai, gives him some well-meaning advice: Find one thing you’re really good at and become the best at it. Those four little words sear themselves into Rahul’s brain. While he’s not quite sure what that special thing is, he is convinced that once he finds it, the bullying will stop torturing him at school. And he won’t be worried about staring too long at his classmate Justin Emery. With his best friend, Chelsea, by his side, Rahul is ready to crush this challenge.... But what if he discovers he isn’t the best at anything? (2016, Grades 6 and up, Dial Books for Young Readers)

The Best Man by Richard Peck

Archer Magill has spent a lively five years of grade school in search of grown-up role models. Three of the best are his grandpa, the great architect; his dad, the great vintage car customizer; and his uncle Paul, who is just plain great. These are the three he wants to be like. Along the way he finds a fourth—Mr. McLeod, a military-based student teacher who both disrupts Archer’s class and enriches it. In response to antigay bullying, Mr. McLeod gives the students a lecture in which he publicly outs himself, a particularly poignant moment. Outside school, Archer also shares daily adventures with his father, his grandfather, and his uncle Paul, whose romantic interest in Mr. McLeod might just well lead to a second wedding in which he has a starring role. (2020, Grades 6 and up, Balzer + Bray)

Buddha Boy by Kathe Koja

At Rucher High, the new kid, Jinsen, is called “Buddha Boy” and considered a freak. He dresses in tie-dye shirts, shaves his head, and begs for lunch money in the cafeteria. So when Justin, the book’s narrator, has to work with Jinsen on a class project, he hopes to get it over with fast. But the discovery of Jinsen’s artistic talent leads to a friendship that changes both boys forever. (2003, 117 pages, Grades 6-10, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux)

Geography Club by Brent Hartinger

Russell Middlebrook is convinced he is the only gay student at his high school until he stumbles across a small group of other gay students. United by their secret, they form a club intended to appear so boring that nobody in their right mind would ever join: the Geography Club. The treacherous terrain of high school dynamics and the pull to be popular undermine even their best intentions and test their values about friendship and bullying. (2003, 226 pages, Grades 7-11, HarperCollins)

Holly's Secret by Nancy Garden

When Holly starts seventh grade in a new town, she decides to hide the fact that her parents are a lesbian couple in order to avoid the taunts and teasing of classmates. Her charade falls apart, and as she endures the barbs of some, she finds out who her real friends are. Mary, one of Holly's classmates, demonstrates excellent ally behavior. (2000, 144 pages, Grades 4-7, Farrar, Straus, & Giroux)

The Misfits by James Howe

Skeezie, Addie, Joe and Bobby are best friends trying to survive the seventh grade in the face of all too frequent taunts based on their weight, height, intelligence, and sexual orientation/gender expression. Motivated by the inequities they see around them, the "Gang of Five" create a new political party during student council elections and run on a platform aimed at wiping out name-calling of all kinds. The Misfits explores themes including popularity and what it means to be different through characters that are not cast as victims, but as self-empowered agents of change. (2001, 274 pages, Grades 4-8, Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing)

Out of My Mind by Sharon Draper

Melody is not like most people. She cannot walk or talk, but she has a photographic memory; she can remember every detail of everything she has ever experienced. She is smarter than most of the adults who try to diagnose her and smarter than her classmates in her integrated classroom—the very same classmates who dismiss her as mentally challenged, because she cannot tell them otherwise. But Melody refuses to be defined by cerebral palsy. And she's determined to let everyone know it...somehow. (2023, Grades 6 and up, Atheneum Books for Young Readers)

The Revealers by Doug Wilhelm

At Parkland Middle School, three students—Elliot, Russell, and Catalina—have had enough of the bullying that plagues their daily lives. By starting an up official email forum at school, their collective statements inspire words from other kids who are equally fed up with these harmful acts. Just when the tide seems to be turning for the better, an act of revenge by a few students still bent on bullying others threatens the underground rebellion that has the whole school talking. (2003, 207 pages, Grades 5-8, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux)

Starfish by Lisa Fipps

Ever since Ellie wore a whale swimsuit and made a big splash at her fifth birthday party, she's been bullied about her weight. To cope, she tries to live by the "Fat Girl Rules"—like "no making waves," "avoid eating in public," and "don't move so fast that your body jiggles." And she's found her safe space—her swimming pool—where she feels weightless in a fat-obsessed world. In the water, she can stretch herself out like a starfish and take up all the room she wants. It's also where she can get away from her pushy mom, who thinks criticizing Ellie's weight will motivate her to diet. Fortunately, Ellie has allies in her dad, her therapist, and her new neighbor, Catalina, who loves Ellie for who she is. With this support buoying her, Ellie might finally be able to starfish in real life--by unapologetically being her own fabulous self. (2021, Grades 5-9, Nancy Paulsen Books)

Stitches by Glen Huser

Travis lives in a trailer park outside a small prairie town, where his love of sewing and desire to become a professional puppeteer make him different from his classmates. These interests make Travis a ripe target for Shon and his friends, the school thugs. As ninth grade graduation approaches and Travis and friends create a puppet production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the taunts and schoolyard ambushes escalate until Shon's anger, jealousy, and prejudice erupt in violence. (2003, 200 pages, Grades 7-10, Groundwood Books)