

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom

by
Louis Sachar

Book Information

Louis Sachar, There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom

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Book Level: 3.4

Interest Level: MG

An eleven-year-old misfit learns to believe in himself when he gets to know the new school counselor, who is a sort of misfit, too.

Award: State Award; Young Reader's Choice Award/Nominee

Topics: Behavior, Lying; Behavior, Misc./Other; Character Traits, Self Improvement; Community Life, School; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - Grades 4-6 (Theme: Friends and Family)

Main Characters

Bradley Chalkers an angry and socially inept young boy who has given up trying to win the approval of others

Carla Davis an unusual school counselor who helps children understand the problems that lead to their behavior

Claudia Chalkers Bradley's frequently inconsiderate sister who sometimes tries to help Bradley

Colleen Verigold a sensitive young girl who has a crush on Jeff and longs to have an adult she can trust give her advice

Jeff Fishkin an insecure new boy in Bradley's school who must learn to let his own feelings, rather than a need to be popular, guide him

Karen a friend of Colleen's who develops a crush on Bradley

Lori Westin a friend of Colleen's who enjoys teasing others

Melinda Birch a friend of Colleen's who is quick to fight others

Mr. Chalkers Bradley's physically impaired father, who does not understand the nature of Bradley's difficulties

Mrs. Ebbel Bradley and Jeff's teacher, who is tired of dealing with Bradley's behavior

Mrs. Janet Chalkers Bradley's indulgent mother, who does not know how to deal with Bradley's problems

Robbie a boy at Bradley's school who becomes friends with Jeff and, eventually, Bradley

Shawne a girl in Bradley's class who openly dislikes him

Vocabulary

befuddled confused

distorted twisted or bent out of shape

flabbergasted very shocked or surprised

glared looked in an angry or mean way

scoffed said in a teasing or mocking way

timidly in a shy, uncertain manner

Synopsis

Eleven-year-old Bradley Chalkers's misbehavior earns him a seat in the back of the classroom by himself until Mrs. Ebbel seats Jeff, the new boy, next to him. When Jeff tries to be friendly to Bradley, Bradley threatens to spit on him unless he gives him a dollar. Later that day Bradley offers Jeff a dollar to be his friend. At home, Bradley's mother informs him that Mrs. Ebbel has asked her to come to the Parents' Conference Day. Bradley is terrified; he knows his lies about his progress in school will be revealed. The next day Mrs. Ebbel persuades Bradley's mother to allow Bradley to see the new school counselor, Carla.

Jeff is being sent to Carla for adjustment problems. The first time he tries to find her office, he accidentally wanders into the girls' bathroom. Jeff flees to Carla's office, where she helps him see that Bradley's friendship may be valuable. When Bradley meets with Carla, she begins to win his trust by responding amicably to several tall tales he tells her. Bradley begins to feel closer to Jeff, but he is confused by Jeff's need to say hello to everyone

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who says hello to him.

More than a week after Jeff's bathroom error, Colleen comes to Carla's office to ask advice on inviting Jeff to her birthday party. Carla tells her that she needs Colleen's parents' permission in order to speak to Colleen. In the meantime, Bradley has become determined to keep Jeff from making new friends because he fears Jeff will stop being his friend. On the way home from school, he tries to fight Colleen and her friends for saying hello to Jeff, but Melinda gives Bradley a black eye. The next day rumors start that Jeff punched Bradley. A group of boys befriend Jeff because they admire his attack on Bradley. Bradley is left friendless again.

Later, Colleen tells Carla that her parents refuse to give permission for counseling, but she feels her problem is resolved because Jeff is no longer friends with Bradley; therefore, she can invite him to her birthday party. When Bradley comes to his session, he does not want to talk, so Carla persuades him to write a list of topics that he would be willing to discuss for the next session. Unfortunately, Bradley's sister Claudia teases him about the list, and Bradley throws it out.

At Bradley's next session, Carla tells him that some people act badly because others have judged them to be monsters. Bradley decides to stop acting like a monster, and he sets a goal of getting a gold star from Mrs. Ebbel. He decides to start doing his homework, but he is too terrified to turn in his homework after he has spent hours laboring on it.

At his counseling session, Bradley admits he was unable to turn in his homework, so Carla lends him a book to write his report on. The following school day, he is reading on the playground when Jeff's friends approach him. When Bradley objects to their touching his book, the boys urge Jeff to fight Bradley. But when Bradley reminds Jeff of their former friendship, the other boys accept Bradley and invite him to play.

Later, Jeff is in the bathroom when Colleen suddenly barges in on him. Confused by the day's events, Jeff

hurries to Carla's office only to find Colleen is already there. They discuss their problems. Colleen invites Jeff to her birthday party and later extends an invitation to Bradley. At his next session, Bradley tells Carla that he is terrified he will make a mistake at Colleen's birthday party. She encourages him to believe in himself. When his mother asks that evening if he has any problems with Carla, he tells her no, and his mother decides not to attend a parent meeting about the new counselor.

At the meeting, several parents express anger at the school for hiring a counselor. Carla is criticized for speaking to children without parental permission, talking about religion to children, and refusing to take disciplinary measures with the children. When Bradley comes to his next session, Carla informs him that she is being sent to another school. Bradley feels betrayed. He rips up the book report he has done, refuses to accept the book as a gift, and ignores Carla's invitation to visit her on Saturday to say good-bye. Bradley goes home sick, but when he returns to school the next day, Mrs. Ebbel has his book report from Carla. Bradley has finally earned a gold star.

When Saturday comes, Bradley wants to go to see Carla, but his mother takes him to the barbershop. By the time he arrives at the school, Carla is gone. Carla has left him a package to tell him good-bye and has left him the book as a final gift. That weekend, Bradley attends Colleen's party and gets along well with the other children. Afterwards, Bradley sends Carla a letter and makes her a gift of one of his most prized possessions.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

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Initial Understanding

Why does Bradley consider Carla's book a good-luck charm?

While he is reading or carrying the book, many good things happen to Bradley. The librarian and Mrs. Ebbel are nice to him. He finds the courage to say hello to Colleen and to stand up to the bullies who bother him. He is invited to play basketball, and he even sinks a shot. His normally gruff father spends time teaching him to dribble. Then he is invited to a birthday party for the first time in three years.

Literary Analysis

How does saying "hello" to others play an important part in this story?

Saying hello is a gesture of friendship, and it becomes a way of acknowledging the good in people. Jeff longs to make friends, and he originally cannot resist saying hello to everyone who greets him. Bradley tries to protect himself from everyone, so he has difficulty understanding Jeff's need to say hello to others. Colleen says hello as an effort to begin a relationship with Jeff, but Jeff eventually feels harassed by this because he sees it as a mockery of him. However, Bradley comes to see that the greeting is a way of letting others know that he wants to change and is trying to stop his antisocial behavior. When Bradley says hello to Jeff when they are getting ready to fight, it defuses the situation and reminds Jeff that they had been friends before and could be again.

Inferential Comprehension

Why does Colleen continue to see Carla even after her parents forbid her to do so?

The first time that Colleen disobeys her parents, she claims she is coming to let Carla know that her parents have refused permission. She also wants to reassure Carla that her problem has been resolved; Jeff is no longer friends with Bradley, so she can invite Jeff to her party without feeling obligated to invite Bradley. Later, she speaks to Carla because she is upset about walking into the boys' bathroom in an effort to force an encounter with Jeff. In both cases, Colleen also has an emotional need to seek out Carla's guidance. She does not feel that her parents listen to her, and she feels that she can trust Carla.

Constructing Meaning

How does Carla's acceptance of Bradley's tall tales encourage him to be more honest about the things that trouble him?

Carla shows that she likes and respects Bradley by accepting his wild stories. Her willingness to listen to Bradley makes it clear that she really believes that he has a lot of good in him and that he is a valuable person. This makes it easier for him to open up to Carla and be more honest because he knows he can trust her and that she really does want to help him.

Teachable Skills

Responding to Literature Bradley is terrified that he will make a mistake at Colleen's birthday party. Have the students write about a time they were worried about making a mistake in a social situation. How did they find out what they were supposed to do? Did they make any mistakes?

Understanding Characterization Carla has very strong principles regarding counseling, which she is not willing to alter even to protect herself. Have the students write a pamphlet that outlines how Carla thinks counselors should do their jobs.

Recognizing Feelings Bradley frequently creates

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scenarios with his animals that reflect his feelings about something that happened to him. Have the students choose one of these role-playing sessions and explain what feelings Bradley was expressing about his experiences.

Comparing and Contrasting Carla helps several children with their personal problems. Have the students write a paper analyzing how these personal problems are alike and how they are different. Have the students include an explanation of external factors that exacerbate the emotional struggles of each of these children.