

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Touchdown for Tommy by Matt Christopher

Book Information

Matt Christopher, Touchdown for Tommy
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Tommy, recently orphaned, struggles for acceptance on and off the football field and hopes to be adopted by the team coach.

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Main Characters

Betty Powell the Powells' daughter

David Warren Tommy's friend and teammate

Mr. Powell Tommy's foster father and football coach

Mrs. Kilbourne the social services worker who is in charge of Tommy's case

Mrs. Powell Tommy's foster mother

Tommy Fletcher an orphaned boy who wants his foster parents to adopt him

Vocabulary

calisthenics exercises done to strengthen the muscles

penalty a punishment given in sports for breaking the rules

scrimmage a practice game between two teams, usually before the season begins

Synopsis

It has been five months since Tommy Fletcher's parents died in an accident, and he was sent to live with the Powells. He enjoys living with the Powells but is worried that soon he will be sent away to another family, especially if he misbehaves. Tommy thinks that if he can impress Mr. Powell on the football field, maybe the Powells will want to adopt him.

One day Tommy finds a fifty-cent piece in the Powells' yard. Excited, he decides to buy some candy. On the way to the store he hears some kids playing football. His friend, David Warren, invites him to join them. Tommy loves to play football, but some of the boys think he plays dirty. They think Tommy hits too hard and doesn't follow the rules. Tommy has never had a coach before, so he isn't aware that he is not playing the right way. Mr. Powell watches the boys play for a while and then takes Tommy home. Tommy realizes he has lost the fifty-cent piece, so after supper he goes back to the field, where he finds it. Feeling guilty, he admits to the Powells that he found it. Mrs. Powell decides that he and Betty can share it and buy sundaes.

At the first practice, Mr. Powell has the players do calisthenics as well as learn plays. In their first game, the referee yells at Tommy for tackling too roughly. Tommy feels bad. The team plays hard but loses. Tommy is confused that the players are happy even though they lost.

Mrs. Kilbourne, from the Child Welfare Department, visits the Powells to see how things are going for Tommy and the Powells. At school, Tommy struggles to concentrate, worried that he might not stay with the Powells. After school, Mr. Powell surprises Tommy with a new puppy. The Powells are surprised to see how much Betty likes the puppy. Tommy agrees to share the puppy, Wag, with her.

The next week Tommy gets a chance to play with Wag by himself. He takes Wag for a walk but accidentally slips on a rock and falls into the cold creek. Tommy and Wag are wet, and since David's house is closer than the Powells', he runs to David's house. Mrs. Warren helps dry them off and calls the

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Powells. Tommy worries that the Powells will be upset with him. When he returns home, he tells them what happened but quickly goes to bed before they can say anything.

The next Saturday, Tommy's team plays a game. During the game Tommy drops a pass and trips a player. He is pulled out of the game for a while. When he goes back in, he intercepts a pass and runs it back for a touchdown. The team wins, but Tommy still feels bad for the mistakes he made in the game.

Tommy continues to worry that he will not stay with the Powells forever. As a result he can't concentrate in school, and his grades drop. His teacher speaks with the Powells, and the Powells speak with Tommy. Tommy tries harder, but his heart isn't in it.

On the last Thursday of October, the Powells learn that another couple wants to adopt Tommy. Tommy says he wants to stay with the Powells, but they explain that the rules usually wouldn't allow them to adopt him since they have been his foster parents; however, they say that they will try very hard to adopt him.

Tommy decides to buy the Powells gifts before he leaves their home, but he doesn't have money. David's mother suggests that he earn the money by collecting and recycling papers and magazines from the neighbors. On Saturday, with the help of Mr. Warren he earns enough, and buys the gifts.

When Tommy gets home, Mr. Powell calls to say they will be gone for a while, and he should go to the football game. It is a beautiful October day, and Tommy goes to his game. Many spectators are there but not the Powells. Tommy's team plays hard and has some good plays. The score is tied when the Powells come over to the bench and tell Tommy that they are going to be able to adopt him. Tommy goes on to make an interception, which he runs back for the winning touchdown.

When Tommy and the Powells get home, Tommy gives them the gifts he had bought. Mrs. Powell

surprises him with his birthday cake, a day early. They celebrate his birthday and the fact that he is staying with them forever. Tommy is happy to have a mom and dad again.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Tommy did not understand the need for the calisthenics Mr. Powell had the team do before practicing plays. Mr. Powell said it would keep the boys from getting hurt as much. Why is this true?

Calisthenics are exercises that are designed to strengthen the muscles. With stronger muscles, players can control their bodies better. They can avoid getting hit or put themselves in a better position to tackle or be tackled. Today, all professional sports teams have staff members whose jobs revolve around strengthening players' muscles and keeping the players healthy.

Literary Analysis

This story was originally published in 1959. At that time children could leave their yards and go to the park without their parents and sometimes they didn't even bother to tell their parents where they went. The country has changed since that time. How has the country changed and how has that effected the way children play?

Answers will vary depending on where the students live and what the particular family situation is, but answers should include an awareness of safety rules and the courtesy of and need for letting others know where the students will be.

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Inferential Comprehension

Tommy thinks he can impress Mr. Powell with his football skills and that will make Mr. Powell say that he wants Tommy to stay with him forever. Tommy is sure that if Mr. Powell says this it would have to happen. He believes this because he thinks that whatever his own father had said "always used to go." Why do you think Tommy believes his father always got his way?

Tommy's parents undoubtedly discussed things privately. His father may have been the person to announce decisions in the family, and it appeared to Tommy that they were strictly his father's decisions. Therefore, Tommy thought his father's word "always used to go." Also, in the 1950s, men often made the decisions for the family. It is possible that Tommy's father's word had more power than his mother's. Today, men and women share decision-making more evenly.

Constructing Meaning

Throughout the story Tommy demonstrates that he is a nice, polite boy. How does he do this?

When Tommy leaves the room during his visit with Mrs. Kilbourne, he comes back quickly when he realizes he has not excused himself. He readily agrees to share his new puppy with Betty when he sees how much she likes the puppy. He feels guilty about keeping the fifty-cent piece because he realizes it really belongs to someone else. He helps win one of the football games but still feels bad that he has made mistakes in the game. When he learns he might have to leave the Powells' home, he buys gifts for the Powells to thank them for taking such good care of him.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Dialogue There are several discussions when Tommy has a chance to tell the Powells about his true worries. Have students find these conversations and take turns reading them aloud. Then have them choose a time when Tommy could have spoken up. Have them write what he might have said.

Understanding Literary Features The author vividly describes football plays. Have students work in groups and choose one description of football action. Have them prepare a demonstration of the play, using words and actions. Have them present their demonstrations to the class.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors

Sometimes a player in a professional sport is accused of playing "dirty." Find examples or newspaper clippings about these incidents. Have the students discuss them in pairs or as a class. Ask the students to decide if the players were unsportsmanlike, and, if so, what could or should be done to prevent it in the future. Have the students discuss why sports have certain rules and how the sports would be different if the rules were not in place.

Responding to Literature When Tommy tries to decide if he is going to tell the Powells about some of the things he does, he feels as if he is "in a fix." He isn't sure what he should do. By telling the truth he can be sent to another family and that family might be better or worse. Have the students compile a list of tips to help people when they are "in a fix." They might put the list in the form of "Do's" and "Don'ts." For example, "Do apologize if you have made a mistake." "Don't tell lies about what you have done."