



Walker Books Classroom Ideas



The Bravest Word

Kate Foster
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*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

Walker Books Australia
Locked Bag 22
Newtown, N.S.W., 2042

Ph +61 2 9517 9577
Fax +61 2 9517 9997

These notes were created by Bethany Nevile.
For enquiries please contact:
educationwba@walkerbooks.com.au

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Outline:

Do you hear that? You're Cliff now, and your life is going to get better, I promise.

When eleven-year-old Matt finds Cliff, a hurt, neglected dog abandoned in the bush, he knows the brave little pup needs saving. He wants to help. But can he?

Lately, Matt has had way more bad days than good days. The pieces of his life just don't seem to fit together any more and he doesn't understand why. He's finding it impossible to concentrate at school and has lost interest in the activities he used to love. Plus, he's tired all the time.

Matt's too afraid to share what's really going on in his own head with anyone. His friends and family will never understand . . . maybe it's not only Cliff who needs saving.

Author/Illustrator Information:

Kate Foster writes children's books about friends, family, and dogs. Originally from the south east of England, she now lives on the beautiful Gold Coast in Australia with her family and rescue dogs. She loves eating cake, reading books, and watching cooking programmes on TV!

How to Use These Notes:

This story works on many levels. The suggested activities are therefore for a wide age and ability range. Please select accordingly.

These notes are for:

- Primary years 4-6
- Ages 9+

Key Learning Areas:

- English

Example of:

- Novel

Themes/Ideas:

- Depression/Mental illness
- Family
- Animals
- Friendship



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Before Reading:

Before reading *The Bravest Word*, view the cover and title of the book. Identify the following:

- The title of the book
- The author
- The publisher
- The blurb

Based on the cover, what do you think this story is about? How do you think it will begin/end? Revisit your answer after reading the book – how close were your predictions to the actual novel?

Exploring the Text:

What are the themes in this novel? As a class or in small groups identify and list the themes. Individually write a statement of belief about each theme.

Identify the orientation, complication and resolution of the story. Ask students to try to identify this structure in other books or movies. As a class, discuss how these narrative features give meaning to stories.

Find passages in the text that show Matt demonstrating or experiencing the following qualities and emotions.

- Compassion
- Courage/bravery
- Guilt
- Anger

Choose a chapter of the novel and analyse the author's use of language techniques such as simile ("*my heart like a drill in my chest*" p215), metaphor ("*Sucked from my brain by that same black hole which attacked last night*" p71), hyperbole ("*I already have the most achy legs in the whole of Queensland*" p25) alliteration ("*I glance at Dad, my eyes wide, pleading – pathetic probably*" p50), idiom ("*Butterflies swarm in my tummy*" p70), personification ("*Cliff lifts his head, face cocked to the side as if he's listening to Dad too*" p182), rhetorical questions ("*How could I have forgotten all this?*" p.62) and imagery ("*The sun still sits fairly low, a yellow-white haze stretching from its core across the blue sky*" p23).

Keep a "Vocab Journal" while reading the novel. Make a note of any words you come across that are unfamiliar and look up their meaning. Also keep track of any words or phrases that you particularly like and write a note next to each explaining why you like that word/phrase.

Depression and Mental Health

"*What problems do I really have to be annoyed about anyway?*" (page 145). Have a full class discussion on what depression is. Make sure to discuss how's it's different to 'feeling sad', and why there doesn't need to a particular event or trigger for depression. Some good resources to use are available from Headspace (<https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/supporting-a-young-person/depression/>), Kids Helpline (<https://kidshelpline.com.au/parents/issues/depression-kids-and-teens>) and Beyond Blue (<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/who-does-it-affect/children>).

Create a mind-map about depression, using what students have learnt from both *The Bravest Word* and from class discussion.

"*I've never heard of kids getting depression. It's an adult thing,*" (page 60). Headspace say "depression is one of the most common health issues for young people in Australia". Not just mental health – health generally. Beyond Blue say "half of all the mental health conditions we experience at some point in our lives will have started by age 14." Did you know this before reading *The Bravest Word*, or were your ideas on depression in young people more like Matt's? How does Matt's mother's incorrect assumptions around depression affect both Matt and his dad? Why is it important to increase awareness of depression in kids and young people?

In what ways does Matt's depression affect him? In turn, how does that affect his friends and family? Have a class discussion on mental illness and the options students can take if they or a friend is suffering, such as talk to parents, a teacher, counsellor, call Lifeline, etc.

A stigma is a "set of negative and often unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something," (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stigma>). What stigma do we see around mental health in *The Bravest Word*? You could consider how Matt feels shame and embarrassment about not being the same as his 'old self,' or his concerns on how others will react. What are some ways we as a society can overcome the stigma around depression and mental illness?

Both Joseph and Matt's Dad have recently lost their fathers. How do they experience grief? How could you support someone in your class going through a loss of their own? How did Matt's dad and Joseph's experiences help them more easily identify and support what Matt was going through?



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"I'm such a burden on their lives. I'm a terrible, miserable son, a letdown on the football pitch, and I can't even be the one to offer an abandoned dog a new home. I'm useless" (page 58). There are many moments in the book when Matt is very self-critical, and they can be upsetting to read. Have you ever had moments where you've felt like Matt? Do you think other young people around his age might be? What would you say to a friend who is feeling this way? Encourage students to repeat this activity whenever they are feeling uncomfortable and self-critical. This can be a private activity. How have Matt's feelings about himself changed by the end of the story?

"I feel so powerless to do anything, to fight for what I want. Like at football yesterday. I didn't want to play, should have spoken up before the game, said I couldn't do it. But, even though I'm so afraid of what's going to happen every day of my life at the moment, I'm also scared of letting everyone down, of people being annoyed with me," (page 52). How does Matt's concern about what others may think of him affect his actions? Do you ever get preoccupied with others' possible impressions of you? Why or why not? How do you manage this?

Discuss the title of the book, and Matt's conversation about asking for help with his dad on page 181. Do you think 'help' is a brave word? Why or why not? Is there a time in your life you've needed help, and found it challenging to ask for?

The Bravest Word is told in first person, from Matt's perspective. What insight did it give you into how Matt and other people who have depression might feel? How would *The Bravest Word* be different if it were told in third person?

"No, I don't think I can talk to Dad. I'm worried about how he'll react if he knows all the things going on in my head, and then he too will be ashamed of me, like Mum. If she is. It's so hard to tell with her. And anyway, I don't really know how to describe what I'm feeling or put my finger on what's wrong exactly," (pages 25-26). Why might it sometimes be challenging for Matt to identify how he's feeling, and to communicate that to others? Do you ever find this difficult? As a group, discuss some things you could try to help express when you're feeling upset or overwhelmed. What expectations and pressures are being put on Matt? Be sure to consider his family, his friends and his teachers. How does this affect him? How has this changed by the end of the novel?

How does posting about Cliff on PicRoll help Matt express and process what he's feeling? What other coping strategies does Matt learn? You could consider the advice he receives from his dad, from Joseph, and from the psychologist. How could you use similar strategies if you were feeling like Matt?

In *The Bravest Word*, Matt has a positive experience with social media. Have a class discussion about some of the positive and negative aspects of social media and how it can affect mental health – and why Matt shouldn't have used a fake age to sign up!

In her author's note, Kate Foster talks about her own experiences with depression. How do you think Kate Foster has drawn on her personal experience in writing *The Bravest Word*? Be sure to consider not only the character of Matt, but also Kate Foster's own connection with dogs.

Friendship and Family

What kinds of support do we see Matt get, including from friends, family and his psychologist? Think of times in your life when you have needed support (as a baby, at school, emotional support – e.g. physical, educational, and emotional). Think of examples when you might need support in the future (e.g. when you're old, when you're learning something new, or starting a new job; if you have an accident, or when you go through a challenging time). Think of examples when you have given support. What can be good and what can be bad about giving and receiving support? What kind of extra support do you need?

How did Matt's father's own experience with mental illness help him to better understand and support Matt?

How does Matt's mother see the world differently to Matt, or to his father? How does Matt's relationship with his mother change after he expresses how he's really feeling?

When Matt first tells us about Joseph, he says he's a bully. How does their friendship grow through the novel? Do you think the two of them will stay friends? Why or why not?

Matt calls himself "a useless friend" (page 181). Do you agree or disagree with his assessment of himself? Why or why not? What examples are there in the book to support your opinion?



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Creative Responses to the Text

Design your own cover for the book with new imagery and a new tagline that will persuade and interest people in reading the book.

A novel will describe the setting and action in words, allowing the reader to visualise using their imagination. A comic strip or graphic novel uses illustrations to show the reader the setting, action and character's emotions. Create a comic strip of a key scene from the novel.

Imagine that a movie was being made of *The Bravest Word*. In small groups, create a soundtrack to accompany some of the key scenes, thinking particularly about the mood you want to convey. You could either make a compilation of existing songs or compose your own musical pieces. Present your soundtrack to the class, explaining why you have chosen the pieces you have. Also choose your ideal cast for the movie and create a movie poster – make sure to include Cliff!

Create a mood board of the story including words and phrases from the text and photos and illustrations that match what you saw in your mind while reading the book.

Other Great Titles From Walker Books



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