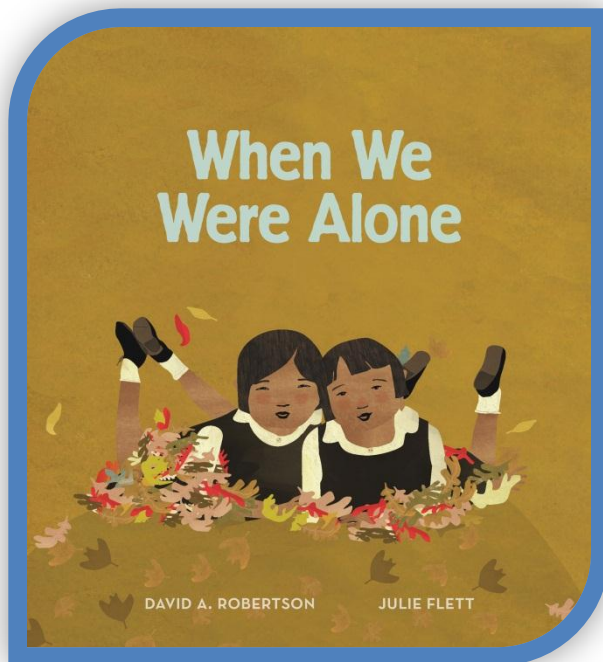




Book of the Month

Presented by ADL's Education Division

About the Book of the Month Parent/Family Discussion Guide: This collection of featured books is from Books Matter: The Best Kid Lit on Bias, Diversity and Social Justice. The books teach about bias and prejudice, promote respect for diversity, encourage social action and reinforce themes addressed in education programs of [A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE® Institute](#), ADL's international anti-bias education and diversity training provider. For parents, guardians and family members, reading the books listed on this site with your children and integrating the concepts into your interactions with them is an excellent way to help children grapple with and learn about these important principles.



When We Were Alone

David Alexander Robertson (Author),
Julie Flett (Illustrator)

ISBN: 978-1553796732

Publisher: HighWater Press

Year Published: 2016

Age Range: 4–8

Book Themes

Indigenous people, Residential schools, Culture, Family, Injustice

About the Book

When a young girl helps tend to her grandmother's garden, she begins to notice things about her grandmother that make her curious. Why does her grandmother have long braided hair and wear beautifully colored clothing? Why does she speak another language and spend so much time with her family? As she asks her grandmother about these things, she is told about life in a residential school when everything was taken away.

Conversation Starters

Whether you read the book aloud or children read it on their own and you discuss it later, use these open-ended questions to deepen the conversation. Remember not to judge their responses and to listen

thoughtfully and engage in a give-and-take that helps them expand upon their understanding of the book and its themes.

- What happens in the story?
- What does Nósisim (the girl) learn about her grandmother throughout the book?
- Why do you think wearing different colors made Nókóm (the grandmother) happy? How do you feel when you wear colorful clothes?
- What does Nókóm say about not being able to speak her language at the school she went to?
- How would you feel if you weren't able to speak the language you were most comfortable with?
- What do you think it would be like to dress like everyone else, wear your hair like everyone else and be separated from your brothers or sisters?
- What did you learn about Native/Indigenous culture while reading the book?
- What are your thoughts and feelings about the boarding school that Nókóm attended?
- Why do you think the book is called *When We Were Alone*?
- What is the message of the book?

Talking Points

Below are some important considerations to highlight in order to make this a learning opportunity for your child and your family.

1. Residential Schools

Talk with your child about some of the history of residential schools in Native American and Canadian history. You may want to share some of this before reading the book so students understand the context and then explain some of it after reading the book. Share what you think is useful and in your own words.

In Canada in the 1870's, the Canadian government partnered with churches to establish and operate boarding and residential schools for Aboriginal (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) children. Attendance was mandatory. The school system was created for the purpose of removing children from the influence of their own culture and assimilating them into the dominant Canadian culture (there were also Residential Schools in the United States). Over the course of the system's more than hundred-year existence, the federal government and churches operated over 130 residential schools across Canada and about 30%, or roughly 150,000, of Indigenous children were placed in these schools nationally.

Throughout the years, students lived in substandard conditions and endured physical and emotional abuse. Students at residential schools rarely had opportunities to see examples of normal family life. Most were in school ten months a year, away from their parents; some stayed all year round. All correspondence from the children was written in English, which many parents couldn't read. Brothers and sisters at the same school rarely saw each other, as all activities were segregated by gender.

After providing this background information to your child and reading the book together, talk with them about the bias and injustice that was part of forcing Native children to attend these residential

schools because the government wanted to strip them of their culture. Promote empathy by asking questions about what that must have been like for them as children and share your thoughts about how this must have been very difficult and had a harmful impact on their lives.

2. Family, History and Culture

In the book, Nónsim learns a great deal about the history and culture of her people by talking with her grandmother. As you read the book, ask about or point out those elements of culture in the book (e.g. references to food, language, clothing/hair, etc.). You can describe culture as parts of daily life that are seen in food, customs, holidays, music and more that a group of people share. Explain that these aspects of culture are often handed down from one generation to the next and they are sometimes connected to their geographic location or country where people's relatives originally came from, but don't have to be. Talk with your child about the aspects of culture(s) that are important in your family. Explain how you would define your family's culture(s), and together identify what foods, holidays, customs, etc. are important to your family. Your family may connect with more than one culture or may not have a strong cultural identity, and that can also be discussed as well. Talk with your child about what they know and don't know about their culture, what they may have found out about their culture from you (their parent), grandparents or other relatives; what more they want to know and the questions they can ask in order to learn more. You may also want to highlight other people in your life (your child's friends and family friends) who have similar or different cultures from your own. Stress that culture is part of who we are but not all of who we are.

3. What's Important to Me

Remind your child about all the important things that Nókóm was not allowed to do when she was at the residential school. Ask your child what some of these things are and how Nókóm was unable to do them while she was at school and why. Explain that those things are habits, cultural traditions and values (something important, like spending time with family). Ask your child how you think Nókóm felt about having these things taken away. Then ask them what kinds of things like that (cultural traditions, values, habits, things they like) are important to them and how they might feel if they were taken away or they weren't able to do them. Explain that not only were these things taken from Nókóm, but parts of her cultural identity were also being taken away at the same time.

Other Books You May Like

Jingle Dancer by Cynthia Leitich Smith and Ying-Hwa Hu, www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/childrens-literature/jingle-dancer

Shin-Chi's Canoe by Nicola I. Campbell, www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/childrens-literature/shin-chis-canoe

Sky Sisters by Jan Bourdeau Waboose, www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/childrens-literature/skysisters

Thunder Boy Jr. by Sherman Alexie, www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/childrens-literature/thunder-boy-jr

ADL Additional Resources

The following are curriculum and resources on refugees and social justice.

Curriculum Resources

Lewis and Clark: The Unheard Voices, www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/lewis-and-clark

Social Justice Poetry, www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/social-justice-poetry

Who Am I? Identity Poems, www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/who-am-i-identity-poems

Websites

10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism

www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/10-ways-youth-can-engage-in-activism

A list of ideas for bringing social activism into the classroom and outside of the school walls. These strategies can be acted upon individually, organized together as a group and young people can join with a larger effort that is taking place locally or nationally.

Definitions Related to Bias, Injustice and Bullying

www.adl.org/education/resources/glossary-terms/definitions-related-to-bias-injustice-and-bullying

A listing of terms and definitions relating to bias, diversity, bullying and social justice concepts written for elementary-age children.

Parent, Family and Caregiver Resources

www.adl.org/education-outreach/anti-bias-education/c/parent-family-and-caregivers.html

Strategies, tips, guiding principles and resources to help parents, family members and caregivers impart values and principles to the children in their lives.

The Question Corner

www.adl.org/education-outreach/early-childhood/c/the-question-corner.html

A collection of answers to frequently asked questions about anti-bias issues faced by early childhood professionals and family members interested in promoting respect for diversity among young children.

Table Talk: Family Conversations about Current Events

www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/table-talk

Provides the tools parents and family members need to engage their families in conversations about important news stories and other timely discussions about societal and world events. Includes discussion guides containing a topic summary, questions to start the conversation and dig deeper, ideas for taking action and additional resources.

Children's Books

Below are links to lists of recommended anti-bias and multicultural books for the indicated category.

People, Identity & Culture: Native American & Indigenous People, [www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid\[213\]=213](http://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid[213]=213)

Social Justice: Activism, [www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid\[236\]=236](http://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid[236]=236)