

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

A Child Called "It": One Child's Courage to Survive

by
Dave Pelzer

Book Information

Dave Pelzer, A Child Called "It": One Child's Courage to Survive

Quiz Number: 36564

Health Communications, Inc, 1995

ISBN 1-55874-366-9; LCCN

184 Pages

Book Level: 5.8

Interest Level: UG

This is the account of Dave Pelzer, who was brutally beaten and starved by his emotionally unstable, alcoholic mother.

Award: Australian Children's Book of the Year Award/Honor

Topics: Behavior, Brutality; Biographies/Autobiographies, Biographies/Autobiographies (All); Community Life, Child Abuse; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - High School (Theme: Tough Decisions); Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks; What Kids Are Reading, 2012, 100 Most Read Nonfiction, ATOS Book Levels 4.0-5.9; What Kids Are Reading, 2012, Grade 7: 40 Most Read Books Overall; What Kids Are Reading, 2012, Grade 8: 40 Most Read Books Overall; What Kids Are Reading, 2012, Grades 9-12: 40 Most Read Books Overall

Main Characters

Catherine Roerva Pelzer (Mother) David's mother, who has a problem with alcohol; at one time she was a loving mother, but her punishments soon escalate into serious abuse of David

David Pelzer a young boy who is terribly abused by his mother; he survives by learning to play her games

Kevin Pelzer David's youngest brother; David feels joy when Kevin smiles at him but knows that Mother will soon turn Kevin against him, too

Miss Moss David's math teacher; she helps convince him to tell the truth about his mother

Miss Woods one of David's fifth-grade teachers; she helps have him removed from his abusive home

Mr. Hansen the principal at David's school; he knows that David is being abused

Mr. Ziegler David's fifth-grade homeroom teacher; he helps to have David removed from his abusive home

Officer Smith the police officer who takes David into protective custody and tells him that he is free

Ronald Pelzer David's brother; he is not directly abused by Mother, but learns to ignore David and to treat David as the slave their mother has made him

Russell Pelzer David's younger brother, born when David is in second grade; David begins to hate him because he tells Mother when David is not following the rules

Shirley a neighbor of the Pelzers who becomes close friends with Mother; when Shirley begins to question Mother about David, Mother breaks off all ties with her

Stan Pelzer David's younger brother; he is not directly abused by Mother, but ignores David and treats David as the slave their mother has made him

Stephen Joseph Pelzer (Father) David's father, who is a fireman; he at first tries to support David, but eventually gives up and leaves the family

Stephen Pelzer David's young son

the School Nurse the nurse who examines David for injuries and reports her findings to school officials

Vocabulary

charade an act

despised hated

magnitude size; greatness

radically completely; in an extreme manner

visualize to see in one's mind

void emptiness; nothingness

Synopsis

The story opens with Mother verbally and physically

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abusing David. David leaves for school and arrives late. He reports to the office and faces the routine questions by the school nurse about an injury on his face. He reports to class but is soon called to the teachers' lounge, where several of his teachers, the principal, the school nurse and a police officer are sitting around a table. He is questioned and tells them how Mother punishes him because he is bad. David is fearful because when the principal called his mother in the past about his bruises, he received only more punishment. The police officer takes David to the police station and calls David's mother to tell her that David won't be coming home. He then begins the trip to take David to the San Mateo Juvenile Department. On the way, he tells David that David is free and that his mother is never going to hurt him again.

The story then flashes back to the "good times" before David's mother abuses him. The family appears to be happy and normal. They take fun-filled family vacations. David's favorite place to vacation is the Russian River. David's mother takes good care of her children and often takes them on day trips. The parents love each other and their children.

David's relationship with his mother changes "from discipline to punishment that grew out of control." No definite reason is given for this change, although Mother begins to drink heavily. Mother singles David out for punishment, even though he and his brothers may have been guilty of the same "crime." She calls him a bad boy and forces him to say over and over that he is a bad boy. Her punishments grow more severe as time goes on. By this time, both Mother and Father are drinking heavily. David notices that Mother is very different when Father is home. She is more relaxed and does not beat David. He sees his father as a protector. Soon, however, because of pressures from Mother, Father does not provide as much protection as he once did.

Mother starves David, causing him to try to get food in any way he can. He steals lunches at school, begs for food on the way to school and even eats from the garbage and the dogs' dish. One time after

eating frozen food from the freezer at school, David's mother forces him to vomit. She then makes him eat his own vomit. She also forces him to swallow ammonia and Clorox. She makes him sleep out in the garage. He is forced to wear the same dirty, ragged clothes every day to school. She treats his brothers as sons, while forcing David to do all the chores around the house. He has virtually become her slave.

One summer day, when David is weak with hunger and trying to complete his chores, Mother accidentally stabs David in the stomach with a knife. Although he is seriously injured and bleeding, she expects David to finish the dishes. David is shocked and angry when Father refuses to do anything about his injury. He loses all respect for him. Mother treats David's wound as though she were caring for a wounded animal, proficiently, but without any compassion. She even allows David to play with his brothers for a short time. She feeds him and helps him change his bloody shirt. A few days later, David realizes his wound is infected, but he refuses to ask Mother for help. He feels proud of himself for dealing with the wound on his own.

After the "accident" with the knife, David's father spends less and less time at home. David still looks upon his father in some way as a protector because Mother is not as bad to him when Father is home. Mother continues to withhold food from David and continues to play "games" with him. One of her favorite games is to send him to clean the bathroom within a certain time limit. She places a bucket filled with ammonia and Clorox in the room with him and shuts the door. The poisonous fumes cause him to choke and make his eyes water. Another one of her "games" is to fill the tub with cold water and have David get into the tub with his nostrils just above the water. He spends hours in the cold water before she allows him to get out.

Throughout these "games," David does his best to survive. He experiences mixed emotions. At times, he is strong and determined. Then he feels as though he has no hope. He realizes that the promises his father has made to take him away are

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just a fantasy. He begins to lose faith in God. He represses his emotions but feels hatred for everyone and everything. David's hopes really hit bottom when his father decides to leave the family for good. David, his brothers and Mother take Father's clothes to him at the hotel where he is staying. David is angry with him but also jealous that Father has escaped, but he has not. On the way home, Mother makes a comment about Father no longer being around to protect David. David knows it is only a matter of time before she kills him. He says a prayer in desperation.

Finally, the story turns to David as an adult. Looking at the ocean, he reflects on his past life and how blessed he is now. He realizes that the challenges of his past have made him a stronger person. David takes his young son to a favorite place from his past -- the Russian River. They watch a sunset together and express their love for one another.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How did David feel when he told his teachers, the school nurse, the principal and the police officer about Mother?

He felt reluctant to say anything at first. Then he was ashamed because he felt that the abuse was his fault. He became worried when he saw his teacher crying. He was also fearful that he would receive more punishment for telling.

Literary Analysis

Name several ways the reader can tell that David's father was bothered by the way Mother treated David. What were some of the ways he tried to help David?

Father bought two paint-by-number sets behind Mother's back as Christmas presents for David. He argued with her about it. Father sneaked scraps of food to David when Mother refused to feed him. He tried to change her mind about feeding David. David noticed that Mother and Father were arguing more often. When Mother stabbed David, Father helped him put the dishes away. Father began to spend less time at home. When Father was home, he helped David wash the dishes and spent time talking to him. He promised to one day take David away with him. David noticed that Father had dark circles under his eyes. His shoulders were slumped, and his hair was turning gray. One night Father came home drunk with a friend and said he couldn't take it anymore. He mumbled that he was sorry. He finally moved out for good. David could see sadness in Father's eyes when the family left him by the hotel where he was staying. All of these things tell the reader that Father was bothered by David's abuse.

Inferential Comprehension

Describe the way David's brothers behaved toward David most of the time when Mother was home. Contrast this with their behavior toward David when Mother allowed him to play with them or when Mother was not at home.

His brothers ignored David when Mother was around. They gave him dirty looks and embarrassed him in front of their friends. They even abused David at Mother's command. His younger brother Russell watched David's every move to make sure he didn't steal food. He even made up tales so Mother would punish David. When Mother allowed David to play with the others, they accepted him. He even felt friendship and warmth from them. David's brother Stan played with him at school but ignored him at home.

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Constructing Meaning

Why do you think it took so long for David to be removed from his abusive home?

Several factors contributed to David's continued abuse. David's father, who was one of the first people to know that David was being abused, did virtually nothing to help David. David's mother was very good at putting up a good appearance in public. Teachers who suspected that David was being abused may have been afraid to say something or felt that they didn't have enough evidence to make an accusation. The same might have been true for neighbors and other family members. People often do not want to become involved because the accusation might turn out to be false. They do not want to jeopardize their relationship with the suspected abuser. They may also have feared that things might have become worse for David if they didn't have enough evidence to prove that the mother was abusive.

said he was "like a rat in a cage." Have the students choose at least three incidents of abuse from the book. Using similes, metaphors or other figurative language, they should write an original sentence or two describing how David might have felt when he was treated in that way.

Understanding Hist/Cultural Factors *A Child Called "It"* was written from a first person point of view and told a personal story of abuse. In the section of the book entitled "Perspectives on Child Abuse," some facts are given. Using the resources cited in the book, as well as other sources, have the students write a short research paper on child abuse. They can include statistics, causes of abuse, and possible ways to help prevent it. They may also want to include information on other abuse cases.

Teachable Skills

Making Predictions Discuss as a class some of the reasons people abuse children. Do research if necessary. Because it is not clear from the book what led to Mother's abuse of David, have the students hypothesize about the reasons. One factor, of course, was her alcohol abuse. What caused her to begin drinking so heavily? Discuss why they think David does not abuse his own child, as many adults who were abused as children abuse their own children.

Understanding Characterization Have the students put themselves in David's place after his father left the family. The students should write a letter from David to his father at the hotel. They should include David's thoughts and feelings in the body of the letter. The students should also follow the correct form when writing the letter.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning Throughout the book, David used figurative language to describe how he felt when his mother abused him. For example, when she made him sleep under the table with newspapers for a blanket, he