

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Nothing's Fair in Fifth Grade by Barthe DeClements

## Book Information

Barthe DeClements, Nothing's Fair in Fifth Grade

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Book Level: 3.7

Interest Level: MG

A fifth grade class, repelled by the overweight new student who has serious home problems, finally learns to accept her.

**Award:** State Award

**Topics:** Community Life, School; Humor/Funny, Funny; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 4-6

## Main Characters

Diane Jenny's outspoken friend who befriends Elsie after Elsie tutors her in math

Diane's mother Diane's parent, who alters Elsie's pants so they fit Elsie; she criticizes Mrs. Edwards's neglect of Elsie

Elsie Edwards a sad, obese fifth-grader whose mother threatens to send her to boarding school; her mother places her on a strict diet

Jack Jenny's classmate who does not tattle when Elsie accidentally hits him with a bat

Jenifer Sawyer (Jenny) a fifth-grade girl who discovers that it is wrong to judge people she does not know

Kenny Sawyer Jenny's three-year-old brother

Marianne Jenny's classmate who is known for her kindness

Mr. Douglas the principal, who warns Elsie that he will not tolerate her antics

Mr. Edwards Elsie's father, who no longer visits Elsie because his girlfriend is uncomfortable around her

Mr. Marshall Jenny's gym teacher, who encourages the class to be kind to Elsie

Mr. Sawyer Jenny's father, who thinks his wife should care for their children and their house

Mrs. Edwards Elsie's unforgiving mother, who resents Elsie's obesity

Mrs. Hanson Jenny's strict fifth-grade teacher, who is persuaded to help Elsie

Mrs. Sawyer Jenny's understanding mother, who becomes assertive with Jenny's father after she gets a job

Robyn Edwards Elsie's little sister, who is spoiled by her mother at Elsie's expense

Sharon Jenny's friend who slowly begins to accept Elsie

the truck driver a man who gives the children a ride in his truck; the children fear he is kidnapping them

## Vocabulary

**confident** sure or positive

**debts** things that are owed

**exemplary** good enough to be an example for others

**plump** having a round, full body

**probation** a trial period

**tutor** someone who teaches another person, usually on a one-to-one basis

## Synopsis

When obese Elsie Edwards joins Mrs. Hanson's fifth grade class, Jenny and her friends Sharon and Diane think she is disgusting, especially when Elsie scrounges for extra food at lunch. Since Elsie is on a strict diet, Mrs. Hanson chastises Elsie for scrounging. Soon afterward someone starts stealing money from desks in Mrs. Hanson's room. One day Jenny sees Elsie buying licorice with money that she believes Elsie stole, since Elsie's diet does not permit candy. She considers tattling on Elsie, but the next day at lunch Mrs. Hanson catches Elsie with the candy and calls Elsie's mother. Elsie, Mrs. Edwards, and the principal meet after school in the principal's office. When Jenny, Sharon, and Diane peek through the office window, they can see that neither Elsie nor Mrs. Edwards is happy.

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Although Jenny knows that Elsie has problems, Jenny also has a problem: she does not understand fractions. Jenny's problem worsens when the flu causes her to miss several days of school. When she returns to school, she is struggling with an arithmetic assignment, so Elsie offers to help. Jenny rudely refuses assistance from "a thief."

A few weeks later Elsie's loose skirt falls off in class. When Elsie runs from the roomful of laughing classmates, Mrs. Hanson sends Jenny to check on her. Elsie, crying hopelessly, admits that she knows no one likes her and that her mother is sending her to boarding school in the fall. Upon hearing Elsie's confession, Jenny realizes that Elsie needs a friend. When she offers to be Elsie's friend, however, Elsie says that the friendship will last only until Jenny no longer feels sorry for her. At recess Jenny defends Elsie against Sharon and Diane's criticism.

Jenny reluctantly takes her report card home after school. Because Jenny received a D minus in math, Jenny's parents decide that she needs a tutor. Jenny is worried about the expense until she remembers Elsie's math ability. She asks her mother if Elsie can tutor her for fifty cents an hour; she persuades her mother to agree by saying that Elsie needs the money to repay the money she stole. Her mother agrees to try Jenny's suggestion. The next morning Jenny explains about the tutoring to her friends, hoping her friends will not reject her if she befriends Elsie. The girls accept Jenny's explanation. That night after dinner Jenny's mother speaks to Mrs. Edwards, who is initially offended at the suggestion that Elsie needs money but eventually agrees to let Elsie tutor.

After Elsie starts tutoring Jenny, Elsie gradually repays all of her debts. Jenny improves quickly in math, and all is going well until Mrs. Hanson discovers that the class's book order money is missing. After class Mrs. Hanson searches Elsie but does not find the money. The following day Mrs. Hanson admits that she accidentally misplaced the money, but Jenny is angry that Mrs. Hanson does not apologize to Elsie. It is also the day of the math

test, and Jenny receives a B minus! After school Jenny's mother offers to reward Jenny and Elsie with ice cream but buys them records instead after Elsie mentions her diet.

The next day Jenny visits Elsie's house with her little brother Kenny. The girls are having a good time until Elsie's little sister Robyn makes a mess. Elsie is cleaning up when Mrs. Edwards arrives and blames Elsie. When Jenny tries to defend Elsie, Mrs. Edwards sends Jenny and Kenny home.

That Monday Jenny stops at Diane's house and mentions to Diane's mother how Elsie has helped her in math. Diane's mother asks Jenny to bring Elsie to Diane's house after school that day because Diane received a C minus in math. After Elsie helps Diane understand the math, Diane invites Elsie to her slumber party. During the party the girls ask Elsie about her weight. Elsie explains that she was always plump, but both she and her mother started overeating to deal with the sadness of Elsie's parents' divorce. When Elsie's mother put them both on a diet, Elsie's mother lost weight, but Elsie kept sneaking food. Shortly after Elsie's explanation, Diane's mother comes in and notices the pins in Elsie's pants. Diane's mother insists on altering them to fit. However, after Elsie goes home the next morning, Mrs. Edwards calls and tells Diane's mother to mind her own business. Diane's mother says that Mrs. Edwards ought to pay attention to her own daughter.

Jenny starts baby-sitting for Kenny while her mother goes to her new job. One Saturday when her father is bowling, Jenny invites her friends to her house. Elsie brings Robyn. When her friends get bored, Elsie offers to treat everyone to the carnival at the shopping mall. The children start walking, but Diane gets tired and waves down a truck to hitch a ride. Elsie objects but follows when Robyn climbs into the back of the truck with everyone else. Elsie's fears increase when the truck drives them far out of town. Terrified, the girls jump out of the truck at a stoplight. Unfortunately, Robyn defies Elsie and goes back for her purse. The truck drives off with Robyn before Elsie can pull her out. The police are notified, and

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Elsie worries that her mother will blame her and definitely decide to send her to boarding school. When Elsie's mother arrives, she says, "This is it for you, Elsie." Shortly afterward, Robyn is returned unharmed.

Later, when Jenny's family goes to dinner, Jenny says that she feels sorry for Elsie. Her mother, however, reminds Jenny that Elsie was responsible for Robyn and scolds Jenny for endangering Kenny. The scolding sparks an argument between Jenny's parents; when Jenny's father implies that the incident was Jenny's mother's fault for being at work, Jenny's mother gets angry at him for leaving the children to go bowling.

On Monday Elsie tells her friends that she is being sent to a boarding school summer camp in June. After school Jenny persuades her mother to visit Mrs. Edwards to talk her out of sending Elsie away. Mrs. Edwards refuses to listen. Eventually Jenny asks Mrs. Hanson to help Elsie, arguing that Elsie has greatly improved and even helped Jenny and Diane with their math. Mrs. Hanson agrees to arrange a conference with Mrs. Edwards.

Later Elsie calls Jenny to say that her mother and the principal have agreed to give her another chance as long as she does not make any mistakes for the rest of the school year. Unfortunately, the next week Elsie accidentally hits her classmate Jack with a bat at recess. Jenny and Sharon beg Jack not to report Elsie, and they wait anxiously to see what will happen. After school Jenny calls Jack, and he says he will not tattle. At the end of the school year, the girls are delighted when Elsie is given permission to return the next year because of her exemplary behavior.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

How does Jenny's father feel about his wife's job?

*First, Jenny's father resents his wife's job because he does not like the implication that he is not able to provide for his family. In addition, he also dislikes watching the children and doing the housework on the two days a week that Jenny's mother works. Finally, he does not feel that he should have to make any changes in his routine to accommodate his wife's job; in fact, he actually depends on Jenny to operate the household in his wife's absence.*

### Literary Analysis

How does Elsie's life change by the end of this story?

*In the beginning of this story, Elsie not only has no friends (except for Marianne, who is occasionally kind to her), but both her mother and her teacher disapprove of her behavior. She cannot control her eating, she steals to get money for food, and she has difficulty trusting others. She also is routinely teased by her classmates and lives under the constant threat of being sent away to boarding school. By the end of the story, Elsie has three friends who are willing to defend her against her classmates, she has redeemed herself to her teacher and the principal, and her mother has been persuaded to give her another chance.*

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## Inferential Comprehension

Why is Elsie's mother known as "Mrs. Edwards" when the other mothers in this story are known as "Diane's mother" and "Sharon's mother"?

*The author is trying to show that Mrs. Edwards is not a very good mother to Elsie. Unlike the other mothers in this story, Mrs. Edwards does not really want to be associated with her daughter. She does not like to be seen in public with her, so she does not take her to the movies. She even plans to send Elsie to a boarding school so that she does not have to deal with Elsie anymore. In addition, she does not tend to Elsie's needs, letting Elsie wear clothing that does not fit and ignoring Elsie's longing for loving attention. Instead, Mrs. Edwards speaks harshly and abusively to Elsie, chiding her for being fat, for not taking good care of Robyn, and for being untrustworthy. On the other hand, the other mothers in this story try to help their children resolve their problems in constructive ways. For instance, when Jenny and Diane are struggling in math, their mothers hire Elsie to tutor them. Sharon's mother showers Sharon with pretty clothes. Even when Jenny makes a major mistake and takes her brother hitchhiking, her mother quickly forgives her, while several people have to talk to Mrs. Edwards before she will reconsider her harsh judgment of Elsie.*

## Constructing Meaning

How do you feel about how Elsie's classmates treat her in this story?

*Answers will vary. Some students might feel that Elsie's classmates are unnecessarily cruel and judgmental and should try to get to know her before they decide what kind of person she is. Other students may feel that Elsie does many things to show her classmates that she deserves their dislike, such as stealing money and begging food from people.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Feelings** Elsie has very strong feelings about the things that happen to her in this book. Have the students write a diary entry

from Elsie's perspective about one event in the book.

**Identifying Persuasive Language** When Mrs. Edwards realized how much weight she and Elsie had gained after her divorce, she placed them both on diets. Mrs. Edwards became angry and frustrated with Elsie when Elsie did not stick to her diet. Have students make a list of reasons that Mrs. Edwards could have given Elsie for staying on the diet as well as a list of rewards that she could have used to persuade Elsie to cooperate.

**Recognizing Plot** Jenny's treatment of Elsie changes drastically in this story. Have the students create a plot line showing how Jenny's relationship with Elsie changes. Have the students include the events that motivate these changes in Jenny's behavior.

**Extending Meaning** Jenny states that Mrs. Hanson gives her "a pain" and is very strict. Have the students assess how Mrs. Hanson treats her class by giving Mrs. Hanson a "report card." Students should list five criteria for good teachers on their cards. Across from the criteria should be letter grades and explanatory comments.