

DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITY GUIDE
LAUGH ALONG LESSONS by HELEN LESTER
Illustrated by LYNN MUNSINGER

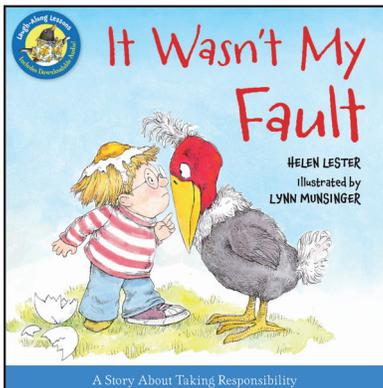


*A new series featuring
Helen Lester and Lynn Munsinger's quirky,
fallible and lovable characters as they
learn valuable life lessons*



It Wasn't My Fault by HELEN LESTER

Illustrated by LYNN MUNSINGER



Book Summary: Murdley Gurdson doesn't understand why things never seem to go his way. From out-of-control toothpaste to tangled kite strings, Murdley often finds himself in the middle of a mess—and he always looks for someone else to blame for it. That's what happens when a startled bird happens to lay her egg right on the top of Murdley's head! Murdley blames the bird, of course, who is eager to pass the blame on to someone else—and thus begins a hilarious chain of events that ends up carrying the responsibility for the mis-laid egg right back to Murdley's own feet! Instead of continuing the fault finding, Murdley and his new animal friends turn the problem into a celebration, realizing that pointing fingers is not nearly as much fun as working together.

Discussion Questions for Read Aloud

- At first, Murdley and the animals are all ready to blame someone else for their own actions. Have you ever blamed someone else for something that was actually your responsibility? Why did you do that, and what could you have done differently?
- Murdley is not pleased to have an egg on his head, but his friends help him turn the problem into something good—something delicious, in fact! Can you think of a time where you or someone you know made the best of a bad situation, just like Murdley and his friends did?

- Why do you suppose Murdley often jumps immediately into blaming someone else when things go wrong, instead of taking responsibility himself?
- When in the book did you first suspect that Murdley might be at least a little bit responsible for the egg on his head? What made you suspicious?
- Why does Murdley cry when he realizes that it was his missing shoe that started the whole chain of events? How do the animals help him feel better? At the end of the book, how do you think Murdley has changed? What in the book makes you think that?

Teaching Ideas

Exploring other perspectives: Ask students to think of a time when they felt wronged in some way, as Murdley did when the bird laid an egg on his head. Murdley didn't directly cause the bird to lay the egg, but as he discovers, a little detective work and deep thinking helped him see his part in the problem. Ask students to write for a few minutes about the problem they encountered and the part the other person (or people) played. Stop them, and ask them to write for a few minutes about the same problem, but this time, from the other person's perspective. You may want to divide students into small groups to share and discuss, or you may want to use students' writing to spark a whole-class discussion about responsibility in relationships—or other topics that come up in students' writing. If your students are beginning writers (or not yet writing) you could have them tell the story out loud instead of writing it down.

Happy accidents: Sometimes when artists are working and they make a mistake, instead of getting upset, they turn the mistake into a “happy accident,” meaning, they change their original plan so that it includes (and is inspired by) the thing that originally started as a mistake. Be on the lookout for this wonderful teaching opportunity—if you notice a student becoming upset

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about something he or she calls a mistake, you can teach her to celebrate the happy accident and turn it into something brand new—just as Murdley and his friends turned the egg on his head into a yummy meal!

Practice with sequencing: Because of its chain-of-events structure, this book provides wonderful opportunities for young children to practice sequencing. You can support them as they retell the story to sequence the events chronologically. For very young children or children needing concrete support with retelling and sequencing, you might even make cards with pictures of Murdley and the animals on them and ask them to use those cards as prompts as they retell the story chronologically.

A Writing Lesson: Chain Stories

Materials Needed: A copy of Writing materials and paper for each student.

Background Knowledge: It will be helpful if you have read *It Wasn't My Fault* with your students several times and discussed the ways in which each character's actions affect the next before attempting this lesson. *It Wasn't My Fault* fits beautifully within a fiction-writing study as it offers a wonderful example of a chain story, or cumulative tale, in which each event directly affects the next, often leading to an unexpected end or a lesson. If you are working with more experienced writers, you might ask students to compare several tales which use this structure before writing one of their own. *This lesson assumes that students are writing independently, but if you are working with less experienced or beginning writers, you might consider asking students to contribute ideas to one class story.*

Set Up: Gather your students in the class meeting place with their notebooks (or loose-leaf paper, depending on what is comfortable and typical for your class).

Introduction: Remind students of the ways in which each character's actions affect the next in the story *It Wasn't My Fault*. Tell them that they will have the opportunity to write this kind of story—a chain story—today. Sometimes, writers of chain stories start by inventing a character who has a problem, and then they imagine the chain of events related to that problem. You may want to model this for your students—inventing a character with a problem, and then thinking about a chain of characters and events that could follow. You might model making notes about this to show students how writers often make a plan before beginning to write. You might ask them to start making a plan on their note paper before you send them back to their seats to write.

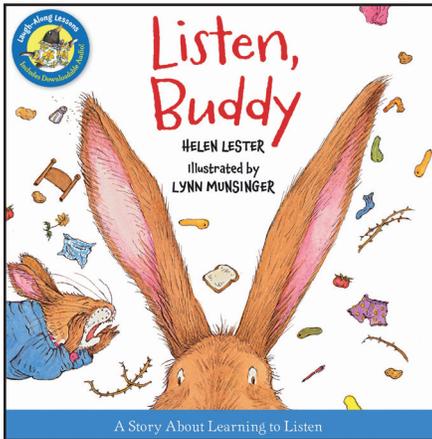
Work Time: As students work, you can circulate and support them. Some students may need support with making sure the characters and events connect in ways that make sense. Some students may need support with drawing a conclusion or a lesson from the sequence of events they create. Some students may simply need a nudge to come up with a character or with a problem. You might carry *It Wasn't My Fault* with you as go so that you have it on hand to study with students who would benefit from a concrete example.

Share: Students are not likely to finish their stories in one session—but they will still be itching to share their work. You might have students read their drafts to partners, or you might choose a student or two who has done something in particular that you think would benefit other students to hear about—someone who has used his notebook to make a clear plan for the chain of events, for example, or someone who has created a story with a lesson, as Helen Lester did.



Listen Buddy by HELEN LESTER

Illustrated by LYNN MUNSINGER



Book Summary: In spite of his big, beautiful ears, Buddy doesn't listen. When his parents speak to him, he is perfectly able to *hear* them, but because he doesn't pay attention, he often mixes up the message—much to the consternation of his patient parents. They are exasperated when he brings them a hen instead of a pen, a load of wash instead of a load of squash, and other mix-ups. Finally, Buddy's lack of attention gets him into serious trouble when he doesn't listen to his parents' directions, takes a wrong turn, and ends up near the cave of the Scruffy Varmint. This rascal has much less patience for Buddy than his parents do! It's a close shave, but Buddy arrives home safe and sound, where he realizes that other people—especially his parents—are worth listening to.

Discussion Questions for Read Aloud

- Why doesn't Buddy listen to his parents? What do you imagine he is thinking or doing that keeps him from taking in what they are saying?
- What are some things that Buddy mixes up because he isn't listening carefully?
- How do you think Buddy's parents feel when he doesn't listen to them?
- Have you ever been having a conversation with someone who is distracted and you realize that they haven't been paying attention? How did you feel? What did you do? Have you ever been the person who wasn't paying attention?

- Why is listening and paying attention an important part of relationships?

Teaching Ideas

Rhyming mistakes: Buddy's mistakes often involve just slightly mishearing a word or two so that he ends up with a slice of bed instead of bread, or fifty potatoes instead of fifteen tomatoes. Your students will be quick to notice that Buddy's mistakes rhyme. can be a fun way to engage students in some practice with rhyming words. You might ask them to identify all of the rhymes in the story, and then to invent their own rhyming mistakes to add to the story. You could have them invent both what Buddy's parents say and how he mishears them. If they need more support, you could set them up by offering a direction (like, "please walk the dog," and asking them to supply the mistake.

Supporting active listening in the classroom: School is a perfect place to practice the kind of active listening that Buddy has a hard time with early in the story. You will have plenty of opportunities to notice students who have misheard directions because they haven't been paying close attention. You might try addressing this playfully – instead of responding with frustration, remind them about Buddy! You might even ask kids to help you invent a signal or word that you could use to quietly and respectfully nudge students back on track when you see that their minds are wandering.

Getting the message straight: As an illustration of how important careful listening is to getting a message straight, after reading engage your students in a quick round of the game telephone (the class sits in a circle and one person whispers a message in the next person's ear, who must then pass it on. The goal is to send the message around the circle and have it come back intact – but this rarely happens, much to everyone's delight and amusement.)

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Listen Buddy by HELEN LESTER Illustrated by LYNN MUNSINGER

A Lesson: Creating and Following Directions

Materials Needed:

A copy of Writing materials and paper

Background Knowledge: It will be helpful if your students are familiar with *Listen Buddy* and have discussed what Buddy learns about the importance of paying attention. This lesson could fit well within the context of a study of procedural writing, though it can stand on its own as well. *If your students are not yet experienced writers, you might either have them simply say their directions out loud without writing them, or you might support the class by coming up with a set of simple directions that you can say to them that they will practice all together.*

Set Up: Gather your students in your class meeting place.

Introduction: Tell your students that they are going to have a chance to practice paying attention, just like Buddy. Explain that they will work in partnerships. Each child will be writing a set of simple directions that the other child will then practice following. Writers should choose to describe a task that can be completed in the classroom. Depending on your students' level of experience as writers, you can ask them to write simpler or more sophisticated directions. You might come prepared with a few examples to share —students might write directions for how to draw a rabbit, for example, or they might write directions for sharpening a pencil. After children have written their directions, they will each have a chance to read them to their partners, and partners will practice listening very carefully so that they follow the directions closely.

Work Time: As the students write their directions, you can circulate and help, prompt and encourage. Midway through, you'll stop students and ask them to finish up. When they've finished writing, they can take turns reading their directions to each other and following them in the classroom. Make sure you ask students to say their directions out loud rather than simply trading papers so that they can practice listening carefully and following directions accurately, as Buddy learned to do.

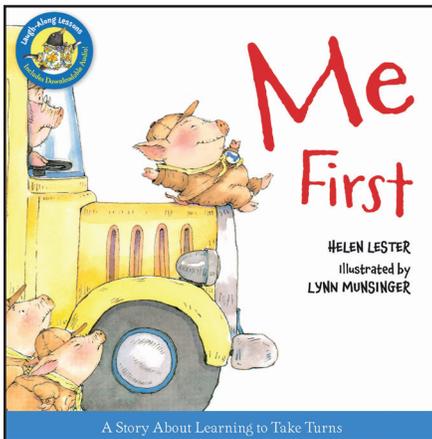
Share: Gather your students together to debrief about this experience. What was harder than they expected? What was easier? What did they learn from being the person writing the directions? What did they learn from being the person following directions?



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Me First by HELEN LESTER Illustrated by LYNN MUNSINGER



Book Summary: Pinkerton is a “me first” (and “me only,” in fact) kind of pig. He does whatever it takes to be the first on the bus, the first to the table, the first in the water at camp. He has no idea of the chaos and hurt feelings this kind of behavior leaves in its wake because he is too busy making sure he’s at the front of the line. One day, while hiking along the beach, Pinkerton and the other pigs hear a voice asking if anyone would care for a sandwich —of course, Pinkerton plows ahead, yelling, “Me first!” at the top of his lungs. He is in for a great surprise – there is no tasty sandwich waiting for him, but instead, a small *Sandwich*, who wants to be cared for. A very disappointed Pinkerton spends the day taking care of the little witch and her sandy home, and in so doing, discovers that caring for others instead of only caring about himself is actually a really wonderful thing. At the end of the day, Pinkerton is a changed (and much happier) pig.

Discussion Questions for Read Aloud

Lynn Munsinger’s illustrations beautifully capture the way it feels to be around someone like Pinkerton who lets the desire to be first get in the way of caring about others. Talk about how that feels – and how the illustrations reveal those feelings.

Why don’t the other pigs stand up to Pinkerton when he pushes them aside so that he can be first?

Do you think that being first really makes Pinkerton (and people in general) happy? Why or why not? Because Pinkerton is always trying to be of other people, he doesn’t know what it feels like to be other people. How does the Sandwich help him understand that first isn’t best?

Do you think the Sandwich really wanted someone to care for her, or do you think she was just trying to teach Pinkerton a lesson? Why?

Do you know anyone like Pinkerton who always wants to be first? Can you think of some ways you might try to help that person, like the Sandwich helped Pinkerton, instead of reacting with anger?

How does Pinkerton change over the course of the book?

Teaching Ideas

Role Playing: provides some wonderful opportunities for students to role play – both situations from the book, and situations that might occur in their lives. You might ask students to act out some scenes from the book in which Pinkerton is pushing others aside in order to be first. You might talk about what the other pigs might have done to tell Pinkerton that what he was doing wasn’t ok, and then ask students to act that out. You might then ask students to come up with their own scenarios in which someone isn’t being nice, and guide them through role plays in which they practice solving the problem.

Solving the turn-taking problem: Is turn-taking ever a problem in your classroom? provides a perfect launching place for a discussion about the importance of taking turns. After discussing what Pinkerton learns, you might challenge your class to help you tackle whatever the turn taking issue of the moment is in your classroom – being first in line to wash hands before lunch, or being first out the door at recess, or however this very common classroom issue plays out. Asking students themselves to take on the problem and help solve it often helps them feel more invested in making the solution work.

Me First by HELEN LESTER
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Standing up to bullies: Pinkerton, at the beginning of the book, is a bit of a bully. can also be a wonderful addition to any conversation about bullying and it will fit right in with any anti-bullying initiative. You might use the book to begin a discussion about how the other pigs might have reacted differently, instead of allowing Pinkerton to push them around. What might they have done to stick up for themselves? And most importantly, what can students do when someone is not treating them nicely in real life? You might even brainstorm a list of specific words kids might use.

A Writing Lesson: Stories about Caring

Materials Needed:

A copy of *Students* will need whichever writing materials are used in your class.

Background Knowledge: Although this lesson could be taught in a variety of contexts, it works particularly well as part of a kindness initiative or as part of community-building work in your classroom. It could also fit well within a study of personal essay or personal narrative writing. Your students will benefit from being familiar with *Me First*. You will want to have read and discussed the book at least once before teaching this lesson, highlighting the ways in which caring for others can make people feel good.

Set Up: Gather your students in your class' meeting area. They will not need to bring anything with them.

Introduction: Ask your students to think about a time when, like Pinkerton, they felt good about caring for or doing something nice for someone else. In the story *Me First*, Pinkerton is changed for the better by the experience of helping the Sandwich – even though it's hard work, work he may never have done before. You may want to model for your students by telling a quick story of your own about a time when you felt good about

helping someone. Tell your students that they are going to have a chance to write the story of a time when they were changed for the better by helping someone else, and that you will collect all of their “stories about caring” into a class storybook. You may ask students to turn and talk to a partner on the rug to help them come up with ideas before sending them off to write.

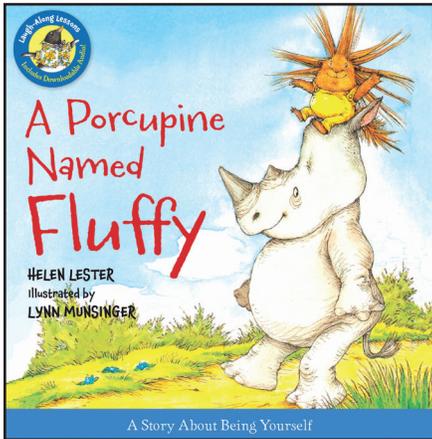
Work Time: As your students begin writing their stories, circulate among them and offer suggestions and prompts. They are not likely to finish their stories in one writing session. You may suggest they finish their stories at home for homework, or you may give them time on other days. Some students might benefit from planning help on the first day – you might help them get started writing an outline of their story, or you might suggest that they tell the story out loud before they begin writing.

Share: As you gather your students together, you might rally their energy to finish their stories so that they can be gathered into a collection all about caring. You might start making plans for how you will share their stories with others. Perhaps your students will want to read their stories to a younger class, talking to that class about the benefits of being helpful. Perhaps they will want to bring a copy of their book to a local library or bookstore. There are many options!



DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITY GUIDE

A Porcupine Named Fluffy by HELEN LESTER Illustrated by LYNN MUNSINGER



Book Summary: Fluffy is an unlikely name for a prickly, pokey porcupine, and Fluffy the porcupine knows it. He spends lots of time trying to change himself so that he is more like his name, but nothing works – he is still as sharp and prickly as all porcupines are. When Fluffy meets a grouchy rhinoceros, at first he might be a little frightened. And when the rhinoceros begins to laugh hysterically at Fluffy's name, he might be a little annoyed. But when he learns the rhino's equally unlikely name, the two share the kind of laughter that can only lead to life long friendship. At the story's end, Fluffy the porcupine is just as prickly and pokey as ever, but he's happy to be who he is; and he's happy to have a new friend who understands how important it is to be oneself.

Discussion Questions for Read Aloud

- What does Fluffy do to try to make himself fluffier? Do any of his attempts work?
- Why is Fluffy trying so hard to change the way he is?
- Why might Hippo the rhinoceros have felt like giving Fluffy a hard time when he first met him? Do you think Hippo liked being named Hippo, at first? Do you think that might have made him cranky? Why?
- Can you think of a time when you didn't feel great about yourself and it made you treat someone else badly?

- Why do Hippo and Fluffy laugh so hard when they learn each other's names?
- How does Fluffy change from the beginning of the story to the end? How does Hippo change? Why?

Teaching Ideas

What makes us who we are? At first, Fluffy the porcupine wants desperately to change his prickles into soft, fluffy fur – when his prickles are actually a part of what makes him who he is! Ask students to choose one thing about themselves that they would change if they could. Then ask them to think and write about how that one thing is a part of what makes them who they are.

Discovering common ground: Fluffy and Hippo don't have a whole lot in common, and at first glance seem like pretty unlikely friends. After talking a little bit, they discover some common ground – they both have very unusual names! Ask students to think about how people don't need to be exactly alike to become wonderful friends – and how often, keeping an open mind and talking to people who seem different at first can reveal lots of commonalities. You might even ask students to partner up with someone they don't usually talk to, and to spend some time getting to know each other, with the goal being to find one thing they have in common to share back with the group. This can be a great community building activity, a great way to start a story, or a great addition to a conversation about the way characters in the books they read relate to each other, and how first impressions are definitely not always accurate.

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A Porcupine Named Fluffy by HELEN LESTER
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**A Lesson: A Portrait of a Friend:
Celebrating Details**

Materials Needed:

Drawing materials of your choice, set up on tables around the room

Drawing paper for each child

Background Knowledge: You'll want to have read *A Porcupine Named Fluffy* and talked about how good friends accept each other for who they are. This lesson can serve as a community building activity or as part of a portrait study during art time.

Set Up: Gather your students together at your class meeting place. You will need to have the room set up so that students can later work in pairs, facing each other.

Introduction: Tell your student that today, instead of making self-portraits (which they may be more familiar with), they'll be creating portraits of a friend. Each student will draw another student's face. You may have students choose their own partners, or you may create partnerships yourself to ensure that students are paired up with classmates they don't generally tend to work with. Before sending them off to draw, discuss the fact that just like Fluffy and Hippo, good friends come in all different shapes and sizes. As they work today, they'll need to pay close attention to all of the little details of their partners' faces.

Work Time: Before your students actually start to draw, you might suggest that they spend a few minutes simply studying each other's faces, paying attention to every detail. As they begin to work, you can circulate. You may need to support younger students, especially, with materials management. You may also want to remind students to study each other carefully and to incorporate details into their portraits.

Share: You may suggest that students leave their portraits at their seats so that you can do a "museum share," during which students walk around the room as though it is a museum, admiring each other's work. You may add on to this lesson by asking students to write a description of their friend. The portraits and descriptions can make for a wonderful bulletin board about friendship!

