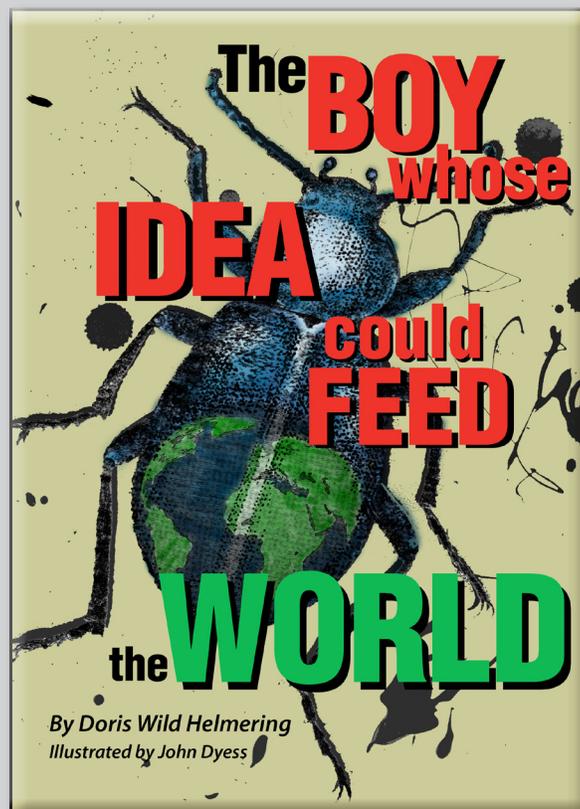

The Parent Teacher Discussion **GUIDE**

Motivation, Bullying, Diversity,
Self Esteem, Kindness, Sadness and Loss
The Environment and Family Values

Including Excerpts from



By Doris Wild Helmering

The Parent Teacher Discussion Guide

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About the Author:

Doris Wild Helmering is a clinical social worker, nationally known author, television and radio personality, and has written eight self-help books, two children's books, numerous booklets, and a weekly syndicated newspaper column for 24-years. She is in private practice where she does marriage and family therapy as well as counseling parents and kids. She also has served as a consultant to a number of school districts. Doris believes most problems are solvable. All it takes is getting the right information and using it for changing one's behavior. Find out more by visiting: www.doriswildhelmering.com.



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The Parent Teacher Discussion Guide

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A Special Note

The Parent Teacher Discussion Guide

“The Parent Teacher Discussion Guide,” was written as a follow-up to the book, “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World.”

When writing “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World,” my goal was to demonstrate the process whereby an unmotivated kid, who has little interest in school and a poor school record generally, can turn around, discover what it means to be motivated, and find success in a variety of areas, in a fun, far-out story guaranteed to catch the imagination of a middle grader. While writing this book, I wound up indirectly touching on issues that come with the territory of being in this age group. Bullying, diversity, family values, sadness and loss, self-image and self-esteem, and what a child might want to be when he or she grows up. I couldn’t resist. After all I’m a family counselor, I write self-help books and have consulted for various school districts. What I had hoped to get across was, “Hey, kid, you’re not alone in the way you think and feel.” Most middle graders have similar questions and are dealing with almost identical issues as they move through grade school.

In “The Parent Teacher Discussion Guide,” these issues are dealt with directly. Excerpts from “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World,” are included as a springboard to start the conversation with your own child or with an entire class. As these discussions unfold I believe you’ll discover quite a lot about how your middle grader thinks and feels. If these discussions take place in a classroom, it will quickly become evident to your middle graders that many of their classmates have similar questions, struggles and concerns.

My philosophy: Throw a kid the ball, step back and listen, listen, listen, and be reassured they will not only catch the ball but run with it. Never have I been disappointed in how honest, perceptive, candid and bright middle graders can be given the right prompts in a safe environment.

One other note: I’ve been asked: Before using, “The Parent Teacher Discussion Guide” should you, your child or students read, “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World?” Based on feedback I’ve received, this book definitely gets kids thinking about a variety of issues. And having read the book prior will make for a more complete, fun, lively and introspective discussion. On the other hand, I’ve included enough excerpts from, “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World” to make this book a stand alone and to get the discussion rolling on these critical topics that touch the lives of all middle graders.

How to Motivate a Kid: Step-by-Step

Excerpt from Chapter One: “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World.”

“Well, let’s get started,” said Mr. D, the new school counselor.

“Your teacher, Ms. Hayes, was interested in the two of us talking, Alex. She said you weren’t doing so well in school. You seem to be having trouble concentrating, staying on track. So what do you think Alex?”

Alex shrugged.

Mr. D continued. “Ms. Hayes is concerned because she says that when she assigns a paper in class, often you turn it in half-finished. The same with your homework.”

What’s new, Alex thought. Every teacher he’d had in the past had the same complaints.

As Alex was thinking over his unhappy situation, he spied a ladybug inching her way across the sofa. “Ladybugs bring good luck,” he could hear his grandmother’s voice saying. Now, sitting in the school counselor’s office once again, Alex figured he needed some good luck.

“I see we have a visitor,” Mr. D said casually. “Maybe Alex, if you sit quietly and keep your hand still, that ladybug will climb onto your hand.”

This guy wants me to let a ladybug crawl up on my hand? Strange! Totally weird!!

Interrupting Alex’s thoughts once again, Mr. D asked him which subject he liked best in school. It didn’t take long for Alex to answer that question.

“Recess,” Alex said.

“Most kids like recess best. And after recess, and of course, lunch, what’s your next favorite time?”

Alex was stumped. He wanted to get this right. He didn’t want Mr. D to think he was stupid.

“I don’t much like any of my subjects,” Alex mumbled.

Shifting in his chair, Mr. D said, “Well then Alex, how about picking one subject that you might like, if you liked anything at all?”

Hesitantly Alex said, “Maybe Science. At least I like it when we talk about bugs and plants and animals, things like that.”

“So you have a lot of different interests,” commented Mr. D.

“If you say so,” Alex said. He’d never thought of himself as having a lot of interests. In fact his mom was always saying, “Doesn’t anything interest you at school? How will you ever make anything of yourself if you don’t do well in school?”

Discussion Topics:

From the onset of the story it’s clear that Alex knows a good deal about bugs and plants from watching Animal Planet and the Discovery Channel and talking with Other Mom (his grandma).

What Mr. D, his counselor, tapped into was if a middle grader has an interest in something he has motivation in that area. He enjoys talking about the subject, reading about it or if it’s an activity like playing video games, making crafts, swimming or skateboarding, he’ll be motivated to do it whenever the opportunity presents itself.

The driving force of motivation comes from being interested in something. Put another way: When you’re interested in something you’ve got motivation.

Often I hear from a worried parent or a concerned teacher that a particular kid is just not motivated. They fear that because of this seeming lack of motivation the child will not be prepared for later life. Or as many parents are prone to say, “You’re never going to amount to anything.”

What I’ve seen, although sometimes you have to look hard, is that all kids are motivated. It’s simply that sometimes they aren’t motivated in areas parents and teachers want them motivated. Their son or daughter or students lack motivation in areas that will serve them not only throughout their school years, such as learning, studying, doing homework, being responsible, trustworthy and socially appropriate, but in areas that will serve them in a positive manner throughout their lifetime.

So if you want your child or certain kids in your classroom to get motivated in a particular area, start with the general question: What interests do you have? You can even have them write their interests down.

Giving them hints as to what they’re motivated about presently is helpful. Are they motivated to play video games? Hang out with or text friends? Play basketball? Watch television?

The next question to ask: In what areas do you think you lack motivation? If a child can’t seem to identify where he lacks motivation, ask her. Who nags you about what? Does your mom nag you about picking up your clothes? Does your grandma keep saying, come on, eat your breakfast, you’re going to be late for school? Or are you nagged about taking out the trash? Doing your homework? Studying? Practicing the piano? Getting to places on time? Giving the dog water? Helping out without being asked? Write down the nags.

Take one area where you are being nagged or you would like to have more motivation and think of a reason to do that particular thing. For example, what would be a reason for doing your homework? Perhaps your reason is because you don’t want other people to think you’re dumb or you don’t want a failing grade, or you want to be able to go on a weekend camping trip. Perhaps your reason for doing your homework is to get a parent off your case. What is the reason for cleaning up your room? Perhaps it’s to be able to go over to your friend’s house.

As time goes on reasons for doing something change. For example, you might even like your room better when picked up. You might feel better about yourself and respect yourself more when you finish an assignment. You might not feel as anxious if you get to school on time.

Mr. D taught Alex the three secrets of motivation. Do you remember the second and third secret?

Excerpt from: “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World.”

“What if you don’t know what you want to be when you grow up?” Alex questioned. “Is that why I don’t have motivation and Aidan does?”

“Lots of kids don’t have any idea about what they want to be when they grow up,” explained Mr. D.

“What they do have, however, is a reason to get the job done. Their reason might be so they can go to the mall with their friends or have a sleepover. They might get their homework done because they have a distant goal like graduating and getting a job or going on to college.”

“You mean all I have to do is figure out what’s my reason for doing something and I’ve got motivation?” Alex asked skeptically.

“Well, almost,” said Mr. D. “The second secret is to begin the job. If you’re writing a paper, it’s one word, and then another, and then another.

And secret number three, perhaps the best part of all,” said Mr. D grinning, “as you’re doing your job, you become energized.” “So let’s practice the three secrets, Alex.”

These three secrets of motivation worked for Alex. Would you be willing to write them down and see if they work for you? Maybe pick one area where your teacher or a parent says you need motivation.

Let's pretend it's picking up your room.

Secret number one: What is the reason to do something? For example, what is the reason to pick up your room?

Secret number two: It's one item and then another and then another. For example, pick up one item and put it away. Ah, now pick up another item and put that item away. Then another and then another, item by item by item.

If it's a book you have to read, it's one word and then the next and then the next and soon you'll have an entire page read. When Alex wrote one of his assignments at home he kept saying one word and then another word and another word.

Secret number three: As you do your homework or pick up each item in your room, or whatever the task is, you become more energized and soon you want to get the job done. When this happens you have discovered motivation for doing that particular task. If you're doing Math it's one problem and then another and another right down the page.

Getting motivated is really that simple!

When Alex became motivated and started doing his schoolwork, he discovered on the Internet that people in some parts of the world eat bugs because of their nutritional value. He then convinces his grandmother to order some crickets and worms and he develops recipes and makes bug bars and worm waffles and cricket-chicken soup.

When he's able to return to school after his accident, he brings some of his food creations. It's not long before he and a few friends design a science project for the entire class raising worms and crickets. When a food company hears about Alex's food creations, particularly his bug bars, he's offered a business contract that leads to having enough money to pay for college for him and his brother. In the end he's off to Kenya to celebrate the opening ceremony of a food plant designed to help feed the world. All of this happened because Alex became motivated about doing his schoolwork.

Bullying Part 1: Half of All Kids Are Bullied

Shockingly, half of all kids are bullied at some time or another. And at least half of all kids have bullied another.

Bullying goes on daily both at home and in the classroom. Despite the fact that bullying has taken a front seat in the media, most kids still do not recognize what actions are considered bullying unless the bullying becomes physical and someone gets hurt.

For example, the child who refuses to get ready in the morning and constantly makes her siblings anxious and late for school is acting out a subtle form of bullying. Likewise is the child who goes into her sister's room and simply helps herself to whatever article of clothing she chooses, despite the fact that she's been told repeatedly to stop. Or the boy who whenever he walks by his younger brother, gives him a punch in the arm despite the fact that he's been told to stop on numerous occasions or he hides his sister's hair dryer to get a reaction out of her, or who continually grabs the remote in order to switch programs he prefers to watch. Parents may be annoyed regarding these behaviors because of the ruckus they create in the family. Rarely however do parents think of these behaviors as bullying. But yet they are.

What I tell parents: if one child constantly reacts negatively to another child's actions, instead of immediately focusing your attention on the child who is reacting, take a look at those actions he or she is reacting to. They may be bullying behavior as opposed to falling in the category of "kids will be kids" or "he's just kidding" or "he's younger than you."

Unfortunately bullying in the classroom often takes place outside of the awareness of teachers and administrators. I'm not one for imposing more things for teachers to do, too much is put on them already, but if one hour each school year was devoted to discussing what bullying behaviors look like, I think we would see a definite decrease both in the classroom and within the family.

Behaviors that are considered bullying include the above mentioned as well as the following: telling someone else's secret, repeatedly pushing, shoving and punching when told to stop this behavior, not letting someone pass, putting out your foot in order to trip someone, continually making rude and insulting comments, or constantly making fun of someone, name calling, starting rumors, putting mean spirited messages on social media, circulating a picture or video that hurts or embarrasses another, taking or breaking someone else's property, name-calling, screaming in someone's face, ignoring or pretending that another child is invisible by refusing to talk or acknowledge him or her. You might not have thought of some of these actions as bullying, but each of them is a subtle and not so subtle form of bullying.

I believe this list is a good starting point for discussion both at home and in the classroom but clearly it is not complete as the following story attests.

Excerpt from: "The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World."

Feeling more enthusiastic than usual about school as he stepped onto the school bus, Alex had completed not only his math homework, but also his insect assignment.

"Hey, Alex, can I see your Math homework?" Ben asked.

"Yeah," said Alex.

No sooner had Alex pulled his assignment from his backpack and handed it to Ben, than Spitter Jenkins reached over and grabbed it.

"Give me that," Alex yelled jumping to his feet. "Sit down, boys," bellowed the bus driver who heard the commotion and could see the action in his rearview mirror. Clenching his teeth Alex let out an audible snort and plopped down. Spitter Jenkins is a real jerk, thought Alex. "Hey, everybody," yelled Jenkins, "watch this."

Spitter now cleared his throat, hocked up a wad of phlegm, and spit a huge loogie right in the middle of Alex's math paper. Several students sitting nearby leaned forward, groaned, and shut their eyes in disgust. Spitter snickered, coughed up another

loogie, and again spit a foamy glob onto Alex's math paper.

Now taking the paper by one of its corners, he flung it at Alex like a Frisbee while proudly proclaiming, "Hey, Crow Face, back at you, all nice and pretty for Ms. Hayes."

Unfortunately the spit filled paper landed on Sylvie's shoulder. Grabbing the paper and trying to flick it off her shirt, a stream of spit ran onto her hand.

"I hate you, Tommy Jenkins," she shouted. "You're a jerk." "How does it feel to have your girlfriend fight your battles for you Crow Face?" taunted Jenkins. "Oh shut up," Sylvie shot back. I'm not touching that paper, thought Alex, even if it means taking a zero for Math.

When Ms. Hayes, Alex's teacher, asks Alex why he didn't do his math homework, Alex sits quietly and says nothing. He doesn't tell her what happened to his math paper. Instead he takes a lecture and agrees to bring her the missing homework as well as an additional assignment.

Nor does Alex admit to Mr. D why he was late for his counseling appointment earlier in the story. As you may recall he was late because he was wiping spit from his locker.

Discussion Topics:

Why do you think Alex keeps quiet about the fact that he's being bullied by Spitter Jenkins?

What about the other kids in Alex's class? They saw what happened on the school bus. Sylvie threatened to tell Ms. Hayes what Spitter had done, but then Spitter taunted her. Do you think Sylvie kept quiet because she became intimidated?

What would you have done in this situation? Would you have told a teacher or a parent what was going on?

Why do you think kids often keep quiet when being bullied?

Note: Instead of instructing a middle grader to **tell** a parent or teacher if they are being bullied, instruct them to **share** with a parent or teacher that they are being bullied. Using the word **tell** often has a negative connotation and puts them in the snitch category in a child's eyes. Whereas using the word **share** has a positive implication that the child is doing something appropriate.

Bullying Part 2: Reasons Why Kids Bully

Excerpt from: “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World.”

“Hey, Crow Face,” yelled Spitter Jenkins when he saw Alex in the cafeteria. “Get in trouble for not doing your homework?”

“Stop calling me Crow Face,” Alex shot back through clenched teeth.

Last year when their class was studying various Indian tribes, Mr. Lansky, their language arts teacher, had suggested that the students come up with a Native-American sounding-name for themselves or for one of their classmates that revealed a unique characteristic about the person.

Tommy Jenkins had said that he thought a good name for Alex Crow was “Laughing Crow Face” because of his last name being Crow, and because he liked to tell jokes and was always finding stuff to laugh about. Everyone in class had agreed. And even though Alex wasn’t too happy that it was Tommy who came up with his Native-American name, Alex liked it. He always had hoped secretly that he had Native-American blood in him as he admired the way the Indians were so connected to the land and nature. Even Mr. Lansky had remarked on Jenkins’s astute observations of Alex.

It wasn’t long, however, before Jenkins shortened the name and started calling Alex, “Crow Face.” Now, instead of the name sounding friendly, it sounded mean, and like a putdown. Funny how some people always manage to turn something good into something bad, Alex thought.

“Hey, Crow Face, I’m talking to you,” Jenkins shouted. “Looks like all those trips to see the counselor aren’t doing you much good.”

Discussion Topics:

Why do you think one kid bullies another? Do you think it’s because he or she feels jealous of the other person? Or maybe he himself feels insecure? Maybe someone is bullying her and she turns around and bullies someone else because it helps her feel more powerful? Can you think of other reasons for such behavior?

Do you think a bully understands how hurtful her behavior is and the possible consequences of these actions?

In the story Spitter certainly could not have anticipated when he took Alex’s backpack that this action would result in Alex almost losing his life.

Have you done anything in the past that later you regret?

Alex had a hard time forgiving Spitter. Although Spitter never told Alex directly he was sorry, he did a number of things that sent the message that he was sorry. And as Alex’s mom said, “Apologies come in many forms.”

If you read, “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World,” do you recall some of the things Spitter did as a way of apologizing to Alex? Eventually Alex forgives Spitter. How do we know this?

Is there someone you might like to apologize to for something you’ve been doing? Will you tell that person directly or write a note or do something that sends the message that you’re really sorry and you intend to stop this behavior?

Diversity Part 1: All Around Us

Most students are becoming aware of diversity – we look different from each other, we enjoy different things, we like different foods, different sports, different music, different books, clothes, hairstyles, colors, games, and on and on. Life would be pretty boring if everyone looked the same, and thought the same and enjoyed all the same things.

Early in “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World,” Alex is in Mr. D’s office and once again his mind starts to wander.

Excerpt from: “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World.”

Looking at Mr. D’s face, Alex started analyzing it. It was a game he and his friends Sylvie, Carlos and Ben played anytime a new student or a new teacher was introduced to the class.

They would study the person’s face and then debate if he or she looked like a horse, or a fish, or a pig. You could tell mainly by their nose. After carefully looking at Mr. D’s face, Alex decided that Mr. D was definitely a horse.

Alex remembered how mad his friend Ben got when they all said that Ben was a pig. But in the end, even Ben agreed that he was a pig. Nothing was wrong with being a pig, but Alex was glad he was a fish. Horses, well, they weren’t too bad either.

Discussion Topics:

When you read the previous passage in, “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World,” or heard it for the first time now, did you decide that you were a horse, a fish or a pig? Did you put a negative spin on this game as both Alex and Ben initially did thinking it was better to be a horse or a fish? If so, you took a bit of diversity and put a negative judgment on it. This is how easily you can put a negative spin on something when people are different from you.

(A fun fact: We are often attracted to people who look like us. If you decided you were a fish, you might be more attracted initially to friends who also might look more like a fish).

Diversity is certainly apparent with Alex’s family, which was multi-generational – three generations living together. There was Other Mom (first generation), Alex’s Mom (second generation) and Alex and Aidan, (third generation). In addition, Alex and Aidan did not have a father living with them as he had died.

What does the makeup of your family look like?

Another way diversity is seen is in the types of jobs Alex’s classmates signed up for when preparing for the science project. Some chose to be accountants, others were shoppers, poster makers, writers, cleaners, while others were responsible for setting up the worm and cricket farms while others liked the idea of tending the crickets and worms.

If you were involved in the science project at Roosevelt Ridge Middle School, what job would you have volunteered for? Again, the jobs you prefer, diversity in action.

In the book Alex and his mother are talking about his father who had died when Alex was young. She has just shown Alex a list of his father’s favorite quotes and Alex is reading them.

Excerpt from: “The Boy Whose Idea Is Feeding the World.”

“Every person I meet is in some way my superior: and in that I can learn from him.” After some thought Alex asked his mother how Claire, the baby next door, could possibly be his superior. Slightly smiling, she told him about an interesting study she had read in one of her nursing books.

“If you put a baby on the floor, and you lie down next to the baby, and try to do everything the baby does, moving your arms, and legs, and head, as much as the baby, guess what? You can’t keep up with the baby. You run out of energy and become exhausted way before the baby does. And in that way, the baby is superior to you.”

How funny, Alex thought.

If you can keep this quote in mind for the rest of your life, "*Every person I meet is in some way my superior: and in that I can learn from him,*" you will never have a problem with diversity.

Now look around your family or at your classmates and decide how each person is superior.

Diversity Part 2: Our Multi-Talented Bugs

Excerpt from: “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World.”

Cockroaches had always fascinated Alex. Especially since he learned that they could hold their breath as long as forty minutes under water. And they could live without their head for an entire week because their brain ran throughout their body. And as far as speed, they are the fastest-moving insects in the world – fifty body lengths in one second to be exact.

Suddenly Alex got his backpack and pulled out his calculator.

I’m four feet two inches, thought Alex, so that means I’m fifty inches tall. If I multiply my height by fifty and then divide by twelve inches, I can find out how far I could run, if I could run as fast as a cockroach.

Yikes! I could run two hundred and eight feet in one second! That means in less than two seconds, I could run the entire length of a football field. Whoa, I’d be the fastest human being on this earth! Nobody could catch me.

Alex now turned his thoughts to wondering how many cockroaches there were in the world. Certainly enough of them were in his basement. About every time he went to the basement, he’d see several of them scurrying across the concrete.

Seeing a roach running across your basement floor wasn’t too good. But being able to smash it with your foot, now that was fun. Because cockroaches have a built-in sensory system in their backside, which lets them know that someone is coming, Alex knew to approach his target from the front.

Ever so slowly he’d walk over to the roach, stand quite still, and then carefully and quietly lift his foot, perfectly positioning it above the roach. When ready, he’d bring his foot down as hard and fast as he could. Sometimes his foot landed just right and he’d hear the shell of the roach pop, quickly squirting a creamy liquid onto the bottom of his shoe and the floor. Kind of like when you drop an egg. First you hear a splat. Then the inside runs out of the shell.

If he wrote about grasshoppers, he could say that grasshoppers had five eyes. “So much the better to see you with, my dear.” Or he could write that most grasshoppers can jump twenty times the length of their bodies.

Now if I could jump twenty times the length of my body, Alex reasoned, I could jump the length of a basketball court in less than a second. Hah! I bet everybody would want me on his team. I’d be famous -- the most famous basketball player of all times.

Basking in his newfound fame, Alex saw himself in one television commercial after another. He would advertise tennis shoes and fancy cars, golf clubs and basketballs, and maybe even a breakfast cereal.

Another thing I could write is that a praying mantis is the only insect in the world that can turn his head completely around. What if I could turn my head completely around like a mantis? And what if I could run like a cockroach?

And jump like a grasshopper?

Nah, bad idea, he said to himself. Everyone would think I was some kind of a freak. But then again, I wouldn’t mind being able to jump like a grasshopper. Or run like a cockroach. Being able to do just one of those things would put me in the Guinness Book of World Records.

Discussion Topics:

Has this book or the information you just heard made you want to read other books about nature and the environment? Have you taken more notice of bugs outside or when you happen to see one in your house?

Has it helped you think about bugs differently and how they too have talents? Even in the bug world, diversity is all around us and each bug is in some way our superior.

Raising Self-Esteem: You Can Do It!

Alex didn't seem to think much of himself when he first visited Mr. D. He didn't do well in school, was small for his age and he didn't think he had motivation like his older brother. But when starting to talk about ladybugs with Mr. D, he perked up and seemed to get a bit more confident. You might say his self-esteem went up a notch.

Alex writing about how a chirping cricket can help you tell the temperature outside, and Mr. D telling Alex he was "brilliant, absolutely brilliant," after hearing what Alex had written, encouraged Alex to think that he might have something going for himself.

Later in the story gathering more information about bugs and doing his homework assignment, Alex's self-esteem soared.

Excerpt from: "The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World."

Surfing the web on his laptop, Alex discovered that it's estimated that every American eats a little more than a pound of bugs in their lifetime. It's just that most people don't know it. In every peanut butter and jelly sandwich there may be 55 bug parts. And those little specks of black that are floating in your cereal bowl: bug parts.

Alex thought about his friends Sylvie, Ben and Carlos all eating bugs. And I bet they don't even know it, he reasoned. When I'm back in school, I think I'll tell them. Or maybe I'll tell them before I get back to school.

Alex now started writing his haiku. After playing around with various sentences and counting and recounting the syllables in each line, Alex wrote the following:

Eating bugs each day

Black specks in your cereal

Legs, arms, all bug parts

Three lines, seventeen syllables, just like Ms. Hayes wanted me to do, thought Alex with a mischievous smile.

Now for the rhyming poem I'm supposed to write using the same subject material, Alex mused. After a number of false starts, too many to count, Alex came up with the following:

If you have to get somewhere and must wake up extra early

And looking in the mirror, you find your eyes quite blurry

Grab a toasted bagel and seven crispy baked bugs

Along with a hot chocolate in a brightly colored mug

A healthy breakfast a nutritionist would say

Protein and carbohydrates to quick start your day.

Smiling and feeling a tad bit clever, Alex pulled up the school's web page. Using the password Mr. D had given him, he composed the following letter:

Dear Ms. Hayes,

Here is my haiku as well as a rhyming poem on the same subject that you asked me to write. You can share my haiku and rhyming poem with our whole class if you like.

Please tell everyone thank you for all the fun get-well cards. I especially like the ones that play music. I have some of them

on a stand by my bed. My brother Aidan has taped the other cards on a wall in our living room next to my bed, so I can look at them each day.

I'm looking forward to seeing all of you again. Sincerely, Alex Crow

After clicking "Send," Alex sat back and smiled with satisfaction.

Discussion Topics:

Sometimes it only takes one positive comment from a teacher or parent or friend that helps a middle grader's self-esteem increase. One girl started seeing herself differently when a teacher remarked to her in the hall that, "You really are a smart girl." Before this comment she never saw herself as smart. By the end of the school year her grades improved dramatically. Maybe this comment encouraged her to work harder in school.

Other times a middle grader's self-esteem increases as a result of some accomplishment such as learning to play chess, or becoming the ping pong champion in the family, or getting several good grades on a report card or making the soccer team or being dubbed the best omelet maker in the family.

Question: Is there anything you've done in the past several years to help you feel good about yourself, to help you increase your self-esteem?

Can you think of a comment either a teacher or a parent or someone else said to you that changed how you view yourself? Such as being told you had a good voice, or were good at handling the ball, or you had a great sense of humor?

Do you think you've influenced any of your friends regarding how they see themselves? Maybe telling someone they did a good job when presenting to the class, or that you like their haircut or the way they did their art project. All of these comments can be a way of helping someone increase her self-esteem.

You have the power to make other people feel good or bad by what you say and do. You also have the power to make yourself feel good or bad by what you tell yourself. If you say to yourself over and over that you're a good person, and you can do it, research shows us that we will act like a good person acts and we have more energy to tackle tough jobs. Having good self-esteem, like having motivation, is not magic. It's often up to you.

Kids, Kindness and an “All for One and One for All” Attitude

In “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World,” there were at least twenty-five instances where an “All for one and one for all” attitude came across. Everyone seemed to be going out of his or her way to lend a hand and support each other. Carlos, Sylvie, Elsie, Ben, Pete, in fact, all of Alex’s classmates supported each other and had fun doing it. Even Alex’s older brother and the teachers at school and Alex’s mom and his grandmother all had an “All for one and one for all” attitude.

Excerpt from: “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World.”

Arriving at school, Alex saw Ben, Sylvie, Elsie and Carlos standing on the school steps holding a large paper banner. Written across the banner were the words: “Welcome back, Alex! We Missed You!”

Grinning, Alex slowly got out of the car. Carlos was there to help with Alex’s crutches, while Elsie took his backpack, and Sylvie carried the box of treats Alex had prepared.

When he had finished catching his classmates up to date, Alex got a big grin on his face and said that he had brought a few samples of his bug creations. And if okay with Ms. Hayes, Sylvie and Ben could pass them out.

Each student received a small bag of candied crickets.

Alex also brought several bug bars and a few worm-waffles in case anyone cared to have a taste. The only catch was that if you had allergies, Alex suggested that you wait until more experimenting could be done. Giggles could be heard throughout the room, but no one, not even Ben or Carlos or Sylvie, stepped up and said they would like to try a worm-waffle or bug bar.

Suddenly Tommy Jenkins got out of his chair and said, “I’ll have one of those bars.” Alex wasn’t sure if Jenkins was trying to show off. Or he genuinely wanted to taste a bug bar. Or it was his way of apologizing. Watching Jenkins take a bite, Alex could hear his mom saying, “Apologies come in many different forms and many sizes.”

Jenkins chewed the first bite slowly, smiled, and then took another bite. Clearly he had the attention of the entire class and was enjoying himself.

“Not bad, Alex,” he said sincerely. “In fact, I think they’re better than most of the power bars I’ve had.”

“Thanks,” Alex said, a little embarrassed, but mostly proud.

Not to be outdone by Tommy’s bravery, Elsie said she’d like to try one of the worm-waffles. Again everyone watched wide-eyed as Elsie took a bite. After her third bite she said with a grin, “Sorry Alex, but I think I’ll stick to whole-wheat waffles.” To which everyone laughed.

A number of the boys and just as many girls dug into their cricket candy. To everyone’s surprise, Ms. Hayes was also seen eating a bug bar the newspaper account said the following day.

Discussion Topics:

How many kindnesses can you recall just hearing this short passage from the story? If you had read, “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World,” what other kindnesses do you recall?

Can you think of when you’ve had an “All for one and one for all” attitude with a classmate? Perhaps you shared your lunch or helped someone study or made someone laugh when she was having a bad day. Perhaps you gave a high five to one of your teammates when he scored a basket.

Think about your own family. How do others in the family show you kindness and support?

How do you show kindness to your family? For example: carrying in groceries, raking leaves, drying dishes, feeding the

dog, taking out the trash. Playing with a younger brother or sister? Giving your mom or dad a hug just because. Saying, “I love you” to your brother or sister. Could you do more?

Did you know that if you do a kindness for another, having the attitude of an “All for one and one for all” you also get a reward? What do you think that reward is?

Ah, you get to feel good inside! In fact, when you take care of others you increase your self-esteem.

Many teachers, counselors and parents were touched with Alex’s “All for one and one for all” attitude when reading the following excerpt from, “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World.”

“Okay, Alex,” his mom said not too long after they got home. “Something is bothering you. Didn’t you like Mr. Benson’s proposal?”

“I don’t know anything about business, Mom,” Alex said, “But I know that if the bug bars sell like Mr. Benson says they’re going to sell, our family might have a lot of money. At the same time, I don’t think it’s fair to Mr. D. I know he didn’t come up with the actual idea, but he was the one who gave me motivation and encouraged me and made a big deal about what I knew about insects. And it was his suggestion that we visit a cricket farm.

“Remember that movie we saw,” continued Alex. “I think the title was, Something that God Made. Remember how smart Dr. Blalock was, and how he came up with operating on the heart, and all the lives that he was able to save, and all the lives that other doctors have been able to save since he developed his techniques?”

“But he also had an assistant, Mr. Vivien Thomas, who helped him all the time. Vivien Thomas stood by him and advised him what to do when he was performing heart surgery. I’m not so sure Dr. Blalock could have done what he did without the help of Vivien Thomas. And yet Dr. Blalock took all the credit. He had his picture in all the magazines and newspapers, and he never said anything about all the help and advice he got from his friend. For that I didn’t respect Dr. Blalock because of how he treated his friend. I don’t want to be like a Dr. Blalock, Mom. I think Mr. D deserves some of the money too.”

“Alex, I think your dad would be very proud of you right now. I know I am,” she said smiling.

“Why don’t you give Mr. Benson a call and tell him your concerns. He certainly seems to be a very smart and honorable man. I think he’ll understand.”

Four days later another two-page contact arrived at the house. Mr. Benson’s lawyers had proposed doing a five-way split with Mr. D receiving one-fifth of the profits and Alex, Aidan, his Mom and Other Mom one-fifth. Alex immediately got out his calculator. If the bug bars sold as Mr. Benson’s company projected, Mr. D could buy a fishing boat if he wanted, or he and his wife could save his share of the money for retirement, and Luke and his other grandson Daniel might even have money for college. Alex felt satisfied.

Sadness and Loss

All middle graders face loss. The worst loss for a child is the death of a parent. The loss of a sibling carries with it additional pain, because the parents are often unable to offer much comfort to the child as they themselves are lost in their own grief. If a grandparent or someone else plays a significant role in a child's life, the child also suffers.

Divorce carries its own feelings of loss, as a child no longer has the stability of the routine she knows. Sometimes a parent will move out of town or a parent is simply absent from a child's life.

Illness, be it the child's or a family member creates an additional sense of loss for a child. Some middle graders are forced to change schools thus losing friends. A pet dying or disappearing brings suffering. These various losses often are dismissed but frequently they linger long after the event.

After Alex's accident, he lost touch with his school friends for a number of months. Additionally his accident had changed his appearance somewhat, which also created anxiety and feelings of loss. He just didn't quite look like himself.

I wrote a newspaper column about children and loss some years ago. The teacher had all the children in class share their losses and it was heart-breaking. Every child had experienced a significant loss by the time they reached seventh grade.

Excerpt from: "The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World."

Alex's Mom is talking to Alex about his father's illness and death.

"Can you remember anything I said to Dad?" asked Alex.

"Well, let me think. The night we got your dad's diagnosis, he sat on the sofa and pulled both of you boys on his lap. He asked if you'd like to sleep in our room. This was one time he didn't consult me. I think he was feeling so very sad about not being able to be there for the two of you growing up, he was determined to be with you as much as he could before he died.

"When he told you boys that you were going to be sleeping in sleeping bags next to our bed, you looked at your dad with eyes as big as saucers. And then you said, so we can watch over each other like angels.

"I remember your dad kissing you and Aidan and saying that you were his favorite angels. Until two days before your dad died, you and Aidan slept in our room in your sleeping bags on the floor."

"Then we slept with you after Dad died, didn't we?"

"Yes, Alex. His mom said quietly. You and Aidan needed me. I needed you, too. We all needed each other. Just like we need each other today."

Discussion Topics:

What losses have occurred in your life? How do you think they have affected you? Do you think you have changed in any way as a result?

Who do you seek out when feeling sad? Is there someone you might want to talk with such as a teacher or the school counselor or perhaps one of your parents or an older brother or friend? Sharing your feelings of sadness generally makes you feel better.

Excerpt from "The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World."

On the eighth day of his hospital stay, Mr. D came to visit Alex.

"I hear you've had quite a time of it, Alex."

Before Alex said anything, tears suddenly collected in his eyes, and soon were cascading down his face. Mr. D stood over Alex and patted him softly on his head.

“I’m sorry,” Alex whispered.

“Alex, one should not apologize for tears. Those tears are simply nature’s way of deciding that your insides needed a good washing out. Just like you need to wash off the dirt on the outside. From time to time you must wash out the hurts and frightening experiences from the inside. Sooner or later, everyone needs a good washing out.”

Allowing Mr. D’s words to run around in his head, Alex decided that he probably needed a few more washing outs. But for now, he felt better.

Bad things sometimes happen in your life. No matter how much a parent or grandparent loves you or a teacher cares for you, they can’t always protect you. So it’s important to have a lot of things you can do to make yourself feel better. Of course, talking about the incident to someone is helpful. But sometimes writing down the bad experience can be just as helpful. Allowing yourself to cry can make things better. Trying not to think about your sadness and hurt but instead seeing a movie or playing a video game or working a puzzle or painting sometimes help. What doesn’t help is to keep thinking about it without doing something about it.

Can you think of something else you or someone else might do to help you cope with your sadness?

Taking Care of the Environment

When Alex started searching the Internet in order to get more information on bugs, he was amazed at some of the things he found. It wasn't long before he was hatching an idea that would change his life, the life of his family, his classmates and eventually the world.

Excerpt from: "The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World."

The following morning Alex's head was spinning with ideas.

When eating breakfast, he asked Other Mom if she would be willing to order several bags of dried crickets, a bag of dried grasshoppers, and a large bag of dried mealworms from one of the websites he had found.

Wrinkling up her nose, Other Mom asked, "What are you planning to do, Alex, eat them?"

Alex simply smiled. Other Mom shot Alex a look of disbelief while adding, "I think you've been on that laptop too long, Alex."

But when Alex explained that people all over the world eat bugs, and some scientists think that if we would raise more bugs and fewer cows, pigs, and sheep, every person in the world would have enough to eat, Other Mom became a little more interested in what Alex had to say.

Alex knew from the television travel channel that people in many countries eat worms regularly and are happy about eating them. What interested Alex most, however, was the fact that eight large earthworms would provide a person with all the protein they needed for a day. If only he could come up with a recipe using eight earthworms in each serving, a lot of people on this planet would no longer be malnourished.

Discussion Topics:

Do you think people in Canada, Europe, Japan, China and across the globe will be eating bugs regularly in your lifetime?

Since reading, "The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World" or simply hearing the excerpts from the book, have you started thinking about bugs as a nutritional food source?

The idea of raising and eating bugs is starting to take hold. "The Wall Street Journal," ran a story on this vary subject entitled, "Roasted Crickets? Millennial Entrepreneurs Think Americans Should Eat Bugs." You can buy edible crickets and worms on the Internet from reputable companies. (If you have a peanut allergy, however, you'll want to stay away from eating bugs until more research has been done).

Have you been doing anything at your school to help the environment? Does your school have a recycle basket in each room? If not, is this something your class could do as a class project, putting recycle baskets in all the rooms of your school?

Do you recycle cans and plastic water bottles and newspapers at home? What other things do you think should be recycled?

What happens to the clothes you no longer wear? Do you hand them down so someone else can wear them? Or take them to a drop off box so they can be recycled? Why do you think this is helpful to our environment?

Has your school or your family ever planted trees on Arbor Day or done anything special for Earth Day? Conservation departments in many states provide free trees for planting. Planting a garden and growing some of your own food is one way to help the environment. Why do you think growing some of your own food helps the environment? String beans, squash, potatoes and tomatoes are easy to grow. Maybe your class could set up a garden at school if you haven't already.

Are you aware of conserving water by not standing in the shower for long periods of time?

Buying a lot of unnecessary things hurts our planet. Can you guess how?

Would you be willing to come up with five ways you can take care of the environment? If your class comes up with 100 ways I'll post them on my website with your school's name.

Identifying Your Values at Home and at School

Most families don't sit around the table and talk about family values. But the way a family lives day to day reflects their values.

Excerpt from: "The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World."

"Saturdays found everyone in the household quite busy. For as long as Alex could remember, or at least since they moved in with Other Mom, Saturday morning was chore day. Other Mom believed that everyone should have some part in keeping the home clean and she was the self-appointed chore master. Every few months she would switch around who did what chores, so that no one got the idea that he was being treated unfairly.

Alex's job for the last two months involved dusting the entire house, including windowsills, taking out the trash and recyclables to the cans in the back alley, sweeping the stairwell, stripping the beds of their sheets, and hauling them to the washer in the basement. All in all, his chores took about an hour if he moved along.

Alex had no problem with motivation when it came to completing his chores. After everyone finished their assigned tasks, the entire family went to Dakota Street to check out the antique-junk stores.

While junking, Alex would scout the aisles for various items he'd seen on Antiques Roadshow. "No telling what treasures we'll find today," Other Mom would say."

After searching around in the various antique-junk shops, the family would head for Mama Nacho's for chips, salsa, and enchiladas. The only time they missed going was when Aidan had agreed to do face painting for some family that was having a birthday party for one of their kids.

Discussion Topics:

Certainly Alex's family had the value of working and playing together.

What family values are you most proud of? Being together as a family while attending a sporting event, pitching in and doing clean up around the house, playing cards, visiting with relatives, celebrating birthdays and special events together?

Is there something more you would like your family to do together?

Schools also have certain values. Family and school values are mostly the same but sometimes they conflict. These differences sometimes create additional stress for students.

Conflicting values might be arrival time at school. Most schools want their students to be on time for class as coming in late to class is disruptive and the student is missing out on the lesson. Some families tend to run 15 or 20 minutes late. This is a conflict in values between the school and one's family.

Often how a kid dresses seems perfectly okay in the eyes of their parents whereas the school doesn't agree that the way a particular child dresses is appropriate for school. This is another values conflict that adds stress for students, teachers and parents.

A student may have the value of finishing his assignments for the following school day or wants to stay up late and study whereas a parent expects her child to be in bed at a certain time in order to get enough sleep.

A middle grader feels sick and looks sick but his parents think he's fine and he should be in school. However the school doesn't want the middle grader there for fear he really is ill and will cause other students to become ill.

The use of certain language may be okay at home but offensive at school.

Discussion Topics:

Are you aware of any conflicting values between your home and school? How do you see this conflict getting resolved? **22**

Kids Starting Their Own Business for Fun and Profit

Excerpt from: “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World.”

After additional research, Alex and Aidan decided that earthworms, sometimes called night crawlers or angleworms, were their best bet if they wanted to raise some of their own ingredients.

“In fact,” Alex told Aidan, “earthworms are one of the few things on this planet that have a zero carbon footprint. And another thing I read,” Alex continued, “good farmland sometimes has as many as one million, seven hundred fifty thousand earthworms per acre. Can you believe that?”

“I wonder if that’s why you can take a shovel and start digging just about anywhere in the yard or along the river bank and come up with a bucket full of worms,” questioned Aidan. “And there’s nothing like a big earthworm dangling from a hook if you’re fishing.”

“Yeah,” said Alex, “and think of all the big Styrofoam cups of worms Mr. Johnson sells at his store to all the fisherman. I wonder where he gets his worms? Maybe we should start raising worms for Mr. Johnson and some of the other bait shops in town. We could have our own worm business.”

“And we could sell them to everybody in the neighborhood who have gardens,” Aidan added excitedly. “When you think about it, just about everyone loves earthworms. So why wouldn’t Mom love them?”

Discussion Topics:

Would you like to try your hand at raising earthworms or mealworms in your bedroom like Alex and Aidan? Or if not in your bedroom maybe you could raise a tub full in your basement? How to do it is all laid out in, “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World.” The cost of starting your own worm business would be about \$30.00.

After raising a few thousand worms, what would you do with them? Alex and his brother were going to sell them to bait shops. After the science fair at Roosevelt Ridge Middle School, Alex’s class sold the worms they raised to some of the gardeners in town.

Excerpt from: “The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World.”

Ever since Aidan was young, he had been interested in drawing. Several years ago his art teacher asked if he might like to do face painting at children’s birthday parties. A good way to pick up a little cash, she had told him.

Aidan frequently practiced his face painting techniques on his family. When no one was willing to sit for a practice session, Aidan would use a grapefruit or cantaloupe, pretending it was someone’s face. Unlike some of the other face painters that Aidan had watched at carnivals and school picnics, who painted balloons, hearts, and flowers, he painted entire scenes.

His favorite scenes were of a cow poking his head through a split-rail fence and grazing on blades of green grass; a bright-yellow mother duck swimming on a pond with three of her ducklings swimming behind; and a monkey swinging from one tree to the next with a banana in her hand. Aidan also offered the young party guests a boy fishing in a boat, a flower garden with a variety of colorful flowers, and a cat ready to pounce on a mouse.

Would you enjoy face painting? You could practice on an orange or a family member’s face. Once you got reasonably good you could offer your services at the school picnic for free or charge and give the money to charity or make a little money for yourself.

Can you think of any other business you might try?

Having a project like starting your own business not only gives you something fun to do, but will give you more motivation and more self-esteem. When you start your business, send me an email. I’d love to hear what you’re doing.

Quotes to Think On and Live By

Alex and Aidan's dad kept quite a few quotes if you recall from, "The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World." Sometimes a one or two line quote can actually change the way you think about things. Here are some of my favorites that you might enjoy discussing.

"Character is what you have when nobody is looking." ---*Marie Dressel*

"Plant trees where you will never sit." ---*Anonymous*

"You will always move toward anyone who increases you and away from anyone who makes you less." ---*Mike Murdock*

"Nothing is all wrong. Even a clock that has stopped running is right twice a day." ---*Anonymous*

"There is no failure except in no longer trying." ---*Elbert Hubbard*

"People who fly into a rage always make a bad landing." ---*Anonymous*

"A diamond is a piece of coal that stuck to the job." ---*Anonymous*

A Special Note

If you are a middle grade teacher from what's considered a low income school and have been given a number to reflect this status, email me a request and I'll try to send you a free download for, "The Boy Whose Idea Could Feed the World."