



Teaching & Discussion Guide

Biffons in Wymo Woods

Includes questions
& activities for
children ages 6–12



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Dear Teachers and Parents,

We wrote this discussion guide from our experiences as a parent/psychotherapist and parent/illustrator. We hope our ideas will cause your young ones to think critically about the situations described in “Wymo Woods” and similar situations in their own lives.

As you journey through Wymo Woods with your child, it gives you an opportunity to wake up more to your own attitudes toward those who are different in some way. How are you like Fume and Butts with your kids...or like Presser and Pauline? Do you know what it feels like to be an outsider? Your attitudes on dealing with those who seem different from you are of great significance as you provide guidance to the children in your home or classroom.

This guide is intended to cover all age levels. Please pick and choose questions and activities you feel are appropriate for the age or emotional maturity of your reader...and thank you for using this story to teach the next generation the value of empathy and diversity.

— *Bob Schneyer, MSSW*
Psychotherapist, Marriage & Family Counselor
Father and Grandfather

— *Bonnie Murray, MA*
Illustrator & Mural Artist
Mother and Grandmother

Review the storyline and discover the theme

“Biffons in Wymo Woods” tells a story of the joy that comes when we’re welcomed and appreciated. It also tells of the pain we feel when we’re treated as if we don’t fit in.

- ▶ How did Peter respond to the news of a new animal in Wymo Woods?
- ▶ What was Eli’s reaction to Peter’s excitement? Why did Eli feel that the biffons did not belong?

Look at all the different animals behind Peter and Eli at the pond.

- ▶ How are these animals the same? How are they different?
- ▶ Are any of them dangerous? Would you describe any of them as bullies?
- ▶ Why do these animals believe *they* belong in Wymo Woods, but not the biffons?

Some of the animals in Wymo Woods planned a welcoming parade while another group prepared to block the bridge and convince the biffons to leave. Compare the scene where the animals parade with gifts for the newcomers to the scene where the animals block the bridge. The bright happy scene of the parade is very different from the dark, dreary mood at the bridge.

- ▶ How do you feel when you welcome a new friend with a gift?
- ▶ Does a “cloud” hang over your head when you feel left out? How does that feel compared to the “glow” you experience when you’re part of the group?

At one time or another, each child is in a situation that makes him or her feel like an outsider. For some kids (especially those in minority groups like the biffons in the story), feeling like an outsider is the dominant theme of their lives.

- ▶ How can you tell when someone is feeling left out?
- ▶ What can you do to make them feel better, to make them feel as if they belong?

Identifying with the characters

When the people around us — parents, friends, classmates, and sisters & brothers — show warmth and interest in us, we feel more at home, like we’re loved and valued. We belong. The human hunger to belong is one of the driving forces of being part of a team or activity group (and also of being part of a gang).

Early in the story, Peter and Bello collide in the forest. Bello told Peter that his father said, “...*the other animals seem to hate us...*” and that they may have to leave Wymo Woods.

- ▶ What did Bello feel like when Peter told him they would be friends? How did his “glow” affect the way Peter felt?

When Peter told his parents about his new friend Bello, they noticed his excitement and wanted to plan a welcome party.

- ▶ How do you feel when your parents listen to you and are happy to welcome your friends?

At the bridge, Peter is asked to pick between Eli and Bello. In the illustration (shown at right), Peter thinks of Bello, but is pulled by Eli.

- ▶ How does the tree behind him reflect Peter’s friendship with Bello compared to what Fume’s demand is doing to his friendship with Eli?
- ▶ In what ways are you like Peter, Eli, and Bello?
- ▶ Would you have the courage to visit Bello and his family?

MESSAGE FROM BOB: *As a psychotherapist, I see the insider–outsider phenomenon in a variety of forms. As a human being, I know how wonderful it feels like to be included...and I also know what it feels like to be on the outside. I’m sure you teachers and parents do, too. Children also feel this way from time to time, even if they can’t put words to it.*





Themes of bullying, feeling like an outsider, loneliness, and empathy

MESSAGE FROM BONNIE: *“Biffons in Wymo Woods” is an excellent vehicle for discussing how children deal with such issues as bullying, excluding others, loneliness, feeling like an outsider, appreciating the strengths of others who have disabilities, etc.*

In the scene where several animals threaten Peter because he is a “scuzzer lover,” Peter pushes against them. Look

at the illustrations in the book. One shows Peter by the familiar old lilac bush with Ronnie Rabbit; this picture shows Peter in his own situation of being bullied. The other illustration (above) shows Peter pushing back — but all of the animals are in a circle surrounded by the earth and the sky. In this painting, I’m trying to show that Peter isn’t alone in being bullied...that bullying is experienced by everyone at some point.

This scene can be the source of much discussion. On one hand, we want to teach non-aggressive attitudes toward problem-solving. On the other, children inevitably will face aggressive approaches from others: classmates, family members, strangers, sometimes even friends. As a teacher or parent, can you think of better ways for Peter to handle these aggressive folks? Where do you stand on all this?

At the bridge Pauline, Peter’s mother, challenges the bullies: *“We have plenty of room in these woods, whether it’s room for newcomers or for those of us who have lived here our whole lives.”*

- ▶ Was this a good example for Peter and the others? Did it work? What would *you* do next?
- ▶ What do you think about what Peter did? What would you do if someone bullied you? What do you do when you someone is acting like a bully? Do you say or do anything to stop it?

As the story climaxes and the bridge breaks, Baldo, Bello’s father, comes to the rescue. The animals witness Baldo’s courage to save the drowning animals using his strange combination of wings and fins.

- ▶ Do you appreciate the strengths of others who are very different from you? How do you show it?
- ▶ How do your own strong points help your family or your classmates?

After Squint and Eli are safe and Baldo has accepted Fume’s apology, two things happen. First, the biffon’s “glow” is passed to all of the animals. Second, as the story closes, Peter, Eli, and Bello are all friends, sitting peacefully under the big family tree of the possum family where the story began.

- ▶ How do you feel when someone apologizes for treating you badly? When you accept an apology, what does it mean to you — can you be friends again, as if nothing has happened? Should you forget what happened, or pretend it never happened?

Discussion topics & activities for the classroom

Ask the students to identify different situations where people might be treated like outsiders.

Feelings of not belonging can come from racial or economic differences, being new in a neighborhood or a school, traveling to a foreign country, having a physical or mental disability, joining a new athletic team, being very heavy or very thin — or something as simple as going to a friend's party where they only know the birthday friend.

Discuss Bello's glow. Why do they think he is glowing? What might create a sense of glow for each of your students? Can they recall any times that they felt such happiness? Can they imagine what might happen that would create an inner glow in themselves? What does it feel like when they receive a compliment or a statement of appreciation from someone? When friends or family members say “thank you” to them, how does it make them feel? *Can “glow” be shared? What about the opposite?*

Gender group exercise

Divide the class into a group of boys and a group of girls. Have them talk about the story for a few minutes, then quietly exchange one boy with one girl. After a few more minutes, ask the students if their group is changed in any way because the boy or girl is in their previously same-gender group. Ask the individual boy and girl if they feel uncomfortable being the only different one in the group.

Rejecting & welcoming exercise

Divide the class into three groups — 45% in two groups (A & B), and the remaining 10% in the third group (C). Have Group C leave the room. Instruct Group A to walk around the room with frowns on their faces; tell Group B to walk around with smiles.

Instruct both groups to interact (with frowns or smiles) with Group C when they return. The purpose of the exercise is to give students an experience of being welcomed or rejected, but also to be in a role of rejector or welcomer. After the exercise, have the students discuss how it feels to feel rejected or welcomed, and whether it feels good or bad to welcome or reject someone. (Please assess your own class. This exercise has the potential of the class getting out of control.)

Positive & negative attention exercise

One of the basic things people need is attention. About 50 years ago in the field of psychology, folks who studied how humans behave came up with some interesting terms about the kind of attention people get. Compliments and kind words or gestures they called “positive strokes.” Put-downs or criticisms they called “negative strokes.”

Let's transfer that to your classroom or home by calling it Positive Attention (PA) and Negative Attention (NA). In *Wymo Woods*, is there anyone who offers Positive Attention? Who and where in the story? Did you get any Positive or Negative Attention today? Did you give any away? Instruct the students to write a list of PA & NA they received, and PA & NA they gave. Ask how they feel if the “NA” list is longer than the “PA” list.

