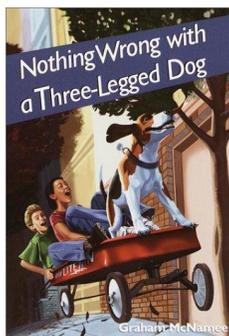


## Discussion Guide for Grades 3–5

# Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog

## Summary



Keath and his best friend Lynda are in the fourth grade. Some kids call Lynda “Zebra” because her mother is black and her father is white. And Keath is “Whitey.” “He’s vanilla in a chocolate school” where Toothpick, a bully, has it in for him. Lynda and Keath both love dogs. Dogs don’t care about what color is the right one. Dogs don’t hate anybody. Their favorite dog is Leftovers, Lynda’s three-legged beagle. When he got hurt, his first owners gave up on him, but Lynda and Keath turn him into a winner, a pooch that shows Keath that sometimes it’s good to stand out, to be special, and that even when you look different, there are ways to fit in.

*Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog* © 2000 by Graham McNamee

Cover illustration by Craig White

2001, 144 pages, grades 4–6, Yearling (an imprint of Random House Children’s Books)

## Requirements

- [Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog](#)
- [Definitions Related to Name-Calling, Bullying and Bias](#) (optional)

## Prompts for Writing and Discussion

Provided below are questions, [by chapter](#) or [by theme](#), related to the themes of bullying and bias that can be used for small or large group discussion, or to guide reflective writing.

### [By Chapter]

#### Chapter One

- How does it make you feel when Keath and Lynda are called names because of their skin color?
- Why do you think some people feel threatened by racial differences or hate others because of their race?
- Keath uses sarcasm or humor to deal with Toothpick’s taunts. Lynda ignores it when she is called a zebra and thinks about the beauty of the real animal instead. Do you think these are effective ways to deal with bullying?

#### Chapter Two

- Larry explains that Ryan attacked Keath so that he wouldn’t be “the lowest worm on the food chain.” What does he mean by this?
- Does someone always have to be on the “top” or “bottom” when it comes to social life at school? What changes would help to make things more equal or balanced?

#### Chapter Three

- How do Keath and Larry “stand out” in their school? What makes kids “stand out” in your school?
- Is it a good thing or a bad thing “to stand out” in some way? How do those who are different get treated?
- Describe a time when you wished you could be a chameleon like Keath and blend into the background. Do you think that “disappearing” would have solved all of your problems?

## Vocabulary

Ambushed  
Camouflage  
Detention  
Menace  
Predator  
Prey  
Race  
Runt  
Suspended/suspension

## Chapter Six

- Keath describes Toothpick as a “predator.” What is a predator? Why do you think Toothpick behaves like one?
- Why is Keath the main target of Toothpick and Blob? Is there anything he can do to change this?
- Why does Keath wish he was a golden retriever? Have you ever wished you were something or somebody else?

## Chapter Eight

- Keath says, “Toothpick saw me staring. So I know I'm dead now. Because I saw him when I wasn't supposed to.” Why was Keath not “supposed to” see Toothpick? Why does Toothpick feel so threatened by what Keath saw?
- Keath decides to face Toothpick and “get it over with.” Lynda says he'd be safer among the crowd and with teachers around. Which is worse, getting hit or waiting for it to happen?
- How do you think Keath felt when Lynda offered to go with him to face Toothpick? Has a friend ever stuck by you in a similar way? How did it feel?

## Chapter Nine

- Keath struggles with the idea of moving to another school, where there would be no Toothpick but also “no Lynda, no Hairy Larry, no dog walks after school.” Do you think that transferring schools is the best solution to Keath's problem? What other choices does he have? What would you do?

## Chapter Twelve

- Why does Keath feel like a “freak”? Have you ever felt this way about yourself?
- How does Keath's dad help him to feel better? Who can you turn to for support when you're feeling badly about yourself?

## Chapter Fourteen

- Lynda resists being defined by her skin color. What can you do in your own school or community to avoid judging others by appearance and to get to know them as people?
- What are some safe and helpful ways to respond when you hear racist comments or observe racism in your school or community?

## Chapter Sixteen

- Why did many of Lynda's relatives refuse to attend her parents' wedding?
- Have you ever encountered prejudice? How did it make you feel? How did you respond?
- What do you think it took for Lynda's grandmother to show up at the wedding when the rest of her family said it was wrong?

## Chapter Seventeen

- Keath says, “That's the thing about Larry, he can take any insult and shrug it off...” What does it take to “shrug off” an insult? How can you learn to ignore nasty comments and not take them personally?
- Do you think it was right for Larry to hit Toothpick? Are there times when it is okay to fight?
- Keath wishes he could “be as brave as Larry.” If we are afraid to fight or choose not to, does that make us weak? Is fighting the only way to be brave?
- What does Larry mean when he tells Keath he's “gotta have some flash”?
- What's hard about being truly yourself when that means being a little different from everyone else?
- What rewards come from being yourself? How do you think you can build the courage or confidence to be a little different sometimes?

## Chapter Nineteen

- How did Keath's father stick up for his friend, Freddie? How do you think this made Freddie feel?
- Keath's father explains that the bully never came after him because he "had nothing he could pick on." In what way did Keath's dad have a special responsibility to be an ally?
- How did Freddie make his bully "invisible"? Why was this an effective strategy? Can you imagine using this strategy when people say mean things to you?
- It's easy to feel hurt or embarrassed when you are teased or bullied, but what does such behavior say about the person who is doing the bullying? How can this keep you from feeling badly about yourself?

## Chapter Twenty-two

- How do Lynda and Larry support Keath when Toothpick bullies him? How does it feel when others support or stand up for you?
- How can you show friendship or support to someone who is being teased or bullied?
- What are some safe and helpful ways to get involved when you observe bullying?
- Keath says, "I'm glad someone's speaking up for me, but I'm just getting a bigger audience for my knockout." Are there times when it's better to be left alone? When is the attention worse than the problem itself?

## Chapter Twenty-three

- Keath feels safe after he talks to his dad. Who makes you feel safe when you have a problem?
- What adults can you turn to in school to help you deal with teasing or bullying?
- Is getting help from an adult the same as "tattling"?

## Chapter Twenty-four

- How does Leftovers fit in with the other dogs even though he only has three legs? How does Keath fit in even though he is the only white student in his school?
- How do you fit in at your school, even with your differences?

## [By Theme]

Click on one of the following themes of bullying and bias. In each theme, the quotes or passages from *Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog* are followed by questions that can be used for small or large group discussion, or to guide reflective writing. All page numbers refer to the August 2001 paperback edition of the book.

- [Standing Out and Fitting In](#)
- [Racial Bias](#)
- [Coping with Bias and Bullying](#)
- [Responding to Bullying](#)
- [Being a Friend and an Ally](#)

## Theme: Standing Out and Fitting In

"...And when you get Toothpick or Blob looking around for somebody to smack, you don't want to stand out. Like Larry. Like me." (Page 13)

"...Like the chameleon,' I tell them. 'If I could just change colors when I need to. I mean, then there would be no problems.' ...'if you're the right color, you fit in.' ...I mean, it's not possible to change colors, but if it was, everything would be perfect. Like the lizard, I could disappear in the leaves, camouflaged. Except the leaves would be the kids at school, and the lizard would be me." (Page 14)

**Questions for Writing or Discussion**

- How do Keath and Larry “stand out” in their school? What makes kids “stand out” in your school?
- Is it a good thing or a bad thing “to stand out” in some way? How do those who are different get treated?
- Describe a time when you wished you could be a chameleon like Keath and blend into the background. Do you think that “disappearing” would have solved all of your problems?

“You gotta have some flash,’ Larry told me one time. ‘If you look and walk and talk like everybody else, what good is that? How you going to even recognize yourself in the mirror if you look like everybody?’ ... ‘You gotta stop trying to be like the Invisible Man...or some day you’ll look in the mirror and you won’t even be there.’” (Page 96)

**Questions for Writing or Discussion**

- What does Larry mean when he tells Keath he’s “gotta have some flash”?
- What’s hard about being truly yourself when that means being a little different from everyone else?
- What rewards come from being yourself? How do you think you can build the courage or confidence to be a little different sometimes?

“...Leftovers is happy hopping along on his three legs. And the other dogs don’t seem to mind. So I guess he does fit, in his own way. If you look at my class photo, you’ll see my white smiling face in a crowd of brown smiling faces. What doesn’t fit? If you asked me a couple of weeks ago, I would have said it was me. But now I don’t know. Maybe I can be like Leftovers and fit in in my own way.” (Page 134)

**Questions for Writing or Discussion**

- How does Leftovers fit in with the other dogs even though he only has three legs? How does Keath fit in even though he is the only white student in his school?
- How do you fit in at your school, even with your differences?

**Theme: Racial Bias**

“At school they mostly call me Whitey. My best friend is Lynda. Some call her Zebra, which is kind of a nice name, only the kids who say it mean it in a bad way. Lynda is Zebra because her mother is black and her father is white.” (Page 1)

“Look around, Keath. Hardly anybody else looks like you. Face it, you’re vanilla in a chocolate school.” (Page 27)

**Questions for Writing or Discussion**

- How does it make you feel when Keath and Lynda are called names because of their skin color?
- What are some safe and helpful ways to respond when you hear racist comments or observe racism in your school or community?

“I don’t know why Toothpick and Blob hate me so much. But I know if I looked like everybody else, I wouldn’t be their main target...I go back to the dog books. Dogs don’t hate anybody. I want to be a golden retriever when I grow up.” (Page 28)

“Some kids look at me and say I’m black, then some say I’m more white than black, or not black enough. It’s stupid. Maybe I’m just Lynda, you know?” (Page 81)

**Questions for Writing or Discussion**

- Why do you think some people feel threatened by racial differences or hate others because of their race?
- Lynda doesn’t want to be defined by her skin color. What can you do in your own school or community to avoid judging others by appearance and to get to know them as people?

**Theme: Coping with Bias and Bullying**

“‘So how’s school,’ Dad asks...‘School’s okay,’ I say. ‘It’s just I’m practically the only white kid there. I’m like a freak.’ Dad frowns. ‘That kid still bugging you?...You let me know if he starts roughing you up again,’ Dad says. ‘...And you’re not a freak. Don’t call yourself that. There’s no such things as freaks, only different kinds of people.’” (Pages 64–67)

“My best friend is Lynda. Some call her Zebra...because her mother is black and her father is white. Real zebras are beautiful...So Lynda says when they call her Zebra she thinks about the horse with the Mohawk, and the name doesn’t burn so bad.” (Pages 1–2)

**Questions for Writing or Discussion**

- Why does Keath feel like a “freak”? Have you ever felt this way about yourself?
- How does Keath’s dad help him to feel better? Who can you turn to for support when you’re feeling badly about yourself?
- What strategy does Lynda use to stay positive when she is called names? What can you imagine or think about to keep from getting upset when others are being mean?

“‘...Freddie was different...He did this trick...Freddie made Dan invisible. ‘Can’t see him. Can’t hear him,’ Freddie used to say...He didn’t make like he heard at all. It used to bug me that Freddie didn’t fight back. But he said, ‘I used to let it wreck me, but look who’s saying it.’ I said, ‘So it doesn’t bug you anymore?’ ‘Yeah, it does,’ Freddie said. ‘But I try to remember who’s saying it.’” (Page 109–110)

“‘...I can see how it hurts. It’s not easy to make the other guy invisible...When someone starts calling you a name, what they’re really saying is: ‘I’m a jerk.’ You know, in those foreign movies when you read the words translated into English at the bottom of the screen? Well. Life should have subtitles like that. Because then, when someone says Ghost or Whitey, you could just read the subtitles and see what they’re really saying: ‘I’m a jerk. An idiot.’” (Page 110)

**Questions for Writing or Discussion**

- It’s easy to feel hurt or embarrassed when you are teased or bullied, but what does such behavior say about the person who is doing the bullying? How can this keep you from feeling badly about yourself?
- What strategies can you use to help you ignore or tune out mean behavior from others? How can you make them invisible?

**Theme: Responding to Bullying**

‘What kind of sandwich you got there? May-o-naise sandwich?’ Toothpick says...He’s totally in my face now with his needle nose...‘Yes,’ I say. ‘It’s a white bread mayonnaise vanilla honky sandwich.’...Wham! I see sparks for a few seconds...I rub the back of my head. Yeah, it was worth it.” (Pages 3–4)

**Questions for Writing or Discussion**

- Do you think that using sarcasm or humor is a good way to deal with taunting or bullying?
- In what situations is this a good strategy and when is it risky?

“‘Toothpic’s been keeping an eye on me from the other side of the cafeteria...I know what I have to do. ‘I’m going outside for a minute,’ I tell Lynda. ‘What? Are you crazy? The second you step out, he’s going to get you. In here you’re sort of safe, with the crowd. He won’t do much with the teachers around.’...‘It’s going to happen sometime. Sooner or later. I can’t take him staring at me all the time like this. Got to get it over with.’” (Page 41)

**Questions for Writing or Discussion**

- Why does Keath face Toothpick instead of remaining safe “with the crowd”?

- Which is worse, getting hit or waiting for it to happen? Does Keath have any other choices?

“Toothpick’s smile turns to shock as Larry barrels into him headfirst, hitting him right in the gut...That’s the thing about Larry, he can take any insult and shrug it off. But don’t mess with his hair...I wish I could be as brave as Larry. He never takes any crap, even though he’s only about the same size as me.” (Page 95–96)

#### Questions for Writing or Discussion

- Keath says, “That’s the thing about Larry, he can take any insult and shrug it off...” What does it take to “shrug off” an insult? How can you learn to ignore nasty comments and not take them personally?
- Do you think it was right for Larry to hit Toothpick? Are there times when it is okay to fight?
- Keath wishes he could “be as brave as Larry.” If we are afraid to fight or choose not to, does that make us weak? Is fighting the only way to be brave?

“There’s always some loser yelling names at the other kids...Usually the other kids get crushed by the loser with the big mouth. But Freddie was different...He did this trick...Freddie made Dan invisible. ‘Can’t see him. Can’t hear him,’ Freddie used to say...He didn’t make like he heard at all...After a while I just started doing what Freddie did, made Dan invisible. And that killed Dan, because he really wanted the attention...Dan still mouthed off, but since nobody was paying him any attention, it got to be like he was talking to himself.” (Page 109–110)

#### Questions for Writing or Discussion

- How did Freddie make his bully “invisible”?
- What effect did this strategy have on Freddie’s bully? On the other students?
- Can you imagine using this strategy when people say mean things to you?

### Theme: Being a Friend and an Ally

The quotes below show different ways that the people in Keath’s life act as friends and allies when bullying occurs. Which strategies do you think are the most and least helpful? Which ones can you imagine trying? What additional ways can you think of to support or help others?

“Toothpick’s been keeping an eye on me from the other side of the cafeteria...I know what I have to do. ‘I’m going outside for a minute...I can’t take him staring at me all the time like this. Got to get it over with.’...I can see Lynda is thinking about arguing, but then she just shakes her head. ‘Do you want me to come with?’ ‘No,’ I say. Better to be squashed in private. ‘If you’re not back in five minutes...,’ Lynda says.” (Page 41)

“Lynda comes over and looks at the picture with me. ‘Most of the relatives from Dad’s family wouldn’t come to the wedding...because...they said it was wrong...for a black person to marry a white...But see right there?’ She points at one of the two little white faces in the crowd, smiling in the front row. ‘That’s my dad’s mother. She showed up.’” Page 89–90)

“‘In sixth grade I had a friend named Freddie Wong,’ [Dad] says...‘A Chinese kid. He was...well, pretty fat. And some of the kids were brutal in bugging him about it...Dan used to say stuff like Freddie Wong ate his weight in won tons every day...I told Dan he was an idiot. Told him his mother must have used his head to clean the toilet, he was so ugly. Dan never came after me. I had nothing he could pick on.’” (Page 108–109)

“The door to the cafeteria swings open. ‘Hey, leave him alone!’ It’s Lynda...‘Come on, man. Leave him,’ a new voice says. It’s Hairy Larry...I’m glad someone’s speaking up for me, but I’m just getting a bigger audience for my knockout.” (Page 122)

#### Questions for Writing or Discussion

- How do Lynda and Larry support Keath when Toothpick bullies him? How does it feel when others support or stand up for you?

- How can you show friendship or support to someone who is being teased or bullied?
- What are some safe and helpful ways to get involved when you observe bullying?
- Keath’s father explains that a childhood bully never came after him because he “had nothing he could pick on.” In what way did Keath’s dad have a special responsibility to be an ally?
- How do you want teachers and other adults to help when bullying occurs? What types of involvement would you consider not helpful?

### Extension Activities

See the extension activities that follow for ideas on ways to increase awareness about bullying using *Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog*.

# Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog Extension Activities

Follow up your reading of *Nothing Wrong with a Three-Legged Dog* with one or more of the extension activities below, which can help to increase awareness about bullying.

## Vanilla in a Chocolate School

In Chapter Six, Lynda describes Keath as “vanilla in a chocolate school” because he is the only white student. Ask students if they think this is a reason for Keath to be singled out for negative attention. Suggest to students that we are all unique or different in some way. Have students reflect on a way in which they are different and write a short poem or essay entitled, “\_\_\_\_\_ in a \_\_\_\_\_ School” (e.g., “Quiet in a Noisy School,” “Jewish in a Christian School,” “Deaf in a Hearing School”). Ask for volunteers to share their writing with the class. Emphasize that when we come across differences, we have an opportunity to ridicule or to celebrate them. Ask for examples of ways that students can celebrate rather than make fun of differences. Post their ideas and their writing on a bulletin board.

## Metaphorically Speaking

In the story, Keath uses a variety of animal metaphors to describe bullying situations. Define the term **metaphor** with your students and challenge them to find an animal metaphor in the story that relates to bullying (see examples below). In small groups, direct students to either illustrate the example they have chosen or role-play it. Have each group share their artwork and role-plays with the larger class, and use them as a springboard for discussing what it feels like to be the target of bullying. As a follow-up, ask students to come up with a metaphor that reflects a role they have played when teasing, name-calling or bullying occurred. Use these metaphors to validate students' feelings and to help them see how they might shift their roles in the future where necessary to become better friends and allies.

### Metaphor

A figure of speech in which a word or phrase meaning one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a similarity between them. For example, “It’s raining cats and dogs” or “She’s swimming in money.”

### Examples of Animal Metaphors

**Lynda is zebra** because her mother is black and her father is white. Real zebras are beautiful. They’re these African horses painted white with black stripes, and they have Mohawk hair that runs from the top of their head down their neck and stands up straight. So Lynda says when they call her Zebra she thinks about the horse with the Mohawk, and the name doesn't burn so bad. (Chapter One)

“Ryan’s like the **runt of the class**,” Larry told me. “You’re the only one he had a chance at beating in a fight. So I guess he got tired of being the **lowest worm on the food chain**. Now he’s second to last.” (Chapter Two)

“I was thinking how that would be the most perfect thing...**Like the chameleon**,” I tell them. “If I could just change colors when I need to. I mean, then there would be no problems.” ...“if you’re the right color, you fit in. But the right color keeps changing, so it’s better if you can change too. One day you’re brown, one day you’re green.” ...I mean, it’s not possible to change colors, but if it was, everything would be perfect. Like the lizard, I could disappear in the leaves, camouflaged. Except the leaves would be the kids at school, and the lizard would be me. (Chapter Three)

Predator is a crazy name for a beagle. If I had to **call anybody Predator, it would be Toothpick**. He’s got those eyes that can catch any movement a small creature might make. A small creature like me. And just when you think it’s safe, he’s swooping down on you with his claws out. (Chapter Six)

Dogs don’t hate anybody. **I want to be a golden retriever** when I grow up. (Chapter Six)

If life was a TV nature special, **Toothpick would be a gorging lion** feeding on his prey, warm blood dripping from his chin. No, hold it. **Toothpick would be a cheetah.** Real thin, real fast, real mean. Lynda would be a zebra, white with chocolate-ripple stripes. And me? **I'd be a little blond mouse** hiding in the tall grass, sniffing the wind for any danger. (Chapter Eight)

### Helpful or Harmful?

Keath and his peers use a variety of methods-some helpful and some harmful-to cope with and respond to bullying. Divide the class into five groups and assign each group one of the [Strategies for Responding to Bullying](#) (excluding the Questions for Discussion) from the story. Instruct group members to reread the section of the book in which their scenario takes place, and to discuss the pros and cons of the strategy used. Gather the class and create a large chart with four columns labeled "Strategy," "Pros," "Cons," and "Helpful or Harmful?" After listing each of the five strategies discussed in small groups and the pros and cons of each, ask the class to decide if that tactic is "Helpful" or "Harmful." If time allows, ask students to generate additional strategies for responding to bullying (it doesn't matter if they are used in the story) and to decide whether or not they are helpful or harmful approaches. Encourage students to consider the range of alternatives they have so that they can make constructive choices when confronted with bullying.