

Muriel Johnson

***Is that Fair? Exploring Justice, Bullying, Humanity
and Morality***

Educational Guide, Grades 3-12



About the Performance

In this program, **Muriel Johnson** brings her audience into the life of a fourth grader as she navigates being bullied at school. One day, she tells a lie about her bully which is bound to get him into big trouble. Is that fair? This is a compelling thought-provoking story for children to experience. Students will be asked mid-story, “what is the right thing to do?” Should she come clean or let him suffer for something he did not do? Students get to suggest and express what is just, what is morally correct, and what is fair according to their personal opinions. This tale and the telling of it creates a wonderful opportunity for students to reflect on their own experiences and sense of justice, morality, and humanity. It is a compelling, funny, serious, and suspenseful personal story re-enactment that will not be forgotten!



About the Artist

Professional storyteller **Muriel Johnson** has performed at preschools and elementary schools, museums, colleges, churches, theaters, festivals and countless other venues across the U.S. and toured Colombia, Brazil, Peru and as well as Cape Town, South Africa and Ghana, West Africa. She has an animated and interactive storytelling style in which she incorporates songs, rhythmic chants, humor and rich character voices. Her masterful telling has captivated audiences around the world. With over 30 years of experience as an early childhood educator, Muriel enjoys teaching about the role storytelling plays in early literacy and language development.

Program Learning Goals

1. To encourage self-reflection and critical thinking through personal narrative storytelling.
2. To inspire students to examine their own sense of justice and morality.
3. To consider what is a fair consequence when someone has wronged another.

Essential Questions

1. What is a fair consequence when someone has wronged another?
2. Why do people bully?
3. Is it okay to do something that is wrong if it is for a good cause?

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Vocabulary

- **Personal narrative storytelling:** recounting a true story about a specific event or experience in the writer's or storyteller's life
- **Integrity:** being honest, having strong moral principles, and consistently acting in line with those principles even when facing difficult choices or when nobody is watching
- **Morals:** what you believe to be right and wrong
- **Justice:** being fair and impartial, ensuring everyone is treated correctly
- **Punishment:** a forced consequence imposed on someone as retribution
- **Humanity:** humaneness, goodness, love, and compassion toward others
- **Moral/ethical dilemma:** a situation where a person is required to make a difficult choice
- **Bullying:** the repetitive, intentional hurting of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involves an imbalance of power

Key Facts and Context for Students

A World of Storytellers

Storytellers have existed in every country, culture and group of people for centuries. Before there was written language people told stories. In many parts of West Africa, a storyteller is referred to as a **griot** (*gree-ot*). Griots are revered figures who are also historians, poets, musicians, and diplomats. The position of griot is hereditary and passed down through generations. In Ireland, storytellers are called **seanchaí** (*shan-a-kee*), in Ancient Greek storytellers were called **bards**, in France storytellers were called **troubadours**. In every Country throughout history, storytellers carried an important role in society.



Oral Storytelling is the oldest form of storytelling, relying on the spoken word to transmit stories and cultural knowledge. It can be found in various forms like songs, chants, poetry, and even dance. It is often passed down through generations, preserving traditions and cultural values. Examples include **myths, legends, folktales**, and **personal anecdotes** told face-to-face.

"I have been telling stories professionally for 30 years.

My love of stories came from my mother singing to me and telling me stories and from enjoying being read to and learning to read as a child."

- **Muriel Johnson**

Pre-Performance Discussion Questions

- Has something ever happened in your life that you will never forget?
- Have you ever meet a bully?
- What are some values that you have? What are things that you think are right versus things that you think are wrong?

Pre-Performance Activity: Exploring Moral Dilemmas

Learning Goals:

- To introduce and explore problem solving in difficult situations
- To examine responses to conflict

Materials:

“Moral Dilemma” worksheet (see page 4),

Suggested books:

Younger grades: *I Did It, I'm Sorry* by Caralyn Buehner

Older grades: *What Would You Do? Moral Dilemmas*

Book 1 by Michael O. Baker



Directions:

1. Discuss moral dilemmas. When have students had to make a difficult decision? Has anyone been in a situation when it was hard to do the right thing?
2. Read one of the suggested books above with students and follow the decision-making prompts. Both books present scenarios and ask the reader to consider different options to deal with a problem. Are students always in agreement on which choice to pick?
3. In small groups, have students complete the “Moral Dilemma” worksheet. Encourage them to discuss and reflect on their reasoning when considering the different prompts.
4. Ask each group to create a short skit that depicts the dilemma from the worksheet with one of the different responses. They could choose to act out a storyline based on their own group discussion from the worksheet, or explore a different response.
5. Perform the skits for the class. After each skit, have the audience discuss what they noticed in the skit, and whether they would have made similar or different choices.
6. Reflect on this activity. Did anyone find new ways to respond in a difficult situation? Why is it important to continually examine our values and approaches to conflict?

Name: _____

Moral Dilemma Worksheet

Directions: Consider the difficult situation below and think about what you would do.

Suppose one of your friends tells a lie to someone in front of you.

Would you (*circle one*):

- a. tell the person your friend is lying?
- b. pretend you do not hear the lie?
- c. ask your friend about the lie?
- d. do something else? Explain: _____

Now consider the following and discuss with your group:

1. What if the lie is about something your friend did when the two of you were together, and your friend is telling the lie to avoid getting into trouble? Would this change what you would do?
2. If the lie will not hurt anyone else and will also keep you out of trouble, would this change what you would do?
3. If the friend is your best friend, would this change what you would do?
4. If there is a chance the lie could get you into trouble, would this change what you would do?
5. If the lie is meant to save you embarrassment, would this change what you would do?
6. If the lie keeps both of you out of trouble but puts the blame on someone else, would this change what you would do?
7. If the lie keeps both of you out of trouble but puts the blame on someone who stole money from you, would this change what you would do?
8. What if your friend also swears in front of you that it's the truth? Would this change what you would do?

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Post-Performance Discussion Questions

- What did you like about the performance and why?
- Was there anything in the story that you related to?
- How do you think you could help a friend or classmate who is being bullied?

Post-Performance Activity: Demonstrating the Lasting Impact of Unkindness

Learning Goals:

- To reflect on the affects of being unkind to others
- To write personal narratives recounting a challenging event

Materials:

One sheet of paper for each student

Directions:

1. Provide each student with a piece of paper and tell them to crumple it up, stomp on it, fold it, bend it, etc. The only rule is that students can't rip it.
2. Ask students to stop and carefully uncrumple the paper, smoothing out the wrinkles to the best of their abilities.
3. Reflect on what students see before them. Was it hard to unfold the paper or smooth it out? What do they notice about the paper now? How is the paper changed? Can the paper return to its original state?
4. Ask students to apologize to the piece of paper. This will seem silly, and it is okay to encourage playfulness here. However, emphasize that their apologies do not erase the dirt, the creases, or the crumples.
5. Tell students that this is a simple way to show that when someone bullies another, saying sorry after they've been mean doesn't heal the scars that may stay with that person forever. It is important to be mindful with our words and to use our influence to build people up instead of crumpling their hearts.
6. Have students write a personal narrative about overcoming a challenging journey or surprising event.
7. Share narratives aloud or create a class book to share stories with the class. Reflect on the experiences students have shared. How has this performance and activity changed students' perspectives on how they treat others?



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Further Resources

- [Muriel Johnson Artist Website](#)
- **By Muriel Johnson:**
 - [We Sing Like This](#) (book of Cuban folktales)
 - [I Can See With My Ears](#) (storytelling CD)
 - **Storytelling videos:**
 - [“Muriel Johnson Tells a Personal Story about Kevin the Bully”](#)
 - [“How Goat Got Out of Trouble”](#)
- **Books about Anti-Bullying and Moral Dilemmas:**
 - Brisson, Pat: *The Summer My Father Was Ten*, Astra Young Readers (1999)
 - Chong, Lisa: *When Words Have Power*, West Margin Press (2022)
 - Clark, Bonnie: *Taste Your Words*, WorthyKids (2020)
 - Furnival, Christina: *The Not-So-Friendly Friend: How To Set Boundaries for Healthy Friendships*, PESI Publishing, Inc. (2021)
 - Goldblatt, Mark: *Twerp*, Yearling (2014)
 - Henkes, Kevin: *Chrysanthemum*, Greenwillow Books (1991)
 - Ludwig, Trudy: *The Invisible Boy*, Knopf Books for Young Readers (2013)
 - Palacco, Patricia: *Bully*, G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers (2012)
 - Sornson, Bob and Maria Dismondy: *The Juice Box Bully: Empowering Kids to Stand Up for Others*, Early Learning Foundation (2010)
 - Tucker, Jeff: *My Name is Sammy and I'm No Snitch*, Boys Town Press (2020)
 - Wolk, Laura: *Wolf Hollow*, Dutton Books for Young Readers (2016)
 - Woodson, Jacqueline: *Each Kindness*, Nancy Paulsen Books (2012)

Curricular Connections

Arts Standards: Theatre

Creating

- Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work. (T.Cr.01)
- Organize and develop artistic ideas and work. (T.Cr.02)

Performing

- Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work. (T.P.06)

Responding

- Perceive and analyze artistic work. (T.R.07)
- Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. (T.R.08)
- Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. (T.R.09)

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Curricular Connections, continued

Arts Standards: Theatre, continued

Connecting

- Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art. (T.Co.10)
- Relate artistic ideas and works to societal, cultural and historical contexts to deepen understanding. (T.Co.11)

English Language Arts and Literacy Anchor Standards

Reading

- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas. (R.PK-12.2)
- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone. (R.PK-12.4)

Writing

- Write narratives to develop experiences or events using effective literary techniques, well-chosen details, and well-structured sequences. (W.PK-12.3)

Speaking and Listening

- Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. (SL.PK-12.2)
- Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric. (SL.PK-12.3)

Language

- Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening. (L.PK-12.3)
- Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships and nuances in word meanings. (L.PK-12.5)

