

# Activity: Oliver Button Is a Sissy

Time: approximately 4x40 minutes

Description: Students will use the text, “Oliver Button is a Sissy” to explore the impact of homophobia, bullying and exclusion for some children who do not conform to traditional gender roles. Students will also be encouraged to challenge their own prejudices and biases about male dancers.

## Expectations (Overall)

Kindergarten

Personal and Social Development: A, B, D, E

Language: A, B

The Arts: A, D, E

Grade 1-3

Language Arts:

Reading: 1

Writing: 1, 2

Oral Communication: 1, 2

Health and Physical Education

Healthy Living: C2

The Arts:

Dance: A2, A3

Drama: B1, B2

## Planning Notes (Materials)

Book Title: Oliver Button Is a Sissy

Author: Tomie dePaola

Publisher: Voyager Books

ISBN: 0152578528

## Prior Knowledge

- There should be a certain level of trust and respect among the students and between the teacher and the students before beginning this activity.
- Because discussing gender roles can become extremely personal, it is a good idea to reiterate classroom rules of responsibility and respect and to remind students that all ideas are important, but that everyone must take responsibility for their words and actions.
- Some previous class discussions on stereotyping and prejudice would also be helpful.

## Teaching/Learning Strategies

### Lesson #1: Pre-Reading Activity

1. Tell the students that you will be reading a story about a child who loves to dance. Ask the students to imagine a dancer in their minds. Guide them to notice details about what the dancer looks like. Invite the students to draw a picture of the dancer in their minds, using detail and colour to make it as realistic as possible. You can share these drawings as a gallery walk, or in a circle, or graph the results. Alternately, you can share the students ideas as a whole-class discussion.
2. Draw an outline of a dancing figure on chart paper. Ask the students to share words that describe the dancer they have drawn. Write the words on the outside of the dancer's body. These words might include the following: female, skinny, able-bodied, white, etc.
3. Based on the discussion or drawings, ask a few critical questions about the words the students generated. For example, "Why do you think so many people described/drew a female/able-bodied dancer?" "Where do our ideas about what a dancer looks like come from?" "Where do we see dancers in our society?" "Do you know anyone who takes dance lessons?"
4. Ask students to think about the qualities or skills that are required to be a good dancer. Write these words on the inside of the dancer's body. These words might include the following: graceful, strong, good rhythm, athletic, etc. Ask critical questions about these qualities. For example, "Is being strong a quality that only a girl or a boy can have?" "Can girls be athletic?" "Can boys be graceful?" "Why do you think so?"
5. Introduce or review the idea that our ideas or assumptions about how people look or behave are called "bias" or "prejudice". We live in a society that creates and re-enforces bias and prejudice. It is important for us to notice our own bias and prejudice, and it is equally important to challenge our ideas when they exclude other people.

### Lesson #2: Read Aloud and Response

1. Say: "Today, we are going to read a story about a boy named Oliver who wants to be a dancer. As I am reading, I want you to think about the following questions: "How does Oliver feel about dancing at the beginning of the story, in the middle of the story, and at the end of the story?" "How do the other people in the story feel about Oliver's decision to become a dancer?" "How do you know?"
2. After reading, ask the students to share their ideas with a partner. Record their ideas on chart paper, using a graphic organizer labelled, "Beginning, Middle, End" Ask the same questions as above, and include examples from the text to support their ideas. For example, "At the beginning of the story, Oliver Button loves to dance. In the book, he joins a tap dance class." "At the beginning of the story, Oliver's father does not want him to dance. He calls him a "sissy" and tells him to play a sport with balls."

### Lesson #3: Feeling Excluded: Peace Circle/Discussion

1. Say; "In the book, "Oliver Button Is a Sissy," there were several people in Oliver's life who teased him about his decision to become a dancer. What were some of the ways that Oliver was made to feel excluded at school?" Possible responses might be: "They called him names, like "sissy."" "They took his tap shoes and threw them around."

“They wrote mean words about him on the wall.” “They teased him everyday.” You can add to/review the graphic organizer from the previous discussion for specific examples from the text.

2. Say: “Today, we are going to have a Peace Circle, where we explore some of the feelings in the book, “Oliver Button is a Sissy.” Remind students about the agreements for having a discussion in a Peace Circle. For example, use a talking piece, one person speaks at a time, look at the speaker, respect everyone’s feelings, the right to pass, etc.
3. Say: “Today, we are going to think about what it feels like to be excluded or teased by our friends. I am going to share a story with you about a time when I felt left out (or teased) by my friends at school.” When you are finished, pass the talking piece to the student beside you. Allow everyone to have an opportunity to share their stories.
4. Thank everyone for sharing their stories and feelings during the Peace Circle. Summarize the conversation by re-stating some of the ways that we can exclude other people, and how it feels to be excluded. Review or introduce the word “homophobia” to describe how people are excluded when they don’t fit into traditional gender roles or stereotypes.

#### Lesson #4: Being an Ally: Role Play/Reflecting

1. Say, “In the book, “Oliver Button Is a Sissy”, there were several people in Oliver’s life who supported him and his decision to become a dancer. We can call these people “allies”. An ally is someone who supports another person. What were some of the ways that Oliver was made to feel included or supported to become a dancer?” Possible responses might be: “His parents sent Oliver to tap dancing lessons.” “Some of the girls stood up to the bullies and defended Oliver.” “Oliver’s dance teacher encouraged him to compete in a talent show.” “Somebody changed the graffiti to say something positive.” You can add to/review the graphic organizer for specific examples from the text.
2. Say: “Yesterday, we had a Peace Circle where everyone had an opportunity to talk about a time when they felt excluded. We learned that feeling left out and being teased can be really painful. Today, we are going to talk about the ways that we can be a good ally to our friends.”
3. Write the following statement on chart paper: “I can be an ally. I can..” Ask the students to share their ideas with a partner. Ask: “What are some of the ways that we can be an ally? How can we respond to teasing and bullying when we see it or hear it?” Write down their ideas on chart paper.
4. Say, “Today, we are going to have an opportunity to practice being a good ally. You are going to work in groups of three or four to act out a short scene or role-play. In this scene, there will be a student who is being excluded or teased for being different. As a group, I want you to show how the student is being excluded, and I also want you to show how the other students can be a good ally and support the student who is being excluded.”
5. Divide the class into small groups of three or four. Give each group a suggested scenario to role-play. Remind everyone that these scenes are based on traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Circulate throughout the room to support their dramatic work. After approximately 20 minutes, invite the groups to share their scenes with the whole class.

You can use your own scenarios or include ideas that were shared as part of the earlier discussions. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

“A girl wants to join the soccer game at recess but there are no other girls playing.”

“A boy brings a doll for show and tell.”

“A girl tells the class that she has two moms.”

“A boy comes to school wearing nail polish.”

“Several girls are playing in the Dramatic Centre and a boy wants to play with them.”

“A girl comes to school after getting a short hair cut.”

“A boy wears a pink t-shirt to school.”

## Assessment and Evaluation

Oral Language: Can students talk about the events in the story, using concrete examples and details? Can students express their own ideas related to feelings of exclusion and inclusion?

Reading: Can students make connections between the text and their own personal experiences?

Drama: Can students use role-play effectively to explore issues of inclusion and exclusion?

## Accommodations/Extensions

\*Write keywords from the story on chart paper to help students with new vocabulary

\*Have students re-tell the story using drama and role-play. Encourage students to practice speaking in-role as one of the characters to express their different points of view

\*Watch video clips of male dancers to celebrate the athleticism of dancing

\*Bring in a guest artist to teach the class how to tap dance

\*Make your own tap shoes with bottle caps

## Resources

The following books can be used for further exploration of the themes in this lesson:

Amazing Grace: Mary Hoffman

The Sissy Duckling: H. Fierstein