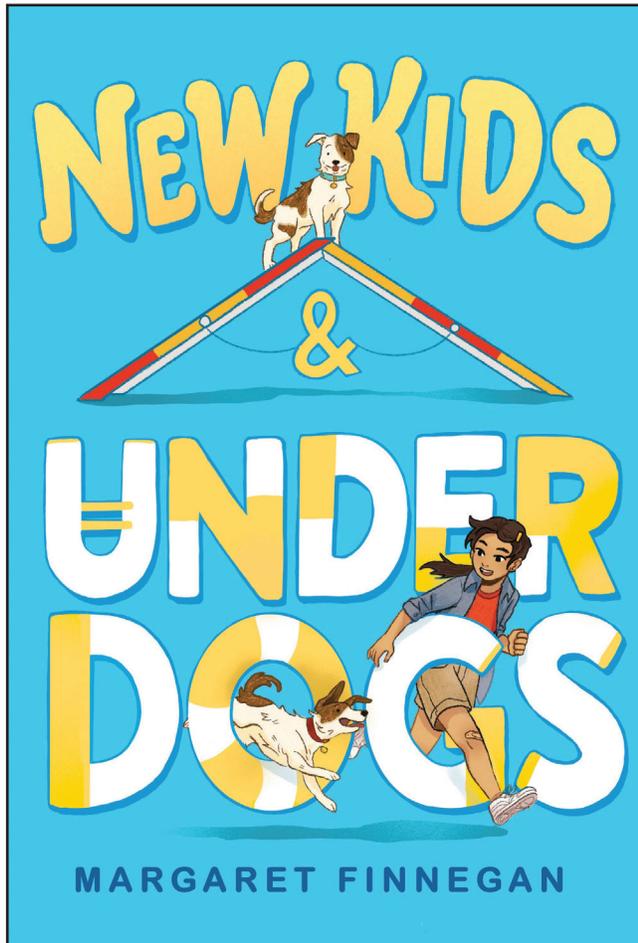


DISCUSSION GUIDE

978-1-5344-9640-8



NEW KIDS & UNDERDOGS

BY
MARGARET
FINNEGAN

When perpetual new kid Robyn signs up her special needs dogs for agility training, she gets an unexpected lesson in friendship in this funny and moving novel from the author of *We Could Be Heroes* and *Susie B. Won't Back Down*.

ROBYN KELLEN HAS BEEN THE NEW KID SIX TIMES. She's practically an expert on the subject and has developed foolproof rules to help her get by: blend in, don't go looking for trouble, and move on. Unfortunately, Robyn's mom has a rule too: Robyn must do an after-school activity.

When Robyn discovers a dog agility class, she thinks she's found the perfect thing—but her dogs, Sundae and Fudge, are rejected from the class. Sundae won't do anything without Fudge, and Fudge is deaf and blind, and the instructor refuses to change the rules to fit their needs. Luckily, the instructor's grandson, Nestor—a legend at Robyn's new school—offers Robyn a deal: if she helps him with math, he'll train Sundae and Fudge. Problem is, Robyn isn't so great at math herself, so she is forced to recruit the class outcast, Alejandra, to help.

Suddenly, Robyn finds herself surrounded by people who do anything but blend in—and sticking to her rules becomes harder than ever. But as Robyn learns to adapt the rules of agility for Sundae and Fudge, she will find that some rules are worth breaking altogether.

"A thoughtful story about learning to look beneath the surface and be a better friend." —Kirkus Reviews

A JUNIOR LIBRARY GUILD SELECTION

simonandschuster.com/kids margaretfinnegan.com



The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and CASEL 5 social and emotional learning competencies addressed by the discussion questions, activities, and worksheets in this guide are noted throughout. For more information on the Common Core, visit corestandards.org; for more about CASEL 5, visit casel.org.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Unless otherwise noted, discussion questions address the following standards: [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1](#)

-  Before reading the first chapter of the novel, think about the title of the book and how new kids and underdogs might be connected. Discuss your predictions about what might happen in this book based on the title and the cover illustration.
-  How would you describe Robyn's mood at the beginning of the book? What reasons may Robyn have for feeling this way? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3](#)
-  How does the journal given to Robyn by her dad and Robyn's interest in the law of cause and effect help her prepare for her new life in California?
-  Robyn's mom feels strongly that Robyn must participate in extracurricular activities. What activity catches Robyn's interest when she and her mother go for a walk in her new neighborhood? How does Robyn's mother react to Robyn's new interest?
-  Describe Robyn's initial reaction to Lulu and Marshan when she meets the two on the first day of school.
-  How do Lulu and Marshan initially shape Robyn's feelings toward Alejandra? What do you think their opinion of Alejandra reveals about what kinds of friends they are? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3](#)
-  What deal is struck among Robyn, Jonathan, Nestor, and Alejandra, and how does the deal benefit all of them?
-  What is "touch training," and how does Robyn apply this technique to her dogs?
-  How did Nestor's childhood illness affect his personality and his goals in life?
-  How do the additions of William and Harrison to the dog agility class change the dynamic in the group? How does Robyn react to new people joining the group?
-  Robyn wants to keep the world of school separate from the world of dog training. What changes her feelings about keeping parts of her life separate from one another?
-  How do you feel as a reader when Robyn's friends from her dog ability class do not show up to her Halloween party? Does this scene in the story change your opinion of the characters? If so, how?
-  What is the positive outcome for the kids and their dogs after Nestor's grandmother, Mrs. Zazueta, is initially upset with the kids for training dogs behind her back?
-  As the new kid, Robyn tries hard to be included. Describe what happens to make her feel excluded from the dog ability group and how her mother helps Robyn work through her feelings of rejection.
-  Nivien, Robyn's babysitter, tells Robyn, "Some people puff themselves up by acting sympathetic, but really . . . it's almost like they're tourists. It's like they want to see a person's pain, like you might want to see a lion on safari. They think that if they *see* the pain and feel sorry for the person with the pain, then that makes them good people." How does this quote reflect the way in which Lulu and Marshan treat others? Cite examples from the story to support your opinion. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3](#)
-  How does Robyn's first impression of Lulu and Marshan change throughout the story as she gets to know the two girls better? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3](#)

-  In what ways does the tutoring club at school help Robyn repair and build friendships with those who matter most to her?
-  Robyn's mom tells her, "I think we learn by persevering." Cite examples from the story that show Robyn's perseverance. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3](#)
-  In addition to following her mom's advice, Robyn learns many other lessons in the story. How is Robyn's observation of Alejandra that "[s]he was strong, and she made everyone around her feel stronger, just by being herself" an important lesson for a new kid with a list of rules about how to fit in? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.2](#)



ACTIVITIES FOR STUDENTS

CONNECTING TO THE STORY

Write a personal narrative based on one of these quotes from the story:

- **Robyn on being a new kid at school:** "It was like everyone else was a whole book, and you were just one chapter."
- **Robyn reacting to Jonathan and Nestor's description of dog agility training:** "Rules were not overrated. Rules were the difference between chaos and order, safety and danger."
- **Robyn after listening to Nivien's comment about the connection between a grove of aspen trees:** "The pack needs everyone, and everyone needs the pack."
- **Robyn reflecting on her plan to fit in:** "It's like the rules have become the bus driver, and I'm the bus."

After choosing a quote from the story, think about how the quote reminds you of a feeling that you have had or a situation that you have experienced. Craft a personal narrative describing how your life event is reflected in the story quote. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.3.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.3](#)

INTRO TO DOG TRAINING

Design an illustrated pamphlet on dog agility/ability training. Draw and label diagrams of the different apparatus used as part of the training. Include key vocabulary terms and their definitions.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.3.2.A](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.2.A](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.2.A](#);
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.2.A](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.2.A](#)

DOG RESCUE

Robyn and her mother rescued their two Jack Russell terriers from a terrible living situation. There are many organizations that rescue and foster dogs to get them ready for adoption. Research a dog rescue organization in your area. Find out how the dogs are located and cared for until they find their forever homes. Write a short information piece about the program. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.3.2](#);

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.2](#)

HANDLING CONFLICT

Meet with a small group to select one scene from the book where Robyn experienced conflict with her peers. Brainstorm ways that Robyn could have more effectively dealt with the conflict. Use these ideas to create a skit to act out the scene of Robyn and her friends dealing with conflict in a positive way.

CASEL 5 Relationship Skills

The discussion questions and activities in this guide were created by Leigh Courtney, Ph.D. She teaches in the Global Education program at a public school in San Diego, California. She holds both master's and doctoral degrees in education, with an emphasis on curriculum and instruction.

NEW KIDS & UNDERDOGS Discussion Guide

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Name: _____

REVISING THE RULES



Before moving to California, Robyn makes a list of rules to help her survive as a new kid. By the end of the story, Robyn has learned a lot about how to make friends. Look at Robyn's original rules and then create a list to show Robyn's new-found knowledge about making friends. Add your own rules to the list as well. Will some of the rules stay the same? [CASEL 5 Relationship Skills](#)

RULES FOR MAKING FRIENDS (original list)	RULES FOR MAKING FRIENDS (revised)
<p>Don't stand out. Lay low and <i>blend in</i>.</p> <p>People are judgers, so don't make it easy for them to judge you.</p> <p>Fight fire with fire—if <i>absolutely necessary</i>—but don't burn down the whole school.</p> <p>Laugh it off. <i>Whatever it is</i>, laugh it off.</p> <p>Don't go looking for trouble.</p> <p>Stay busy. Don't look alone.</p> <p>Be nice to everyone.</p> <p>Don't rush things.</p> <p>If they hurt you, don't let it show.</p> <p>Be flexible.</p>	

Name: _____



PRACTICING A GROWTH MIND-SET

Robyn's mom encourages her to have a growth mind-set: "We have to believe that we can get better, that we can get past challenges. The difference between 'I can't' and 'I can't *yet*' can make all the difference in the world." Think of examples from the story where characters demonstrate a growth mind-set. List the characters' names and text evidence to support your selections. Include yourself too!



What have you done in your life that has shown a growth mind-set? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.3](#);
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3](#)

CHARACTER

EXAMPLE OF A GROWTH MIND-SET

ME

Name: _____

WHAT MAKES A GOOD FRIEND?

Think about events in the story that demonstrate what a good friendship LOOKS like, SOUNDS like, and FEELS like. Jot one-sentence examples of each in the chart below. Try to list more than one example of actions characters in the story took that showed friendship, words of friendship they shared, and emotions the characters expressed that illustrated good friendship. **Case 5 Relationship Skills**

WHAT A GOOD FRIENDSHIP LOOKS LIKE:

WHAT A GOOD FRIENDSHIP SOUNDS LIKE:

WHAT A GOOD FRIENDSHIP FEELS LIKE: