

A Curriculum Guide for

Far from the Tree

By Andrew Solomon

About the Book

“Parents and children are always struggling to bridge their differences,” writes Andrew Solomon in this thought-provoking exploration of how people who love each other must struggle to accept each other. But what if children are *so* different from their parents that the parents aren’t sure how to connect with them? *Far from the Tree* asks that question of families of children with deafness, dwarfism, Down syndrome, autism, schizophrenia; of parents whose kids are prodigies, or conceived in rape, or criminals, or transgender. The voices of both the parents and the children address complicated questions of modern life. How do you love someone who is so different from you? And how can you help that person feel safe? These questions are perfect for classroom discussion, writing assignments, and debate.

Discussion Questions

The discussion questions below align with the following Common Core State Standards: (RI9-12.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8)

1. Explain what the author means by vertical and horizontal identity. Give examples from different chapters of these identities. The author writes, “Many parents see a child’s horizontal identity as an insult.” Give examples of this and explain why a parent might feel that way.
2. The author goes on to say, “We use the word *illness* to criticize a way of being, and *identity* to validate a way of being.” What does he mean? Give examples from the book.
3. What are the practical advantages of having a medical label attached to a condition like deafness or dwarfism? What are the disadvantages? Why do some people with any of those conditions object to its being termed a disability?
4. Discuss the book’s title, which comes from the “old saying that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, meaning children tend to be like their parents.” How does the title apply to the book’s contents? In what ways have the children in the book fallen “far from the tree”? Give specific examples.
5. Discuss why some people argue against giving cochlear implants to deaf children. What are the arguments for and against the procedure? What are the threats to Deaf culture from the operation?
6. When the author told friends that he was writing about dwarfs, “they burst into laughter,” unlike their serious reactions to the other categories in the book. Why is there so much callousness and lack of sensitivity to this difference? What are some of the problems that those with dwarfism face?

7. Jason Kingsley, who has Down syndrome, wrote, “Think of your abilities, not your disability.” Analyze his statement. How does it relate to the idea of using a phrase like “person with deafness” rather than “a deaf person?”

8. Review the pages on the beliefs and knowledge about the causes of schizophrenia, and summarize the contents. Analyze the statement that “an epidemic of self-help books argue that mental health is simply a matter of positive thinking.” What is harmful about this idea? Discuss possible connections between drug abuse and schizophrenia. Is it certain that drug abuse causes it? How else can the data be interpreted?

9. Prodigies and other high-IQ students encounter resentment from their peers to the point where they sometimes try to “conform to the norms of less gifted children.” The author observes, “A bias against excellence accompanied our American pursuit of equality.” Give examples from the book. Have you seen this in your surroundings? Why are bright kids resented? Does this apply to other areas, such as sports?

10. Describe ways in which it can be difficult to be the parent of a prodigy. How are these difficulties similar to those of other parents in the book? How is the experience of being the parent of a prodigy different from the other parental experiences in the book?

11. How are the children conceived in rape similar to others in the book? How are they different? Why do some mothers not tell their children that they were the product of rape? What are some of the emotions that mothers feel about having a child after being raped? What are some of the consequences for the child as shown in the text?

12. How are children who commit crimes similar to other children in the book? How are they different? How is the experience different for their parents than for other parents in the book? Do these kids have a sort of disability? Can good parenting prevent crime? Discuss some of the specific kids in the chapter and how their backgrounds are related to their becoming involved in crimes.

13. Solomon writes that the juvenile criminals he met “didn’t grasp their own reality.” What does he mean? How does it relate to his observation that, “The wrongs that some of these teenagers endured were far more real to them than the ones they’d inflicted on others.” What role does lack of empathy for others have in committing crimes? Give examples from the text. How do people learn empathy?

14. The reactions toward a transgender child can be vicious, as seen with Anne O’Hara’s family, who received threats and whose dog was killed. Speculate on why her neighbors were so angry and violent. What other negative reactions are seen in this chapter? Where else in society is there such a level of hatred toward people in certain groups? What excuses do people find, in religion and elsewhere, for their violence toward transgender children?

15. The author opens the book with a chapter called “Son” and closes with one called “Father”. What do the chapters have in common? How do the chapters and their contents serve to frame

the book and its thesis? How did Solomon's passage from being the gay son of straight parents to being a parent himself change his point of view?

16. Find places in the book that address suicide and give statistics about it for different groups. What are some of the reasons behind the suicides? Which groups are most vulnerable? What could be done to help prevent the suicides? Do people commit suicide directly because of their condition or because of how other people treat them for being different?

17. Which conditions in the book are most likely to be blamed on the parents, both now and in the past? Find examples of parents, especially mothers, who were blamed in the past but whom the medical community no longer holds responsible. Why is there an impulse to blame someone? Why are the parents blamed? What are the consequences for the blamed parent?

18. Find examples in the book of parents who felt their lives had been enriched by having a child who fell far from the tree. What did they find rewarding about their experience? What did they learn from it? In what ways have their child and the child's condition changed the parents? And is "finding meaning" a choice for them?

19. Which parents felt that the impact of their child's condition on their lives was more negative than positive? Analyze examples of some of the negative impacts. How do these parents cope with the difficulties? What are some of the things that can help a parent who's under pressure because of their child's condition or actions?

20. The author refers to ways in which spending money on prevention or intervention can save society money in the long run. Discuss these examples of preventive spending and whether you think they are good ideas. What are the arguments against them, if any?

21. "I hate the loss of diversity in the world," writes the author. What are benefits of having a diverse world? Which chapters show diversity being celebrated, and why? Which don't, and why?

22. How do the words of the poet Emma Lazarus, "Until we are all free, we are none of us free," apply to this book? How do they apply to other social issues and to the world as you know it? What is the author hoping to convey about all of us fighting for all the rest of us?

Extension Activities

The activities below align with the following Common Core State Standards: (W9-12.7) (RI9-12.2) (SL9-12.5)

1. Everybody's Different

"Everybody is different in one way or another. It's the one thing we all have in common. But our differences can unite us instead of dividing us." Have students write essays reflecting on their differences from those around them. Are those differences strengths? Or drawbacks? Or both? In what ways have the differences been beneficial? Which ones would they like to change?

2. The Ashley Treatment

Have students reread the section about the Ashley Treatment and write a paper summarizing the two viewpoints, for and against the treatment both in Ashley's case and in general. Students should express their own opinions on the procedures and whether they might choose them if they were in the same situation as Ashley and her parents.

3. Welcome to Holland

Have students meet in small groups and discuss the essay, "Welcome to Holland." What does it convey about the experience of having a child with Down syndrome? What emotions come through in the essay? What does it mean for things to be different than expected, but good in their own way? What was the reaction to the essay from other parents? What other conditions in the book could the essay apply to? Does it apply to any experiences the students themselves have had?

4. Designer Babies Debate

It is increasingly easier to select or avoid certain traits in an embryo through prenatal screening. Many expectant mothers who receive a prenatal diagnosis of Down Syndrome terminate their pregnancies. Some Deaf parents want to select to have a deaf child. Have students collect evidence and create arguments for both sides of the issue, and debate the topic formally in pairs in front of the class or small groups. How well-informed are the expectant parents who are making these choices?

5. Raising Their Voices

One way to improve attitudes and conditions for different groups in this book is through advocacy. Have students choose one of the advocacy groups that Solomon mentions or another group associated with an identity in the book and research it using print and online sources. Have the students prepare a multimedia presentation about the advocacy group, their goals, their actions, and more, relating their findings to *Far from the Tree*.

Guide written by Kathleen Odean, a former school librarian and Chair of the 2002 Newbery Award Committee. She gives professional development workshops on books for young people and is the author of Great Books for Girls and Great Books about Things Kids Love.

This guide, written in alignment with the Common Core Standards (www.corestandards.org) has been provided by Simon & Schuster for classroom, library, and reading group use. It may be reproduced in its entirety or excerpted for these purposes.