

THE SPARKY BOOK

TEACHER'S GUIDE



Target Audience: Senior High School

Curriculum Areas: Wellness
Personal Growth
Moral and Ethics Studies
Biology
Health
Media Education
English Language Arts

Curriculum Topics: Death
Grieving
Family relationships
Pet ownership, behaviours, responsibility, relationships
Heart transplant
Creative Expression
Public awareness campaign
Organ donation

The Sparky Book tells the story of the near death of a heart transplant patient and the death of her beloved pet dog, Sparky. The intertwined stories are told in a visual and verbal language that lovingly describes the deep emotions underlying their relationship. Viewers will feel the highs and lows, joys and sorrows of the narrative. These responses may trigger memories of when the viewers experienced the death of a loved one and the accompanying grief. We recommend, then, that the teacher inform the school principal and the parents/guardians of the students that this subject matter will be explored in the classroom.

1. Bridget has had Sparky since he was a puppy, and he's been a member of her family. They have done almost everything together, forming a strong bond where they know when each one needs a hug, a cuddle, a playmate, a time to rest, a time to run, a time to share, love and comfort. They don't speak the same language—one speaks English and the other barks—but they understand each other and communicate effectively. How does Sparky express this communication? Because of this ability to communicate and their bond, Sparky knows when Bridget needs him and she knows when he needs her. What do they give each other when Sparky arrives at Bridget's hospital bed and when Bridget lies down on the carpet with Sparky? How does their presence, during each other's crisis, help? When Bridget lies down beside Sparky on the carpet and tells him it is okay and to sleep, what is she really saying to herself and to Sparky?



2. While in the post-surgical intensive cardiac care unit, Bridget has a crisis where the nurses say, “We are losing her.” Bridget nearly dies but through the skill of the medical staff, she lives, or as the nurses say, “She’s back.” Why did the medical team work so vigorously to bring her back rather than just let her go? Sparky is lying on the carpet dying. Bridget is there to comfort him but not to bring him back as the medical team did for her. Why is there no medical intervention for him? Bridget understands that it’s time to let Sparky go. What has brought her to this realization? How did the meaning of the phrase “quality of life” translate into action towards Bridget and Sparky?
3. There are stages in the grieving process. Not everyone passes through each step, and not everyone spends the same amount of time on each one. Bridget and her family members will grieve the loss of Sparky because he wasn’t just an animal in their home but a member of the family. The stages are:
 - a. Denial: The “it can’t be” or “I don’t believe it” or “It must be a mistake” response to the news.
 - b. Anger: The “Why” response where the reality of the loss begins to be realized.
 - c. Bargaining: Promises are made to a higher power or to someone who the survivor feels may have some power to effect a change.
 - d. Depression: A debilitating sadness takes effect where the survivor feels isolated and unable to move
 - e. Acceptance: The survivor accepts the loss and moves on.

As the family moves through these stages, acknowledging their grief and loss, giving themselves permission to express these emotions, they will arrive at acceptance and again smile when they think of Sparky, speak of him and remember him. One strategy to move from tears to smiles when thinking of Sparky is to write a poem about him. Brainstorm a list of words to describe Sparky’s appearance, personality, antics and relationships. Put the students in groups and ask them to write a poem, either about Sparky, or a poem to Sparky, or to Bridget and their relationship. Students may also choose to write a eulogy, create a memory scrapbook or draw a portrait of Sparky.

4. Because of their ability to understand humans and to communicate with them, dogs perform many roles in society. As well as being companions or pets, there are working dogs who perform such tasks as drug sniffing, bomb sniffing, pet therapy and avalanche rescue. There are also police dogs, guard dogs, sled dogs, hunting dogs, seeing-eye dogs, and dogs that assist people with physical handicaps. Have the students research which dog breeds are most often used for such jobs. What special training do they and their handlers receive? How should the public interact with these dogs and why? If there is a Working Dog training facility nearby, consider taking the class there for a field trip or inviting one of the handlers and his dog to the classroom to present a demonstration. Please first make sure that none of the students are allergic to dogs.

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5. When Sparky is home alone he has a regular routine: sleeping, eating, drinking, exploring, talking to goldfish and occasionally peeing on the carpet. Sparky has a particular view of the world and his house because of his perception of his place and role in the family. How does Sparky demonstrate his perception of his place in the household? If you could attach a mini video camera to Sparky's collar, what would be his view of the world? To approximate this, ask the students to hold the video camera at the same height as their knee in order to approximate the height of Sparky's eyes, and film / tape some things from this perspective. Discuss what they learn.
6. Bridget needs a heart transplant. The following Web site has animations of how a human heart works and the names of the parts of the heart: www.3dscience.com/Resources/3d_Heart_Model_anterior_cut.php. The students can listen to a heart beating with a virtual stethoscope at: www.smm.org/heart/heart/pumping-f.htm.

Working with the Physical Education teacher, explain the relationship between a pulse and heart rate. Have the students take and record their resting pulse and then again after doing different physical activities such as walking up a flight of stairs, running up two flights of stairs, eating a meal, skipping rope or listening to loud music. Have the students research the effects of a healthy life style on heart disease. This information can then be used to create promotional material and multimedia productions about healthy life style choices as part of a school-wide February Heart Month project. Students should be made aware of basic message design principles such as the use of colour, font, size, Z eye movement and the rule of thirds.¹

7. The following Web page is from the Toronto Hospital for Sick Children:
www.aboutkidshealth.ca/clinicalAreas.asp?pageContent=HC-nh3-04o
It provides answers to key questions about the heart transplant program in Canada. As Bridget's brother asks, Where does the heart come from? Other questions include, Who decides who gets a heart when one becomes available? What happens before, during and after surgery?
 - a. Organ donation: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ahc-asc/media/nr-cp/2001/2001_36bk1_e.html provides information on the situation in Canada. www.organdonations.ca/ and www.organdonation-works.org/ provide real-life stories of people who donated or received an organ and information on organ donation and becoming an organ donor.

¹ Z eye movement is one of several patterns the human eye follows in order to see / process what it visualizes - the eye moves across the page / text / screen as though the person was making the letter Z - upper left corner across to upper right corner diagonally down to the lower left corner and across to the lower right corner.

Rule of thirds: Draw 3 imaginary horizontal lines across the page / screen / text to divide the space into 3 equal sections, and then you draw 3 imaginary vertical lines across the page / screen / text to divide the space into 3 equal sections. The most important material should be placed either at or beside the intersection of the lines in the middle of the page / screen / text.

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b. Because of an insufficient number of organs for transplantation and because of the long waiting lists, an organ-donation-for-profit business has developed in poorer countries. People who can afford it travel abroad to buy a kidney, for example, have the transplant surgery and return home, having circumvented the waiting list in Canada. In some countries a kidney donor is paid for the kidney while in other countries the donor kidney may come from executed prisoners. Have the students research this global trade in human body parts. Students can debate some of the ethical dilemmas in the following situations:

- i. Is it right that someone who travels to another country for this procedure and buys a kidney should get one faster than someone who cannot afford to do this?
- ii. Is it right for a person to take advantage of someone else's economic problems to "bribe" them with money to undergo major surgery and give up one of their organs?
- iii. Is it right to accept an organ from an executed prisoner when that prisoner's trial was conducted under a judicial system less democratic than your own?
- iv. If after returning to Canada, the patient experiences post-surgical complications and rejection of the new kidney, should this move him / her farther up the Canadian transplant list to get a kidney faster since (s)he is now in complete renal failure and dependent on kidney dialysis?

8. *The Sparky Book's* animation style evokes a sense of Newfoundland, and the soundtrack contributes to the emotional impact. Discuss this. The characters themselves also contribute to the narrative technique. For instance, explore how the character of Goldfish maintains the narrative flow. If Bridget's mother, brother or doctor became the narrator, how would this change the story? If the story was moved from Newfoundland, what other elements would have to change?

