

DISCUSSION GUIDE



ZERO TOLERANCE

by Claudia Mills

Is it ever wrong to do the right thing?

Seventh grader Sierra Shepard has always been the perfect student. So when she sees that she's accidentally brought her mother's lunch bag to school, including a paring knife to cut an apple, she immediately turns the knife in at the office. Much to her surprise, her beloved principal places her in in-school suspension and sets a hearing for her expulsion, citing the school's ironclad zero-tolerance policy: no drugs, no weapons, no exceptions.

Sierra spends her days in suspension with the so-called troublemakers, including her classmate Luke, and discovers that their stories are more complicated than she had realized. Suddenly none of the lines between good and bad are as clear as she thought they once were. Anyone, even a perfect student like Sierra, can make a decision that has dire and unexpected consequences.

"Author Claudia Mills has written a compelling story. Schools often face these issues, and it's interesting to see what such a crisis feels like from a student's perspective. Readers could fall on either side of the issue and still find something to think about in this well-written book." —BOOKPAGE

"Sierra is a realistic and appealing character whose experiences will resonate with readers who enjoy stories about school and friends. This compelling novel could also spark a discussion about the slippery nature of rules and how they are enforced." —SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL

"Provocative and fun, from a master of the school story." —KIRKUS REVIEWS

BEFORE READING



- What rules govern behavior in your classroom and in your school at large? Why do you think these specific rules that shape your daily life at school were created? What are the consequences for not adhering to the rules? Are there any rules that are negotiable? Discuss the nature of rules and how the rules are implemented at your school with your class.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In the novel's opening scene, Sierra is waiting in the school office to speak to the principal about her idea to implement the ZAP (Zeroes Aren't Permitted) program at her middle school. Sierra is mildly annoyed by the crooked "R" in the word "Reliability" on the banner promoting the school's creed: RULES, RESPECT, RESPONSIBILITY, RELIABILITY. How does this initial scene in the story define Sierra's character for the reader?
- Sierra's personality is further defined by the list of goals she makes for the semester. Sierra appears to be a perfectionist but her goals also hint at some of her social concerns. How does her goal "don't let people push you around" foreshadow how she chooses to behave as the story progresses?
- Sierra makes a pivotal decision in the cafeteria when she discovers that she has mistakenly taken her mother's lunch bag to school instead of her own. If you were faced with the same situation, how would you respond to it?
- The principal, Mr. Besser, is also placed in a challenging situation when he finds Sierra in his office after the lunchtime discovery. How do you think the presence of a visiting principal affects how Mr. Besser deals with Sierra's infraction?
- Sierra's view of her crush, Colin, as well as her close circle of friends shifts during the course of her battle with the school. Colin in particular changes from soulful poet to champion and ultimately to boyfriend of someone else. How does the reaction of Colin and Sierra's friends in Leadership Club and choir shape Sierra's trouble with the school administration?
- The zero tolerance policy at the middle school clearly outlines the consequences for students who break the rules—mandatory expulsion. Sierra is dismayed and her parents are enraged at the thought of Sierra having to leave Longwood Middle for an alternative school. What was your emotional reaction as you read the section of the story describing the initial meeting between Mr. Besser and Sierra's family?

- Sierra is placed in in-school suspension until her expulsion hearing. The detention room is populated with troublemakers. Sierra is reminded that her mother always said that everything happens for a reason. “Maybe the reason Sierra had gotten a completely unfair in-school suspension was so she could learn that bad kids weren’t as bad as she had thought they were, that they were actually pretty nice.” What lessons about people and the nature of fairness does Sierra learn in the detention room?
- Sierra’s father is a lawyer and decides that media attention will help Sierra’s case with the school. How does the media’s coverage of Sierra’s plight help and hinder her battle with her school’s zero tolerance policy?
- At the beginning of the novel, Sierra is a studious, rule-abiding leader in her middle school. Sierra shows a darker side of her character when she uses Ms. Lin’s email to send a letter to the editor of the newspaper. In contrast, Luke breaks from his troubled behavior to support Sierra. Both Sierra and Luke are multi-dimensional characters with the ability to be both tough and soft, rebellious and obedient. How do multifaceted characters add to a story with a black-and-white theme of zero tolerance?
- Sierra mulls over the concept of fate towards the end of the story. Was she fated to bring the wrong lunch bag to school that dreadful day? Was Mr. Besser’s fate sealed when he shared the zero tolerance policy with the visiting principal the day of Sierra’s infraction? Was Ms. Lin’s fate decided the day she stepped away from her desk long enough for Sierra to use her email? Was Sierra’s dad fated to laugh at her mom’s play in a case of mistaken enjoyment of her mom’s writing? Does the concept of fate take away from the characters’ responsibility for their actions in the story?
- As Sierra’s expulsion hearing is resolved, she feels that “everything in her life [is] a little bit more crooked than it used to be.” Why is the idea of imperfection and subjectivity so powerful to Sierra after all she goes through in the story?

Common Core State Standards addressed by the discussion questions and activities in this guide include:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.5, 7.2, 7.3, 8.2, 8.3

For more information about the Common Core, visit www.corestandards.org.



Claudia Mills is the author of many chapter and middle grade books, including *7 x 9 = Trouble!*; *How Oliver Olson Changed the World*; and most recently, *Kelsey Green, Reading Queen*. In addition to writing books for young readers, she holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from Princeton University and teaches at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Learn more about her life and works at www.claudiamillsauthor.com.

ACTIVITIES

- Search for examples of people in the news who have “done the right thing.” Share these current events with your classmates and discuss any celebrations or controversies surrounding the “do-gooders’” actions.
- Think about the need for some sort of rules to govern behavior and ensure student safety in school. List pros and cons of a zero tolerance policy at a school.
- Examine your list of pros and cons for a zero tolerance policy at school. Decide which side you can best support in an argument. Use the list to help build a persuasive essay either supporting the implementation of a zero tolerance policy or contradicting the need for such a policy in a school setting.
- Imagine how the incident of Sierra bringing a knife to school and the subsequent controversy appeared through the eyes of the principal, Mr. Besser. Write a journal entry from the point of view of the principal. Do you think he was conflicted about his administrative responsibilities? Was he disappointed in Sierra? Did he feel anger towards the legal actions Sierra’s father set in to motion?
- Examine the cover of the novel. How does this illustration encapsulate the events of the story? Create your own cover illustration. Display your class’s book covers on a bulletin board in the classroom or in the school library.
- Complete a T-chart comparing Sierra’s interests and attitudes before the incident of bringing a knife to school and her interests and attitudes after she felt the sting of her school’s zero tolerance policy.
- Illustrate what you consider to be the most important scene in the story. Share your illustration and reasoning for the scene’s importance in the novel with a partner or the class at large.



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 elementary school in San Diego, California. She holds both masters’ and doctoral degrees in education, with an emphasis on curriculum and instruction.

CHARACTER T-CHART

Name _____

How does the zero tolerance policy at Longwood Middle School affect Sierra's character? List Sierra's interests and attitudes BEFORE she confronts the zero tolerance policy and AFTER she is punished as a result of the policy.

**SIERRA'S INTERESTS AND
ATTITUDES BEFORE**



**SIERRA'S INTERESTS AND
ATTITUDES AFTER**

A large T-shaped area defined by a thick green line, intended for students to write their responses.

