

For Adults:

The Bully Free Classroom: Over 100 Tips and Strategies for Teachers K-8 by Allan L. Beane. Free Spirit Publishing, 1999.

The *Hey, Little Ant* official Web site, including lesson plans and information for ordering the song can be found at www.heylittleant.com

The Kindness Curriculum: Introducing Young Children to Loving Values by Judith Anne Rice. Gryphon House, 1997.

Quit It! A Teacher's Guide on Teasing and Bullying for Use with Students in Grades K-3 by Froschl, Sprung, Mullin-Rindler.

Respect: An Exploration by Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot. Perseus Press, 2000.

Thinking Together with Young Children: Weaving a Tapestry of Community by Susan Hopkins, 2001. Available by writing to 12959 Woolman Lane, Nevada City, CA 95959.

"To Squish or Not to Squish" by Barbara Gruener. *Teaching Tolerance Magazine*, fall 2001. (www.Tolerance.org.)

When Students Have Power by Ira Shor. University of Chicago Press, 1996.

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Huge thanks to Susan Hopkins, Dan Simberloff, Kerin Motsinger, Amian Kelemer, Katie Greenman, Karel Kilimnik, David Todt, Barbara Gruener, Mara Sapon-Shevin, and Shoshana Hoose for providing ideas and reviewing drafts of this guide.

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Tricycle Press

a little division of Ten Speed Press

P.O. Box 7123, Berkeley, California 94707

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# A TEACHERS' GUIDE TO *HEY, LITTLE ANT*



Written by Phillip Hoose  
with illustration by Debbie Tilley

## Background and Summary of Story

*Hey, Little Ant* is a song-based children's picture book used throughout the world to teach young children alternatives to violent and bullying behavior and to emphasize the worth of all living things. The story of *Hey, Little Ant* is a negotiation between an ant about to be flattened and a child (the "Kid") about to flatten it.

The story was written as a song in 1992 by Phillip Hoose and his then nine-year-old daughter Hannah. The Hooses deliberately left the outcome of *Hey, Little Ant* unresolved, ending the story with the question, "Now what do you think that Kid should do?"

This guide is based on interviews and correspondence with educators, parents, performers, biologists, and school librarians.

## A First Step: Identifying Core Values for Teaching *Hey, Little Ant*

After reading *Hey, Little Ant*, make a list of the values expressed in the story that you wish to emphasize in working with children. They may include:

- ~ Respecting differences
- ~ Fostering respect for all living things
- ~ Considering stereotypes
- ~ Recognizing alternatives to resolving tension through violence
- ~ Exploring concepts of big and small, powerful and powerless
- ~ Standing up to peer pressure

### Ideas For Getting Started

Read or sing the story to your students. The book's final page contains musical notation to the song's simple melody, or you may obtain a recording at [www.heylittleant.com](http://www.heylittleant.com). Try reading with expression. Some have presented *Hey, Little Ant* effectively with puppets for the Ant and the Kid. After they've heard the story, let the children read or sing the story themselves. Allow them to choose parts and then switch them; this will help children identify with both characters. Talk as a group about whether it is easier or more fun to be the Ant or the Kid—and why.

### LESSON #1: Respecting Differences

Ants are different from us in ways that are often amazing and fascinating. We often don't like insects, but some cultures have worshipped bugs: The Egyptians prayed to the Scarab beetle. The ancient Greek cult of Artemis worshipped the bee. What can ants do? How strong are they? How long do they live? Can they smell? If so, how? How many body sections do they have? How do they know to go home right before it rains?

### Activities



➔ Make a list of ant facts. Draw, make, and/or visit an anthill. Bring an ant farm into the classroom so students can carefully observe ant behavior, see how ants organize themselves, and try to understand what they are doing. Keep individual or class journals for a few weeks with writings, opinions, drawings, observations, facts, and questions. After having learned more about ants, revise *Hey, Little Ant* by writing a new story, keeping the same rhyming format. This time let the ant state its case with abundant facts based on student research.

➔ Extend the discussion to “how are we different from each other?” Have students press their thumbs into an inkpad and make thumbprints on pieces of paper. Compare them. They're almost alike, but each is unique and special in its detail. Have students draw self-portraits from their thumbprint.

### LESSON #2: Fostering Respect for All Living Things

When they hear or read *Hey, Little Ant*, children often want to know if it's ever okay to kill something. “What if it's a bee?” they ask. “What if it's a mosquito on your arm? Can you slap it?” “What if it's a hundred ants crawling after something you spilled in your kitchen?” Here are ideal questions not to answer, because they lead to good discussions. At the heart of the book is the idea that all living things have a great deal in common, even though sometimes this may be difficult to recognize.

### Activities



➔ List the things that ants and children have in common. The story mentions some, but are there others? Does an ant have a heart? A brain? Research for more and make a list. A few resources are listed below.

➔ Explore ways in which we are similar to one another. Again, make a list. Examples: how we look, how we move, what we do, what we want, what we love, what we dislike, and what we fear.

→ Have students draw a creature that would be okay to kill, then discuss why. What makes it okay? Fangs? Claws? A mean expression? Too big? Too little? Is it stinky? Does it have a stinger? Poison? Then ask the artists to take the point of view of a killable creature in a role playing session. Have the child plead for the creature's life. Or have a child lawyer argue its defense. What arguments would work?

→ Facilitate a group discussion: Is it ever okay to kill anything? When? Under what circumstances? What do our civic laws and religious commandments say about this? Are there certain animals that are okay to kill? When? Are there alternatives?

### LESSON #3: Considering Stereotypes

Early in the story the looming Kid declares: "Anyone knows an ant can't feel. You're so tiny you don't look real." But are things always what they seem? How do we know?

#### Activity



→ Assign the students to draw a creature that cannot feel. What would it look like? Cultural biologists point out that we invest in protecting animals with which we can identify. We save creatures with big round eyes (pandas) or large heads that seem to smile (dolphins). We respond to creatures that respond to us (monkeys, dogs, cats) or that can soar (eagles) as we aspire to do, or that seem pretty (brightly flowering plants, Monarch butterflies) or graceful. Other creatures are not so lucky—in one survey, respondents were willing to spend fifteen times more money to save a spotted owl than a striped shiner (a fish).

Discuss the children's drawings. Why can't their creatures feel anything? What does it take to feel something? How do we know? Show photographs of various animals and plants. Include snakes. What are they feeling? List the responses, then discuss them. Can we know how something or someone feels by how they look? Could we sometimes make universal assumptions about all sorts of living things whose individual experiences vary greatly?

### LESSON #4: Exploring Concepts of Big and Small, Powerful and Powerless

The Kid is able to intimidate the Ant because (s)he is overwhelmingly big. But the Ant is not without power. It states its case clearly and respectfully, without calling the Kid names. It asks the Kid to hear it out; it acknowledges the Kid's physical strength without sacrificing its own dignity or self-respect. The story raises these questions: How can we be powerful and effective in life without being abusive? How can we stand up to superior physical strength?

#### Activities



→ Ask the class to speculate as to why the Kid felt like flattening the Ant in the first place. Make a list of hypotheses. Was (s)he angry? Bored? Frustrated? Didn't like bugs? Then make a list of—and role play—alternative responses. Could the Kid have counted to ten? Walked away? Tried to figure out the real reason for raising a squishing foot? Ask students, "When you feel bad, are you ever mean to a pet? How do you feel afterwards?"

→ Ask the class, without allowing them to name anyone present, "Who are the Ants in your life? Who do you feel like squishing sometimes? Why? Because you can? Because they seem different? Because they're smaller? Because you're bored? Angry? Because things aren't going your way?" Have students tell their stories. And then ask, "Who are the Kids, the people in your life who seem so big and powerful that you don't feel free or confident when they're around?" One guidance counselor devised a bookmark to focus such discussions. It bears the acronym ANTS—for Awareness, Negotiation, Tolerance, and Sensitivity.

→ After the discussion, assign students to write their own version of *Hey, Little Ant* with themselves in one role and an Ant or Kid in their lives in another. Then write again, reversing roles.

## LESSON #5: Standing Up to Peer Pressure

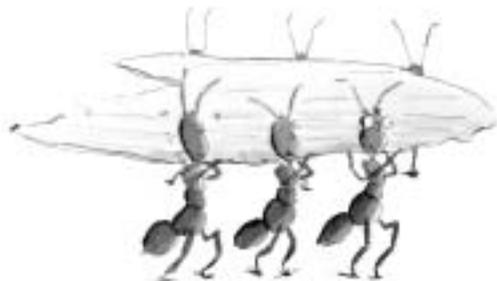
Late in the story, the child's friends arrive on the scene and listen in to the dialogue. The Kid feels mounting pressure as they yell "Squish it!" The child is deeply conflicted and experiencing a pain that is common to children. By now the Kid knows the Ant, and views it with empathy, so maybe squishing it is wrong. On the other hand, to give in to a bug will look very weak indeed—and there seems so little time to choose.

### Activities



➔ Role play the scene. Ask your students to imagine that they have just arrived and may have only a few seconds to help their friend, the Kid. What could they possibly say or do to offer support? In many classrooms, children have suggested things like "Tell the Kid that it's her or his decision. It's up to you—nobody else." Or, "You don't have to listen to them. Make up your own mind." What else could be said or done? What are the kinds of power at work here? Surely the Kid's colossal size and superior strength represent power. So does the force of what the other kids are saying, and the clarity of the ant's appeal. What other kinds of power might be available? Ask children to recount stories—without naming names—in which they were pressured to do something they thought might be wrong. How did they work it out? What could a friend have said or done to help them out of the situation?

➔ If age appropriate, write a persuasive essay, individually or in a group, from the viewpoint of the friends who try to influence the Kid one way or the other. Persuasive essays are a part of many state standards; use this occasion as a persuasive prompt.



## LESSON #6: Working Individually and as a Group to Resolve the Story

As noted, the authors left the story unresolved to permit discussion. So, what to do? Should the ant get squished? Should the ant go free? The most common way of working with this question has been to have children vote. But the vote alone is of limited value. Some children vote "Squish it!" just to attract attention. Others show that they are "good" by sparing the ant. Then, without a follow-up processing activity, the lesson ends. Here are some things to try:

### Activities



➔ Follow the vote with a group discussion, asking children to explain their views. Try to ask questions without passing judgement. Ask them how they think they would feel after having acted on their decision.

➔ If age appropriate, assign each child to write an ending. If they like, they can write it in rhyme. Then have them read their endings aloud, describing their reasoning.

➔ Working with markers and an easel, brainstorm the creation of a group ending. Fantasy is fine—one South Dakota classroom won a national contest by creating a Super Ant able to discuss matters evenhandedly with the child.

## A Sampling of Resources

### For Kids:

*Because We Can Change the World* by Mara Sapon-Shevin. Allyn & Bacon, 1998.

Eyewitness Children's Encyclopedia (CD-Rom)—  
"Investigate an Ant." Gives marvelous cross-sections.

*I Want to Play* by Elizabeth Crary. Parenting Press, 1998.

*Inside An Ant Colony* by Heiderose and Andreas Fischer-Nagel. Children's Press, 1998.