

Using **Your Life in** **COMICS** *in the Classroom*

Comics offer a fun and creative way to practice reading, writing, vocabulary, and storytelling. This is true whether you teach kids who are avid bookworms or reluctant readers. It's true if your students are learning English as a second language, or if they have learning differences. And while the book is directed mainly at guys, girls will enjoy the book's activities and the comic book format just as much as boys do.

Your Life in Comics can be used in many ways with kids and teens. Try out the following ideas with your students.

Set aside a daily 20-minute comic-creating period. During this time, encourage kids to create comics about something they learned or read or experienced or imagined that day. Maybe their comic depicts a new ending for a book they read, explains a concept they learned in science, depicts a conversation they had with a friend or family member, or explores a problem they are trying to cope with, such as how to deal with bullying. Reassure kids that they don't have to be the world's greatest artists to enjoy this activity. If they like, they can use simple stick figures or even pictures cut out of magazines to tell their stories. Day by day and comic by comic, kids will trace the many things they experience, learn, think, and feel. Before long, each student will have created a comic book that is theirs to treasure, chuckle at, keep private, or share with friends and family.

Display pages from *Your Life in Comics* on a projection screen or whiteboard. (Visit www.freespirit.com/comics for downloadable comic pages from the book.) Invite kids to suggest text for the thought bubbles or speech balloons. Or, have students use the comics as writing prompts. Give kids a short period of time—say, five minutes—to do freewriting based on the page you've displayed. Students who feel comfortable doing so can then share their writing with the group.

Go beyond the comic book page. At the bottoms of many of the comics in the book, you'll find links to websites with additional information on the subjects being talked about. Challenge your group, whether singly or with partners, to choose topics for deeper exploration and research, and to present their findings on these subjects to the larger group.

Keep it simple. Invite kids to work in small groups to fill in some of the pages in the book. Encourage them to work together to come up with imaginative ideas for story development. As they talk and think about how to fill in the speech bubbles or thought balloons, kids may gain greater insight into various situations they're dealing with. Writing dialogue can also help them practice what they might say or do in different circumstances or how they would deal with specific problems.

Make a connection. *Your Life in Comics* is a useful resource for students with autism spectrum disorders, learning disorders, and other special needs. Whether you're a teacher, counselor, therapist, or parent, you'll find that comics are a great way to help kids build a greater understanding of emotions, prepare for activities and social interaction, communicate with others, and express themselves. The book's many characters show a range of feelings, which can help students recognize these emotions in others. The comic strips in *Your Life in Comics* also depict many different situations and scenarios that may reflect your students' own lives. A natural fit for visual learners, comic strips can help kids ready themselves for and cope with a variety of experiences. In addition, the book can be a way to help students talk about their lives, including their feelings about challenges such as stress, school pressures, and bullying. Students can read the comics and discuss them one-on-one or in groups to connect with peers. Or, by creating their own comic strips or books, kids can explore the world of their imaginations. All students will enjoy and take pride in the empowering experience of writing and drawing comics.

Get creative. The topics introduced in the book provide good starting points for deeper exploration of the issues that are important to kids. In the following pages, you'll find questions related to about half of the 100 activity pages in *Your Life in Comics*. These questions go beyond the basics of each comic. You can use them to start discussions, spark writing exercises, or even serve as the basis for skits, songs, or other creative expression.

These prompts are organized into eight broad categories: bullying awareness and prevention; stress, anger, and insecurity; the social scene; friendship; family life; feelings and identity; creativity and imagination; and goals and accomplishments. Of course, many of the activities in *Your Life in Comics* fit into—or can be adapted to fit into—multiple topic areas. You know your group best. Feel free to experiment with subjects and to add your own questions to the mix. Also, keep in mind that some of these questions and the resulting conversations can be pretty personal. Reassure kids that they can share as much or as little as they feel comfortable doing.

Conversation Starters and Writing Prompts

Bullying Awareness and Prevention

COMIC #16: Helpful Advice

- Have you and/or your friends dealt with bullying? What did you do?
- What do you think might cause a person to bully someone else?
- What do you think are good ways to prevent and stop bullying?

COMIC #24: What's going on here.?

- What is this boy protecting his friend from?
- How have you watched out for your own friends? How have they looked out for you?
- What kinds of situations do you think are too tough to handle alone? When do you think it's necessary to get an adult involved?

COMIC #57: Some Good Advice

- Have you ever felt isolated or alone? How did you deal with that feeling?
- How important is “fitting in” to you? Have you ever pretended to be different from your true self in order to fit in with the crowd? How did you feel about that afterward?

Stress, Anger, and Insecurity

COMIC #8: He has so many things on his mind.

- What kinds of pressures do you face?
- How do these pressures affect your life?
- How do you deal with stress?

COMIC #13: School Day Blues

- Are there some things that seem to have the power to ruin your day? What are they?
- Who or what cheers you up when you're feeling down?

COMIC #58: The one thing that drives me crazy is . . .

- What kinds of things really get on your nerves? Why do you think they bug you so much?
- When you find yourself getting irritated, what is your reaction?
- What are some good ways to stay calm and not let little things drive you nuts?

COMIC #84: What can his friend say to help him.?

- What kinds of things make you angry? Why do these specific things bother you?
- How do you deal with your anger?
- Have you ever done something while you were angry that you later felt bad about? What were the results? How did you deal with them?

COMIC #97: *What's keeping him awake all night?*

- Do you struggle with worries that keep you from sleeping? How else can worry and stress affect your daily routines?
- Who can you talk to about your fears and worries?

COMIC #99: *He's giving himself a pep talk.*

- What do you think this guy is gearing himself up to do?
- What are some times when you need extra encouragement? If no one is around to give you that boost, how do you motivate yourself?
- Do you find it hard to keep going in the face of tough challenges? How do you push through?

The Social Scene

COMIC #17: *A Day on Girl Planet; A Day on Guy Planet*

- Girls and guys sometimes see things so differently. Where do they share common ground? Where do they differ?
- How can guys and girls understand each other better?
- What would life be like in a girls-only world? How about one for guys?

COMIC #34: *Their First Meeting*

- Do you sometimes struggle with shyness? If so, how do you get past it?
- Do you use certain questions, stories, or jokes as “ice-breakers” when you meet someone new? What are they?

COMIC #44: *What's up?*

- Why do you think some people find it easy to talk to others, while for other people it's more difficult?
- Do you like talking on the phone, or do you prefer to communicate in other ways? Why?

COMIC #46: *Mr. Popular*

- Do you find it easy or difficult to make friends?
- What do you think makes someone popular or attractive to others?
- What qualities help us relate better to others? What kinds of traits can get in the way of connecting with each other?

COMIC #48: *A First Date Where Everything Went Wrong; A First Date Where Everything Went Right*

- Do you go on dates? If so, have you had any really great first dates? What about not-so-great?
- What kinds of things do you think make a date go well or poorly?

COMIC #59: *Play the gossip game.*

- Have you ever gossiped about someone? Why did you do so? Did they ever find out about the gossip? If so, what happened?
- Have you ever found out that people were gossiping about you? How did you feel?
- Do you think gossip is harmless? Always bad? Somewhere in between? Why?

COMIC #61: *What's the morning buzz today?*

- What's on your mind today?
- What are the subjects that you and your friends, classmates, or others talk about most often?

COMIC #63: *A Tough Situation—What to Say?*

- Have you ever been in a situation where you faced peer pressure? What did you do?
- Why do you think people try to get others to do certain things?
- What are some good ways to respond in a situation where others are pressuring you to do something you don't want to do?

COMIC #75: *Create an avatar to represent you on the Web.*

- Do you think people usually tell the truth about themselves online? Why or why not?
- What are ways to be safe when using the Internet?
- Do you think people say things to others online that they would not say in person? If so, why do you think that is?

Friendship

COMIC #5: *What's so funny?*

- What's the greatest laugh you remember having with a good friend?
- What do you think goes into building a strong friendship with another person?
- What do you expect from your friends, and what are you willing to give?

COMIC #9: *She has good news!*

- What are the good things you hope to hear from your friends?
- Who's the first person you want to talk to when you have good news? What about bad news? Why do you choose that person (or those people)?

COMIC #32: *What's the plan?*

- Part of the fun of having a good friend is coming up with plans for the future. What are some of the best plans you and your friends have made together?
- What happens when things don't go according to plan?
- Sometimes, is it more fun to go forward without a plan, or do you always like to have things mapped out?

COMIC #42: You've received a very important letter.

- Is there a letter (or an email or other message) that you've always hoped to receive from a friend (or from a family member)? What would it say?
- Or is there a letter you *have* received that you especially treasure? What does it say, and why is it important to you?
- Have you written any important letters to other people? If so, what did you want to share with them? Why did you choose to do so in writing?

COMIC #88: An Important Conversation

- What are the most important things you talk about with your friends?
- Do you think that you are a good listener when your friends have things to tell you? What do you think makes someone a good listener? A bad one?

Family Life

COMIC #3: A family sits down to dinner.

- Does your family usually eat dinner together? If so, what do you talk about?
- What kinds of traditions does your family have? Are these traditions important to you? Are there different traditions you'd like to begin?

COMIC #18: After Dinner

- What's the strangest or most interesting thing that has ever happened to you at school? Who did you tell about it?
- Are there certain times of day or certain settings where you find it easier and more comfortable to talk with a parent or other family member?

COMIC #22: What are they talking about?

- Do you have close relationships with any of your grandparents, great-aunts, great-uncles, or other elderly relatives? What do you value about these relationships?
- What adult (or adults) do you usually turn to for advice? Why?

COMIC #28: Imagine you're an adult and have a son. What advice or helpful words do you offer him?

- What are the most important pieces of wisdom that you've heard from your family members?
- What advice do you want to pass along to the next generation?

COMIC #51: On a Drive

- Are there topics you want to talk about with your parents (or other family members), but you feel nervous or embarrassed about bringing them up? What kinds of subjects are they?
- How do you think you can get past your nerves and talk about these things?

COMIC #66: Troubles at Home

- What do you think this boy is worried about? What do you think his friend says to him?
- Do you have worries that you find hard to shake? What helps you cope with worrying about troubles at home or elsewhere?

COMIC #90: A Proud Moment

- What kinds of things make your parents or other family members proud of you?
- How do you feel when others are proud of you and the things you've done? What about when you think you've disappointed others?
- Do you think it's more important to be proud of yourself, or for others to be proud of you? Why?

Feelings and Identity

COMIC #4: My happiest memory is . . .

- What are some memories that you treasure?
- Have you ever found that your memory of an event doesn't match up with someone else's? Why do you think this is?

COMIC #10: I love to . . .

- What are your favorite activities? What do you love about them?
- Have you ever tried something that you didn't think you would like, only to find that you actually loved it? Or have you had the opposite happen—you thought you would really enjoy something, but didn't? How do you think our expectations of things affect the way we experience them?
- Do you like trying new things? Why or why not?

COMIC #47: I'm sorry about . . .

- Are there things that you've done that you feel badly about? How do you handle that feeling?
- Do you find it easy or hard to apologize? Why?
- Do you spend a lot of time thinking about your mistakes, or do you move forward? Are you very worried about making mistakes? Why or why not?

COMIC #55: A Challenge

- What is a very difficult thing you've had to deal with? How did it change you?
- What good things can come out of facing challenges?
- Do you find it hard to handle change in your life? Why or why not?

COMIC #96: A Good Question

- Is there anything you would change about yourself if you could? What is it? Why do you want to change this aspect of yourself?
- What do you think are your best qualities?
- How do you think the way we see ourselves is different from the way others see us?

Creativity and Imagination

COMIC #1: An Interesting Conversation

- What would humans and animals talk about if each could speak to the other?
- Do you think that pets have feelings and thoughts?
Do you think that humans and animals sometimes understand each other?
- What have you learned from your pets, or from your friends' pets?

COMIC #7: These guys are competing in a rap showcase.

- Write your own rap song for a holiday or special event that's coming up.
- Compose a song about a book you've read recently.
- Sometimes music can help us say things that are hard to express in other ways.
Why do you think this is?

COMIC #12: Design your own website.

- What kinds of things would you put on your website?
- What do you think makes a good website? A bad one?

COMIC #41: Adventures of Invisible Guy

- Would you like to be invisible? Why or why not?
- What kinds of things would you want to do if you were invisible?
- Do you ever feel like you *are* invisible? What causes you to feel this way?
How do you deal with it?

COMIC #45: Write something in a secret language that no one but you can figure out.

- Is there something that you want to say to someone, but haven't?
- If so, why haven't you shared this thought with him or her yet? How do you think you could make it easier to say what you want to say?

COMIC #50: On the billboard, write a message to the world.

- What would you say if you had a billboard all to yourself? Would you spread a political message? Would you make a joke? Would you advertise a product?
- Do you ever get tired of seeing advertising? How do you think ads affect the way we see the world? Ourselves? Others?

COMIC #65: *You can live in your favorite book . . .*

- What's your favorite book? What makes it special to you?
- Which characters do you especially relate to? Why?
- Do you ever wish that a story ended in a different way? Why do you think writers make the decisions they do?

COMIC #73: *A Knock-Knock Joke*

- What kinds of things make you laugh? Why do you think people have such different senses of humor?
- Who's the funniest person you know? What do you think makes him or her so funny?
- Why do you think laughter is important?
- Come up with your own knock-knock joke and share it with the group. Do you think it's hard to make up original jokes?

COMIC #91: *Predictions for the Future*

- What do you think will be the coolest new invention in the next 100 years? The silliest? The most dangerous?
- Think about what people living 100 years ago might have imagined the present day would be like. What predictions do you think they might have gotten right? Where were they way off the mark? How about people 1,000 years ago?
- If you could make a time capsule for people to open in the year 2150, what would you put inside? Why?

Goals and Accomplishments

COMIC #20: *A Hope for the Future*

- What are some of your hopes and dreams about the future?
- Do you think about the future often, or do you focus more on the present? Why?
- How do you picture yourself and your life a year from now? Five years from now? Ten? Twenty?

COMIC #39: *My biggest achievement so far has been . . .*

- What is an accomplishment that you are very proud of?
- Why is this achievement especially important to you?
- How can you build on that success?

COMIC #54: *The most important thing I know is . . .*

- What do you know that you think can help other people? How did you learn this thing (or things)?
- How do you share your knowledge with others?
- What are the ways you most like to learn things?

COMIC #62: *He's thinking about his goal.*

- What are your goals?
- How are you working to reach these goals?
- What are some of the problems you've faced as you work toward your goals?

COMIC #81: *He's thinking about his biggest challenge.*

- Are there certain things that always seem to be difficult for you? How do you deal with these challenges?
- How do you feel when you overcome a challenge?

A Note from the Author

I hope that by using *Your Life in Comics* with young people, you enjoy helping them communicate more effectively; create something imaginative and fun; and join in meaningful, interesting conversation. Creating, discussing, and sharing comic strips can help students think more imaginatively and develop (or sharpen) a fondness and a facility for writing, reading, and telling stories. Many kids find short comic strips more approachable and inviting than long books. And it seems that just about anyone who sees a blank balloon floating over an interesting-looking character's head has the urge to fill it in with his or her own words. Through this process, kids become more than readers—they become creators. They find their voices, and they realize that their views of the world are unique and worth sharing.

I'd love to hear your feedback. If you have any questions or suggestions, you are always welcome to write to me in care of Free Spirit Publishing:

217 Fifth Avenue North, Suite 200
Minneapolis, MN 55401-1299

You can also email me at help4kids@freespirit.com.

Bill Zimmerman

