



Penny Draws a Best Friend

SARA SHEPARD

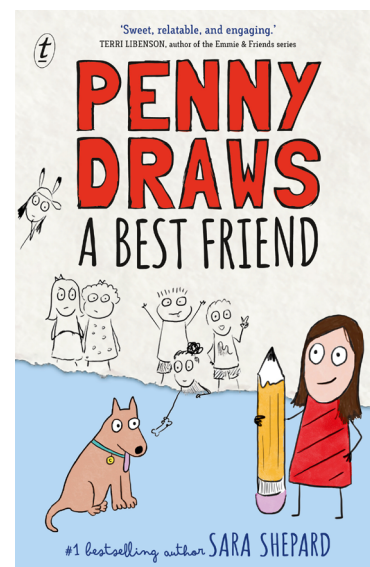
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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 9+

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CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning, and connect it to audience, purpose and context. They aim to encompass a range of forms and include a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they include the integration of ICT and life skills.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Credit: Danielle Shields

Sara Shepard is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Pretty Little Liars* series, *The Lying Game* series, *The Heiresses*, *The Elizas*, *The Perfectionists* series, and *Reputation*.

SYNOPSIS

Penny Lowry is looking forward to starting fifth grade. But on the first day back it becomes clear that this year everything is going to be different. Her best friend, Violet, who she hasn't seen at all during the holidays, is acting weird and withdrawn. Violet tells Penny that she doesn't want to do art club anymore because it's too babyish, AND she's become friends with Riley, the mean girl they both dislike. Penny's worries have always felt overwhelming, but without her best friend they threaten to topple her. So, she goes to the one place she always feels safe—the office of Mrs Hines the Feelings Teacher.

Penny had assumed that she was the only kid who needed to see Mrs Hines, but when she gets there she's surprised to see another kid in the waiting room. Kristian introduces himself enthusiastically and, as he and Penny start crossing paths more frequently, they become friends. Soon, Maria Mendes, another surprise visitor to the Feelings Room, has joined their group and Penny has not one, but two new friends!

Penny starts to think that everything might just be okay. She misses Violet but is having so much fun with her new friends. But when Penny gets put into a group with Violet AND Riley for the Science Fair, things get a LOT more complicated. At first, it seems as if things are going to be okay. After a bumpy beginning, Violet and Riley ask Penny to hang out with them, and it seems like she might find a way to have both her old and her new friends. But Riley starts to pressure Penny to choose—it's friendship with Riley and Violet OR with Maria, Kristian and Rocco, not both. Penny doesn't even want to be friends with Riley, but she does want her friendship with Violet back. When Penny chooses to watch Maria at the spelling bee instead of hanging out with Riley and Violet, Riley goes on the attack. She causes a huge scene at the Science Fair and makes all of Penny's new friends dislike her.

To make matters worse, when Penny gets home she discovers that her dog Cosmo, her best friend of all, has eaten chewing gum and is really sick. As Penny rushes Cosmo to the vet, it seems as if she's on the verge of



losing everything—her oldest friend doesn't want to know her, her new friends think she's awful, and her best friend—Cosmo—might not make it through the night.

Luckily, Penny's real friends show up to help her through the ordeal, and when everything has calmed down (and Cosmo is out of harm's way) Penny realises that real friends accept you for who you are, and will stick around when you make mistakes.

BEFORE READING

In her author's note, Sara Shepard writes: *'Your worries are real! But you aren't alone dealing with anxiety. There are a lot of people out there just like you—I am certainly one of them! I've found that the best thing to do was talk to someone like Mrs Hines...or write letters to your dog...or find comfort in true friends who have your back no matter what.'*

1. Have you ever felt worried or anxious about something? What helped you?
2. Discuss the differences between everyday worries and ongoing anxiety.
3. What are some of the ways we can support a friend who has anxiety?
4. Reflect on the title of the book—*Penny Draws a Best Friend*—what does the title suggest to you about Penny? What do you look for in a best friend?
5. Draw a picture of your best friend. Add some labels that show some of the things that make them a good friend.

WHILE READING

1. What are some of the standard activities Penny and Violet do over summer? Why didn't they get to do these things this summer? What is their first interaction after the holidays like? Why do you think that Penny describes it as 'rocky'? (p. 8) What has changed since she and Violet last saw each other?
2. How does Violet respond when Penny gives her the best friend drawing? How does this make Penny feel?
3. How would you describe Penny's expression when she first goes to the Feelings Teacher? Why does she feel so worried?
4. When Penny says 'I guess' (p. 92), what does she really mean? Do you ever say one thing but mean another?
5. What is the 'thing' that Violet and Penny share?
6. Who is the Feelings Teacher? What does it mean to 'teach feelings'? How is learning feelings different to learning other subjects.
7. What reason does Violet give for not being into drawing anymore? Do you agree with her? Do you think this is the real reason she doesn't want to go to the classes anymore?

8. What is the story behind the name 'Juice Box'?
9. Who is the most surprising person Penny sees coming out of Mrs. Hines' office? Are you surprised?
10. Why does Penny describe Maria Mendes as 'magical'? (p. 50)
11. What does Penny say was her best birthday gift? Write the story of the best birthday gift you ever received.
12. Where does the title *Penny Draws a Best Friend* come from?
13. How does Penny think Rocco will react when he sees her cry? How does he actually react?
14. What are some of the lists Penny makes in the book? How does making lists help Penny to understand the world?
15. What is the big secret that Penny's mum is hiding? What does Penny think the banana bread is a sign of?
16. What is operation smarty pants? Why does Penny want to know her mum's secret so badly? What are some of the things she thinks the secret might be?
17. How does Penny solve her problem about the science fair?

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

1. What are some of the differences between Riley and Maria?
2. How does Penny describe the other kids from her school and art class? Do you think her judgments are fair? Why/why not? Who is the Bug Man?
3. What are some of the things you 'can't see' (p. 10) in a best friend? What are some things that you can't see about Penny that might make her a good friend?

STYLE & STRUCTURE

Diaries and drawings

1. The illustrations in the book break up the text, illustrate funny anecdotes and sometimes show something that might be difficult to describe with words. What do the illustrations reveal about the way that Penny feels or the things she can't say/ doesn't know how to say?
2. What other books have you read or do you know that use a mix of illustrations and diary entries. Do you like them? Discuss how these two techniques are used to make you feel more connected to the main character in the book.
3. *Penny Draws a Best Friend* is an example of an epistolary novel, which means a novel written in the form of letters—in this case to Cosmo, Penny's



dog. Why does Penny choose to write her letters to Cosmo?

- How can you tell that Penny is writing a diary entry, even though she doesn't begin with 'dear diary'?
- Who are diaries for? 'I do like the idea of writing this to someone.' (p. 3) Describe your ideal imagined reader for a diary. Why is it important that this reader is imaginary rather than real? How would your writing change if you thought that someone was going to read your diary?

THEMES

Friendship

- What makes Penny realise that Violet hasn't been a good friend to her? (p. 107) What does Penny decide about the kind of friend she wants to be? What kind of friend do you want to be?
- 'I'd sat on a deflated beanbag and listened to Violet and Riley cut up people I liked. And I hadn't defended them. Worse, I'd sort of agreed.' (p. 174) Did Penny do the wrong thing by not defending her friends when Violet and Riley were insulting them? What do you think Riley would have done if Penny had defended them?
- Penny says she finds it hard to answer when Maria asks her if Violet is her best friend. (p. 53) What do you think the answer is and why?
- Do best friends need to stay friends forever? Discuss Violet's behaviour at the very end of the book. How do you think she's feeling about everything that has happened?

Anxiety

- Penny knows that her worries often don't come true—'This isn't supposed to happen, Cosmo. The stuff I worry about—it's not supposed to come true.' (p. 220) Why do you think she worries about things even though she knows that they're unlikely to happen? How do you think this makes her feel? How does she feel when her worries do come true?
- What is Penny's 'worry lamp'? Do you think anxiety is something that you can turn off and on? Why/why not? What happens when Penny tries to turn her anxiety off for too long?
- Throughout the book, Penny feels as if she has to manage her worries alone—particularly when Violet tells her that the reason she's turned her back on their friendship is because Penny worries so much. How could Violet have supported Penny rather than rejecting her?
- What happens to Penny when she feels worried about things? Where does the worry come from? Make a list of things in the book causing her worry that she can control, and a list of things she can't.

Stereotypes

- What are some of the rumours Penny has heard about Rocco Roman? What assumptions does she make based on these rumours? Describe at least one situation in which Rocco surprises Penny.
- Penny says she has 'no idea why Maria visited with Mrs Hines, the Feelings Teacher [because] she seems so perfect.' (p. 52) Is it true that only a certain 'type' of person needs help with their feelings? How can stereotypes like this make it harder for people to ask for help?
- On page one, Penny talks about 'certain girls'—what kind of girls do you think she means? Is it fair to make assumptions about other people like this?

RESPONDING

- Make a list of the realisations Penny has about friendship by the end of the book. Can you make a list of five 'rules' for being a good friend and use them to draw (and write) your own best friend.
- Penny wonders what her life would look like if she worried less. (p. 124) Write an alternative version of one of the scenes from the book in which Penny is free from her worries.
- Penny introduces many of the new characters with a list of facts she knows about them. Pair up with someone in the class you don't know very well. Write down a list of things you do know about them. Spend some time talking to each other about your lives and hobbies and interests—now reflect on the things you wrote down. Were they correct? Has the person you spoke to surprised you in any way? Introduce them to the class by sharing something interesting about your partner that you've learned during your conversation.
- Draw/write the qualities you value in your best friend. Include the memories/stories that are attached to the parts of your picture. Make a time capsule that captures the important memories you have with your current best friend and put it somewhere safe (or bury it) to open again in the future. Write an accompanying letter to your future self.