

# War & conflict?

## Books can help

**Our world offers more images than ever of aggression. But there are children's books that explain how conflict comes about, and how it can be dealt with. David McKee's *Tusk Tusk* is one such book, and Janet Evans has used it successfully with classes of seven, eight and nine-year-olds.**

*Tusk Tusk* by David McKee is a wonderful book for encouraging thinking, talking and writing. First published in 1978, it tells of two groups of elephants, the whites and the blacks, who cannot live together peacefully. The two groups begin to fight because of their different colours, and eventually they kill each other off. A few individuals from both sides escape the conflict, and long after the troubles have finished their grey descendents look set on a harmonious path. However, 'recently the little ears and the big ears have been giving each other strange looks'.

The importance of the book's theme was recognized straight away, by one of its first reviewers, Elaine Moss, who wrote:

*The stupidity of racial intolerance is the theme of David McKee's very simple, very funny picture book.*

This book is as fresh and relevant today as it was 28 years ago, as I found when my interest in picture books dealing with issues of war and conflict led me to use it recently with seven-, eight- and nine-year-olds in a central London primary school and in a small school in the north west of England. I was to find that in these difficult times *Tusk Tusk* has the power to stimulate children to think and talk about complex, contemporary issues.

### First ideas from the book's cover

Prior to reading *Tusk Tusk*, the children were asked to predict what they thought it would be about from looking at the cover. Before any discussion took place, each child was given a slip of paper and asked to write down their initial thoughts (without worrying about spelling, punctuation and grammar). As I expected, their slips showed that that they had made their predictions by using the book's title and the information contained in the cover illustration; by drawing on their previous experiences; and — in some cases — by using what they knew about other books they had read by the same author.

*The black elephants fight the white elephants . . . They don't like each other. Their tusks look like a hand and the four birds were watching because they look mad. They make up in the end. One's on one side and the other one is on the other side. It reminds me of Elmer the colourful elephant. It reminds me too about elephants dying in Asia. Jacob, eight*

*I predict that it is about a family of black elephants meeting a family of white elephants and because their skin colour was different they had a big fight and got hurt and then they realized that they shouldn't be nasty. They made friends. Matthew, eight*

After these initial responses to the cover and title, the book was read aloud to the children. This was an uninterrupted



*I think TUSK TUSK was an average 5 year old book. It had very little text. It did have a very good moral. CONCECUEVE If you fight when you're kids when you're adults it will turn into war and the CONCECUEVE will be terrible!*

Matthew's illustration and writing

read, with appropriate intonation and expression, and the pictures were available for the children to see as the book was read.

The children were then asked to work in response partner pairs to discuss their initial predictions, after which they returned to their slips of paper to write down whether those predictions had been correct or not. In returning to their initial ideas in this way, they were drawn into the narrative and forced to relate to the overall story line and meaning. They were quick to reconsider their predictions:

*It was wrong a bit but I got sum right.*

*I was not right*

*I was half right.*

*My prediction was 7/10.*

*Wrong.*

### Using the 'Tell Me' model for book talk

After this first reading and return to the children's predictions, we read the whole book again, prior to a whole-class discussion of the thoughts and issues it had raised.

In an attempt to make it easier for the children to organise their thoughts about the book, I used the model offered by Aidan Chambers, in his book *Tell Me*, for enabling children to think and talk about the books they read. He proposes four basic book-talk questions:

- ◆ Was there anything that you liked about this book? (LIKES)
- ◆ Was there anything that you disliked? (DISLIKES)
- ◆ Was there anything that puzzled you? (PUZZLES)
- ◆ Were there any patterns — any connections — that you noticed? (PATTERNS)

The children's initial responses to these questions were shared at class level and written on a grid on the board by me acting as scribe. This whole-class activity needs to be done a number of times with different texts if children are to learn to get the most out of it.

Chambers provides more open-ended questions that can be used as part of the *Tell Me* model, but the overall intention is to get children responding to texts in personal and meaningful ways. With this in mind, I had prepared a few thoughts of my own to share with any children who were reluctant to offer responses. I made my thoughts into 'I wonder' statements, so they could see that I, as the teacher, didn't yet have all my responses to the text worked out:

- ◆ I wonder why the elephants didn't like each other.
- ◆ I wonder if it might have made a difference if the elephants had all lived together instead of each keeping to different sides of the jungle.
- ◆ I wonder why they felt they had to kill each other.
- ◆ I think they could have got together and talked about their disagreements.
- ◆ I wonder why some of the elephants went to live deep in the centre of the jungle. Maybe they didn't want to argue.

And so on

I need not have worried about reluctance on the children's part, and I had little need of my 'I wonder' statements! Their thoughts in relation to the likes, dislikes, patterns and puzzles model were abundant, and they were clearly motivated by this way of responding to the book.

### Reflecting on the book in writing

After we had shared our thoughts and ideas using the grid, the children began to work individually, writing down their reflections on the book and illustrating their work. Some of their ideas were illuminating, as Matthew's piece shows. Others had give the theme equally serious thought:

*I did not like it when everyone was bad and then it was getting better then it went bad again. The moral is if you fight when you are kids over silly things, then you will be really bad when you are adults.*  
Hannah, nine

*I think Tusk Tusk has a very good moral and the moral is that people that are different shouldn't fight.* Imran, eight

LIKES	DISLIKES	PUZZLES	PATTERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* <i>the way David McKee uses black and white to make grey</i></li> <li>* <i>bit where they had babies and all got along</i></li> <li>* <i>first double-page spread where they still liked all creatures</i></li> <li>* <i>when grey elephants emerged as friends</i></li> <li>* <i>the way David McKee illustrated the elephants</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* <i>when they had the battle, because I don't like fighting</i></li> <li>* <i>when all the elephants got killed</i></li> <li>* <i>killing other animals/people ... it isn't nice</i></li> <li>* <i>the title</i></li> <li>* <i>the fighting</i></li> <li>* <i>the violence</i></li> <li>* <i>when grey elephants are giving dirty looks — they might fight again</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* <i>Did they really die or were the bullets peanuts?</i></li> <li>* <i>Why did the grand-children elephants have different sized ears?</i></li> <li>* <i>What happened when peace loving elephants went into jungle? HOW did they come out grey?</i></li> <li>* <i>Who actually won?</i></li> <li>* <i>Where did the dead ones go — did they really die or go to sleep?</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* <i>reminds me of Elmer</i></li> <li>* <i>this can happen anywhere, anytime, anyplace!</i></li> <li>* <i>when they fight in book it's like fighting on the streets</i></li> <li>* <i>reminds me of how people are different colours — black, white &amp; mixed race</i></li> <li>* <i>World War II when elephants (B&amp;W) shoot each other</i></li> <li>* <i>the jungle illustration was like a pattern</i></li> </ul>

*I liked the bit where they said they like all creatures and I think it was sad though when they all died in the battle because they're both different. I think it taught you about racism.* Abigail, eight

When the individual pieces of work were finished and had been read out loud in class, I posed another question: 'Does this book make you think of anything that is happening in the world around us at the moment?'

The children's answers showed that the book had stimulated them to think about contemporary events that they knew people were worried about, or which they had worried about themselves. Some children focussed on the plight of elephants as wild creatures being poached to extinction for ivory. Others noted the analogies between the arguments in the book and arguments and fighting in the playground. Other, more contemplative youngsters even drew analogies with the invasion of Iraq and the problems that arise between people of different cultures and colours:

*It doesn't matter what colour you are, be proud of what you are.* Yonaton, seven

*It makes me think that elephants are being killed all over the world. It made me feel sad that people are killing elephants when the elephants are not doing anything to them.* Grace, nine

*It makes me think of fallouts [falling out with people] and I don't like fallouts.* Nicole, seven

*The Iraq war because everyone is fighting.* Raumin, eight

*It makes me think of arguments, the playground, the war and the Serengeti National Park in Africa.* Abigail, eight

*It makes me think of racism.* Imran, eight

*Getting ivory for jewelry.* Adam, seven

So, *Tusk Tusk* had provided the stimulus I had hoped for: it had promoted thought and talk about complex issues of aggression, conflict and wasted opportunities. Many other, seemingly simple, picture story books can be used for themed discussion with primary children, and over a period of time I have collected a number of text sets of such books. The sets, several of which are given on my website, contain books that are linked in one of a number of ways, for example, by author, subject matter, genre, illustration, and so on. *Tusk Tusk* is part of my text set of books on war and conflict, and most of the books from this set could be used as an initial stimulus with children anywhere between the ages of four and eleven to promote meaningful thought and discussion and then to stimulate children to write about their ideas and record what the book has made them think and feel. For, as James Britton said, 'Reading and writing float on a sea of talk'.

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