

PERRI'S PENCIL PROBLEM

Classroom Discussion Guide

For Grades K-5 | Ages 5-11

Free Resources from perrispencilproblem.com and saysomethingsweet.org

About This Guide

This free classroom discussion guide is designed to help educators, librarians, and counselors use Perri's Pencil Problem as a springboard for meaningful conversations about identity, belonging, and kindness. It includes before-reading warm-ups, during-reading prompts, after-reading reflection questions, vocabulary support, and hands-on activities aligned with Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks.

The guide is organized by grade band so you can go as deep as your students are ready for. Every section is flexible; use what fits your classroom.

A Note from Marleigh

This story happened to me. I wrote the book I wish I had as a little girl, one that told me my hair was beautiful, my feelings were valid, and my voice mattered. My hope is that this guide helps you create a classroom where every child feels exactly that.

Marleigh Brown, Author

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Grade Band	Best For
Grades K-2	Sweet vs. Sour language; feelings; basic kindness. Focus on how words make people feel.
Grades 3-4	Introduce microaggression vocabulary. Explore identity, hair, and belonging more deeply.
Grade 5+	Allyship, systemic thinking, and what it means to speak up. Excellent for SEL or advisory.
All Grades	The read-aloud prompts, vocabulary chart, and Sweet vs. Sour activity work at every level.

VOCABULARY SUPPORT

Before reading, introduce these words. For younger students, use the simple definitions. For grades 3-5, use the full explanation.

Word	What It Means
Microaggression	A small action or comment that sends a hurtful message to someone because of who they are, even when the person doing it doesn't mean to be hurtful. (Simple: sneaky-sour word or action.)
Identity	The things that make you YOU; your hair, your skin, your family, your culture, your name, your values.
Afro	A natural hairstyle that grows upward and outward. It has been a symbol of Black pride and beauty for generations.
Boundaries	The invisible lines around your body, feelings, and belongings that other people should not cross without permission.
Belonging	The feeling that you are welcome, valued, and accepted exactly as you are.
Empathy	Being able to understand and share how another person is feeling, even if it hasn't happened to you.
Allyship	When someone who isn't directly affected by a problem stands up and speaks up for someone who is. (Grades 4+)
Sweet Words	Words and actions that build people up, show respect, and make others feel seen and valued.
Sour Words	Words and actions that put people down, cross boundaries, or make others feel small, even accidentally.

BEFORE READING

Warm-Up: Activating Prior Knowledge

Choose one or more of these prompts to open the conversation before you begin the book:

For Grades K-2

- Show students your own hair (or a photo of different hair types). Ask: What are some different kinds of hair people have? What makes your hair special or unique?
- Ask: Have you ever had someone touch your things or your body without asking? How did that feel?
- Ask: What is a kind thing someone has said to you recently? What is something someone said that made you feel not-so-good?

For Grades 3-5

- Ask: Has anyone ever done something to you on purpose or by accident that made you feel like you were different in a bad way? You don't have to share what it was, just think about how it felt.
- Ask: Why do you think some people might touch someone's hair without asking? Do you think they know it might bother that person?
- **Think-Pair-Share:** What does it mean to belong somewhere? What does it feel like when you belong and what does it feel like when you don't?

DURING READING

Read-Aloud Prompts

Pause at these moments during the read-aloud to check in with students. You don't need to use all of them; choose the ones that fit your class.

Pause 1: When the pencils go into Perri's hair

- **All grades:** Look at Perri's face. What do you think she's feeling right now?
- **Grades 3+:** Why do you think the classmate did that? Do you think it was kind, unkind, or something in between?
- **Grades 4+:** If you were sitting next to Perri, what could you do right now?

Pause 2: When Perri reacts (or doesn't)

- **All grades:** Why do you think it can be hard to say something when something doesn't feel right?
- **Grades 3+:** Have you ever wanted to say something but felt frozen? What got in the way?

Pause 3: At the end of the story

- **All grades:** How did Perri feel at the end? Is that the same or different from how she felt at the beginning?
- **Grades 3+:** What changed for Perri? What do you think she learned about herself?

AFTER READING

Reflection Questions

Use these questions for whole-class discussion, small groups, journaling, or partner talk. Questions are organized by grade band.

Grades K-2: Understanding Feelings & Kindness

1. What happened to Perri in the story? How did it make her feel?
2. Was putting pencils in Perri's hair a sweet thing or a sour thing to do? How do you know?
3. Have you ever felt like Perri felt? What happened?
4. What could Perri's classmate have done differently?
5. What is one sweet thing you could say or do for someone tomorrow?

Grades 3-4: Identity, Belonging & Microaggressions

1. Why do you think the author says touching someone's hair without permission is a microaggression, even if the person touching it thought it was okay?
2. How do you think Perri felt about her afro before this happened? How do you think she felt about it after?
3. Why does it matter that Perri is the hero of her own story?
4. Have you ever seen someone be treated unfairly because of something about how they look? What did you do or what do you wish you had done?

5. What would you want to say to Perri if you could talk to her?
6. What is one thing you learned from this book that you didn't know before?

Grade 5+: Allyship, Identity & Speaking Up

1. The book is based on something that actually happened to the author, Marleigh Brown. Why do you think she chose to write a picture book instead of keeping the story private?
2. What is the difference between someone who witnesses a microaggression and an ally? What does it take to move from one to the other?
3. Perri's hair is a symbol of her identity. What are some parts of your identity that feel important to protect?
4. Why might some people not realize that a comment or action is a microaggression? Does not meaning to cause harm make it less harmful?
5. If this happened in our classroom, what would you want your teacher to do? What would you want your classmates to do?
6. What does it mean for a classroom to be a place where everyone truly belongs? What is one thing we could do to make ours more like that?

THE SWEET VS. SOUR ACTIVITY

What It Is

The sweet vs. sour framework is central to the Say Something Sweet movement. Sweet words build people up. Sour words, even accidental ones, can sting. This activity helps students practice telling the difference and choosing sweeter responses.

Option 1: Class Sort (K-2)

Write the following words and phrases on index cards or display them one at a time. Ask students to decide as a class: Sweet or Sour? Why?

- **Sour examples:** Can I touch your hair? (without waiting for yes) / Your hair is so different. / Why is your hair like that? / Putting something in someone's hair without asking.
- **Sweet examples:** Your hair looks amazing today. / Hey, that wasn't very nice to her. / I like how you did your hair. / Sitting with someone who looks left out.
- **Tricky ones (discuss):** Wow, your hair is so cool it's like a puffball! / I didn't mean it to be mean. / I was just curious.

Option 2: Sweet vs. Sour Flip Cards (Grades 3-5)

Give each student two index cards. On one, write a sour statement. On the other, rewrite it as a sweet one. Share with a partner and discuss: What changed? What stayed the same?

Sour Examples	Sweeter Alternative Examples
Can I touch your hair? (reaching in)	Your hair is so cool; is it okay if I ask you about it?
Your hair is so weird.	Your hair is really unique. I've never seen a style like that before.
I didn't mean it to hurt you.	I didn't mean to hurt you, but I can see that I did. I'm sorry.
Laughing when pencils go in someone's hair	Saying, "Hey, that's not cool. Are you okay?" to the person affected.

Option 3: Sweet Word Wall (All Grades)

As a class, brainstorm words and phrases that affirm, celebrate, and include. Write them on sticky notes or paper leaves and build a Sweet Word Wall in your classroom. Students can add to it throughout the year.

- Starter prompts: I see you. / Your story matters. / You belong here. / Your hair is beautiful. / I'm here for you.

FOR FAMILIES: KITCHEN-TABLE CONVERSATIONS

Send this section home or share it at a family event. These prompts are written directly for parents and caregivers.

Starting the Conversation

Reading a book together is just the beginning. Here are some questions to keep the conversation going at home:

- What part of the story surprised you the most?
- Has anything like what happened to Perri ever happened to you; where someone made you feel different or left out?
- What do you love most about your hair; or about something else that's uniquely you?
- If you saw something like this happen to a friend at school, what would you do?
- What is something sweet you want to say to someone this week?

Tip: You don't need all the answers. The goal is to listen, validate, and let your child know that their feelings and their identity matter deeply.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Write Your Own Book I Wish I Had | Grades 2-5

Marleigh wrote Perri's Pencil Problem because it was the book she wished she'd had as a little girl. Invite students to think: What book do you wish existed? It could be about something they experienced, something they want other kids to know, or a part of their identity they want celebrated. Students can write a short story, a picture book draft, or just a first page.

Hair & Identity Art Project | All Grades

Have students draw a self-portrait focusing on their hair. Around the portrait, they write or draw things that make them uniquely them, their name, their family, their culture, their favorite things. Display these as a We Belong Here gallery.

The Say Something Sweet Pledge | All Grades

Invite students to take the Say Something Sweet pledge as a class. Each student signs their name and commits to choosing sweet words. Visit saysomethingsweet.org to access the pledge and printable certificate.

Classroom Kindness Tracker | Grades K-3

For one week after reading, students track sweet moments they notice or create. At the end of the week, share as a class: How many sweet moments did we make? What did they look like?

SEL FRAMEWORK ALIGNMENT

Perri’s Pencil Problem and this discussion guide support the following CASEL Social-Emotional Learning competencies:

SEL Competency	How This Guide Addresses It
Self-Awareness	Students reflect on their own identity, feelings, and how experiences shape their sense of self.
Social Awareness	Students consider Perri’s perspective and explore how bias and microaggressions affect others.
Responsible Decision-Making	The Sweet vs. Sour framework teaches students to evaluate actions and choose kinder responses.
Relationship Skills	Students practice empathy, allyship, and speaking up skills for building equitable relationships.
Self-Management	Students explore emotional regulation: how to process a painful moment and respond with agency.

About the Author

Marleigh Brown is a high school student, entrepreneur, and children’s book author. She is the founder of Meadow Angel, LLC, a small business creating personalized stationery featuring diverse characters, and has fulfilled hundreds of orders across nine countries. Perri’s Pencil Problem is her debut picture book, inspired by her own childhood experience with microaggressions.

Book: perrispencilproblem.com

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