

**About the Book of the Month:** This collection of featured books is from Books Matter: The Best Kid Lit on Bias, Diversity and Social Justice. The books teach about bias and prejudice, promote respect for diversity, encourage social action and reinforce themes addressed in education programs of [A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE® Institute](#), ADL's international anti-bias education and diversity training provider. For educators, adult family members and other caregivers of children, reading the books listed on this site with your children and incorporating them into instruction are excellent ways to talk about these important concepts at home and in the classroom.

## When We Were Alone

David Alexander Robertson (Author),  
Julie Flett (Illustrator)

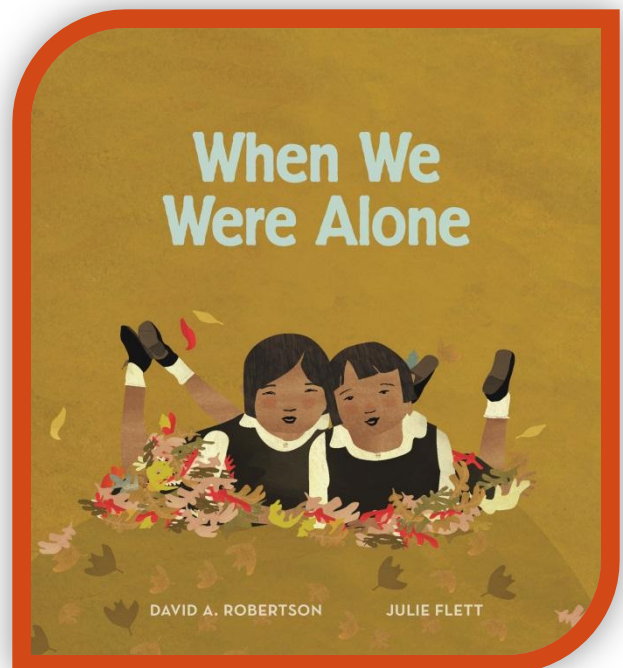
When a young girl helps tend to her grandmother's garden, she begins to notice things about her grandmother that make her curious. Why does her grandmother have long braided hair and wear beautifully colored clothing? Why does she speak another language and spend so much time with her family? As she asks her grandmother about these things, she is told about life in a residential school when everything was taken away.

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Publisher: HighWater Press

Year Published: 2016

Age Range: 4–8



## Book Themes

Indigenous people, Residential schools, Culture, Family, Injustice

## Key Words

Discuss and define these words with children prior to reading the book. Do not focus on students' retention of all the words; instead make sure they understand the words enough to follow the story and remind children of their meanings as they come up in the book. You can also post the words and point

out to students when they appear in the story. See also ADL's [Definitions Related to Bias, Injustice and Bullying for Elementary Age Children](#).

- |             |            |             |
|-------------|------------|-------------|
| ■ allowed   | ■ Cree     | ■ prune     |
| ■ bannock   | ■ culture  | ■ separated |
| ■ braid     | ■ hues     | ■ strange   |
| ■ chameleon | ■ language |             |
| ■ community | ■ proud    |             |

### Discussion Questions

Before reading the book aloud, ask pre-reading questions:

- What is the title of the book?
- Who and what do you see on the cover of the book?
- What do you think the book might be about?

As you read the book aloud, ask a few discussion questions periodically throughout the reading to check comprehension and keep the students engaged:

- How are the children dressed at the school where Nósisim's grandmother attended as a child? (page 4)
- Why do Nókóm and her friends braid their hair with blades of grass? (page 12)
- To whom is Nókóm separated from at the school? (page 22)

After reading the book aloud, ask some or all of the following discussion questions:

- What happens in the story?
- What does Nósisim learn about her grandmother throughout the book?
- Why does Nókóm dress "in rainbows" (i.e. very colorful)?
- Why do you think the children had to wear clothes at the school that were not colorful and were all the same, like a uniform?
- Why do you think wearing different colors makes Nókóm happy? How do you feel when you wear colorful clothes?
- Why does Nókóm wear a long braid now?
- What does Nókóm say about not being able to speak her language at the school she attended as a child?
- How would you feel if you weren't able to speak the language you were most comfortable with?
- What do you think it would be like to dress like everyone else, wear your hair the same as your classmates and be separated from your brothers or sisters?

- What did you learn about Native/Indigenous culture while reading the book?
- What did you learn about the school Nókóm attended? How do you feel about those kinds of schools?
- Why do you think the book is called *When We Were Alone*?
- What do you think was the message of the book?

### Extension Activities

Below are activities that you can do with children in order to extend the learning from the book.

#### 1. Residential Schools and Native American/Canadian History

Explain some of the history (below) of residential schools in Native American and Canadian history. You may want to share some of this before reading the book so students understand the context and then explain some of it after reading the book.

*In Canada in the 1870's, the Canadian government partnered with churches to establish and operate boarding and residential schools for Aboriginal (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) children. Attendance was mandatory. The school system was created for the purpose of removing children from the influence of their own culture and assimilating them into the dominant Canadian culture (there were also residential schools in the United States). Over the course of the system's more than 100-year existence, the federal government and churches operated over 130 residential schools across Canada and about 30%, or roughly 150,000, of Indigenous children were placed in these schools nationally.*

*Throughout the years, students lived in substandard conditions and endured physical and emotional abuse. Students at residential schools rarely had opportunities to see examples of normal family life. Most were in school ten months a year, away from their parents; some stayed all year round. All correspondence from the children was written in English, which many parents couldn't read. Brothers and sisters at the same school rarely saw each other, as all activities were segregated by gender.*

*When students returned to their homes, they often found it difficult to fit in. They didn't have the skills to help their parents, and became ashamed of their native heritage. The skills taught at the schools were generally substandard; many found it hard to function in an urban setting. The aims of assimilation meant devastation for those who were subjected to years of abuse.*

After explaining this history in your own words, ask students what questions they have about the residential schools or Indigenous people and culture. Record the questions and from those, generate a list of possible research topics. Students can then choose one of the topics to learn more. Their research can culminate in a written essay or oral report about their findings.

#### 2. Grandparents and Our History/Culture

In the book, Nósisim learns a great deal about the history and culture of her people by talking with her grandmother. Engage students in a discussion about **culture** by first defining it as the patterns of daily life that can be seen in language, arts, customs, holiday celebrations, food, religion, beliefs/values, music clothing and more. Then ask students what they know about their own culture and brainstorm a list of examples. Explain that we can often learn more about our culture from our grandparents, relatives and other family members, especially older ones. Generate a list of

questions they might ask their relatives and then have students use the questions to interview a grandparent or family member. They can also interview relatives who don't live nearby by Skyping with them or emailing questions to them and asking them to respond back. While conducting the interview, students can either take notes or record the interview. This project can culminate in students sharing what they learned with the class, either verbally, writing an essay or creating a collage. You may also want to consider holding a special Grandparent's Day (many elementary schools have these) where students' projects are shared with the grandparents.

### 3. What's Important to Me?

Ask students: *What are some of the things that Nókóm was not allowed to do when she was at the residential school?* Make a list and record those on the board/smart board. Explain that those things were habits, cultural traditions and values (something important, like spending time with family). Then, ask students to identify what things (habits, cultural traditions and values) are important to them, by having them turn and talk with a partner or silently making a list of those things. Then ask students: *How would you feel and what would you do if you weren't allowed to do those things?* It might help to share an example from your own life about this. Then, using an example from the book (such as Nókóm growing her hair long because she wasn't allowed to when she was at the school), have students take something from their list that is important to them and create an illustration, similar to the book, about what they would do if they weren't allowed to do that important thing. After they are completed, have students share their drawings with the class and consider compiling them into one book for the whole class to share with their families.

## ADL Resources

The following are curriculum and other educational resources on social justice, people, identity and culture and Hispanic/Latino people.

### Curriculum Resources

Columbus Day or Indigenous Peoples Day?, [www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/columbus-day-or-indigenous-peoples-day](http://www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/columbus-day-or-indigenous-peoples-day).

Lewis and Clark: The Unheard Voices, [www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/lewis-and-clark](http://www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/lewis-and-clark)

Should Washington's NFL Team Change Their Name?, [www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/should-washingtons-nfl-team-change-their-name](http://www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/should-washingtons-nfl-team-change-their-name)

Social Justice Poetry, [www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/social-justice-poetry](http://www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/social-justice-poetry)

Who Am I? Identity Poems, [www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/who-am-i-identity-poems](http://www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/who-am-i-identity-poems)

### Websites

Anti-Bias Education

[www.adl.org/what-we-do/promote-respect/anti-bias](http://www.adl.org/what-we-do/promote-respect/anti-bias)

Provides training program offerings for pre-K through 12th grade school communities—educators, administrators, youth and families—which focus on the development of an inclusive culture and respectful school climate by addressing issues of bias and bullying.

Creating an Anti-Bias Learning Environment

[www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/creating-an-anti-bias-learning-environment](http://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/creating-an-anti-bias-learning-environment)

Provides tips for the classroom educator to create an anti-bias learning environment.

Dos and Don'ts with Special Diversity Events

[www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/dos-and-donts-with-special-diversity-events](http://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/dos-and-donts-with-special-diversity-events)

“Dos and Don'ts” to help schools host special diversity events that are thoughtful and create environments that are inclusive and safe for all multicultural students.

### Children's Books

Below are links to lists of recommended anti-bias and multicultural books for the indicated category.

People, Identity & Culture: Native American & Indigenous People, [www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid\[213\]=213](http://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid[213]=213)

Social Justice: Activism, [www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid\[236\]=236](http://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid[236]=236)