



JUST KICKIN' IT

Teacher Guide

Orphaned Jesse uses his savings to pay his grandpa's WiFi bill, leaving him with nothing for the cool new pair of sneakers he was saving for. When an older kid proposes a scheme to rob the local corner store, Jesse finds himself torn between fitting in and following his late father's advice.

Themes:

Peer Pressure | Social Emotional Learning | Stereotyping | Power of Choice | Crime | Diversity | Afro-Canadian Diaspora

Discussion Questions:

1. Sixteen-year-old Jesse, lives with his grandfather after losing both of his parents in a car accident. How does Jesse's grandfather provide a sense of stability in Jesse's life after the tragic accident? How does Jesse demonstrate his understanding of their financial situation? Do you know of any services that support children who have lost their parents or do you have any ideas of what support can be offered to orphaned children?
2. Jesse was saving for a "new pair of kicks" until his grandfather needed money to pay the WiFi bill. Have you ever had a collection that you were really proud of? Was it a positive experience?
3. Have you ever saved up to buy something over a long period of time, and were you excited to finally get it? What was that feeling like?
4. How would you describe the friendship that Jesse and his best friend Tay have? Have you ever connected with a friend with a special greeting? Did it make your connection stronger? What did you notice about Jesse and Tay's relationship when Derick was introduced to Jesse? Have you or someone you know ever experienced a change in a friendship? Explain what happened that caused the change.
5. "Black boys can't be trusted," was a thought that went through Jesse's mind throughout the novel. What do you think was going through his head? How would this impact the way you went through your day at school and in your community? Would feeling like you couldn't be trusted anywhere you go have an impact on your life?



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6. Throughout the story, Jesse experiences lots of emotions, and he has places where he goes to seek reflection. Is this a good strategy when you are feeling overwhelmed? Why do you think Jesse only expresses his emotions when he is alone?
7. What is wisdom? How does Jesse use his dad's words of wisdom even though his dad isn't physically present?
8. Jesse and Tay don't want Derick to think they're "soft." How does Derick use this to ensure Jesse and Tay do his work for him? Is it important to appear "tough?" Why or why not? What pressures are in your peer group that make you feel, act or be a certain way?
9. How did Jesse end up listening to his inner voice? Why do you think it was such a challenge to do the right thing? How do good people get pulled into situations that aren't good?
10. Why does Derick look for "vulnerable" people to do his work? Who benefits from this? How do you think Derick knows who to approach? What techniques does he use to gain Jesse's trust? Why is trust such an important theme throughout this novel? What can you learn from Jesse and Tay's experience that you could also share with your peers?



Photo by Yousouf Atchia

About the Author

Julie Thompson is a passionate storyteller and mindfulness advocate dedicated to celebrating the beauty and diversity of childhood experiences. As a mother of two boys, Julie is especially inspired by the concept of Black Boy Joy, crafting stories that spark connection, promote understanding and encourage meaningful conversations within families and communities. Drawing from a rich 27-year career in youth services, community outreach and law enforcement, Julie infuses her work with authenticity and heart, creating characters and narratives that resonate deeply with readers of all ages. Her stories are a reflection of the vibrant people, unique places and transformative experiences that have shaped her journey. Julie is the author of several children's books, and *Just Kickin' It* is her first middle-grade novel. Her second middle-grade novel will follow in 2026. In addition to her writing, Julie is a certified facilitator in breathwork, yoga mindfulness and mediation. She lives in Toronto with her two sons, and she is committed to nurturing well-being and fostering connection through her creative and healing practices.

