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# Emma Rose : An Original Short Story For Early Adolescent Children

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# EMMA ROSE

An Original Short Story
For Early Adolescent Children

By

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# ABSTRACT

"Emma Rose" is a short story about an overweight seven year old girl whose mother helps her cope with the pain of being teased because of her obesity. Although Emma Rose is only seven, the story speaks to children between the ages of ten and twelve in that it addresses early adolescent issues such as: peer pressure and acceptance, moral reasoning, self-image, and the role of adult guidance in the search for self.

In addition to the story itself, this paper describes and analyzes children's responses to the story and shows how the central issues faced by Emma Rose reflect developmental agendas of pre-adolescent and adolescent children. The story is also examined in relation to other stories written for this age group on the issue of obesity.

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# I. INTRODUCTION

# INTRODUCTION

The story "Emma Rose" grew from my experience in a class I took at Bank Street College of Education called, "Language, Literature and Emergent Literacy". Throughout the course we explored childrens' literature that opened our eyes to the issues of diversity in our society. However, it became increasingly apparent that there were not many children's stories that dealt with a minority group which is often the target for ridicule on the sole basis of appearance. I am speaking of obese childdren.

Having done volunteer social work with compulsive overeaters, many horror stories of ill-treatment towards the overweight child have come to my attention. Certainly obese children are teased by other children and excluded from peer groups based on their appearances. But, interestingly enough, it is often the adult who will slight an overweight child at an initial meeting by saying: "My, you look like you like to eat a lot!" rather than a cordial "How are you?" Whether the remarks stem from an insensitive adult or child, all of the childhood tales regaled to me had a constant theme: the obese child was made to feel inadequate based entirely on his weight. In addition, there was rarely an understanding adult to come to the defense of the overweight child.

Consequently, when I learned that the final class assignment was to write a children's story, it seemed clear me that there was a need in children's literature for a story about an obese child. It was also important that a compassionate adult who understands, rather than adds to the torment, be included in the story. And so began the story of "Emma Rose".

"Emma Rose" is a short story about a plump seven year old who awakens one glorious Saturday morning, and sets out to meet a new friend, Lucy, the granddaughter of one of her neighbors. Emma Rose is delighted upon seeing Lucy and soon initiates a make believe game of pretending to be ballerinas. She proceeds to dance among the flowers while Lucy watches her in amazement. What Emma Rose doesn't anticipate is Lucy's surprise upon seeing someone as fat as Emma Rose dancing around like a ballerina. Lucy finds Emma Rose's dancing so uproarious that she blurts out, "You're too <u>fat</u> to be a ballerina! I never saw such a fat ballerina in my life!" As Lucy falls to the ground amid gales of laughter, Emma Rose runs home in utter humiliation and begins sobbing alone on her bed. But, she isn't alone for long, because her warm and loving mother enters the room and intuitively knows how to comfort Emma Rose. She holds her daughter in her arms and sings to her, which lulls them both to sleep.

Even though "Emma Rose" is about a seven year old child, the unresolved ending makes it clearly a story for older children. The reader needs to be able to grapple with the notion

that Emma Rose still has to wake up from her soothing nap and face both her obesity and her upsetting relationship with Lucy. My sense was that children between the ages of 10 and 12 would have enough life experience as well as emotional maturity to identify with the complexity of the characters. So, to gauge the appeal of this group, I went to six diverse classrooms to have the story read. What I found was that the children were involved in the story and saw the characters as multi-dimensional. As a matter of fact, "Emma Rose" conjured up many of their own experiences and several were willing to share them. The children clearly identified with the uncomfortable position of being an outsider in a group as well as being teased. Although not every child had been teased because he was fat, it was clear by the class discussions that all of the children had been in the painful position of being made fun of by their peers for various reasons.

"Emma Rose" also afforded this early adolescent child an opportunity to discuss the characters' moral values. And, in doing so, the children could begin to construct some of their own moral values. In fact, "Emma Rose" proved to encompass many issues salient to the early adolescent like, body image, peer pressure, moral reasoning and looking to an adult to have faith in.

To better understand the developmental issues of the early adolescent, I consulted the writings of Erik Erikson, among others, which substantiated my findings in the discussions.

Research agreed that early adolescence is a hard time for many because of the dramatic changes the adolescent's body is going through. Formal operational thought allows the 10 to 12 year old to hypothesize, so the discussions following the readings of "Emma Rose" were the basis for introspection and moral reasoning as to the actions of the characters. With the research and the discussions following the readings, it was clear that "Emma Rose" clearly holds timely issues for early adolescence. What I wanted to know next was how "Emma Rose" fit into the world of children's literature.

To assess "Emma Rose" in relation to other stories, I took a closer look at books which dealt with a central character who is overweight and found that "Emma Rose" had much in common with the literature, for it requires an emotional maturity and some introspection to make sense out of the ending. "Emma Rose" shared dilemmas similar to those of the characters in the stories examined such as: the pain of being teased because one is overweight, and the need for an understanding friend or a compassionate adult to help sort out the inevitable cruelties which come with life.

And, as an educator, "Emma Rose" can provide subject material for discussions about salient developmental issues. For, during this stressful time in the early adolescents' life where being caught between a child and an adult can add to the uncertainty of one's identity, a story like "Emma Rose" can help the early adolescent sort out issues of identity. Discussions of

"Emma Rose" can provide a safe structure for children to reflect on their own issues as well as enlighten the class to the pains of the obese child.

# II. EMMA ROSE

# Emma Rose

The blue Indian summer sky and Saturday sunshine held promise for Emma Rose as she ran down to the breakfast table where a glass of orange juice and colorful boxes of cold cereals made her tummy grumble. She gave a thought to the "snap, crackle, pop!" that the friendly little elves guaranteed on the Rice Crispies commercials, and yet the sugary coating of Sugar Snaps was making her mouth water. As a plump red cardinal landed on the window sill and peeped in at Emma Rose, she decided to mix the two cereals together and feast upon the yummy sweet treat.

"So you want some toast, Emma Rose?", mumbled her bleary-eyed mama, wrapped in a tattered nightgown with a lit cigarette hanging out of her mouth.

"Yes! With butter," said Emma Rose, as she poured the half and half on her cereal.

Mama laid a couple of pieces of lightly buttered toast on a napkin, beside the chipped china bowl of cereal. Emma Rose inspected the toast and found she could barely even see the butter. So while Mama poured herself another cup of black coffee, Emma Rose dipped her spoon into the soft stick of butter and slapped a generous amount onto the toast.

Mama plopped herself down at the kitchen table, and reached for another cigarette. "Finished already?"

"Yes. Can I have more toast?"

"More toast?", said Mama. "Four pieces of toast is way too much for a little girl. That's what Daddy eats."

"All right. All right. All right!", said Emma Rose. And she pushed her chair away from the table, jumped up and ran out of the house.

To begin her Saturday adventure, Emma Rose hopped over to old crackly-voiced Mrs. Armstrong whose house was right next door. Emma Rose reached up and banged the door knocker a good half dozen times. Mrs. Armstrong yelled from inside her white clapboard cottage, "Just a minute. I'm on the phone!"

Emma Rose waited on the front stoop while the morning sunlight cast a warm rosy hue on the blue hydrangeas that caressed the house. When she closed her eyes, a gentle breeze blew softly through her curly blond hair, as if nature had provided a fan to cool her brow. A fuzzy white wisp of a dandelion collided with her black lashes which tickled her eyes open, revealing a lavender butterfly dancing lightly atop the hydrangeas. Her heart was glowing like a bouquet of soft red roses.

"Emma Rose, do excuse me. Do excuse me. I was on the phone with Lucy's mama who was in a tizzie, because she entirely forgot forgot forgot to pack Lucy's jammies. But I told her, 'Now Lila, don't sweat the small stuff. K-Mart is no further than a bus ride to town and if worse comes to worse, Lucy can always sleep in one of Grandpa's pajama tops.'"

While old Mrs. Armstrong was blathering on about her

granddaughter's dilemma, Lucy appeared from under her wing. She looked like she was about seven years old, same age as Emma Rose, with orange braids curtailed by two floppy yellow bows. A spray of freckles colored her slender face. Upon seeing Emma Rose Lucy's mouth gaped wide open and her eyes grew as big as saucers.

"Emma Rose, this here's my granddaughter Lucy."

Emma Rose was excited at the prospect of a new playmate. She had an older brother and sister, but mostly she got in their way, or at least that's what she thought, seeing as how they'd yell, "Get outa here!" whenever she'd poke her nose in their rooms to see what fun things they were up to.

"Oh, there's that phone again. Must be Lila. You two amuse yourselves, playing around the yard here...Lucy, go on now."

Lucy was glued to her grandmother's side, staring at Emma Rose.

"Lucy, go on and play!" Then old Mrs. Armstrong shoved Lucy onto the front stoop and whirled off to tend to the phone.

The two gawked at each other.

"How old are you?", said Emma Rose.

Lucy mumbled something or other, then she began giggling at the ground. Emma Rose didn't get the joke, but she piped up, "Well, I'm seven." As Lucy continued giggling, the lavender butterfly lighted on the black iron rod banister of the stoop.

"Hey, I know what let's do!", exclaimed Emma Rose. "Let's be ballerinas. Want to? Come on. We can dance around the flowers like fairy princesses."

Lucy watched Emma Rose buoyantly leap out towards the flower garden and begin to twirl. Lucy found this so amusing that she had to hold both sides of her belly to contain her giggles. Emma Rose figured Lucy didn't much want to dance herself, but she was enjoying the show, so Emma Rose continued spinning until she got so dizzy she fell down. Now they both were laughing.

"Come on, Lucy. It's more fun if you dance too.", said Emma Rose.

"You... you...", said Lucy while pointing her finger at Emma Rose amid gales of laughter. "You're too <u>fat</u> to be a ballerina. I never saw such a <u>fat</u> ballerina before in my life!" And even though Lucy slapped both her hands over her mouth, she could not control her laughter.

The flowing roses that had been warming Emma Rose's heart now burned to a crimson. The blush in her cheeks turned a stinging scarlet as she faced the familiar dilemma of fighting back a deluge of tears. She watched Lucy buckle over with laughter as she squealed "too fat" over and over again. Emma Rose's mortification became so unbearable that she could no longer contain the flood of tears that was about to burst upon her trembling cheeks.

Without saying "good-bye" or anything she left Lucy

cackling on the green grass and fled home. She ran up the stairs, rushed into her bedroom, slammed the door shut, flung herself on her bed, knocked her Teddy across the room, and she wept into her pillow.

Emma Rose was sobbing so hard that she didn't even hear the door squeak open or the soft footsteps that were coming towards her. Then, a hand touched her gently. It was Mama. Emma Rose reached over and hugged her desperately. No words were spoken; this was a familiar scene to Emma Rose's mama. After rocking her girl in her arms for a little bit, Mama began to sing.

This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.
Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine.

When Mama had finished her lullaby some soothing moments of silence calmed the aftermath of Emma Rose's tears until the ebb and flow of her breathing was as peaceful as it had been when the birds' songs had awakened her this hopeful morning. She cuddled closer to Mama.

Pretty soon, Emma Rose started to sing the second verse of that same song herself.

Everywhere I go,

I'm gonna let it shine.

And then her Mama started singing with her.

Everywhere I go,

I'm gonna let it shine.

Everywhere I go,

I'm gonna let it shine.

Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine.

They sang that song a few more times. Mama kept on rocking Emma Rose in her arms until they both got quieter and quieter and quieter until all was still except for the soft whispering in and out of their breathing. In the stillness of their embrace, a summer breeze hummed gently through the trees, lulling them both asleep.

# III. CHILDRENS' RESPONSES TO "EMMA ROSE"

## CHILDRENS' RESPONSE

"Emma Rose" is like real life in that it does not have a "tidy" ending where everybody lives happily ever after. Emma Rose still has to wake up from her soothing nap and face her obesity and the painful teasing which will remind her that she is different from everybody else. But one thing which makes it possible for Emma Rose to endure, is her supportive mother who instinctively comforts her with hugs and sings a life affirming song, urging her to let her inner light shine.

Based on readings of the story to my classmates in the graduate school at Bank Street, I knew that adults would be able to comprehend the nuances in "Emma Rose", such as seeing the mother as caring even though her tattered gown and cigarette smoking did not suggest a story book version of motherhood. But, I was curious as to what the youngest age group would be that could deal with the depth of emotion and complexity of characters "Emma Rose" offers. My sense was that children between the ages of 10 and 12 had enough life experience and emotional maturity to identify with the characters and would find sorting out the story's moral values challenging. As Oppenheim (1986) states in Choosing Books For Kids: "Books for ten to twelve year olds provide a way to learn about certain aspects of life without actually experiencing them. They help children have literary experiences that enrich their lives and at the same time sort out ideas in a way that is meaningful, but also safe" (p. 217).

Through "Emma Rose" the ten to twelve year olds could explore their own issues about being "different" without having to explore their own painful issues too closely.

In order to gauge the appeal and range of responses of this age group, I went to six diverse classrooms to have the story read. At a progressive school on the upper west side, where the children sat comfortably in a familiar, cosy meeting area, the story was read by the teachers to a fourth, fifth, and sixth grade classes. In the sixth grade, the head teacher and a student teacher chose to dramatize the story by reading the lines of different characters, which made for a lively interplay between the characters similar to readers' theatre. The 4th grade was the only class who were not asked to verbalize their responses after hearing the story but submitted written responses immediately after the story was read to them. I have incorporated their reactions in my discussion.

I read "Emma Rose" to three other fifth grade classes, namely: a progressive school on the east side; a Spanish bi-lingual class on the upper west side; and a fifth grade class at a public school on the upper west side. In these settings, the teacher introduced me as the author.

In the fifth grade public school class, I initially wondered whether or not I'd get an attentive audience, because the moment I entered the classroom I was abruptly greeted with "You the author?", while children were running between desks, shouting loudly, and throwing paper wads into the wastebasket.

However, once the teacher reminded them that the reading wouldn't start unless they settled down and cleared their desk tops, the noise gradually lessened. I waited for the first moment of silence and seized the opportunity to begin my reading. I was surprised that the class was quiet once the story began and remained so throughout the reading.

In all the readings, I noted an involvement with the story because the children focused on the readers with periodic glances out the windows as if to better visualize the story, or perhaps refocus their eyes a bit. They were all free from excessive fidgeting or whispering and appeared attentive to the story.

I discovered that "Emma Rose" has a lot of humor as childrens' giggling was peppered throughout the story in all of the readings. All the classes chuckled at the description of Emma Rose and the "friendly elves" on the Rice Crispies box as well as at Emma Rose fixing her breakfast and sneaking some more butter on her toast. The description of Emma Rose's mama in her tattered nightgown drew almost a "guffaw" from the fifth grade public school class. Emma Rose's line, "Hey I know what let's do, Let's be ballerinas!" drew some general laughter as did the song: "This Little Light of Mine". Some children even sang along softly as the teacher read.

The line in the story which drew the biggest laugh (except for the east side fifth grade who remained engrossed yet silent to the end of the reading) was Lucy's taunting: "You're

too fat to be a ballerina!" I wondered what was it about that line that drew such a response? A child from the fifth grade progressive school offered some insight as to why anyone would laugh at a person who was obviously being teased. The child said: "Sometimes when everything's quiet and nobody's saying anything, then somebody says a joke, and everybody starts laughing, then I start laughing too, even when I think something's not funny."

All of the classes were eager to participate in lively discussions following the reading and had insightful comments about Emma Rose's relationships with Lucy and her mother. Before I even opened the discussion, one child in the public school fifth grade had his hand raised. I asked him, "Do you have a question?" He said, "No, but I have an answer."

The children acknowledged that Emma Rose probably felt better when she woke up from her nap because her mother had comforted her, but she still might be feeling sad because she was left with her unresolved weight problem and her splintered relationship with Lucy. One child in the bi-lingual class said, "I thought she was feeling so-so, because she was mad about Lucy and she was glad about her Mom." Many children from the east side school developed this theme of Emma Rose's complex feelings. One child said, "I think that after the nap she would probably be comforted by her mother, but she probably, I think, would be sad inside but not show it as much as before. Because her mother, I think her mother kind of helped her, and Emma Rose acted like she

felt better. But she was still upset inside."

All of the classes acknowledged that Emma Rose probably got teased a lot because she was fat but noted her resiliency. One child in the sixth grade said, "She wasn't afraid to try again, even though it happened before, because in the morning she just went out again."

All of the classes had a visceral identification about having been teased or having witnessed another being teased; however the degree of openness varied from class to class. When I asked the fifth grade public school class if any had ever witnessed someone being teased the way Emma Rose was teased, about half of them quickly raising their hands, saying softly yet audibly, "Yes, to me." When I asked if any cared to share about it, their hands went quickly down and all were absolutely silent. Then I asked them how they thought Emma Rose felt about being teased and several hands shot up. I find it noteworthy that the children could speak easier of another's pain than their own and I was expecting some ponderous insights similar to the other classes. But to my surprise I got one word responses. "Embarrassed". "Ashamed". "Mad". "Down". "Depressed". "Heart broken". "Awful". "Unencouraged".

In sharp contrast, the bi-lingual class not only identified with Emma Rose's pain openly, but responded to the notion of being teased by relaying personal incidents of having been teased themselves. One child said, "Some people call me Bugs Bunny or Buck Tooth!" In addition to discussion, this class

submitted written responses to the story, saying that they identified with Emma Rose and then many recounted incidents of being teased because they were too fat. One child wrote: "I know how Emma Rose felt when Lucy called her fat. That happened to me once in Halloween. When I was in second grade. I dressed up as a clown, and all the kids started to laughed at me, and I felt terrible. But when people call me names, I let it come through one ear and out through the other." Some responses were in Spanish where their English was not as fluent. One Spanish response loosely translated was, "I didn't understand all of your story because my English is not so good. But the part that I liked the best was when somebody called Emma Rose fat. Many times somebody calls me fat, and it makes me feel bad."

Children in the progressive schools also identified with the pain of being teased, but spoke more theoretically than personally. All three classes acknowledged that one who teases another is probably feeling bad about themselves to begin with. The progressive east side school developed the theory of teasing most fully. One child noted the stages of teasing by saying, "It's sort of in stages. First thing I want to do to the person who teases me is go to the person and tease them. Then I get sort of mad. But then after that stage I just want to get away from the person." This class also acknowledged a moral obligation to help someone who is being teased and obviously in pain and went on to cite the consequences of helping out. One child said, "A lot of times it might upset the person who's being

teased if you go and help them, and they may not want your help." Another child added, "And also if you see somebody who's being teased, you can't go and help them because the people who are teasing him will start teasing you." Another child built on this complex theme of standing up for another by concluding that, "They might not feel as good as if they could take care of themselves."

Lucy is a character with which the children empathized, which surprised me, because I hadn't thought I had written any sympathy towards Lucy. But at the first reading, a child in the progressive west side fifth grade asked, "Is Lucy an evil character, or is she a kind person who just did something bad?" Generally the children felt that Lucy wasn't a bad person, but had made a poor judgment in making fun of Emma Rose. One sixth grade student acknowledged that since Lucy was only 7 she might not have known that she was hurting Emma Rose and really wanted to be friends. The children in the east side school showed the most compassion towards Lucy's point of view. The class generally felt that Lucy was having a bad day and might even have be put off by Emma Rose's aggressive offer of friendship without even taking the time to know Lucy. One child offered a complex rationale for Lucy's behavior: "Well, Lucy might have been nervous, and she might have been homesick because she was staying with her grandmother, and her grandmother had just been on the phone with her mother and she forgot her pajamas. She was in a strange place, and she might have also been scared. She probably

wasn't feeling good about herself."

The fourth grade written responses also showed compassion toward Lucy as one child wrote, "Lucy did not seem very interested in meeting Emma Rose. And in my experiences with staying with grandmas, it has not been something I look forward to." I can see that the children identify with Lucy's situation by reflecting on their own life experiences. Another child wrote, "After Emma Rose went home, Lucy probably was happier."

Most of the children felt that the Emma Rose's mother was troubled because of her appearance, but a good mother because of her actions. The children saw the mother as helping her daughter lose weight by discouraging her from eating more toast and felt that singing to Emma Rose comforted her. However, most of the students felt that initially they didn't think the mother would be very caring because of the image that smoking cigarettes and drinking black coffee conjured up in their heads. One child said, "At the beginning she was a witch kind of like, and just out of it in the morning. Most people are actually out of it in the morning and that could be one of the reasons she was acting like that. But later on she really feels bad for her daughter and tried to make her feel better."

The majority of fourth grade written responses (without the development of a discussion as in the other classes) also saw the transformation of the mother based on her actions. One child wrote, "I thought in the beginning Emma Rose's mother was poor, and she had a lot of problems, problems at work and

problems with money, ... but at the end it was like she was a whole new person. She was caring, trusting and loving."

The fifth grade public school appeared most comfortable with one word responses, saying that the mother was, "nice, quiet, sweet, encouraging. friendly." I tried to elicit more of a response from the children, so I asked one child, "What makes you think the mother was friendly? " The girl said, "My mother never sings to me." After a while this class began responding more conversationally, as one child explained the change in the mother as: "Stingy at first and then nice...Because when she wanted a piece of toast, she didn't want to give it to her."

I asked the kids if there was anything in the beginning of the story that would indicate that Emma Rose was overweight? The majority of the students began reciting Emma Rose's breakfast as an indication of obesity. One child in the bi-lingual class said, "I think that she ate too much for breakfast because one bowl of cereal and one piece of toast, that's enough. But one and one mixed together and four toasts is too much." Another child in the same class said, "I thought she might have looked like my sister. She's white and she eats more than ever. For her age she's a little bit too big." And, a child in the fifth grade public school said, "Maybe she ate too much toast and got hyper."

However, for some it came as a surprise that Emma Rose was fat. One girl said, "I thought she was just having a big breakfast. It didn't occur to me that she ate too much until

after Lucy had called her fat. Then I realized that she had been eating that in the morning."

Few children wondered where the father was, but two children from the east side school said that they didn't get the feeling that the parents were divorced. One child had remembered that the father ate four pieces of toast for breakfast and that Emma Rose was probably eating a lot because she had seen her father do so. And three of the fourth grade written responses showed that children wondered where the father was. One child wrote that the mother "...was a troubled woman. She didn't get much help from her husband (presumably because he worked a lot)."

All of the classes clearly identified with the characters and most could comprehend the resolution of the story through the comfort of an understanding parent. However, many children wanted a different ending to the story, as one child in the sixth grade stated, "I like how you ended it. But I really enjoyed the story, and I would have liked to have heard more." All of the classes gave possible alternative endings, having to do with Emma Rose reconciling herself with Lucy or Emma Rose deciding to go on a diet. A child in the fifth grade public school said, "I'd like to see her punch Lucy out." Another child in the same class said, "Well, I would like to see when she wakes up to go eat lunch and go outside and make new friends. And then when Lucy finds out that she has a lot of friends and that she's ignoring her, she will probably apologize."

After the discussions I told the children how important

it is for an author to get feedback from the population who will be reading the story, and I thanked them for their input. All but one of the classes applauded me loudly, where one sole voice said, "You're welcome." The kids then moved onto their next task.

Quite the opposite response was given by the fifth public school class. A majority of the children rushed up to me and wanted my autograph and also wanted to put their autographs on the first page of the story. The bi-lingual class also crowded around me and told me how much they had enjoyed the story. One boy said, "I thought at first like Lucy and she were having a good time and laughing an everything. But then when Lucy said, 'You're fat' to Emma Rose, man that was like lightning hitting the iceberg."

The teacher of the bi-lingual class later told me that she didn't think the kids' English was proficient enough to understand the story, but that the imagery was so colorful and vivid that the kids got what the story was about. Indeed, discussing the specific colorful images in the story was part of their responses: "I saw colors in the cereal box about rice crispies. And the butter yellow and the mother smoking a cigarette, white." Other children recalled the colors of the grass and flowers and one child said, "Emma Rose's dress, it was pink."

It appears that "Emma Rose" holds universal appeal that crosses the language barrier, for all were able to identify with

Emma Rose's torment. And many identified with being teased because of obesity. A child in the fourth grade wrote about Emma Rose's feeling upon awakening from her nap, "I think that she felt a little bit better but not all that great because being called you're fat takes a little while to get over."

In summary, the children were deeply involved in the story and saw the characters as multi-dimensional. The children followed the story and during our follow up discussions cited specific incidents from the story to back up their statements. The children were eager to discuss the characters interconnectedness, the ending and the style of the piece. The children were sensitive to the content and message of the story, for "Emma Rose" addresses their human condition. It conjured up their own experiences of being teased, and many were willing to share about it. And yet, many children could remain at a safe distance from their own pain and find solutions to Emma Rose's pain, which might help them feel not so alone in their dealings with being teased. Finally, I feel that "Emma Rose" addresses the fat child as a target for teasing, and it is my hope that who reads this story will become more sensitive to the obese child.

# IV. DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES OF EARLY ADOLESCENCE

# DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES OF EARLY ADOLESCENCE

From the experience of reading "Emma Rose" to various groups of children, it appears that it speaks most directly to 10 to twelve year olds. The ages between 10 and 12 mark the transition between childhood and early adolescence which is most visibly identified by the development of puberty. During this period the child undergoes biological developments which transform a child from physical immaturity to a state where he is capable of sexual reproduction. One of the first visible signs is a growth spurt which could be as much as six to nine inches during this short two to three year period. This physical metamorphosis contributes to the child's preoccupation with his new appearance.

Such a physical transformation is accompanied by introspection and how one is perceived by others. This introspective thinking is part of a development in cognition known as formal operational thought which David Elkind (1970) in Children And Adolescents describes as: "Formal operational thought, not only enables the adolescent to conceptualize his thought, it also permits him to conceptualize the thought of other people; this capacity, however, is the crux of adolescent egocentrism" (p. 67). With formal operational thought and radical physical change comes a period of confusion for the early adolescent characterized by heightened emotions. Oppenheim, in

Choosing Books For Kids, refers to this period between the ages of 10 and 12 as "the search for self". It is a time when children are asking themselves, "Who am I? How do I fit into the world?" (p. 216). Some issues which the adolescent is concerned about, in addition to a search for identity, are: peer pressure, acceptance in groups, insecure self-image, ideals and moral guidelines, and adults to have faith in.

Of these pivotal concerns, the issues of (1) peer pressure; (2) looking to adults to have faith in; and (3) moral questioning all sparked the most revealing discussions in class responses to "Emma Rose". Since "Emma Rose" is a story of a seven year old girl, it could be that the children shared their thoughts so freely because they felt protected from revealing their inner feelings. Adolescence is a time when children can be secretive about their thoughts for fear of appearing foolish in the eyes of their peers. But, adolescents need to voice their concerns during this hard time of physical newness and emotional upheaval.

It is likely that the children made some inner progress in sorting out their identity through the conversations generated by readings of "Emma Rose", for the issues raised in the story are critical to adolescent thinking. Following is an examination of adolescent concerns expressed in response to issues raised in "Emma Rose".

PEER PRESSURE

The early adolescent is suddenly introspective about his budding new appearance and how he fits into the world. In order to grab a foothold onto his new identity, the early adolescent clings to a peer group and is eager to be affirmed by his peers. In fact, membership in a clique helps further shape his identify. This clique sets a standard of rules and conformity where the opinions of others in the peer group are of greater importance than the opinion of one's self. Membership in the group creates a preoccupation with what the early adolescent appears to be in the eyes of the group, rather asking himself who he feels he is.

In Erik Erikson's (1968) Identity, Youth And Crisis this period is referred to as Identity vs. Identity Confusion. He speaks of adolescent confusion and offers an insight into the importance of a peer group: "To keep themselves together they temporarily overidentify with the heroes of cliques and crowds to the point of an apparently complete loss of individuality" (p. 132). To be a part of this group, the early adolescent searches for sameness, conforms with others in dress, watches the same television shows, and frequently ostracizes the same child -- and, all too often momentarily becomes the child who's being ostracized. This identification with being teased could be one reason why Lucy's unkind remark to Emma Rose, "You're too fat to be a ballerina!" drew such a large and uncomfortable laugh from the children.

Perhaps one reason the children laughed so heartily at the remark was an attempt to alleviate insecurities about their changing body images. Since the early adolescent's body is going through dramatic changes, looks can be very important in building enough self esteem to be popular or just to fit in. Laughing at a remark about another's imperfect body could be a way for early adolescents to deal with their confusing unarticulated feelings about their developing bodies.

Another reason the children could have responded in such a unanimous fashion is that the fat child is very often the target of ridicule. In one of the discussions following a reading of "Emma Rose" a child was recounting an episode she'd witnessed where an obese child was being teased for no apparent reason other than her corpulence. The child said: "Well, there was someone sitting in the lobby once and there was someone ... kind of ... round..." Upon hearing the emphasized word "round", the entire class began laughing so hard that the child could not complete her thought. The teacher then asked the class: "What makes you laugh about that, that she was sort of round?" The class became silent and only one child could offer an explanation as to why the class laughed: "Round is a funny word".

Or, another reason the children could have laughed is that prejudice against fat children is an early acquired response. In Childhood Obesity: A Biobehavioral Perspective (1988), Buckmaster and Brownell state: "The pervasive bias against obesity is exhibited by children as young as six years of

age. Obese children are rated by six year olds as less likeable than children with a variety of physical handicaps, and children attribute to a picture of a fat child they do not know characteristics such as 'lazy, sloppy, devious, absent-minded, dirty and stupid'" (p. 10). Such a permissive bias against fat children helps to explain the class's unfiltered response to Lucy's teasing Emma Rose about her weight.

Some of the overweight children who participated in the class discussions related anecdotes of being teased specifically because they were fat. One child said: "Well, people be calling me 'big butt'. [class laughs loudly] And I be saying to them, 'At least I have one and you don't'". Here we have an example of a child who has learned to tease himself perhaps before others do. Silverstein (1991) states in So You Think You're Fat: "Kids often tease other kids, and fat children are the biggest targets for teasing. Some overweight children become the 'class clowns', trying to be funny so that other kids will laugh at their jokes, not at them. Others become withdrawn and try to be noticed as little as possible" (p. 24). Children develop different coping mechanisms for being teased.

Although not all children have been teased because they are fat, it was clear by the class discussions was that all of the children had been in the painful position of being made fun of by their peers for no apparent reason. But, the reasons to go along with the peer group who are teasing another child are complicated. Erikson offers some insight into this question:

"Young people can become remarkably clannish, intolerant, and cruel in their exclusion of others who are 'different' in skin color or cultural background, in tastes and gifts, and often in entirely petty aspects of dress and gesture arbitrarily selected as the signs of an in-grouper or out-grouper" (p. 132). The children identified so deeply with teasing that class discussions following the readings were marked with a variety of suggestions of how to handle being teased, for example, try to iron things out with the child, never talk to the child again, or aggressively tease them back.

Ostracizing others was admitted to by one child who said that he went along with laughing in group situations when he felt nervous: "I start laughing too, even when I think something's not funny." While it doesn't make sense to tease someone just because others do, Erikson suggests that a closer look at the principle behind teasing can explain why children would go along with such cruelty towards another child: "It is important to understand in principle (which does not mean to condone in all of its manifestations) that such intolerance may be, for a while, a necessary defense against a sense of identify loss" (p. 132).

The lengthy discussions following the reading of "Emma Rose" revealed that the children had thought a lot about peer pressure and teasing, but one wonders how frequently they had been able to verbalize such feelings. Some children spoke about their own pain when being teased: "A fat girl called to me,

'You're so skinny. You're all bones.' I just looked at her." Many offered advice to Emma Rose on how to deal with Lucy's tormenting her: "I want her to get back at Lucy". And others identified with the pain of seeing another being teased but explained the difficulties of helping that person out: "The person that's being teased could really be thankful or they could get really mad and feel that they couldn't stand up for themself and needed help."

The children's cognitive abilities afford them the possibility to think through their ideas. And, the ideas of teasing were universal in the classrooms, for the classmates listened to one another, as if wanting to gain a better insight into this common dilemma. One child prefaced her comment with: "It's kind of like what Will said and what Cathy said..."

In addition to these responses, all of the classes came up with the idea that Emma Rose should talk to her mother about being teased by Lucy. The children felt her mother was in a unique position to support her in a variety of ways and would be integral in solving the dilemma.

ROLE OF THE SIGNIFICANT ADULT

Looking for a supportive adult for guidance was a theme in all of the stories examined in the next section of this paper as well as in "Emma Rose". Furthermore, the heartfelt talks with significant adults enabled each of the characters' to effect change in their lives, and several began to lose weight.

Only one character, Emma in Nobody's Family Is Going To Change (Louise Fitzogh, 1974) sought support from a trusted peer group rather than an adult. However, she too was able to lose weight, for being a member of this group enabled her to articulate her political thoughts to friends who would listen to her and understand her. And, the operative action for all of the principal characters in the stories is: opening up to someone trustworthy. Certainly Emma Rose trusts her mother will help her feel better by cuddling in her lap until she stops crying and falls asleep.

As a matter of fact, seeking guidance from a trusting adult (often one's parents) is an integral part of the early adolescent's security. For, with the development of formal thought the child is able to now articulate feelings about his new body, and such abstract thinking enables him to better understand his insecurity about his physical and emotional changes. Admittedly, relationships between the early adolescent and parents are typically full of struggles. A child may now feel he is now old enough to stay up past his bedtime, but his parents still insist on the "old rules". These often boisterous struggles are an indication that the child is exercising his newly acquired cognitive abilities and, in fact, trusts his parents as a sparring partner. One larger aspect to these struggles is that the early adolescent is attempting to re-negotiate a more independent relationship with his parents. Cole and Cole (1989) in The Development Of Children point out that

most early adolescents respect their parents, and further state that: "Dialogue rather than outright conflict or rejection was the major method of resolving disagreements" (p. 547).

Such dialogue with one's parents is precisely what many children suggested Emma Rose do with her mother to resolve her conflict with Lucy. Another child felt that Emma Rose's mother should speak with Lucy's grandmother to help straighten out the friendship. This way both adults would be acting as trusted servants to help smooth over the children's relationship. This suggestion seemed to have come about from personal experience, for several children admitted that when they had a problem they went to their mother to talk it over and felt better.

It is interesting that early adolescence is often thought of primarily as a period of rebellion against one's parents, but Cole and Cole offer a more balanced perspective on the parental relationship: "...adolescents talk to their mothers about personal topics both to obtain practical advice and to validate their feelings and impressions. This talk may be argumentative." Indeed, many children felt that Emma Rose's mother was helpful toward her even in the beginning when she admonished her for wanting more toast. Several children felt the mother only wanted to help Emma Rose lose weight.

And, Emma Rose's mother was seen as a kind and compassionate mother by all of the children because she helped Emma Rose to feel better by singing to her and rocking her on the bed. Furthermore, discussions about the mother's appearance as

misleading to her compassionate nature was a topic of interest to all of the children. Many felt that the image of cigarettes and black coffee didn't go along with the usual notion of a caring mother. And yet, all of the children saw this same mother in an entirely different light once they took her caring actions towards her daughter into account. It seemed as if the children needed to discuss the transformation of the mother to understand her better in their own minds. In all of the discussions, the children listened to each other, and one child articulated a general consensus nicely: "I thought the mother wouldn't be very caring in the beginning because of what she was wearing. But in the end she turned out to be very caring." As a matter of fact, many children described the mother as being "a good mother" as if they were judging her actions morally.

MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Some insights into the early adolescent's hypothetical reasoning was evidenced by the moral issues which the children chose to discuss such as: the compassionate actions of the mother which seemed contradictory to her dress, whether Lucy was a bad or good character, the justice of the ending of the story, and why I wrote the story.

Giving a logical reason as to why such a good mother may have appeared unkempt was of interest to the children. One child said that since it was Saturday, the mother was probably sleeping in and wasn't really a morning person. It's as if the

child offered a rationale for the mother's appearance to fit with his understanding that a moral person who takes care of another, would also want to take care of herself. Making the mother seem nice and supportive seemed to be important to the children, as one child's response indicates: "I thought it was good how you made Emma Rose's mother not want to give her more butter because she was thinking of Emma Rose". And, these children have the cognitive abilities to understand such abstract ideas, which helps them develop an inner code of ethics.

Whereas younger children obey external rules made by adults without questioning them, the older child is capable of developing his own morals with the development of an internal conscious. This internal consciousness could be a result of the development of formal operational thought which enables a child not only to conceptualize his own thought but also to "deal with facts and hypotheses in an experimental fashion" (Elkind, p. 64). And yet, acceptance by one's peers may make a child hesitant about expressing his opinion, which could be a reason that children in this period are somewhat secretive about their thoughts. But, since there is a real need to make sense out of one's place in life, these reflections about the moral actions of the characters in "Emma Rose" may have helped the children begin to develop their own inner moral code of ethics.

Perhaps a need to understand one's complex emotions is a reason why Lucy's actions were contemplated in terms of morality. One child said that "Since Lucy was only seven, she

may not have known she was hurting Emma Rose." It is interesting that the distance in age affords the 10-12 year old a more objective perspective of Lucy. Many children considered Lucy's point of view and tried to reconstruct events which could have lead up to her hurtful remark to Emma Rose: Lucy was in a strange house; the grandmother was ignoring Lucy by talking on the phone; Emma Rose was too forward to Lucy; Lucy was nervous and didn't know what to say, so she laughed. Many children saw Lucy as a complicated character who needed understanding, as evidenced by one child's question about Lucy: "Was the girl who laughed at Emma Rose supposed to be a kind character, or just a person who does bad things sometimes?" This ability to see another's point of view is integral to moral reasoning because it enables the child to hypothesize the reasons behind the actions. Such hypothetical discussions illustrate an early adolescent's ability to see combinations of logic.

The ending of "Emma Rose" provoked discussion of morality. Children seemed to want justice for Emma Rose. One child offered this possibility for a morally sound next step: "After they sleep, you really want to know what she does. If she wants to get thinner, then she can show Lucy. She can really go and do that. Or if she wants to go and tell Lucy that she was wrong." To be able to ponder the outcome of Emma Rose, a child needs to have the emotional maturity to empathize, to see various points of view, and a desire to seek a certain justice for Emma Rose. In fact, grappling with how Emma Rose will come to terms

with Lucy gives many early adolescents an opportunity to reflect on his own issues which require problem solving.

In addition to reflections about the moral complexities of the characters in the story, the children asked why I wrote the story. Many wanted to know if the story was based on my own experience of being teased. Before I answered their questions, I would ask the children for their ideas as to why they thought I wrote the story. Most children felt I wrote the story to illustrate the unfairness of teasing another.

The children clearly identify with the moral issues raised in "Emma Rose". Since the early adolescent is capable of abstract thinking and eager to voice his opinion in a safe environment, "Emma Rose" offered a structure to speak freely without revealing too much of oneself. A book can provide an important opportunity for children to discuss their own dilemmas by projecting themselves onto the characters and remain anonymous. "Emma Rose" provides this opportunity for children to examine themselves.

# V. "EMMA ROSE" IN RELATION TO OTHER STORIES ON OBESITY

# "EMMA ROSE" IN RELATION TO OTHER STORIES ON OBESITY

The thoughtful discussions which grew from the childrens' responses to "Emma Rose" indicate that pre-adolescence is an appropriate age to read the story. To see how "Emma Rose" fits into the world of pre-adolescent literature, a closer look has been taken at books which deal with a central character who is overweight. Of the books examined, the following have been chosen to compare to "Emma Rose": Nothing's Fair In The Fifth Grade (Barthe De Clements, 1981); Blubber (Judy Blume, 1974); Nobody's Family Is Going To Change (Louise Fitzouh, 1974); The White Pony (Mary Oldham, 1981); Laughter In The Background (N.B. Dorman, 1980); In A Mirror (Mary Stolz, 1953); Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack (M.E. Kerr, 1972); The New Improved Gretchen Hubbard (Ilene Cooper, 1992); Nobody's Baby Now (Carol Lee Benjamin, 1984).

In each of these books, the central characters range from 10 to 15 years, and one is a young college student. Two prominent themes in these books are: the main characters suffer from low self esteem, and they are yearning to be thin to improve their shameful body image. These themes closely parallel pre-adolescent issues of preoccupation with appearance and insecurity in their search for identity. Since Emma Rose is seven, she may not experience these issues yet, but the themes and situations which "Emma Rose" shares with these books are key issues for

overweight pre-adolescents. Such themes and situations include: the obese characters experience prejudice and are typically called derivatives of "Fatso" with little regard to their feelings; the overweight characters are often friendless and seek consolation through food; all are intelligent and artistic; and the conclusions of the stories are not tidy, yet they are hopeful.

What makes these conclusions hopeful is another theme which "Emma Rose" has in common with these stories. Namely, the obese characters seek guidance through peers and an understanding adult to help them sort out questions about life's difficulties. And, except for Emma Rose and Linda in Blubber, all of the characters are able to lose weight once they slowly open up their souls and begin communicating their deep feelings to a compassionate listener. This intuitive compassion is precisely what Emma Rose's mother brings to her child at the end of the story when she knows instinctively to gently rock her sobbing daughter in her arms. It is also noteworthy that neither Emma Rose nor her mother seek consolation through food, but rather hold onto each other. A closer look at these themes and an evaluation of "Emma Rose" in relation to the selected books follows.

The overweight Emma in Nobody's Family Is Going To Change has never been successful as dieting or making friends in all of her eleven years. She is called "Piggy" and reminded countless times that she is fat even by her own family and speaks

of her body in shameful terms such as "a fat black mess" (p. 54). Emma is not able to open up to others, but takes comfort in daydreaming and through isolating herself with food. When her mother catches her eating out of the refrigerator, she is scolded and feels humiliated "...as though she'd been caught nude." (p. 10).

Annoyed by her family's nagging to go on a diet and irritated that they don't listen to her radical ideas for social reform, she bravely ventures out to a meeting of a socially aware group called "The Children's Brigade". It is there that Emma is able to identify with like minded children whose mantra is "inner progress before outer progress", and we see Emma slowly begin to come out of her shell. As she articulates her thoughts to the group we see Emma become more introspective, and there is the possibility of friendships developing. As she gets more practice at conversation, her obsession with food is lifted and she has the courage to boldly declare to her family her views on social change and that she's going on a diet!

It is equally troublesome for the overweight Barbara to open up to her peers in Mary Oldham's The White Pony. Oldham shows how difficult it is for the obese child to establish initial friendships because of snap judgments made against fat people. Because of such judgments, the adolescent Barbara is used to initial feelings of disgust when meeting a new friend. When Peggy, her contemporary, sees her for the first time, her initial reaction is: "How awful...she's enormous". However, once

Peggy realizes that both she and Barbara share a common passion in horseriding, their friendship blossoms. Finally Barbara is able to cry in front of Peggy about her shame of being so overweight and speaks of a panicky hunger inside which she always has to fill up with food.

This panicky hunger which Barbara speaks of turns out to be unnamed emotions, which she has never been able to speak to her mother about because Barbara's mother doesn't listen to her but is obsessed about her going on a diet. However, Barbara is able to open up to Sylvia, an understanding adult who sympathizes with her weight problem and helps her think through some issues which may be causing her to overeat and encourages her to develop her writing talent. This communication between Barbara and Sylvia serves as a role model for adolescents who cannot open up to their parents but who have so many questions about their changing body image and need a supportive adult who can offer guidance through his or her own wisdom.

However, an inability to open up to either a friend of an adult is what keeps Linda in Judy Bloom's Blubber obese and isolated. Bloom explores the role of Linda as a scapegoat. Linda is called "Blubber" and bullied by a group of girls throughout the story because she is the fattest girl in the fifth grade. Blume focuses heavily on the issue of peer pressure, and we see how the classmate Jill goes along with bullying Linda, not because she agrees with it but because Wendy, the ring leader of the "in crowd", instigated it. Jill does not question Wendy's

judgment because "It's important to be Wendy's friend" (p. 82), a criteria which many 10-12 year olds would be able to identify with.

However, friendships among peer groups can be fickle, and when Jill becomes the new scapegoat, she feels the pain of being a friendless outsider. The one person Jill feels she can open up to is her mother who helps her sort out her feelings and consoles her with gentle wisdom: "It's rough to be on the other side, isn't it?" (p. 142).

Although the passive Linda is not able to change her situation by losing weight or making friends because we never see her reach the point to where she's willing to examine her inner feelings. But we see Jill change as she asks a new girl (not part of the "in crowd") to eat lunch with her, because "You sometimes have to make the first move or else you might wind up like Linda -- letting other people decide what's going to happen to you" (p. 148).

Just as Jill is able to change, so is the 12 year old Marcie in N.B. Dorman's Laughter In The Background. Marcie begins her saga by kicking a rock on her way home from school, because she felt it symbolized "hope". Marcie lives with an actively alcoholic mother who brings men home from bars and verbally abuses Marcie. What she wishes for desperately is that her mother will stop drinking and be supportive to her. But as her mother's drinking worsens, Marcie's binging escalates to the point where she's numbed out most of her feelings except for

despair. She begins to steal money to buy food eat even more to cope with her pain, but "The trouble was that sometimes Marcie got so hungry there didn't seem to be enough food in the entire world to fill her up. No matter how much she ate, she was still ravenous afterward" (p. 33). What Marcie was craving was not food, but love and understanding.

Marcie never finds compassion from her mother who doesn't change, but she does begin to articulate her feelings in a support group with other children of her age whose parents are also alcoholic and ultimately finds compassion from a foster family she moves in with, and her obsession with food begins to diminish. In her search for love, she takes a risk when she opens up to her foster mother and tells her that she's lost weight since living with them. Aunt May's response is what Marcie needs: "Aunt May's delighted gasp and open arms were all the answer Marcie needed. It didn't matter, after all, where the love came from. It only mattered that you'd found it, and knew it, and accepted it."

Opening up to an understanding adult is also pivotal for Bessie in Mary Stolz's In A Mirror. Written in the form of a journal, Bessie is a passionate young college student whose attempts at dieting inevitably backfire into binging once she feels an uncomfortable emotion. Although she finds fulfillment through her passion for writing, it alone is not enough to feed Bessie's spirit. She needs to live vicariously through the dates and wardrobe of her beautiful and slim roommate because of her

inability to face her own feelings of inadequacy. This friendship is so important that once they begin to grow apart, Bessie is forced to analyze her hurt and sort out her feelings. Once Bessie begins to open up, she is able to lose weight and bravely begins to date. She tells an understanding adult what precipitated her weight loss. "I guess I just got tired of substitute emotions. I've spent my whole life listening to other people and watching them, but aside from writing I had very little on my own in the way of emotions. I love the writing, but perhaps it isn't enough" (p. 172). Although Bessie is a college student, she articulates her feelings in an introspective, honest way that could help a 12 year old understand her own complex feelings about baffling friendships and embarrassing body image.

As all of these characters learn to trust adults with their feelings, it is Dinky's parents in M.E. Kerr's Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack who must learn to recognize when their daughter is asking for guidance. Kerr illustrates the significance of two distinct parental relationships in shaping a child's sense of self. In one family we have Dinky Hocker, an overweight 15 year old girl whose mother is a celebrated drug rehabilitator. Although she's helped hundreds of addicts overcome their additions, she allows her daughter to take diet injections and pills in futile attempts to lose weight. As sympathetic as the mother is to the pain of addicts, she cannot see how deeply Dinky connects with a new found male friendship who is as intelligent, overweight and opinionated as Dinky. The mother rebels against

the relationship and forbids her daughter to see him again.

Dinky's platonic friend Tucker comes from a very close family who is in tune with their own needs and value their son's opinion in family matters. During a home cooking lesson, Tucker learns from his father "...to make anything work, from a meat loaf to a marriage, there are two things you have to do. Forgive and continue" (p. 134).

Dinky's binging worsens as her parents refuse to hear her and dismiss her weight as an adolescent thing which she'll outgrow. They never stop to question if there's any unresolved inner pain which Dinky is eating over, the same way an addict shoots smack to numb out his pain. It is through Tucker that Dinky's family finally learns that, "People who don't shoot smack have problems too." (p. 187). Tucker has been the necessary messenger, for Dinky's parents are finally doing everything they can to help Dinky lose weight and to show her how much they love her.

The effects of an unaware parent are also explored in Barthe DeClements, Nothing's Fair In The Fifth Grade. DeClements shows how 12 year old Elsie's insensitive mother contributes to her obesity. When asked by her new friends at a slumber party why she's so fat, Elsie speaks of her neglectful mother: "If I whined around Mama, she'd tell me to go get a cookie. It got so every time I felt sad I went to the kitchen and pulled down some cookies or graham crackers to eat. After a while I was eating all the time." Elsie is speaking of emotional needs not being

met early on and she learned to substitute food for a compassionate adult.

As Elsie's friendships become more solid, she is able to stick to her diet and confide in her friends that her mother doesn't ever listen to her explain anything. A friend offers some advice about Elsie's mother: "You need a grown-up to talk to her" (p. 119). Indeed, we see here the way in which a fifth grade child can view a parent as a mediator and a supportive problem solver.

Such supportive parents are found in Ilene Cooper's The New Improved Gretchen Hubbard. Cooper introduces us to 6th grade Gretchen who is not only dealing with her new attractive, thin body, but also dealing with embarrassment about her changing body image. Although Gretchen's parents are separated, she speaks openly with both of them. Gretchen's sensitive father is able to communicate his concerns about reconciling his marriage. He tells Gretchen: "I still love her. I've been mad that she felt she had to go away, but it was a wonderful opportunity for her...But now I wish she'd come home." Perhaps these open conversations with her parents lay the ground work for Gretchen's ability to emerge from being an isolate and slowly shed her former image of "Hippo Hubbard" by risking new friendships. Even though Gretchen has lost weight and is pretty, she is surprised that losing weight hasn't "fixed" her and she thinks: "What was wrong with her? Here she was the new improved Gretchen Hubbard, and she didn't feel one bit better than she had before."

Gretchen's journey of self discovery is one of awakening to pubescence and previously buried feelings. On a first date she speaks of butterflies in her stomach, as she excuses herself: "The butterflies turned into elephants...By the time she was outside, the elephants were joined by horses stomping on her heart. She had never heard it beating so loudly" (p. 63). Through these harsh feelings and the realities of life that come with relationships, we see Gretchen break out of her shell. Her date for the school dance sums up the new improved Gretchen nicely when he speaks of the former "Hippo Hubbard": "But that's not why people didn't pay attention to you then. In spite of all that tonnage you were carrying around, it was like you weren't even here. You never said anything" (p. 203).

Gretchen's journey of self-discovery is similar to Olivia's in Carol Lee Benjamin's Nobody's Baby Now. Olivia is a witty overweight fifteen year old who has good intentions with each diet she starts, but inevitably winds up eating Twinkies. She describes herself as a "Twinkietarian", the way others would refer to themselves as vegetarians. Her family is a close one where an open discussion about caring for an nearly non-functioning 81 year old grandmother leads to Olivia caring for her after school. Even though it's not easy caring for grandma, because her health has deteriorated to the point where she no longer speaks, Olivia spends her afternoons helping Grandma grab hold of a tea cup, feeding her cookies and reminiscing about the past when grandma used to take care of Olivia. Olivia sees

grandma as a kind of confident. She can speak to her about the boy she's madly in love with at school and reads her very personal poetry she's written, which she won't even show her parents. Almost miraculously, one afternoon grandma begins to weep as Olivia is telling her she loves her and finally speaks, "No one's said I love you to me since my Sidney died" (p. 104). This breakthrough marks the beginning of a trusting inter-generational relationship which enables Olivia to gain self esteem, and begin to lose weight through heartfelt talks. Grandma offers this sage advice about the boy Olivia is in love with: "Love is the sweetest thing life has to offer....But you have to be first. You have to love yourself to show other people how worthwhile you are, yes?" (p. 123).

This love which Grandma speaks of is something which Emma Rose's mother knows about, as evidenced by the intensity of knowing her daughter's needs when she finds her sobbing on her bed. Her mother's singing and caressing seem to heal her wounds with warmth, understanding and love.

Just as loving interactions can heal, there are damaging interactions which can leave a person wounded, as Emma Rose was wounded by Lucy. And, although Emma Rose is younger than the characters in the books discussed, she experiences the same pain of being called fat as the older characters do. This pain appears to be something which she's not as used to as the older characters, since she wakes up in the morning hopeful. Perhaps children are more resilient at seven. And perhaps seven

year olds are not as adept at hiding their emotions as the pre-adolescent, which makes Emma Rose a safe character for older children to identify with. Such identification with Emma Rose's pain is a starting point for older children to understand the injustices which are part of life.

One such injustice is a prejudice against fat people, which all of the characters, including Emma Rose, experienced. This sentiment is well expressed towards Elsie in Nothing's Fair In The Fifth Grade as one of the characters sums her up: "I never thought of her as having feelings. I just thought she was a fat girl." With this kind of insensitivity, it's no wonder all of these characters have become inured to derogatory remarks on the surface, but still feel the pain underneath. Unfortunately these characters haven't had positive experiences of opening up to an understanding adult who's willing to listen to their problems. As a result, a character like Dinky in Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack will continue to binge to console herself because her cries are not heard by her parents. But, the food never solved the underlying pain and the hunger continued.

This "panicky hunger" which Barbara refers to in The White Pony turns out to be an unnamed emotion which all of the characters speak of. These unnamed emotions could be a result of a pain being numbed out with excessive eating to the point where hunger has replaced legitimate emotions. This is where Emma Rose is more in tuned with her emotions than the older characters. There are two reasons for this: (1) she is seven and hasn't

experienced as many blows as the other characters and (2) she has a remarkably loving mother who is willing to share the pain, thereby legitimizing her feelings.

And yet, it is not always a parent who is the significant adult who brings the wisdom of age to the children. As we see in Nobody's Baby Now, the significant adult is Grandma, and in Laughter In The Background, the compassionate adult is the foster mother. What is striking is that the messages of love and understanding are the same as Marcie discovers through her foster mother in Laughter In The Background: "It didn't matter, after all, where the love came from."

Love is precisely what heals the characters, as they risk opening themselves, which gives the idea that the characters possess some seeds of inner strength. This strength and trust in others is inherent in Emma Rose and her mother as well, which could be part of the appeal for older kids who are struggling with developing a moral code for themselves. The scenario of Emma Rose's Mama rocking her daughter in her arms offers to older kids the possibility of guidance from a significant adult. Because "Emma Rose" does not have a "storybook ending" (meaning that the conflict is unresolved in the end), this story is clearly for children older than seven. For, Emma Rose still has to wake up from her nap and continue her day and confront the aftermath of her verbal assault by Lucy. However, one gets the feeling that she will be all right with such a supportive mother.

Similar to the untidy ending, the Mother is not a tidy

looking woman. In fact, the childrens' responses to Emma Rose's mother indicate that the majority initially felt the mother to be neglectful of Emma Rose because of her sloppy appearance and cigarette habit. However, their opinions changed once they got a glimpse of the character behind the tattered nightgown. When the children saw the care and love the mother intuitively knew to give her daughter, they felt her to be indeed a "good mother".

Defining an action as "good" or "bad" is part of a moral development which is timely for 10-12 year old. It could be that the lively discussions by the children enabled them to sort out their own feelings without exposing themselves to their peer group. It could be that they were able to project their own painful experiences on what happened to Emma Rose and talk about themselves through one of the characters. But, most importantly, the children could relate to Emma Rose's dilemma which is similar to that of the characters in the stories discussed: the need for an understanding friend, or a compassionate adult to help the children sort out the inevitable cruelties which come with life. And, as attested by all of the books, this loving interaction can become one of life's sweeter moments.

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