

Just US

ACTIVITY KIT

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Molly Beth Griffin
Illustrated by Anait Semirdzhyan
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About the Book

One year, a storm prevents all the relatives from coming to visit for the holidays. No Grandma, no aunts, no uncles, no cousins. No fun! This family will have to adapt their traditions to versions that can be done on a smaller scale—a simpler stew dinner, a hike in the snow, and a game of cards instead of rowdy charades. Navigating disappointment with mindfulness and gratitude, the family pieces together a holiday full of new traditions, while still acknowledging that it’s okay to miss the old ones.

About the Author

Molly Beth Griffin is a graduate of Hamline University’s MFA program in writing for children and young adults and a writing teacher at the Loft Literary Center in the Twin Cities. She is the author of *Ten Beautiful Things*, *Loon Baby*, and *Silhouette of a Sparrow*.

About the Illustrator

Anait Semirdzhyan is an illustrator with a passion for children’s books. She grew up in a multicultural family and has lived in several countries with diverse cultures. Now she lives in the Seattle area with her husband and twin daughters. Anait enjoys afternoon walks with her four-legged shaggy friend.



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Activity Kit

Before Reading

Pre-reading concept reviews help enrich students' learning experience!

For younger students (K-2nd):

- After looking at the cover of the book and reading the title, ask students what they think *Just Us* is about. Write their responses on chart paper.
- Discuss snowstorms and big weather events with the class. Do students live in an area that gets snow? What happens when a storm is big enough to make travel unsafe?
- Invite students to draw their family. This can include birth families, foster or adoptive families, blended families, and extended or intergenerational families, as well as pets. When you introduce this activity, remind students that all families look a little different, but what they have in common is love and support for each other.

For older students (3rd and up):

- Based on the title and cover, ask students to describe what they think the book is about. Write their responses on chart paper.
- Have students discuss the following questions in small groups. Tape the questions to a wall and ask students to tape their answers beneath the questions.
 - What is a tradition?
 - What are some holidays you celebrate?
 - What are some reasons that traditions change?
- Ask students to write in their journals about a time in their life when plans changed. What was the original plan? Why did the plan change? What did they end up doing instead? How did they feel about the change? Optionally, invite students to discuss their journal entries in small groups and share any common themes they noticed with the class.
- Ask students to name as many holidays as they can. List the responses on chart paper. One by one, ask students if each holiday is big or small (or if they don't know). Circle the big holidays and ask students: Do these big holidays have things in common? Students may observe that major holidays often involve shared meals, family gatherings, or religious observances.

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After Reading

Post-reading discussion can help students develop greater understanding and connect them to curriculum activities.

For younger students (K-2nd):

- Revisit student predictions from the pre-reading discussion. What predictions were correct? Did *Just Us* surprise them?
- At the start of *Just Us*, what was supposed to happen? Why did the plan change? What ended up happening instead? Do students think this was a “good” holiday? Why or why not? Could it be more complicated than the holiday simply being “bad” or “good”?
- Turn to the back matter and look at the apple crisp recipe together. Have students ever eaten apple crisp? Do they like it? Why or why not? What are some alternative fruits that could be made into a crisp? Are there any fruits that might not be good in this dessert?

For older students (3rd and up):

- Revisit student predictions from the pre-reading discussion. What predictions were correct? Did *Just Us* surprise them?
- Take a second look at student responses to the pre-reading discussion questions:
 - What is a tradition?
 - What are some holidays you celebrate?
 - What are some reasons that traditions change?

Talk as a class about how these questions are connected to the story.

- In *Just Us*, the author does not specify what holiday is being celebrated. Why do students think the author made this choice? From context clues, what are some likely possibilities? Does it matter if we know exactly which holiday is being celebrated? Why or why not?
- Does *Just Us* remind students of other experiences they’ve had of holiday plans being canceled, perhaps due to the COVID-19 pandemic or other major events? What similarities and differences are there between this book and their experiences? Does the book invite them to think about their experiences differently, or confirm the way they already think of and feel about those experiences?

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Language Arts: Holiday Fun

Name: _____

Date: _____

Lots of families celebrate big holidays. Answer the questions about your favorite holiday below or on a separate sheet of paper!

1. What is the name of your holiday?
2. When does your holiday take place?
3. Who do you celebrate with?
4. What do you eat on this holiday?
5. What are special games or activities you do on this holiday?

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SEL: When Plans Change

Sometimes a change of plans can spur big emotions in kids. Use the lesson plan below to build skills for managing disappointment and refocusing.

Materials

- A copy of *Just Us* by Molly Beth Griffin
- An emotion wheel or other emotional identification tool, such as a facial expressions poster
- An expandable Hoberman sphere or other visualization tool for guided breathing
- Chart paper or a whiteboard

Procedure

1. **Engage with the source text.** Read *Just Us* together as a class. Use pre-reading questions to introduce the book and engage students in the reading.
2. **Practice emotional identification.** Ask students to name the feelings they saw expressed in *Just Us*. Go back to specific pages and invite students to identify what each character is feeling based on their words, actions, and expressions. If students get stuck, use an emotion wheel or facial expressions poster to review the possibilities and compare with the text. List the identified emotions on chart paper or a whiteboard.
3. **Interpret the results.** Review the list of identified emotions and ask students: Is this a wide or a narrow range of emotions? Show them the emotion wheel and ask if the feelings are just in one section of the wheel or all over, to help them visualize the range. Then ask: Are these little feelings or big feelings? How do you know?
4. **Review the plot and identify the conflict.** Point out that in *Just Us*, the family's plans changed when a storm made it unsafe for their relatives to visit. Sometimes changing a plan can cause disappointment. Invite students to reflect in small groups or in journal writing about a time when they were disappointed by a change in plans.
5. **Brainstorm coping strategies.** On chart paper or the whiteboard, write WHEN PLANS CHANGE . . . in large letters at the top. Ask students how the characters in *Just Us* coped with their disappointment and made the holiday special after their plans changed. Write down their examples on the board or chart. Encourage them to make generalizations from the story text—for example, while it may not always be possible to specifically go on a hike, getting some exercise can release frustration, and appreciating nature can help put you in a peaceful frame of mind. Invite students to think up coping strategies that were not specifically modeled in *Just Us*, such as slow breathing.
6. **Practice a breathing exercise.** Using the Hoberman sphere or other visualization tool, guide the class in a box breathing exercise: inhale for a count of four, hold for a count of four, exhale for a count of four, hold for a count of four. Repeat several times, then invite students to reflect on how they felt before and after box breathing.

Grandma's Apple Crisp Recipe

Enjoy author Molly Beth Griffin's classic apple crisp! Don't forget to ask a grownup for help chopping ingredients and using the oven.



Ingredients

Filling:

- 6 apples
- 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon

Topping:

- 1 cup rolled oats
- 1/2 cup flour (whole wheat suggested)
- 1/2 cup sugar (raw cane sugar or brown sugar suggested)
- 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/2 cup butter, melted
- pinch of salt

Directions

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.
2. Peel, core, and dice the apples, put them in an 8" x 8" baking pan, and toss with the cinnamon.
3. Mix the dry topping ingredients in a medium bowl (oats, flour, sugar, more cinnamon, and salt), then add the melted butter and stir to combine.
4. Pour the topping over the apples in the pan.
5. Cover with aluminum foil and bake for 30 minutes, then remove the foil and bake for another 10–15 minutes until the fruit is bubbly and the topping is brown and crisp.
6. Let it cool a little before eating so it doesn't burn you. A scoop of ice cream or yogurt in your bowl cools it down nicely!

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Word Search

Name: _____

Date: _____

E	T	A	O	I	N	S	H	F
G	C	R	I	S	P	R	D	A
R	O	L	U	T	M	W	H	M
A	U	H	F	E	O	R	I	I
N	S	N	O	W	I	Q	K	L
D	I	B	T	U	R	K	E	Y
M	N	T	A	G	L	N	H	D
A	S	M	G	K	C	E	P	L
T	R	A	D	I	T	I	O	N

GRANDMA
CRISP
COUSINS

TURKEY
SNOW
HIKE

STEW
TRADITION
FAMILY