

PHOTOCOPIABLE TEACHING NOTES

Keep Your Hair On!

Elizabeth Vercoe



Jess is 16 years old. She's never wagged school. She's on a netball team. Her best friends are Sara and Charlotte. She has cancer. Last week she kissed a boy called Dylan. Today her hair is going down the plughole.

Keep Your Hair On! is written from Jess's point of view and is both brave and funny. The novel spans Jess's course of treatment, it's about Jess's quest for normality as the world she's known unravels.

From Elizabeth Vercoe

Keep Your Hair On! has been sitting inside me for a long time. I wrote it because I wanted to look at cancer from a young person's perspective. *Keep Your Hair On!* is the result of participating in dozens of 'cancer' discussion groups with patients and their siblings, where the same concerns were raised over and over again.

It isn't based on any one person, but contains aspects of many different people and events. Like the girl who had been having chemotherapy and went to tighten her ponytail while playing tennis. The ponytail came off in her hands! In many ways, cancer forces people to maintain a sense of humour.

Hopefully the issues in this book will open up discussion and make it a little easier to talk about the tough stuff, things that are sometimes hard for even 'adults' to be honest about.

Cancer is a complex issue. It touches most of us at some time (one in three 'westerners' will have cancer in their lifetime) and it is, paradoxically, something that is still relegated to the 'too hard basket' in terms of open and honest discussion.

Most of us still think in terms of prognosis (or length of time a person has left) when we hear the word cancer. The reality today is that more people than ever are surviving this illness.

Teenagers and adolescents have a very specific set of concerns when it comes to cancer and other life threatening illness. They're not legally old enough to vote or to have sex. Is a 15-year-old qualified to decide that they no longer want to pursue a chemical treatment that is dramatically reducing their quality of life?

Keep Your Hair On! contains many of these issues, some of which remain unresolved. There are dozens of ideas and themes explored as the story unfolds, each of which could potentially become a topic for deeper exploration.



When I was 25 years old, I got cancer. This was the beginning of an amazing journey, my journey. I made a discovery: there is light even in darkness. It is now almost ten years since my dalliance with cancer. I don't like calling it a battle because I was not really at war with myself.

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Ideas for activities

1 The hot seat. As a group, decide on individual group members to come up to the front and sit in the 'hot seat' – each as a different character from the book. Chose from Jess, Spud, Ruby, Dylan, Sara, Charlotte or Mike. The chosen people need to feel that they know the characters fairly well. Each person will sit in the hot seat, in character, and answer questions from the rest of the group.

2 In pairs or small groups, investigate some different cancer treatments: radiotherapy, chemotherapy, natural therapies such as meditation, diet, positive thinking and exercise, and present this to your class in an entertaining way! You might like to perform the information as an interview with a well-known professor, or as a conversation between bead-twirling hippies in a yoga class. The possibilities are endless.

3 Perhaps you or someone you know has first-hand experience with cancer. What are the very first things that jump into your mind when you think about it? As a group, compile a list of concerns that a newly diagnosed young cancer patient might have.

- Will I miss school?
- What will my friends say?
- Who is that doctor anyway?
- What treatment will I have?
- Will it hurt?
- Etc, etc.

See if you can come up with twenty or even thirty! Write them up on large sheets of paper or a board. Now do the same thing from the point of view of friends and family.

- Is it contagious?
- Will they change a lot?
- Will I be teased for being their friend?
- Will they die?
- Etc, etc.

When you look at the two lists, compare the similarities and differences. Does fear of the unknown play a big part? What do the two lists reveal to you?

Written activities

1 Imagine you are a journalist interviewing one of the characters from the book. Compile a written list of at least eight questions and then answer them from the character's point of view. Work all your information into an entertaining article. Think up a headline that will hook your readers into wanting to know more.

2 Jess and Spud haven't seen their Dad for a long time. What do you think they would say to him if given the opportunity? Write a letter as Jess, or as Spud, and tell him what you think.

3 Sara gives Jess support and encouragement, but she does get annoyed at her too. What do you think would be the hardest thing if one of your friends had or got cancer or some other illness? Would/do you act the same way as you do now, or would/do you treat them differently? What would/has change/d? How and why?

4 Time travel to just after Charlotte has had her baby. Create a conversation between Jess and Charlotte. Are the characters happy? What might be happening for them now? There is no right or wrong here. You decide their fate! Write down their conversation. Perform it for the group.

5 Can bullying be stopped? What's Mike's problem? He treated Spud very badly. Do you think that he was dealt with fairly?

6 Have you learnt anything about cancer that you didn't know before you read the book? What? Make a list of these things. Has the book changed your attitudes to people with cancer? Why/Why not?

7 What will happen with Jess and Dylan