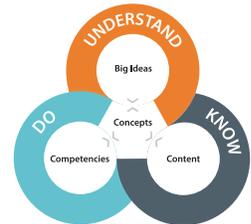


Drugs and relationships in “Perks of Being a Wallflower”



The Perks of Being a Wallflower is a novel by Stephen Chbosky (and was made into a hit movie in 2012). It is listed on the BCTF’s top 100 books.

Perks is a year-long series of ‘Dear Friend’ letters, written by 15-year-old Charlie, to an anonymous older teen whom Charlie believes is non-judgemental and won’t be freaked out by his references to drugs, sex and mental health issues. Charlie’s letters reveal that he is sensitive and very bright, but is struggling with post- traumatic stress disorder and filled with deep sadness owing to the suicide of his only school friend. He’s also filled with rage but doesn’t know why until the end of the story (when a sexual encounter triggers a repressed memory of his being molested by his aunt, who herself was a victim of child molestation by a family member).

The year during which the story unfolds, Charlie is in Grade 9, is seeing a psychiatrist and has loving parents. That year, he also is taken under the wing of a thoughtful English teacher. But it’s his relationship with a caring set of older kids in Grade 12 who take him to parties—where drug use, sex and “big questions” are the norm—that seems most significant to Charlie’s development.

Perks provides various avenues for meaningful conversations around drug use, sexuality and wellbeing as well as dealing with mental health issues.

Instructional strategies

The following strategies are just some of the ideas teachers can use to help students explore themes related to drug use and wellbeing as part of a study of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*.

1. Draw attention to the fact that *Perks* is filled with complex relationships. Trust and acceptance (or lack thereof) seem paramount. Have students explore, through a class discussion or working in small groups, the nature of the complex relationships in the story using questions such as:
 - Identify and unpack one of the key relationships in the story. How would you describe this relationship? How important is trust in this relationship? Why might trust be important in relationships?

- Are the relationships in the story realistic? To what degree do the complex relationships in Charlie’s life reflect relationships in real life? Explain.
- What, if anything, do relationships have to do with drug use? Illustrate your ideas with incidents reflected in the story.
- At the end of the story, Charlie concludes, “*I guess we are who we are for a lot of reasons. And maybe we’ll never know most of them. But even if we don’t have the power to choose where we come from, we can still choose where we go from there. We can still do things. And we can try to feel okay about them.*” What does this passage tell us about Charlie and his relationships? How do these relationships change throughout the story? Why?



2. Invite students to consider how the book addresses the issue of drug use and attitudes toward intoxication. You might have them work in groups to identify different characters' attitudes toward, and relationships with, cannabis and other drugs. Then have them discuss the reasons that might have contributed to the different characters' attitudes and behaviours. Finally, have them offer suggestions on how they might help a friend whose relationship with drugs might be getting out of hand.
3. Invite students to consider the meaning behind the title of the story, as explained on p. 37. This could be done in a class discussion or in a writing assignment (essay, poem, song). Encourage students to reflect on questions such as:
 - What does it mean to be a wallflower?
 - What are the perks of being a wallflower? Are these really perks or something else?
 - Do other social labels have perks? Explain.
4. Charlie's teacher has him read and write in order to help him in some way. Invite students to write an essay on the topic: Can reading and writing be a drug (medicine)? They should use material related to *Perks* in addition to any other material they wish to draw on in developing their argument.
5. Have students create a character and use letter writing to tell the character's story.

Drug literacy

Big ideas

- ✓ Drugs can be tremendously helpful and also very harmful
- ✓ As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage the drugs in our lives
- ✓ We can learn how to control our drug use by reflecting on the different ways people have thought about drugs, exploring stories from various cultures and listening to each other

Competencies

- ✓ Assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, communities and societies
- ✓ Explore and appreciate diversity related to the reasons people use drugs, the impact of drug use and the social attitudes toward various drugs
- ✓ Recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use
- ✓ Recognize how official responses to drugs may have less to do with the drug than with other factors
- ✓ Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs
- ✓ Develop personal and social strategies to manage the risks, benefits and harms related to drugs



Links to curriculum

English Language Arts 11 – Composition

Big ideas

- ✓ The exploration of text and story deepens our understanding of diverse, complex ideas about identity, others, and the world
- ✓ People understand text differently depending on their worldviews and perspectives
- ✓ Texts are socially, culturally, geographically, and historically constructed
- ✓ Language shapes ideas and influences others
- ✓ Questioning what we hear, read, and view contributes to our ability to be educated and engaged citizens
- ✓ People are empowered by being able to communicate effectively
- ✓ Engagement with writing processes can support creativity and enhance clarity of expression

Competencies

Comprehend and connect (reading, listening, viewing)

- ✓ Read for enjoyment and to achieve personal goals
- ✓ Apply appropriate strategies in a variety of contexts to comprehend written, oral, visual, and multimodal texts, to guide inquiry, and to extend thinking
- ✓ Recognize and understand how different forms, formats, structures, and features of texts enhance and shape meaning and impact
- ✓ Think critically, creatively, and reflectively to explore ideas within, between, and beyond texts

- ✓ Recognize and identify the role of personal, social, and cultural contexts, values, and perspectives in texts
- ✓ Recognize and understand how language constructs personal, social, and cultural identities
- ✓ Construct meaningful personal connections between self, text, and world
- ✓ Evaluate how text structures, literary elements, techniques, and devices enhance and shape meaning and impact

Create and communicate (writing, speaking, representing)

- ✓ Respectfully exchange ideas and viewpoints from diverse perspectives to build shared understandings and extend thinking
- ✓ Respond to text in personal, creative, and critical ways
- ✓ Demonstrate speaking and listening skills in a variety of formal and informal contexts for a range of purposes
- ✓ Use writing and design processes to plan, develop, and create engaging and meaningful texts for a variety of purposes and audiences
- ✓ Express and support an opinion with evidence
- ✓ Transform ideas and information to create original texts, using various genres, forms, structures, and styles
- ✓ Experiment with genres, forms, or styles of creative and communicative texts



English Language Arts 11 – Creative writing

Big ideas

- ✓ The exploration of text and story deepens our understanding of diverse, complex ideas about identity, others, and the world
- ✓ Texts are socially, culturally, geographically, and historically constructed
- ✓ Language shapes ideas and influences others
- ✓ Writers write for authentic audiences and real-world purposes

Competencies

Comprehend and connect (reading, listening, viewing)

- ✓ Read for enjoyment and to achieve personal goals
- ✓ Recognize and understand how different forms, formats, structures, and features of texts enhance and shape meaning and impact
- ✓ Think critically, creatively, and reflectively to explore ideas within, between, and beyond texts
- ✓ Recognize and identify the role of personal, social, and cultural contexts, values, and perspectives in texts
- ✓ Recognize and understand how language constructs personal, social, and cultural identities
- ✓ Construct meaningful personal connections between self, text, and world
- ✓ Evaluate how text structures, literary elements, techniques, and devices enhance and shape meaning and impact

Create and communicate (writing, speaking, representing)

- ✓ Respectfully exchange ideas and viewpoints from diverse perspectives to build shared understandings and extend thinking
- ✓ Respond to text in personal, creative, and critical ways
- ✓ Demonstrate speaking and listening skills in a variety of formal and informal contexts for a range of purposes
- ✓ Use writing and design processes to plan, develop, and create engaging and meaningful texts for a variety of purposes and audiences
- ✓ Express and support an opinion with evidence
- ✓ Transform ideas and information to create original texts, using various genres, forms, structures, and styles
- ✓ Manipulate language purposefully

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