



**Gracie and Josh**, written by **Susanne Gervay**, illustrated by **Serena Geddes**

## Study Guide



### Synopsis

'Gracie and Josh' invites kids to play, relate, explore and live each day to the full. It recognises the great challenges of illness, special needs, illness and loss on those children and their siblings and community. Children get sad, but have great resilience and when they feel well, the world is bright and exciting. When they feel sick, they are confused and vulnerable. Children have all the complexity of adult emotions with love, hope, fear, guilt, happiness, powerlessness, courage. However they don't have the experience and skills to deal with it. Siblings develop special relationships which are exacerbated when one of the children faces illness. The story journey and drama through 'Gracie and Josh' breaks the silence and opens discussion and understanding.

Gracie and Josh is one of those rare books which takes a hard and gut wrenching topic and approaches it in such a delightful way that both adult and child reader will thoroughly enjoy and learn from it. The story is about a

brother and sister relationship and the effect of battling illness/disability. Brilliantly created, with story and illustrations intricately blended, this book does not mention illness. Illness/disability does not become the focus of the book, but the means by which Gracie and Josh take every moment of life as a precious gift. A sweet telling of siblings loving each other, enjoying each other, and rising above what life throws at them.



### **Background to *Gracie and Josh***

Susanne was approached by Variety to write a story advocating hope for kids. Her inspiration for *Gracie and Josh*:

“Tory, my daughter? She is dressed as a spider (above) – secretly she wanted to be a princess. Tory climbed that spout when the sun dried up all the rain. She is the sun. Like so many kids, who meet challenges, they find the gifts of everyday life. I wrote *Gracie and Josh* because my son and daughter played, supported each other, teased and loved when life was difficult. Kids have an enormous capacity of hope.”

Incy Wincy Spider & the message of try, try, try again.

- Hope and inclusion of all kids and families.

Susanne used her:-

- Personal experience as a mother where her son faced hospitalisation and the management of his special needs.
- Her professional experience as an educational consultant with children.
- Interviews with parents, children, hospital staff and community.
- Relationship with Variety, which supports kids and families, especially those facing challenges. Variety helps many schools providing wheelchairs, special equipment, bringing entertainment and joy to kids.

### **Creating *Gracie and Josh* - Core Issues**

- Special need kids face tough challenges of treatment, disability, times in hospitals, missing school time, broken friendships due to absences, social stigma, the family under stress, families often breaking up.
- Siblings face tough challenges with feelings of marginalisation, increased responsibilities, family under stress and the impact on their social groups.
- Parents face tough challenges with grief, guilt, exhaustion, anger, concerns for the future.
- Communities are challenged to include special need kids and their families within their everyday lives.
- The lack of communication on many levels.

These are hard realities but there's also:

- Parental love and pride in their children and the joys of each little step forward
- Siblings developing greater maturity and empathy and pride in their special needs sibling
- The strength of family relationships
- Schools and community groups embracing these families

- Kids imagining, celebrating the day, playing and pursuing their dreams.

### **Creating *Gracie and Josh* – Goal**

- To use the warm and wonderful characters, engaged in daily life, to create a book where both special needs and non-special needs children and adults can identify with the characters and play, laugh, have hopes and meet challenges.
- To open real communication through story where children and parents and adults can question, share their feelings, relate, connect and have a voice.
- To provide deep sub themes which children and adults can explore if they want and/or need to:
  - Impact on the family of a child with special needs
  - Sibling relationship with emotional highs and lows
  - Tough times physically and emotionally
  - Good times physically and emotionally
  - Inclusion in community
  - Recognition that special needs kids and their siblings are not defined by a special need
  - Special need kids and their families are like all of us with hopes and dreams, play and love.

### **Creative Issues**

- A key is the creation of accessible, identifiable, ‘everyman’, wonderful characters that resonate with young readers and parents and adults.

*Gracie and Josh* are wonderful characters.

- Create a structure that engages all kids, parents and teachers at multiple levels.

*Incy Wincy Spider* is a loved nursery rhyme and a natural structure to carry the strong theme of meeting challenges – try, try, try again – and is driven by hope and achieving your dreams.

- Although a ‘hard and gut wrenching topic’, create a joyful space for play and imagination.

*Gracie and Josh* is joyful and real.

- Partner with an illustrator who can create delightful characters, multiple layers of meaning, with a strong sense of movement and colour.

Serena Geddes combined her experience as a Disney animator with her strong sense of character and engagement with the theme. She spent a lot of time in the children’s hospital researching and talking to kids to ensure integrity in her illustrations.

### **About the Author**



The daughter of Hungarian refugees and the sole parent of 2 children, **Susanne Gervay** is a teacher, educational consultant, national and international speaker, writer, children's and young adult author committed to social justice through literature, Susanne is also committed to the arts and heritage with the restoration of The Hughenden Boutique Hotel at 14 Queen St Woollahra, and the creation of a meeting place for writers and artists, a home to creative societies.

Awarded an Order of Australia for services to children's literature and other organisations, and as an author and specialist in child growth & development, Susanne is committed to empowering children to be all they can be through story. There is more about Susanne, her books, awards and roles in organisations on page 10 of these Teaching Notes.

### About the Illustrator



**Serena Geddes** studied Visual Arts at The University of Western Sydney as well as attending (part time) the Billy Blue College of Design. In 1996 she was accepted as a Trainee in-betweener for Walt Disney Animation Australia, undertaking their intensive 3-month training program. After working for eight years designing greeting cards, stationery, spot illustrations for magazines as well as commissioned work for advertising and design agencies, in March 2009 she decided to follow in the footsteps of her fellow Disney colleague, Tina Burke, into the book world. She has been working for 3 years in the publishing industry with 16 books completed and 4 lined up to welcome in the new year!

Asked where her inspiration comes from. Serena replied, "It can vary from people watching in a café to looking through books at the local library or bookstores. I find meeting with the author can give me a better insight into the style or characters for their books and it's also a good excuse to meet up for a coffee :)"

## Classroom discussion and activities

Teachers might divide their class into groups, with the following questions shared between the groups, then have the group leader report back to the class:

- What do Gracie and Josh want to be?
- How does Gracie help Josh?
- How does Josh help Gracie?
- What problem does Gracie face when she knows she isn't allowed in to see Josh who is ill, but still goes in.
- Why does Gracie hate Josh's bad week?
- Why does Gracie love Josh's good week?
- What does it mean when the spider tries and tries again?
- How do Gracie and Josh feel when Josh has to take off his cap?
- Why do you think the mother holds Gracie's hand too tightly?
- When Josh lies in his bed with his eyes closed, how does Gracie feel?
- 'He's nowhere but everywhere.' Where do you think Josh is?
- Why does everyone sing at the end?
- Describe the characters of Gracie and Josh
- In what way is the song-poem-story 'Incy Wincy Spider' similar to Gracie and Josh's life?
- Discussion about what feelings children have when they are sick or when their sibling is sick?

Students might:

- develop mind maps for their own story/stories
- plan their illustrations for their story/stories
- write and review the opening paragraph for their story, or joint text construction
- elaborate the ideas in their personal or joint story/stories
- produce their own illustrated pair, group or class story
- re-read their own text and edit for meaning by adding, deleting or moving words or word groups to improve content and structure.
- use a range of software including word processing programs to construct, edit and publish written text, and select, edit and place visual, print and audio elements
- use a range of communication forms (oral, graphic, written, role play) and digital technologies to present their narrative.

## Drama Activities

***Gracie and Josh*** – emotionally and creatively engaging in Drama

'Gracie and Josh' offers an emotionally engaging and relevant entry into drama for younger students. In a teacher-led process, the whole class can participate

**Teaching Notes** for *Gracie and Josh*, written by Susanne Gervay [www.sgervay.com](http://www.sgervay.com) illustrated by Serena Geddes <http://www.serenageddes.com.au/>

with singing and acting out Incy Wincy Spider while students perform it. There can be improvisation, devised fictional work, dramatic play and role-play through *Gracie and Josh*.

### **Variety's involvement & endorsement of Gracie and Josh**

**Variety** provides practical equipment, programs and experiences. *Gracie and Josh* works with these goals providing through story, a platform of expressing feelings and open discussion, empowering children to live, laugh & learn.

- Initiated my response to their project
- Supported my direction in story – validation of kids and siblings, inclusion in the community and opening discussion
- Provided the illustrator Serena Geddes with access to children's hospitals and children with special needs so that she creates real-life scenarios.
- In the illustration of the film strip she has included 'secret' tiny illustrations of the hospital personal and Variety's David Small and Grace Proust as she was so appreciative of their support.
- Inclusion in **Variety** events.



Variety helps children in need to overcome whatever obstacles they face & live life to the fullest.

*Gracie and Josh* by Susanne Gervay illustrated by Serena Geddes; Published by **Ford Street Publishing**  
IBSN PB 978 1921 665 851; HC 978 1921 665 844