

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Dibs in Search of Self

by Virginia M Axline

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Chapter 1

1. Dibs prefers to be left alone. He alienates himself from others, to the point of sometimes attacking teachers or other children when they approach him. His mother, however, wants to leave him where he is. Imagine you are the parent of another child in Dibs' class. Compose a letter to Dibs' mother relating your feelings about having him in class with your child.
2. Dr. Axline says, "At one time, he seemed to be extremely retarded mentally. Another time he would quickly and quietly do something that indicated he might even have superior intelligence." Write a letter to Dibs' teachers explaining why you think he might be hiding his intelligence from them.
3. Dibs' mother admits that he has a problem, but at first she is unwilling to enlist special help for him or to send him to a school for children with emotional disorders. Instead she used her social and family connections to enroll him in a prestigious private school. List at least one other obvious way Dibs' mother seems to use her wealthy status to keep from having to deal with his difficult behavior.
4. Dibs' mother compensates for his problems by praising his sister, calling her "a perfect child." Dibs' mother thinks that she has failed with him, so she stresses the good behavior of her "normal" child. Write a paragraph about how you think this attitude might make Dibs withdraw into himself even more.

Response Journal

5. Hedda and Miss Jane both take a special interest in Dibs. Do you think it was worthwhile for them to spend extra class time on Dibs, or do you think the other children in the class might have suffered from it? Think of a time when either a) you benefited from a teacher spending extra time with you during or after class, or b) you think a teacher might have neglected the rest of your class because of one student's actions. Write a letter to this teacher about how the experience affected you.
6. Dibs' parents seemed to compensate for his seemingly lack of intelligence by constantly praising his sister's accomplishments. Make a list of reasons why people seem to "hide" the bad things of their lives by stressing the good parts.

Chapter 2

7. The narrator tells us, "Understanding grows from personal experience that enables a person to see and feel in ways so varied and so full of changeable meanings that one's self-awareness is the determining factor." Compose an argument to either agree or disagree with this statement.
8. Upon first visiting Dibs in his classroom at school, Dr. Axline notes that life, to him, seemed to be "a grim business." Can you see evidence of Dibs' outlook on life in the way he approaches the objects in the playroom at the school? How is his response different from the way the other children in his class would probably react to a roomful of toys? Make a list contrasting Dibs' actions with those of a happy, well-adjusted child in a playroom. Follow this form:

DIBS

Stares at toys
Crawls under table

WELL-ADJUSTED CHILD

plays with favorite toy
joins other children

Chapter 3

9. Dibs' parents didn't think he would ever change. When parents or teachers have low expectations for children, it can have negative consequences for their education and their self-esteem. Write an article for a parent-teacher newsletter about how low expectations for children can affect them, both immediately and later on in life.

10. Dibs has a lot of locked doors in his life. For example, when Dr. Axline arrives at the family's house, she hears Dibs screaming, "No lock door! No lock door!" Dibs is often locked in his room by his parents, who are embarrassed by him. Write an email to Dibs' parents in which you explain other ways of disciplining Dibs or keeping him occupied.

11. Dibs' mother wants to pay Dr. Axline for seeing Dibs, but she refuses. Dr. Axline says, "She had probably often been able to pay her way out of taking this much involved responsibility for Dibs." Dr. Axline realizes that Dibs' mother uses money to try to pay off her problems. Does it work? Write a list of the things Dr. Axline notices about Dibs' mother during their first meeting that make it seem as if she is really very unhappy, despite her wealth. Then make a list of the pros and cons about being very wealthy.

Chapter 4

12. Dibs' parents take several weeks to decide if they want him to start play therapy sessions. Dr. Axline is careful not to push them to make a decision, even though she is anxious for him to begin treatment. What do you think might have happened if she had called Dibs' mother and asked for a decision? Complete the following conversation:

Dr. Axline: Dibs' teachers and I wanted to know if you planned on bringing him in for therapy.

Dibs' Mother: Well, we've been thinking...

13. Dr. Axline witnesses Dibs not wanting to go home with his mother and throwing a tantrum in the lobby of his mother's office building. She thought that it was better to leave and not get personally involved. Could she have jeopardized his treatment by doing this, or could she have shown Dibs' mother that she wanted to help her? Compose an argument that either agrees or disagrees with her thinking.
14. Imagine that you are Dr. Axline keeping a journal of your play sessions with Dibs. Write a journal entry for the first play session.

Chapter 5

15. When Dibs wants to take off his hat and coat, he says, “You will take off your hat and coat.” Dr. Axline notes that Dibs rarely refers to himself in the first person; that is, he rarely makes “I” statements. What do you think this says about his opinion of himself?
16. Dibs is fascinated with locks due to the many doors in his life that have been locked. Explain to a classmate what the “locked doors” mean to Dibs.

Chapter 6

17. Dibs thinks “his intellectual abilities were the only part of him that was valued by others.” He wants to be appreciated for who he is and not what he can do. Think of a time when you might have felt this way. In addition, think of a time when you enjoyed being appreciated for a special talent (such as in sports, drama, or music). Compose a list of pros and cons for each situation.
18. Dibs needs to learn that he has many aspects to his personality. He has, Dr. Axline says, ups and downs, loves and hates, fears and courage, and infantile desires and mature interests. Can you think of several conflicting aspects of your personality? Make a list of at least three of these conflicts. Do you think they make you a more interesting, multi-faceted person, or do you struggle with them? Be sure to use examples in your writing.
19. Dibs thinks “his intellectual abilities were the only part of him that was valued by others.” Have you ever thought that people were only interested in only aspect of you as a person? For example, an athlete might be popular only because of his or her sports skills. Write a diary entry about that time and how it made you feel.