



McKenna

Learning Guide

Learn about believing in yourself, encouraging others, and respecting differences among people through the stories of McKenna Brooks, Girl of the Year 2012.



McKenna: Girl of the Year 2012

Dear Educator,

American Girl is pleased to introduce you and your students to McKenna, the 2012 Girl of the Year. McKenna Brooks is an energetic girl living in Seattle, Washington. McKenna has always excelled at school and in gymnastics, but now that she's entering fourth grade, school suddenly feels difficult to her. When her teacher suggests she get a reading tutor, McKenna is horrified—until she gets to know her tutor, Josie, who is super confident and who also happens to be in a wheelchair. Josie helps McKenna realize that what might seem like a giant roadblock is really just a series of small obstacles that can be overcome one by one, day by day.

Many of the techniques McKenna learned to improve her reading comprehension can be applied to facing any kind of challenge. The activities in this learning guide teach the following language arts skills:

- ☆ Visualization
- ☆ Prediction
- ☆ Poetry writing
- ☆ Journaling

The learning guide has also been designed to support the themes introduced in McKenna's stories:

- ☆ Focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses
- ☆ Believing in yourself and your potential
- ☆ Encouraging others to believe in themselves
- ☆ Respecting and appreciating differences in people

Through the following activities, students have an opportunity to discuss these themes in class discussions and small groups. In addition, students can personally reflect on the themes through independent work and journaling.

Even though the learning guide has been developed with the hope that each student in your class will read McKenna's stories, it also includes relevant excerpts from the books in case reading the two-book series is not possible.

Thank you for addressing these important themes by introducing your students to McKenna.

 American Girl



Focusing on Strengths

McKenna, page 59

When I met Josie on Monday, her eyes danced with energy. “Hey, McKenna,” she said. “You know how you visualize your moves for gymnastics?”

“Yeah?” I answered, wondering where she was going with this.

“We’re going to try something like that with reading,” Josie announced. She held up a book titled *James and the Giant Peach*. “You’ve heard of this one?”

I nodded. “But I’ve never read it,” I said.

“Even better,” said Josie. “I picked this one out because I thought it would be a good one to practice visualization with. I’ve heard that if you make pictures in your head of what you’re reading, that can really help with comprehension.”

Theme Introduction

Josie understands that visualization is one of McKenna’s strengths, so she has McKenna use visualization to help her improve at reading. By focusing on McKenna’s strength rather than her weakness, Josie finds a way for McKenna to overcome a challenge.

Talk About It

- ☆ How do you feel when people focus on your weaknesses?
- ☆ Does focusing on a weakness make you feel as if you can overcome it? How so?
- ☆ How do you feel when people focus on your strengths?
- ☆ Does focusing on a strength make you feel as if you can use it to improve a weakness? How so?

Think About It

List three of your strengths.

How could you use one of your strengths to improve at something you don’t do well?

Journaling

Write a story about a superhero who has one of your strengths—to the **extreme**. Draw a picture of your superhero, too, if you’d like.



Encouraging Others

McKenna, page 109

Nestled in tissue wrap, I discovered a tiny hand mirror, its wooden frame brightly painted.

"It's beautiful," I said. I had never imagined I needed such a thing until I held it in my hands.

"I painted it," Sierra said. "My mom's an artist. She sells things like this at Pike Place Market. But this one—this one I painted all on my own."

"You're good," I said, turning the mirror over and over in my hands.

"It's an encouragement mirror," explained Sierra.

"Yeah?" I said. I studied the mirror, seeing only my tawny hair and my blue eyes staring back. "How does it work?"

"Well, it's like this," said Sierra. "When you look into this mirror, you can tell yourself only good things, not bad. Like how amazing you did at the demonstration or how you're going to heal up fast—things that encourage you. You've helped me so much at the gym, McKenna. I want to help you, too."

Theme Introduction

We all experience times when we doubt our abilities, have negative thoughts, and feel like giving up. Facing a challenge can be difficult, but it's easier when you've got someone encouraging you along the way.

Talk About It

- ☆ Describe a time when you encouraged someone else.
- ☆ How does encouraging others make you feel?
- ☆ Describe a time when someone encouraged you, and it helped you to succeed.

Think About It

List three people who are always there for you, cheering you on.

Name one thing you could do, say, or make to encourage someone who is going through a hard time.

Journaling

Toulane and McKenna greet each other with the phrase "Ready to work?" and the response "Ready to fly!" whenever they need to get fired up. Write some inspiring phrases or cheers that you can say to encourage yourself and others.



Staying Positive

McKenna, page 64

“Let’s pull out picture books,” she said, “and then chapter books. Show me your favorites, and I’ll show you mine. We’ll sit and read a few.”

I groaned. “But they’re too easy,” I complained.

“Sometimes it’s good to go back to easy,” said Josie. “When I get frustrated, I remind myself there was a time when I couldn’t tie my own shoes or make my own bed.”

I nodded—that made sense. I turned to the low rack of picture books. I recognized several of them, and then I came across an old favorite.

“Oh, I loved Harry, the Dirty Dog!” I whispered loudly, nudging Josie. I flipped the book open and read it cover to cover, standing right there in the library aisle. “That was easy,” I said as I slid the book back onto the shelf.

“Good! That’s the point,” said Josie. “Let’s read a bunch of them.”

Soon I’d gathered an armful of books, plopped into a green beanbag chair, and started turning pages. “You’re right,” I admitted after reading another book. “This is fun.”

Theme Introduction

Reading picture books is easy and fun for McKenna, and it shows her that she really has made progress in reading. Seeing how her reading has improved makes McKenna feel good about herself and more positive about facing challenges ahead.

Talk About It

- ☆ When has it been difficult for you to stay positive?
- ☆ When you feel discouraged, what can you do to stay positive?
- ☆ What’s something you do to have fun?
- ☆ What are some things you could say to yourself to feel good?

Think About It

List three of your favorite things, and think about them whenever you’d like to feel more positive.

Journaling

Josie teaches McKenna how to write *haiku* [hi-koo], a type of Japanese poem written in three lines. The first line has five syllables, or beats. The second line has seven syllables, and the third line has five syllables. Read the haiku Josie wrote about playing the flute—something she does well.

Silver notes of flute
Float above a metal chair,
Set my feet dancing.

Now write a haiku about something you do well.



Believing in Yourself

McKenna, pages 47–48

We took turns reading first pages of novels to each other and predicting what might happen to the main characters. We went on like this through half a dozen books. It was like a game. I liked thinking of where the author might take the story after the first page. With some books, the very first sentence really got me thinking—and predicting.

When we stopped, Josie said, “You did great! Okay, here’s a tough one: Let’s predict our futures. You go first.”

“You mean like tomorrow, or in twenty years?” I asked her.

“Whichever,” she said. “I’m just curious.”

I’d never really thought much beyond gymnastics. “Well,” I began, “I predict . . . doing well at the gymnastics demonstration in November and then making the competitive team next spring.”

“And when you’re grown up?” Josie asked.

I flashed to the image of myself wearing a gold medal, but I didn’t tell Josie about that dream.

Theme Introduction

Josie helps McKenna build confidence as a student, which helps McKenna start to believe in herself and her potential again. She knows that she can face any challenges ahead and can even see a gold medal in her future.

Talk About It

- ☆ What happens when you don’t believe in yourself?
- ☆ What helps you believe in yourself?
- ☆ Why is it important to make predictions about your future?
- ☆ How does imagining your success help you achieve it?

Think About It

Predict what your life will be like as an adult. What is one thing you believe you will achieve? Picture the moment when you reach that goal. Where are you? Who is with you? How do you feel?

Journaling

Reaching a big goal is a bit like following a recipe. You usually have to follow certain steps, often in a specific order, to make your dream come true.

Write a recipe for success. Choose a big goal. Think of the ingredients you’ll need and the steps you’ll have to take to make it happen. Then write it down as if it were a recipe.



Respecting and Appreciating Differences

McKenna: Ready to Fly!, page 65

Julius held a wooden spoon in his hand. He held it out toward Toulane and mumbled, "Me Julius."

Toulane shrank back, her brow wrinkled. "What?" she said. "I can't understand him."

"He says his name is Julius," Josie said gently.

I couldn't blame Toulane for shrinking away. My first time at the riding center, all I saw were the riders' disabilities—the ways they were different from me. But now I was learning to see all the ways we were the same. Julius's smile told me that he was having just as much fun making cookies and meeting friends as I was. I wished Toulane could see what I saw.

Theme Introduction

McKenna goes with Josie to a horseback-riding center for children with disabilities, like young Julius. At first, she focuses on how different Julius and the other children are from her, and she feels uncomfortable. But when McKenna looks for the things she has in common with the children, she feels more comfortable and makes new friends.

Talk About It

- ☆ Have you ever felt uneasy for being different?
- ☆ Josie is different because she uses a wheelchair, but coping with physical challenges has made her brave and confident. Has coping with one of your weaknesses ever made you stronger?
- ☆ Do you think it's good that people are different? Why or why not?
- ☆ Overall, do you think people are more alike or more different? Why or why not?

Think About It

Describe someone you know who seems quite different from you.

What do you appreciate about that person?

What are some things you have in common with that person?

Journaling

We're all different in some way—that's what makes us unique. Write about some of the things that make you special.





Picture This

To help her remember what she reads, McKenna uses a trick called *visualization*, or picturing in her mind what she's reading. It's like making a mental movie. You can try it, too!

Fold this page in half lengthwise so that you can't see the questions. Read the passage below, and try to visualize what you're reading. Then flip the paper over and look at the questions. How much can you remember about what you read?

The September sun warmed the sidewalk outside Almost Home Coffee Shop. Bikes filled the bike rack. Customers sipped warm drinks at outdoor tables as a few dogs rested beside their owners. I headed inside and set the brass bells jingling—*ting-ting, ting-ting*. Smells of fresh-baked cookies, scones, and muffins greeted me. The coffee shop was full of customers chatting, reading, or working on laptops.

"Hi, McKenna!" said Mom, stepping out from behind the giant churning coffee roaster, her red apron tied over a skirt. Tucking strands of her sandy hair into her bun, she asked, "So, how was your *second* Tuesday of school?"

—from *McKenna* by Mary Casanova

Answer these questions about the paragraphs you just read.

No peeking!

1. What month is it?

2. What is the name of the coffee shop?

3. What's in the rack outside the shop?

4. What animals does McKenna see?

5. What sound do the bells over the door make?

6. What is one of the things McKenna smells?

7. What's something the customers are doing?

8. What color is Mom's apron?

9. How does she wear her hair?

10. How many weeks has McKenna been in school?
