
THE BIGGEST TEST IN THE UNIVERSE

Author: Nancy Poydar

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THEME:

Dreaming bigger and trying harder often helps us reach levels of achievement that we didn't think possible.

PROGRAM SUMMARY:

The Biggest Test in the Universe is a story of a boy dreading the "big test" which has become his elementary school's right-of-passage. The pressure to prepare and do well in this test is echoed by host LeVar Burton's daughter Michaela as she practices for an audition, and by the young members of the NYC children's theater group TADA! as they pour their hearts and souls into preparing for a performance.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:

Before watching the program, discuss with students circumstances in their lives in which they wanted to do really well. Invite them to share their stories about these events, including both the positive and negative aspects.

Discuss with students times they have felt nervous about an upcoming event.

Talk about what sometimes happens to people when they are nervous (e.g., they feel sick, they can't sleep, they are grouchy, etc.)

Ask students about ways in which they make themselves feel calm when they are nervous or anxious.

Invite students to share experiences they have had with being on a stage.

Ask students to define "competition" and discuss both the positive and negative aspects of it in relation to different activities in which they have been involved, such as school achievement, contests, and sports.

Pose the question, "What do you worry about?" Discuss the variety of worries that are mentioned and lead students to conclude that we all do not have the same worries and that to have a healthy mind and body, we cannot let worries be too important in our lives.

After viewing the program, discuss some of the emotions the young Ta-Da performers might have experienced during auditions, in rehearsals, prior to a performance, and after a performance. Talk about action these feelings might inspire (e.g., never give up on your dream even if you aren't chosen, keep trying even when the activity is hard, stretch yourself to learn something new, etc.).

CURRICULUM EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

If possible, take a field trip to a local children's or community theater. Arrange to have someone explain auditions and rehearsals and take a tour of the backstage area to see what is needed for a performance.

Invite an expert into the classroom to teach the students some relaxation techniques and exercises. Routinely incorporate these techniques into the daily schedule.

Reader's Theatre is typically a low stress performance activity and enhances reading fluency. Tips for writing scripts and performing Reader's Theatre as well as numerous samples of scripts may be found on the internet. The following sites are particularly useful collections of Reader's Theatre scripts:

"Aaron Shepard's RT Page"

URL: <http://www.aaronsherp.com/rt/index.html>

"Reader's Theater Scripts and Plays"

URL: <http://www.teachingheart.net/readerstheater.htm>

"Timeless Teacher Stuff"

URL: <http://www.timelessteacherstuff.com/>

Brainstorm a chart, "Be a Good Test-Taker!" The following items are helpful recommendations for before and during the test: 1) Get a good night's sleep; 2) Get some exercise—it sharpens your mind; 3) Eat good meals—fruits and vegetables reduce stress; 4) Practice relaxation techniques, such as slow, deep breaths, tensing and relaxing different muscles, and visualizing a peaceful scene; 5) Give yourself positive reinforcement, and be confident that you can do well; 6) Read everything on the test carefully, including the directions; 7) Stay on task; 8) Don't panic if others finish ahead of you—keep going.

Revisit this chart as needed before testing situations.

Several **Reading Rainbow** programs feature segments in which children and/or adults are preparing for a musical, dance, or dramatic performance. View the appropriate clips from these episodes and compare their common experiences in preparing for a performance. The following program segments will be useful: the Boys Choir of Harlem in Berlioz the Bear (#90), a dance troupe in A Chair for My Mother (#20), performers from the musical "Cats" in Duncan and Dolores (#52), the Julliard School of Music Chamber Orchestra in Zin! Zin! Zin! A Violin (#125), the behind-the-scenes glimpses into the making of a TV series in The Bionic Bunny Show (#46), creation of a music video in The Tin Forest (#142), the Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre in Badger's Parting Gifts (#141), and The Steppers in Mr. George Baker (#148).

Sam wore his lucky hat on the day of the big test. Brainstorm a list of things people do to bring them good luck (e.g., carry a rabbit's foot or other "lucky charm," wear a particular piece of clothing or wear it in a certain way, follow the steps of a routine in the same order, sleep with the information to be tested under one's pillow, and others). Discuss how luck may be a factor in success but that good preparation is usually more reliable. Research some good luck/bad luck superstitions and illustrate them.

To help students understand the structure of questions, allow opportunities for them to write their own about a story they have read or curriculum topics they have studied. Use the activity to teach them about questions that require only memory to answer and those that require them to extend their thinking. Considerable practice and modeling is needed to enable students to write questions that encourage thinking. Two strategies for teaching good question writing:

- Use a book such as *The Biggest Test in the Universe* to review basic question starters. Have students examine the cover and ask who, what, when, where, how, and why questions. Jot down their questions and start reading. After a few pages, have students generate more questions. Continue this process throughout the book. At the end of the story, refer to the questions to see which ones they now have answers to. Which questions were they not able to answer? Might those answers be found elsewhere? Using this strategy of writing questions before, during, and after reading a story assists comprehension as well as develops skill in forming questions.

- One possible analogy is to compare questions with a stoplight. "Stop" questions are those that have "yes" or "no" or one-word answers. The answers are generally details that are easy to produce from the text. "Go" questions are those that explore "how" or "why" and may require inferences from the text. (Example of a "stop" question: "What was the largest dinosaur?" Example of a "go" question: "How are dinosaurs similar to and different from large animals that live on earth now?")

The Biggest Test in the Universe contains many examples of exaggeration. Revisit the story and locate some of the exaggerated speech (for example, the test booklet is as big as a telephone book, your arms fall off when the test is over, you get blisters on your brain, and others). Discuss why we exaggerate about events and activities. Lead students to conclude that humor sometimes eases anxiety.

RELATED THEMES:

healthy lifestyles
conquering our fears
creative dramatics

RELATED READING RAINBOW PROGRAMS:

#91 *Amazing Grace*
#134 *When Aunt Lena Did the Rhumba*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Nancy Poydar states that she has always enjoyed drawing. As a child, she gave drawing lessons to her friends and told them stories using the pictures. She gathers ideas from her own childhood experiences to use in her stories. A former elementary teacher, Nancy places many of her stories in classroom settings. She presently makes her home in Massachusetts.

BOOKS REVIEWED BY CHILDREN:

WEMBERLY WORRIED
by Kevin Henkes (Greenwillow/HarperCollins)

ANGELINA ON STAGE
by Katharine Holabird, illustrated by Helen Craig (Viking/Penguin)

BEVERLY BILLINGSLEY TAKES A BOW
by Alexander Stadler (Harcourt)

SUPPLEMENTARY BOOKLIST:

DANCING IN THE WINGS
by Debbie Allen, illustrated by Kadir Nelson (Scholastic)

FRANKLIN'S SCHOOL PLAY
by Paulette Bourgeois, illustrated by Brenda Clark (Kids Can Press)

ARTHUR MEETS THE PRESIDENT
by Marc Brown (Little, Brown)

FIRST GRADE TAKES A TEST
by Miriam Cohen, illustrated by Ronald Himler (Star Bright re-issue)

STAGESTRUCK
by Tomie dePaola (Putnam)

THE WORRYWARTS
by Pamela Duncan Edwards, illustrated by Henry Cole (HarperCollins)

TESTING MISS MALARKEY
by Judy Finchler, illustrated by Kevin O'Malley (Walker)

THE ALMOST AWFUL PLAY
by Patricia Reilly Giff, illustrated by Susanna Natti (Puffin)

IRIS AND WALTER AND THE SCHOOL PLAY
by Elissa Haden Guest, illustrated by Christine Davenier (Harcourt)

SUPPLEMENTARY BOOKLIST Continued:

SOME THINGS ARE SCARY

by Florence Parry Heide, illustrated by Jules Feiffer (Candlewick)

THE HAPPIEST TREE

by Uma Krishnaswami, illustrated by Ruth Jeyaveeran (Lee & Low)

SOMETHING MIGHT HAPPEN

by Helen Lester, illustrated by Lynn Munsinger (Houghton Mifflin)

SPEAK UP, BLANCHE

by Emily Arnold McCully (HarperCollins)

STUART GOES TO SCHOOL

by Sara Pennypacker, illustrated by Martin Matje (Orchard)

I AM THE TURKEY

by Michele Sobel Spirn, illustrated by Joy Allen (HarperCollins)

JUST IN CASE

by Judith Viorst, illustrated by Diana Cain (Atheneum)