

Far from the Tree — Educator's Guide

ABOUT THE BOOK

Thirteen-year-old James Campbell is trying to build a different future for himself than that of his incarcerated father and older brothers. While navigating family hardship, financial insecurity and pressure from both criminals and the police, James finds unexpected support from his school's new principal, Mr. Kelly. Through encouragement and trust, James begins to see that he can make choices that lead him toward a different path.

Far from the Tree explores resilience — the ability to persevere through adversity — and mattering, the feeling of being valued and cared about by people in your life. As James's story unfolds, consider how one caring adult and supportive friendships can influence the choices young people make.



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BEFORE READING

Discussion Questions:

1. What challenges can make it difficult for young people to make positive choices?
2. What does it mean to “break the cycle” of family expectations or circumstances?
3. How can one supportive adult influence a student's future?
4. Looking at the title *Far from the Tree*, what predictions can you make about the story's themes?

While Reading — Exploring Themes

RESILIENCE

Resilience is the capacity and tendency to bounce back from adversity and setbacks that can be academic or interpersonal. This theory explores the process of navigating challenges and thriving and emphasizes the inner resources and external supports. Research has found that more than half of those who grew into competent and confident adults encountered at least one teacher who became a positive role model in their lives. Competence, confidence and caring can flourish even under adverse circumstances if young people encounter people who provide them with a secure basis for the development of trust, autonomy and initiative. Teachers can work to build resilience.

AS STUDENTS READ, ASK THEM TO NOTICE:

- Moments when James faces difficult choices
- People who encourage James to succeed
- Obstacles that threaten James's goals
- Examples of James's personal growth

Discussion Questions:

1. Which challenge tests James's resilience the most? Support your answer with examples from the novel.
2. James is surrounded by people making very different choices. Who influences him in positive ways? Who influences him negatively?
3. How do tutoring, chess club and new friendships contribute to James's confidence?

MATTERING

Mattering is the feeling of being valued and cared about by people in your life. Feelings of mattering can be instilled in young people by caring people in caring situations and communities.

Researcher Dr. Gordon Flett describes mattering through three key elements:

1. **Importance** — the perception that other people see us as significant.
2. **Attention** — the sense that other people are noticing us and keeping track.
3. **Dependence** — the perception of mattering because other people rely on us.

By introducing instances of showing students that they matter, you develop relationships, build resiliency and encourage success.

Anti-mattering is the feeling of being unvalued or devalued in ways that can result in feeling unseen, unheard and/or unimportant to others. The sense that no one cares about you is exceptionally painful.

As students read, encourage them to identify moments when James begins to realize that someone believes in him and how these moments influence the decisions he makes.

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways does Mr. Kelly (or other characters) show James that he matters?
2. Why do you think simple gestures can have such a lasting impact?
3. At what point does James begin to believe he can create a different future for himself?
4. How does James's confidence and view of himself change over the course of the story?

Bringing Mattering into Your Classroom

Small, consistent acts of encouragement can have a profound impact on a young person's life. Mr. Kelly demonstrates this through his genuine interest in James and his willingness to invest time in building a relationship.

After reading the novel, discuss with students how these actions contribute to James's resilience before exploring ways educators can foster a similar sense of mattering in their own classrooms.

EDUCATORS CAN HELP STUDENTS FEEL THAT THEY MATTER BY:

- Greeting students by name
- Recognizing individual strengths, abilities and growth
- Celebrating both effort and achievement
- Welcoming students back after an absence
- Providing meaningful classroom responsibilities
- Creating opportunities for student leadership
- Displaying student work throughout the classroom
- Sharing positive feedback with families
- Making time for one-on-one conversations
- Helping students recognize their own potential

ADMINISTRATORS CAN HELP TEACHERS FEEL THAT THEY MATTER BY:

- Greeting teachers by name
- Spending time in the staff room and/or sharing meals
- Celebrating teacher successes publicly in meetings, newsletters and assemblies
- Using part of each staff meeting or professional development day to allow teachers to lead and teach new skills
- Being respectful of life circumstances
- Going on field trips with students and staff
- Providing refreshments for staff
- Seeing them as individuals with individual challenges and needs
- Prioritizing conversation over paperwork when staff are present
- Celebrating their growth as educators

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