

# **You Can't Say You Can't Play Study Guide**

**You Can't Say You Can't Play by Vivian Paley**

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# Plot Summary

*You Can't Say You Can't Play* is the story of Kindergarten teacher Vivian Paley's attempt to teach her class not to treat some children as inferior to others by systematically excluding them from playing with others. Paley sees this process of exclusion hardening as children age, and continuing long into adulthood. She believes that if children can be taught to treat one another as equals no matter what, this lesson could follow them throughout their lives.

In Chapter 1, Paley outlines the problem. The phrase "You can't play" is the beginning of the formation of a social hierarchy, and makes some children feel awful about themselves and sometimes leaves them isolated. Paley writes a story to teach the pain of rejection to her students that feature a variety of characters, which initially includes a magpie named Magpie, a young princess named Annabella and her father, a prince named Kareem. She reads the children the story throughout the book, writing it day by day alongside her attempts to root out social hierarchy and social rejection among her students.

The story is used to teach the children about fairness, rejection, how to treat others as equals and include them, and the good things that result from practicing these ideals. Paley comes up with an idea for a social rule, which is also the title of the book - "You can't say you can't play." In other words, that little phrase "You can't play" or any of its variants may not be used. And all children must accept all others. She realizes, however, that this rule will come as a shock to her students and so she embarks on two tasks. First, she discusses the rule with older students, first, second, third, fourth and fifth graders. Second, she prepares her students for the rule with her story and discussions of their own.

In Chapter 2, Paley conducts the inquiry among the older students, taking notes on the attitudes of these students towards the kindergarten experiment that she is proposing. They are skeptical about having the rule applied to themselves, believing that it will insulate them from harsh reality, interfere with friendship, and fail due to natural character flaws. They, however, acknowledge that it is fair. They think it might work for the Kindergartners. Alongside the interviews, Paley unfolds her story about Magpie, Annabella, Kareem and later Alexandra, Beatrix, Raymond, the flower people, the golden eagle, the ship captain and his crew, the dragons and Raymond's father Corporal Thomas (the dragons and Raymond's father do not arise until Chapter 3).

In Chapter 3, Paley readies her class for the experiment and in Chapter 4, she implements it. Paley finds that the rule has interesting consequences. After a short while, the rule becomes self-reinforcing. The children and Paley must work out the application of the rule in a case by case fashion but the children often invest creative methods of applying the rule. The rule sometimes faces serious challenges, but for the entirety of Chapter 4, it perseveres. Paley sees some costs but believes implementing the rule has brought wonderful improvements.

# Chapter 1, You Can't Play, The Habit of Rejection

## Chapter 1, You Can't Play, The Habit of Rejection Summary and Analysis

The author, Vivian Paley, notes as she turns sixty that the child's phrase "You can't play" sounds increasingly harsh to her. The habits of rejection and acceptance among small children are surprisingly forthright, some even asking, "Are you my friend?" By the time Kindergarten arrives, a social order has formed within the classroom, with elites determining who is accepted and who is not. This phenomenon continues year after year, long into adulthood. Paley tries to thwart this practice at the start with a sign which states "You can't say you can't play." The twenty-five students in Paley's kindergarten class are shocked, and only the outcast children (four out of the twenty-five) seem happy.

Some of the children can no longer make sense of play time, seeing it as having no point if others cannot be excluded. The rule has yet to be implemented. So to get the children to accept the new social order, Paley tells them a story about an imaginary bird named Magpie who helps the outcasts and helps them to remain strong through story telling.

Paley's classroom seems stressed and unhappy. Regretfully, Paley leaves to speak in Canada about happy classrooms. The trip was difficult and Paley must deal with many new faces. On a morning run, Paley believes that she hears a magpie speak to her. She realizes that this is how her students feel when they are engaged in imaginary play, caught in fantasy.

One of Paley's students, Angelo, doesn't understand the story about the magpie; Paley explains there is a magpie in her mind telling her a story. The chapter transitions to the story of the magpie, who has appeared to help Paley escape a strange land by taking her on his back, flying around the castle walls twelve times and breaking the spell trapping her in a strange land. However, the magpie is surprised to find no birds around the castle walls and an entire forest that had no birds. The magpie, named Magpie, listened for voices, and hears a sad child. A young girl in the castle is brushing her doll's hair. Magpie finds her and asks if he can help. But the girl denies that she can be helped. The girl's name is Annabella and her father is Prince Kareem; they are descended from African kings and queens. Her doll's name is Maruska.

Back in reality, Angelo tells Paley about his dream of being alone. He was sad to be lost in his dream; Paley empathizes. The outsiders, like Angelo, are lonely. And the teachers only reinforced this loneliness by giving popular students more attention. Paley had apparently been an unpopular student on the outside.

Returning to the story, the princess leads Magpie down the stairway. Annabella wants to know more about the princess at Magpie's home castle, Alexandra. Alexandra is light skinned while Annabella is dark skinned. Annabella wants to play with her, and Magpie offers to tell her a story.

In Magpie's story, a lonely princess wanted a bird to help her find a playmate. She wishes for it and a yellow bird came and took her to find a fairy child that she could play with during the day only and that she must return to her castle before nightfall. She did this for six days, but on the seventh she forgot. The girl, who was able to play with the fairies because she had wings during the day, lost her wings and could not return home. She and the fairies are sad; they cry, but their tears form a river that takes the princess home. The fairy decides to stay and be the princess's friend. When Magpie finishes the story, Annabella was pleased. She introduces him to her father Kareem.

In reality, Paley tells the reader that she has a 'vocal problem' where she loses her voice easily. She tells her students that she didn't know how to handle a problem when a student Clara was made to feel unwanted. Angelo wants to wrong righted. He sympathizes with Clara's rejection. Clara says that Cynthia and Lisa rejected her. Nelson says that Ben wouldn't let him play. Ben and List defend themselves. Angelo also wasn't allowed to play. The children are now engaged; they understand the rejection of not being allowed to play. The children do not quite know how to react to this social practice. Paley tells her students that the practice happens every day. She asks the students whether this is fair, given that the classroom is the property of all the students. Angelo says it is like the place where Magpie lives.

The Magpie story has successfully engaged the children and Paley spends the coming weeks developing the story. She introduces the next chapter. Prince Kareem gets his bird book out and finds an entry for the Magpie. He is surprised because Magpie can speak and asks Magpie about his habits. Magpie is pleased to learn that Kareem is writing a book about birds because Kareem too is a story teller. Annabella tells Magpie that his stories are only pretend, but Magpie maintains that his stories are real but in a different way. Magpie then asks Kareem why, if he and Annabella love birds, do they live in a place where there are no birds? Kareem answers that when his wife was alive, her singing attracted birds; but after she died the birds all left, along with all the other people who lived there.

In reality, Paley is off to speak in Arizona, her voice still hoarse. She reviews her conversation with the children where she suggests the "You can't say you can't play" rule. The students protest that their play shouldn't be disrupted by people they don't like. However, some think that eventually all children should be allowed to play. The students start to argue about what the rule should be but cannot agree. The problem is that children won't take the steps necessary to make their lives better and be friends with everyone. Some seem to believe that the point of playing is to show who is boss and not to be connected with others.

Paley thinks on the discussion and tries to draw some general lessons from it. She thinks that play develops out of friendship; yet friendship also develops out of play.

Since the connection works in both directions, play could lead to friendship, but the children can't see this and come to believe it more strongly as they grow up. In some sense, this practice of exclusion is inevitable but Paley tries to work against the continuance of the practice in her class room. The children resist as they age, believing exclusion to merely be a fact of life.

We return to the story. Magpie is saddened by the tale he hears. And he tells Annabella and Kareem the story of how Beatrix, a witch, saved his life. Magpie tells them that as he was going born, he found that he was alone, buried under some moss under a pine tree. He saw two girls above him arguing with each other. They turned out to be sisters who were fighting over him. Sylvia had nearly stepped on him and Beatrix yelled at her about it. Magpie was scared that he would be hurt and Beatrix was intent on saving him. Beatrix saves Magpie and raised him like her own. He decides to stay with her, in the Kingdom of Tall Pines.

Kareem draws Magpie's picture and tapes it to his wall. Then Magpie and Annabella play hide-and-seek. Kareem asks Magpie why he wasn't afraid to live in a strange place, and wonders whether he and Annabella would be happy in Magpie's home. Annabella is excited about the prospect of going to the Kingdom. And Magpie is excited, telling Annabella that fourteen children live there and go to school. Many birds are there too. Magpie leads the two in their carriage to the Kingdom.

Annabella's excitement is not shared by her real-world counterparts, where being with other children is often a source of pain, with many ruining the play of others. The students tell stories that represent their exclusion; Paley often writes them down. She finds at her talk in Arizona that some teachers try to remember the "you can't play" problem, whereas others simply let kids work it out for themselves. Paley believes that she can change the practice; and when the kids realize this, they wonder about whether she has such authority. Paley promises to tell the children how older grades understand "you can't say you can't play."

Returning to the story, Kareem and Annabella have packed their things and Magpie draws a map. He describes the journey in detail. Magpie lets Annabella fill in the map with her own details from her own perspective, since he only knew the way from the air. The prince then gets the carriage moving and they are deep in thought. When they reach a desert, Annabella wants to stop and smell the cactus flowers and Kareem decides to draw the colors of the desert. Kareem wants Annabella to pick a flower for him to keep but when she tries the flowers close up; she believes she hears voices inside the blossoms.

# Chapter 2, The Inquiry, Is It Fair? Will It Work?

## Chapter 2, The Inquiry, Is It Fair? Will It Work? Summary and Analysis

Paley keeps organizing discussion with students, and wants to expose the "You can't say you can't play" rule to scrutiny. Teachers are interested, but they don't understand that Paley's proposal is to get the group, the class as a whole, to change their expectations vis-à-vis outsider children. She asks whether the rule is fair and whether it can work. Students discuss their feelings of rejection with Paley and observe that some become bosses merely by playing the boss-game first. Those who are left out get rejected. Paley encourages the rule that everyone can play. The students often acknowledge that it is fair.

Paley tells her story again. Kareem tells Annabella that the flowers want to be left alone. He and Annabella get back in the carriage and move forward. The sun starts to set and they stop travelling for the night. While Annabella is preparing her bedding, she spies some orange desert flowers moving, and then an eagle swoops down and causes the flowers to fall down the mountainside, except for the smallest. Magpie flies to investigate, with Annabella running alongside. The flowers, it turns out, are actually tiny people. The eagle has stolen a small child. Magpie and Annabella ask the flower people if they can help.

Nelson is rejected by some of the other boys because he doesn't want to play a bad Transformer. Charlie and Ben decided his role for him. Paley discovers that it is hard to formulate a rule that can stop 'boss rule.' She gives other examples of subtle exclusion and notes that it raises various important qualifications and questions, but the first-graders she drew the questions from all remembers that it was bad not to let other kids play.

Back to the story, Annabella climbs up a mountain path. The flower people had gathered. Annabella and Magpie discover that the flower people live in the cacti and they meet Queen Orangelina. The Eagle stole her son, Prince Orange Flower. The flower people were usually safe, save when they climbed the unlucky seventh mountain, often covered by fog and clouds. Dragons are thought to live there. But this place turns out to be unlucky as well. Magpie promises to use witch trickery to retrieve Prince Organ Flower and recruits Annabella to work with him on the plan. Uncle Orangerio comes with them. But when night falls, Magpie sends them back because they cannot see where they are going.

Paley is now asking second grades about the rule. The children quickly start talking about the rule and its difficulties. They often don't think it is fair to force children to play with other children they don't like. It'd also make games not fun. The kids prefer to

simply accept a boss. She asks the children what the alternative to having a boss would be, and they suggest that the kids could either vote or some could come in voluntarily. Voting presents the problem of showing who doesn't like the person who wants to come in. The voting rule, however, will have the consequence of making people nicer. They end up agreeing on the rule.

Back in the story, Annabella agrees to return home. Magpie realizes that he can use the flower people to get inside the Eagle's nest. Magpie takes Uncle Orangerio on his back and they fly away. After some time, after the moon disappears behind a cloud, Annabella, Kareem and the flower people hear the eagle screech. Magpie was on the ledge, and the two had rescued the prince. Magpie pulled off the rescue by imitating the eagle's call, signaling to the eagle that another eagle wanted to fight. The eagle flew towards the noise but Magpie went around him and let Uncle Orangerio rescue the prince.

Paley is now speaking to the third grades; they have a similar discussion as the second-graders did, noting those who are rejected and those who are bosses. The discussion is immediately personal and everyone is emotional. Some admit that they have become meaner. They insist that the rule won't work because they can't get along; the rule must be introduced early. Third, fourth and fifth grades see the rule as counterproductive. The rule, they admit, is fair but can't overcome the partiality that most people prefer.

The flower prince loves Maruska, Annabella's doll. He wants Annabella to come live with them, but Annabella tells him that they have to catch the bus. The prince begins to cry. And Magpie offers to tell him a story. There was once a small brave strong boy; a three-horned lizard attempts to break into his house and the boy defeats him with a thorn sword. When a dragon sent fire his way, the boy threw a stinging liquid back. When the boy saw an eagle steal a magpie, he taught the eagle a lesson. The prince, upon hearing the story, laughed and gave Magpie a hug. The flower people were grateful for the help and Magpie was sorry to see them leave.

Paley returns to her class and tells her students about the conversation with the third grades. The children aren't surprised at the sadness of some of the excluded students. Paley tells the students that they are only planning to implement the rule and she is only gathering information on it. The cynicism of the older children makes her skeptical that the rule will work. Fairness follows friendship, not the other way around.

In the story, Annabella awakes to help her father pack. The three leave and cross the sixth mountain. They look for the sea along the horizon and hear the ship's bell; they are about to miss the ship so Magpie flies ahead in order to ask them to wait. He is successful and a sailor helped Kareem and Annabella board the ship. However, some of the sailors and the captain are upset about a food thief. Magpie has flown ahead to inform Alexandra that Kareem and Annabella are on their way. Annabella is excited when she hears that they will be accepted. The crew, however, is focused on finding the thief.





Paley now visits the fourth grade. The girls are most certain that exclusion is primarily their problem. Boys are more accepting, but the boys disagree. It turns out they just have different methods of exclusion. The 'let anyone play' rule seems fair to them, but some might quit the game if some others join. Also, too many people might enter the game as well. They want a rule, but they see problems. Some of the boys demand that if everyone gets to play, no one can take advantage of the rule by being mean. The fourth graders think the rule will work on the kindergartners, but that it is too late for them.

Back in the story, Kareem asks the captain if they must be searched. The captain says no, and they stall the search. Magpie is there when they reach the shore of the Kingdom and Alexandra is there. Annabella is excited about the school. The ship ride, it turns out, had dirtied Annabella's blankets and someone was in their carriage. Alexandra welcomes them. Beatrix isn't there; Magpie tells Alexandra this is because she isn't ready. Beatrix is sitting behind a tree thinking that she isn't as nice as Magpie thinks she is.

In Kindergarten class, Lisa tells one of her own stories. In her stories, she lets everyone play. Lisa notes that Beatrix is jealous; she is worried that she will be excluded. Paley lets the kids doodle in her Magpie manuscript. They all want to draw. Lisa draws a picture of Magpie; others draw other parts of the story. It turns out that even Lisa has an idea of the outsider, black children; but she is unaware of this. Paley realizes that Lisa wants to be like Magpie and not exclude anyone.

In the story, the king and queen give Kareem and Annabella part of their castle to live in. Alexandra walks Annabella home from school each day. Alexandra wishes one day that she and Annabella were friends. The two decide to play make-believe. But Beatrix hears them and gets jealous, telling Magpie she hates the two girls. Magpie is upset and tells Beatrix she has no reason to hate them. Beatrix begins to plot to hurt them. Beatrix digs a whole for Annabella and draws her across the hole by creating a blueberry bush. Beatrix believes no one likes her and thinks that witches aren't supposed to be liked.

Next both girls fall in the hole. Annabella falls in but Alexandra jumps in after her. Beatrix screams that she made it only for Annabella. Alexandra is upset with Beatrix and Beatrix is upset that Alexandra helped Annabella. She doesn't believe that anyone would do that for her except Magpie, who is nice to everyone. When Beatrix starts to cry, Alexandra comforts her, and so does Annabella. They invite Beatrix in and now she feels accepted.

Paley gears up to impose the rule, to legislate a new social morality. But she wonders whether she can force this upon others. Don't children have the right to choose their friends by themselves? Yet, isn't the desire to exclude one that she be repressed, like other dangerous desires? Paley can't decide what is fair.

In the story, the girls are all chatting about the new red-haired boy. They don't like him and want Beatrix to make him disappear. The boy, Raymond, was a mystery. No one knew where he came from and none of the other kids liked him. Before Raymond got to school, the Older and Younger children helped each other; but Raymond claimed he

didn't fit into either group. Alexandra wants Raymond punished, as do the other girls, but Magpie discourages them. Kareem wants the girls to invite Raymond over. Raymond doesn't want to come over, throws himself on the ground, and starts to cry.

Magpie asks for Raymond's help, to aid a raccoon trapped in a cage. Raymond helps free him and is happy, but Magpie sees that he is embarrassed by doing a nice thing. Magpie followed Raymond as he left to see his mother. He sees Raymond enter a cave and there is no mother there. Raymond apparently was the thief on the ship Annabella and Kareem arrived on. The stolen goods were there. Raymond said to himself that he liked helping the animal and decided to help someone at school the next day.

## Chapter 3, The New Order Begins

### Chapter 3, The New Order Begins Summary and Analysis

Paley postpones talking to the fifty graders; she has decided to impose the new rule. The children are nervous and ask many questions about possible conflicts. Paley says to deal with them as they arise. Lisa now thinks it's unfair because she wants her own friends. When Lisa worried aloud that someone could hurt her or be mean to her, others suggested remedies. Some of the children reference Raymond in the magpie story, someone mean and alone who only Magpie befriends.

Returning to the story, Raymond is on his way to school, wanting to show everyone that he is nice. He tries to help a girl put buttons on her doll but he messes up and she thinks he's being mean. He tries to help a boy at a carpentry bench and the same thing happens. He is trying to be nice but the others still see him as mean. He cries out for Magpie. Beatrix asks him why he is crying out, and Raymond says he has to ask Magpie something. He introduces himself.

Beatrix suggests to Raymond that everything bad he does, he should do on purpose since no one will believe him anyway. Magpie returns and Raymond tells him his story; Magpie has pity on him. Raymond is worried that he will never find friends.

In the classroom, the kids are still anxious about the rule. Paley says she's exempt from the rule and then Lisa suggests that the rule would have solved Beatrix's frustration was Annabella and Alexandra. Paley wonders why exactly the rule does not apply to her. However, she is still convinced both that the rule is essential and that it should be learned intuitively.

In the story, Magpie tells Raymond that he is Raymond's friend. Beatrix leaps up, grabs Raymond's hand and claims to be his friend. Raymond wants to pretend that he's a lost baby-dragon who wants to find his father. Beatrix wants to be the bad dragon. Alexandra and Annabella run up and want to be dragon sisters. Raymond isn't sure he trusts Annabella and Alexandra. They all begin to play together. Prince Kareem appears and notes that they found the young man. Kareem asks Magpie for a story and Magpie obliges. He mentions that the story is inspired by Raymond.

There is a baby dragon in the land of six dragons. The baby dragon's father wants him to be a fighter and trained him. At four, the father tells the son he is old enough to fight the blue-humped dragons for taking water from their mountain. The baby dragon wants to let the other dragons use some of their water but the father pushes him into battle. When the baby dragon attacks, his fire pushes him far up into the sky. The father is sad, and a blue-humped dragon asks if he can drink some of the father's water. The father allows it. When the blue-humped dragon drinks, a rainbow brings the baby back.

When Magpie ended the story, Raymond walked away, claiming he had to leave to meet his uncle who was waiting for him.

# Chapter 4, It Is Easier to Open the Door

## Chapter 4, It Is Easier to Open the Door Summary and Analysis

Sarah and Paley are surprised at how easy transition to the rule was. Sometimes the kids screw up, but they will remind the others. The children mostly follow the rule because they are afraid not to; they no longer have to decide who to exclude. Paley is able to do away with the time-out chair.

Lisa becomes a rule enforcer. Lisa also wants Cynthia to like her more than Mary Louise. Lisa doesn't really like the rule and suggests that they bring back bosses. Paley wants the idea of a boss to disappear. Lisa knows that Magpie likes the rule. And she does claim to like the rule. When a child becomes less sad, all the children 'rise in stature.' When the threat of unkindness is removed, it relaxes everyone.

In the story, the girls look for Magpie the next day after school. Beatrix appears to be gone, but comes out from behind a tree. The girls are looking for Raymond as well. But Raymond and Beatrix are with Kareem. The three girls go to the cottage to find Kareem and Magpie talking to Raymond. Raymond admits to them that he ran away and now lives alone, saying his father died in battle. However, he and his mother believe he is still alive, so Raymond is searching for him. Kareem wants Raymond to live with them; his mother is sick. Annabella is happy and Kareem is grateful that his daughter is so accepting.

Raymond agrees but he needs Magpie's help at the moment. He wants to go to the land of the six mountains, for Raymond has seen the mountains in his dreams. Raymond says that in his dreams he sees a man that reminds him of his father around the seventh mountain; his father is in a cave, guarded by the lost dragon. Magpie asks Kareem if he and Raymond can borrow his carriage, and Kareem agrees. Beatrix wants to go as well, because she could use her magic. Raymond admits to stealing food and wants to return them. The others are proud of him. Raymond tells them that his father's name is Corporal Thomas of the Royal Guard.

The fifth graders tell Paley that her plan might work but it would be difficult. The kids say that it will be hard to resist the times when one simply wants to be around friends. Other kids insist that exclusion should be experienced in school to prepare one for the real world. Paley, however, wants the classroom to be nicer than the world. And others agree that the rule could be learned. And the children get serious and begin to feel strange. However, another child says that it hurts a lot to have the teacher force other kids to play with you. At the end of the discussion, the children remain confused. The next morning before school, a fourth grader asks Paley how the rule is working. Paley says that it is and Ruthie, the fourth grader, is happy. And in fact, Ruthie wants the rule as well.



In the story, the captain thinks Raymond for returning the food and asks Raymond to promise not to be a stowaway. The captain is worried about Raymond's destination. The first mate tells them to sleep at the foot of the mountain and wake up early the next day to climb it. When they reach the mountain, Raymond doesn't want to wait. Beatrix turns herself into a moth and the three friends go into the fog. The climb was difficult, with Raymond often slipping and getting poked with thorns. Beatrix sees something and calls the other two over. They see the herd of dragons asleep and in the middle of them, Raymond's father sat in a cage. Raymond cried out and the dragons awoke.

The children are upset when the chapter ends without a resolution. They ask Paley to have Raymond be protected by the rule; they want their new equal protection to apply to Raymond as well. Some of the children start discussing how to integrate the rule into the story and suggest that Raymond always be allowed to play with the girls. Paley reviews how they think the story would go, and has the Schoolmistress, the teacher in the story, sit the kids down, tell a story, and suggests the idea of the rule. A discussion similar to the real one ensues among the children and the Schoolmistress imposes the rule. The children are now happy in fact and in fiction. Paley notes that moral rules must be taught to children when they are young in both myth and reality.

The next day Paley continues the story. The dragons awake confused, surprised that there are two red-headed men. Magpie and Beatrix have not yet been seen and formulate a plan. Raymond tries to force his way through the dragons and his father tells the dragons that Raymond is harmless and that if they let him go, the two of them will lead the dragons to good things; but the dragon lifts Raymond into the cage and the other dragons start a fire. Raymond and his father talk; Raymond's father explain that the dragons don't want to hurt them, just to keep them because they believe the red-headed man is a spirit sent to protect them. Next two of the dragons feed them wonderful food.

Beatrix has turned herself into a moth and goes down near the cage. They talk about what the dragons will do if they see a blueberry bush. Then Raymond calls down Magpie to tell them all a story.

Back in reality, older children regularly talk to Paley about the experiment. They remain skeptical about applying it to themselves. Paley explains to the reader that the rule is not a 'thou shalt not' rule, but a rule that changes their perspective. Instead of saying 'Don't be mean' it causes children to understand the role of meanness in every day social life. Paley gives an illustration in a fight between some of the girls. One of the girls isn't telling the others they can't play but selects one to play with each day. This seems outside the spirit of the rule, they decide. These objective examinations of their behavior help the children to take a perspective of fairness. The children are learning new ways of following the rule, learning to 'open the doors' rather than 'keep people out'.

Magpie flies down to the cage and asks the Corporal what his command is. He asks Magpie to tell a story. In Magpie's story, a flock of royal geese was ordered to find blueberries and bring them to the emperor; he often asked that the blueberries be



baked in different ways for him each day. As time goes on, they run out of ideas and the emperor falls into a sadness, refusing to eat. A young dragon goes to the emperor's room one day, encouraging him to come outside and taste some ripe blueberries right from the bush; the emperor obliges, comes out of his depression and decrees that only his royal dragon is allowed to bring him blueberries.

Magpie finished and Beatrix turns back into a girl. She then created a blueberry bush. The dragons were amazed and picked the blue berries. Beatrix then created another bush further away and they did the same thing. She slowly moved the subsequent bushes further away, forcing the dragons into the light. The dragons were shocked to be outside of the fog and Raymond's father encourages them to explore the world. Raymond, his father, Beatrix and Magpie prepare to leave, but before they do, Magpie asks the dragons to be kind to the flower people, and tell them that they are Magpie's friends and will protect them from the eagle. The four then return home.

Lisa comes to accept and adapt to the woods. She accepts when her vote is overridden by others. They begin to learn democratic procedures. Paley gives an illustration of Lisa's behavior. The play continues to go well, but a problem arises two weeks in when they begin to apply the rule to storytelling and acting. The stories meant a lot to the children and they wanted the rule to be featured in it. Lisa gets furious with Cynthia when Cynthia doesn't pick Lisa to be in her story. Paley encourages Cynthia to allow Lisa into the story; this resolves the conflict and relieves the parents who are there for Cynthia's birthday party.

However, the problem remains. The rule never covers story-telling, which was the property and province of the individual. Paley suggests to the children the next day that the kids take turns choosing who will be what in the stories. Lisa doesn't like this rule, though, because she enjoys the process of picking (much like she enjoyed the process of picking who to play with). Paley argues that the rule will improve Lisa's story just as it improved her playing. The kids think the rule is unfair because they want control over their own stories. Paley encourages them to try working out the rule. Oddly, after a few days of holding out, Charlie and Lisa come back and tell Magpie stories and make themselves flower people. The rule has survived and evolved. The rule continues to lead to rule-making but the author has the authority to refuse to change the story.

Another phenomenon appears when the children stop looking for loopholes. In reaction, the children now accept any role assigned to them for the same reason they were afraid to exclude others. By playing any character, the children (Paley speculates) are freeing themselves from the expectations of others. The children discuss the new development. Paley is sad that the new class that follows these children will already have the rule in place; part of the fun has been grappling with the issues that arose. Plus, the rule doesn't come naturally.

Returning to the story, Raymond and his father keep talking and Beatrix is annoyed. Raymond's father stays to see Kareem to thank him for his help. They get on the boat, meeting the captain and Raymond's father thanks him for the help. When they reach the Kingdom, Annabella and Alexandra made a sign welcoming Corporal Thomas home.

Beatrix is annoyed that the others weren't welcomed home, but Kareem made a sign for them too. Raymond's father sees something odd and begins a story of his own.

Apparently Raymond's father had passed through the forest twice without knowing about it. He was looking for a magpie egg and found one that was partly broken, taking care of the egg until it hatched. Magpie appeared restless during the story. Raymond's father said he placed the egg in his pocket and the magpie was alive, but he lost the egg in the forest and thought this was the reason for his bad luck. Magpie tells him that it was his life Corporal Thomas had saved. And Beatrix raised Magpie. It turns out that everyone had helped everyone else in the story. And then Kareem invites Raymond and his father to stay in the Kingdom with Raymond's mother.

Paley visits the third graders to see how the rejected children are doing. The kids maintain that the rule won't work for them but they are learning slowly. The plan only works with half the students; these students comply because they're afraid others won't like them. However, Shirley disagrees with this view, telling Paley that they had started throwing parties and allowing anyone to come. She says "We decided to have a party." Paley points out that Shirley had begun thinking in terms of the group.



# Characters

## Vivian Paley

Vivian Paley is the main character of *You Can't Say You Can't Play*. Paley was born on January 25th, 1929 in Chicago. She earned a PhD from the University of Chicago in 1947 and began teaching. She became extremely interested in childhood learning and came to believe that the learning of children was restricted by strict boundaries between different areas of knowledge and forced memorization. When she was teaching in Great Neck, New York, she started to think that children would learn best in 'play' situations, and that Kindergartners should learn more within the context of play than is ordinarily practiced.

*You Can't Say You Can't Play* reflects Paley's developing teaching philosophy. She believes that learning occurs effectively during play but is faced with the fact that play is a profound source of social and intellectual development for children. Social hierarchies form in early childhood most directly during playtime, with some children as the bosses of others and still other children excluded from play altogether. *You Can't Say You Can't Play* is the story of Paley's attempt to solve this problem with a social rule preventing the exclusion of some by others and thus preventing the development of social hierarchies and the minds that result from growing up within these hierarchies. She does not portray her own personality directly in the book, but we have the sense that she is an ardent researcher with a strong sense of social inequities and a student of childhood social forms.

## Magpie

Magpie is the lead character of the Magpie story that Paley creates. The purpose of the Magpie story is to create a method of communicating to the children the significance and rationale behind the *You Can't Say You Can't Play* rule. Magpie represents Paley's example of kindness and acceptance of all. He never permits anyone to be mean to anyone else for long. He encourages people to end conflicts. He is courageous, forgiving, wise, kind, resourceful and thoughtful.

Magpie begins the story and is the one who finds Annabella and Prince Kareem. He is the one who leads the both to the Kingdom of Tall Pines and he comes up with the plan to rescue the orange flower prince from the golden eagle. He unites Beatrix with Annabella and Alexandra, integrates Raymond into the growing community of friends in the Kingdom, and aids in the search for Raymond's father, Corporal Thomas of the Royal Guard.

Magpie is a teacher by nature and is particularly excellent at telling stories. His stories are usually symbolic, representing a conflict at hand and teaching those in the conflict or problem how to understand it and deal with it appropriately. His story telling is widely

regarded as excellent and in many places within the Magpie story, his story-telling is requested. Magpie was also saved and initially raised by Raymond's father, but Corporal Thomas lost him. Beatrix found him and finished raising him.

## **Angelo**

One of the excluded classroom children. He is sometimes excluded because he is black.

## **Lisa**

Perhaps the most prominent student, Lisa admits to enjoying excluding others and is a bit of a drama-queen but she eventually admits the goodness of the rule.

## **Annabella**

The daughter of Prince Kareem and one of the major characters in the Magpie story.

## **Prince Kareem**

The father of Annabella and one of the major characters in the Magpie story.

## **Other Kindergarteners**

Paley discusses many of her other students in the book. They are initially skeptical of the rule but like it once it is implemented.

## **Alexandra**

The princess of the Kingdom of Tall Pines. When Annabella moves there, they become close friends, much to Beatrix's chagrin.

## **Beatrix**

A young lady witch in the Magpie story who is friends with Alexandra and Annabella after resenting them for awhile. She has some wicked qualities and the power to turn into a brown moth and create blueberry bushes.



## **First, Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Graders**

Paley interviewed the older grades to see what they thought the benefits and costs of the "You Can't Say You Can't Play" rule would be. Generally they raised sensible concerns.

## **Raymond**

A boy in the story who sneaks into the Kingdom of Tall Pines to search for his father, Corporal Thomas. He is initially disliked at school, but comes to be accepted.

## **The Flower People**

Small people who dress with orange cactus flowers and live in the desert. Magpie, Annabella and one of the flower people save the young prince of the flower people from the golden eagle.

## **The Dragons**

The Dragons live in the fog of the seventh mountain and are holding Raymond's father prisoner because they believe he was sent to help them.

## **The Ship Captain and His Crew**

The ship captain and his crew take people to and from the Kingdom of Small Pines. The reader meets them frustrated with a hidden thief who later turns out to be Raymond.

## **Corporal Thomas of the Royal Guard**

Raymond's father, once thought dead, who is being held captive by the dragons of the seventh mountain.



# **Objects/Places**

## **Kindergarten Class**

Where Paley and her students discuss and implement their rule.

## **Paley's Travels and Conferences**

Paley appears to be an educator of some note during the book, often traveling across the country to give talks at conferences.

## **Paley's Voice**

Paley's voice could easily be lost from talking too much.

## **The Lonely Kingdom**

The lonely kingdom is where Magpie finds Annabella and Prince Kareem, all alone after Annabella's mother died.

## **The Kingdom of Tall Pines**

The Kingdom where most of the Magpie story takes place.

## **The Ship**

The ship of the ship captain that takes the characters to and from the Kingdom of Tall Pines.

## **The Desert**

The desert had to be crossed on the way to the Kingdom of Tall Pines. Annabella, Magpie and Kareem meet the orange flower people there.

## **The Six Mountains**

A small mountain range on the way through the desert to the boat that Kareem, Annabella and Magpie must cross.



## **The Seventh Mountain**

A hidden mountain covered in fog, Raymond dreams that his father is trapped there by the dragons. This turns out to be true.

## **Beatrix's Trap**

Early on in the Magpie story, Beatrix sets a trap for Annabella.

## **Raymond's Cave**

When Raymond comes to the Kingdom of Small Pines, he spends some time living in a cave.

## **Magpie's Imitation Abilities**

Magpie has the ability to imitate the calls of other birds. He uses his ability to free the prince of the orange flower people from the golden eagle.

## **Beatrix's Magical Powers**

Beatrix can turn into a brown moth and create blueberry bushes; she uses these powers for good and for ill throughout the Magpie story.

## **You Can't Say You Can't Play**

The rule the book is focused on. It requires that students not exclude other students from playing with them.

## **Loopholes**

The kindergarten class often looks for loopholes in the "You Can't Say You Can't Play" rule.

## **Interviews**

Paley spends a great deal of time interviewing the older grades and her own class about her proposed rule.



## Blueberry Bushes

Beatrix can create blueberry bushes. She initially uses a blueberry bush to lure Annabella into a trap but later uses blueberry bushes to lure the dragons away from Corporal Thomas's cave.

## Story-Telling

The You Can't Say You Can't Play rule almost breaks down when the children attempt to apply it to their story-telling habits.

# Themes

## The Habit of Rejection

The first chapter of *You Can't Say You Can't Play* concerns the 'habit' of rejection. This initial chapter contains themes that pervade the book. Paley believes that Americans live in a society that is exclusivist, intolerant and excessively hierarchical. She believes that this is due to the fact that children learn their forms of social interaction at an early age, and that these forms of social interaction do not reflect the broader moral beliefs of society at large. Parents and teachers do not teach children morality in practice. The natural behavior of children, like adults, is to prefer their own personal attachments to being fair to all, to focus on their particular lives rather than universal ideas like equality and democratic participation.

Children even often enjoy excluding one another from play and marginalizing certain members of their class. In the same way, adults marginalize certain members of society and often enjoy this exclusion. We see that Lisa, one of Paley's students, often admits to enjoying the process of picking some friends over others. It is fun, in her mind, to develop a group of friends that share something special and leave others out. Paley also often finds students, from Kindergarten to Fifty Grade, find the *You Can't Say You Can't Play* rule to be a mild form of harassment, preventing children from pursuing their own friendships. However, Paley believes that play leads to friendship and that exclusivity prevents friendship development rather than promoting it.

## Fairness versus Practicality

The second chapter of the book concerns two questions - Will the *You Can't Say You Can't Play* rule work? And is the *You Can't Say You Can't Play* rule fair? These two questions suggest a contrast between a commitment to fairness on the one hand and a commitment to practicality on the other. When interviewing students from Kindergarten to Fifth Grade, Paley finds that many if not most students will freely acknowledge that the *You Can't Say You Can't Play* rule embodies fairness. Particular attachments are often seen as exclusive, unfair, and indifferent to universal morality. However, the students appear to believe that the demands of this kind of fairness (a kind of fairness they apparently regard as legitimate) run against the grain of human nature.

Children enjoy pursuing their own private friendships; they often want to be left alone with those children that they like and feel pressured to interact with those they don't like. They consider the *You Can't Say You Can't Play* rule as a form of interference. Further, many of the students regard the rule as sheltering children from the reality of social life - that some people are mean and that life isn't fair. Some children argue that it is wrong to not give children a taste of what real life is like; if they don't learn to handle the harsh realities of the world early on, they will be unprepared when they enter it. Finally, they simply thought that human nature was too corrupt for the rule to work generally. Maybe

Kindergartners could follow the rule, but that was only because they were young enough to see teachers as powerful law-givers, not as mere individuals that could be disobeyed at will. Further, humans just flat out enjoy excluding others, and this enjoyment is not going away.

## **You Can't Say You Can't Play**

"You Can't Say You Can't Play" is the title of the book, but it is also the name of the main idea in the book, a rule which prevents Paley's students from excluding one another from play. Because Paley believes so strongly that children learn best through play, she is intent on preserving play as an activity that promotes learning for all, not just learning for some. Play is often a source of social exclusion, preventing some children from not only learning but developing social skills and finding fulfillment in social relationship.

The rule is designed not only to enable positive relations of play but to avoid the status of a purely propositional rule like, "Don't be mean." You can't say you can't play is a rule that specifies a practice that must not be repeated, not a general prohibition on a kind of attitude. This rule must be applied in practice and the children develop creative ways of dealing with problems applying the rule as they arise.

The rule also has a fascinating feedback mechanism. Once exclusion has been broken down, the children want to keep it going. First, the rule prevents them from dealing with the social discomfort of excluding some. There are a handful of students that enjoy exclusion, but most students consider the practice as having more costs than benefits. Second, children worry that if the rule breaks down, they will be excluded, rather than becoming the excluders. So over time the rule maintains a kind of equilibrium, confirming Paley's theory (in her mind, anyway) that the rule can perpetuate itself despite flawed human nature.



# Style

## Perspective

The perspective of *You Can't Say You Can't Play* is that of Vivian Paley, the book's author and main character. As mentioned in the character descriptions, Paley studied education and took her PhD from the University of Chicago. She spent many of her years as a self-described 'uninspired' teacher but eventually began to develop her own theories of education. She found that standard approaches to public education excessively subdivided subjects and placed unreasonably burdensome requirements on children. It also involved too much rote memorization. Her knowledge of child development helped her to elaborate a view of child learning where play features prominently.

Paley sees play as crucial to child learning and believes that many social problems develop from excessively hierarchical and exclusive forms of play. So she develops the *You Can't Say You Can't Play* rule as a remedy for these problems. She has the approach of a social scientist, and the creative and kind mind of a devoted school teacher. However, Paley also has ideological commitments. She is fiercely anti-hierarchical and believes that fairness and kindness routinely override the value of particularity and small-group bonding within the classroom. She even extends her model to child story-telling, asking her students to choose students to play different characters according to an egalitarian model (although this request was subject to various constraints). In general, Paley's perspective is hopeful, creative and committed, with deeply egalitarian and democratic commitments.

## Tone

The tone of *You Can't Say You Can't Play* possesses an interesting dualism between that of an academic work on the one hand and that of a children's book on the other. It resembles a children's book in part because it is about a Kindergarten class. It contains dialogue between a teacher and her students and between the students themselves. It contains their thoughts, fears and hopes, and descriptions of their interactions with one another. It is light-hearted in its own way, and innocent in another. The book contains a child's story, the Magpie story, the reads just like a children's book - because it is, after all, a children's story. It contains magic, dragons, small flower people, a witch and a talking bird. The story has a happy ending and is thoroughly G-Rated. The book even contains doodles from Paley's kindergarten class in some of the margins.

However, the book also reads like the study of an academic, again, because it is written by a woman who has studied education professionally at the University of Chicago and is looking to test out her unique educational philosophy on the class she is teaching. The *You Can't Say You Can't Play* rule is subjected to scrutiny; Paley discusses it with colleagues but mostly with older grades. She often expresses her philosophical and

ethical commitments and specifies how they are associated with the rule and the implementation of the rule in practice. However, the scholarly aspect of the book never becomes dry. The book is short and contains no citations and the scholarly arguments are surrounded by dialogue and the Magpie story.

## Structure

The structure of *You Can't Say You Can't Play* is two-fold. First, Paley tells the story from her perspective of coming up with the *You Can't Say You Can't Play* rule, discussing it with her students, and interviewing older grades to get their input on whether the rule is (a) fair and (b) practicable. She often discusses her own thoughts on the rule, and her reactions to her experiences and thoughts throughout the book. One thing she does frequently is record conversations with students, focusing not only on describing her students' but letting them speak in their own words. The students are usually quoted verbatim, interspersed with commentary from Paley.

The other half of the book is the Magpie story told by Paley to her students. She writes the story as the book progresses, sometimes modifying it in accord with her students' wishes. The point of the Magpie story is to communicate the goodness of the *You Can't Say You Can't Play* rule to her students, and so the story is not only full of magic, talking animals, and many of the standard alluring features of such stories but various moral lessons that constantly return to treating one another fairly and being kind, with an implicit argument that these forms of behavior are self-reinforcing and can bring even the meanest-seeming kid over to the behavior. Magpie, the main character, reinforces this lesson whenever he has the chance.

The two stories intertwine, with Paley often switching between the two narratives to make specific points and draw certain contrasts. Another interesting feature of the book is that it contains the common literary device of the 'story within the story' which occurs whenever Magpie tells a story.

# Quotes

"You can't play." (3)

"You can't say you can't play." (3)

"The stranger that sojourneth with you shall be unto you as the homeborn among you ..." (11)

"Everyone can play." (36)

"The trouble is, there is no dependable rule that protects everyone equally from the slings and arrows of boss rule." (40)

"But it really might work because sometimes people are very nice to each other. Even to me." (54)

"Because they'll believe you that it's a rule. You know, a law." (63)

"Why, Magpie, father is just like you. When he finds out that Beatrix is lonely, he'll probably invite her to tea every day." (72)

"Why doesn't Schoolmistress have the rule?" (86)

"How long will it take to get rid of the notion of a boss?" (95)

Maybe our classrooms can be nicer than the outside world." (100)

"We must be told, when we are young, what rules to live by. The grownups must tell the children early in life so that myth and morality proclaim the same message while the children are still listening." (110)

"Because the children are learning that it is far easier to open the doors than to keep people out." (118)

"You're saying *\*we\** are having a party. *\*We.\** I don't remember you saying 'we' before." (134)

# Topics for Discussion

What is the habit of rejection? Why does Paley want to correct it?

What do you think of the older classes' reaction to the rule? To what extent are their reactions plausible?

Do you think the "You Can't Say You Can't Play" rule is fair or unfair? Give reasons on both sides and then argue for the side you prefer.

Do you think the imposition of the "You Can't Say You Can't Play" rule could work in Kindergarten classes generally? If so, why? If not, why not?

What advantages does Paley think the "You Can't Say You Can't Play" rule has over a simple "Don't be mean" rule? Do you agree with Paley?

List two purposes of the Magpie story. What does Paley intend to accomplish with it?

In the story, discuss three of the characters and who they represent.