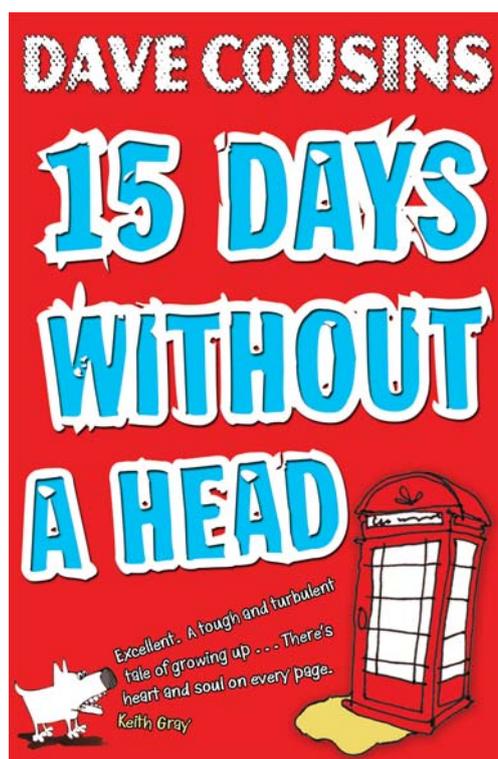


The World of

15 DAYS WITHOUT A HEAD

Ideas for exploring Dave Cousins' novel
with pupils in Years 7-9



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Introduction

15 Days Without a Head offers a glimpse into the chaotic life of a family that is falling apart due to a parent's addiction to alcohol. The story is told through the voice of teenager Laurence Roach, who is trying to keep what remains of his family together despite his mother's condition. As well as a play on the troubled family's name (Roach), the title refers to the cockroach's ability to survive and function without a head, after most creatures would have died. The cockroach's situation is metaphor for Laurence's situation, left alone to care for his young half-brother, while terrified that if he does not keep their predicament secret, the family will be split up. The story encourages readers to think about:

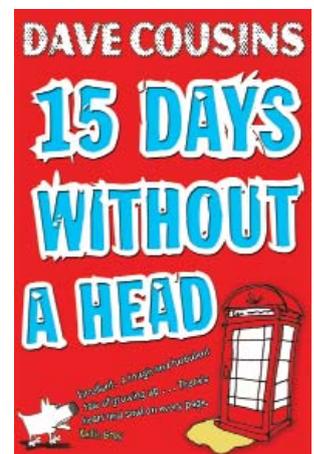
- how everyone depends on support from their communities and how people who need it most can be cut off from it by their situation
- the consequences when parents or carers are unable to cope with their responsibilities
- the value of friendships, positive thinking and a meaningful activity to focus on.

Synopsis

15-year-old Laurence is the main carer for his half-brother Jay and often also for his alcoholic mother Maggie. Despite Maggie's two part-time jobs the family barely survive, and Laurence lives in constant fear of him and Jay being taken into care. Laurence hopes to help the family turn over a fresh leaf by winning a prize holiday for them all, by entering a local radio competition. He has to pose as his dead father in order to enter the competition, which is only open to adults. He wins the first few rounds, but at this point Maggie fails to come home from work.

Laurence soon runs out of money for food and can't access his building society account without Maggie's signature. Desperate not to attract the attention of the authorities, he fends off questions from Jay's childminder and a friendly teacher and resorts to lies and forgery to deflect a prying neighbour. Meanwhile he continues to compete and win the daily radio quiz rounds and to search for his mother. At this time he befriends a fellow pupil, Mina.

On a rare outing with friends to a local music festival, he catches a glimpse of his mother in a hall of mirrors but she slips away with a male companion whom Laurence later recognises in a local shop. Despite a crisis when Jay becomes ill, Laurence becomes quiz champion and steals his prize holiday voucher when the station staff insist on meeting his father to hand it over. The boys trace their mother to a canal barge where she is living with her new friend, Phil. She refuses to come home, claiming that the boys will fare better without her. Laurence prepares to hand himself and Jay over to social services, but Mina persuades him to try again. After a chase along the canal bank in which Jay nearly drowns, Maggie agrees to return home and give up drinking. The holiday company rejects the prize voucher as stolen but with help from Mina and her sons, Maggie convinces a social worker to keep the family together.



Diary of disaster: the structure and voice of **15 DAYS WITHOUT A HEAD**

Re-read the first and last chapters. Why might Dave Cousins have made the openings so similar?

What does the writer achieve by using the following techniques in the book? How do they make you, the reader, feel?

A day in the life

Dividing Laurence's story into days.

Giving each chapter a title that sounds like a normal day of the week but attaches a negative idea to it (although only one chapter title is the real day of the week). What does this tell us about how Laurence feels about his day?

First person

Writing in the first person (in Laurence's voice) and in the present tense.

Exercise

Try writing the section that starts near the bottom of page 4 ('Happy Hour lasts for approximately one hour') to the bottom of page 6 ('It's my own fault, I should have known what would happen') first in the third person, then in the past tense, then in both the third person and the past tense. How does the reader's view of Laurence's experience change each time?

Note

Present tense is the tense that is most often used in Facebook, texting and reality TV (which often divides participants' experiences up into days). Laurence attempts to make sense of his experience as it happens to him and use of present tense allows the reader to share the immediacy of the experience as if is happening in the reader's life too. It leaves the reader uncertain about the outcome (if a story is writing in first person past tense we know that the character has survived to tell the tale).

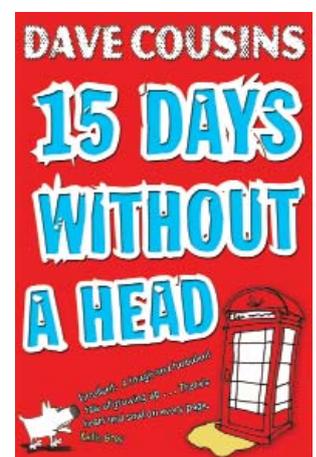
Talking point

Do you have any ways of telling your friends what is happening in your life? For example, do you use

- Facebook and other social media?
- instant messaging?
- texting?
- Skype?

Does Laurence use any of these? How does he keep in touch with his friends?

Why does he use a phone box to play Baz's Bedtime Bonanza? How does using a phone box make it harder for him to play?



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Team Laurence: ideas of community in **15 DAYS WITHOUT A HEAD**

Exercise

List all the adults in the book whom Laurence comes into regular contact with (meaning that he sees them every day, or every school day, or a few times a week).

The list might include Laurence's head of year Mr Buchan, Jay's childminder Angie, the boys' neighbour Nelly and even Baz the radio presenter and his producer Cheryl.

Number the names on the list in order of those who might be most likely to help him (with number 1 being the most likely). Then list them again and number them in the order in which Laurence might be willing to ask them for help. Do any of the names have the same number both times?

Talking point

Imagine that you have a problem and list everyone you know, both young people and adults, whom you know you could ask for help.

Laurence has some friends (Hanif and Mina) but how does his situation make it difficult for him to see more of them or get closer to them?

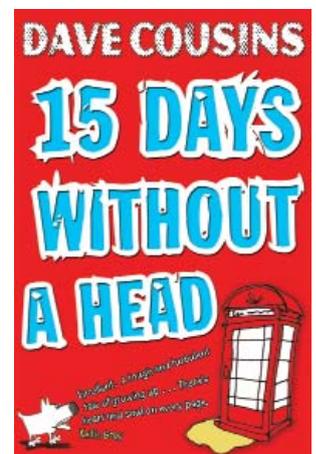
Exercise

List all the characters in the book that do help Laurence, young and older. Think about each character in turn and ask:

- does Laurence realise they are helping?
- would he have expected them to be able to help?
- is he able to accept their help right away?

For example, how is Laurence helped by:

- Jay?
- His Nanna?
- Mina?



“A secret is like a bag you have to lug around all the time—each day you add another lie, and it just gets heavier and harder to carry on your own.” *15 Days Without a Head* captures perfectly some of the struggles children face living with an alcohol-dependent parent. Some parents will stop drinking, some won't, not everyone will get a happy ending, but by writing this moving story Dave Cousins can help children to realize that they are not alone, and that there is help for them, he gives them a voice.

Alison Jarvis, National Association for Children of Alcoholics

A Guide for Schools: Children of Alcoholics in the Classroom

From the National Association for Children of Alcoholics

Teachers are ideally placed to detect and help troubled children of alcoholics. Here are guidelines on how to look out for, and how to respond if you do spot such a child – or, if indeed, the child spontaneously confides in you.

What to look out for

- A child fails to get excited about an anticipated class trip or event (because promises are so often broken at home).
- A child acts very differently during alcohol and drugs education from the way he or she usually reacts (for example, a talkative child becomes quiet, or a quiet child becomes animated).
- A child gets upset around his or her birthday and / or holidays (because special days are filled with disappointment for the child).
- A child wants time alone with the teacher or clings to a teacher or an aide (this represents an effort to get the nurturing they are not getting from a parent).
- A child has unrealistic expectations of other children and may often be disappointed in others (children of alcoholics often look to friends to provide the nurturing they are not getting at home).
- A child may not be able to comply with the requests of the school when these involve parents (for example, a student may not bring a permission slip, a smock, or an item from home for a project).
- A child may act out one of the adaptive roles children of alcoholics play in their families (for example, the hero, the scapegoat, the lost child or the mascot).
- A child talks back to a teacher or fights with other schoolchildren (because he or she is angry at his or her parents, but can't express the anger and comes to school like a "time bomb").
- A usually responsible child who does homework on time and does well in tests may inexplicably fail (for example, may offer no excuse or a far-fetched excuse for not having done homework or for doing poorly on a test - either of which may be covering up the real reason related to a parent's alcohol or drug use).

Of course, all children may demonstrate some of this behaviour on the odd occasion, and this does not mean they are necessarily children of alcoholics. But the appearance of some of these signs in a consistent way should alert the teacher that the child may well be the child of an alcoholic. So what can the teacher do?

How to respond

Even without special training, a teacher can do much to aid children of alcoholics. The key to helping is to be able to recognise the nature of what the child is living with. Being able to listen is vital. Children of alcoholics are guarding a family secret that is struggling to come out. Being able to listen, understand and comfort will make a difference.

In time, you might be able to give the child some of the information you have learned about alcoholism.

First, alcoholism is a disease: alcoholics drink because they have a sickness, not because they are bad people or do not love their children.

Second, nothing the child does or says causes a parent to drink, or to stop. All the child can reasonably do is to protect him/herself as best he or she can, perhaps by staying out of the way or even leaving the house if they feel threatened.

Third, the child is not alone; he or she is one of up to five million other such children in the UK.

Fourth, the child is a person of worth who deserves help. Tell them about Al-Ateen, the self help group for teenage children of alcoholics, if they are 13 or over. If they are younger, you may be their only source of outside support.

If you are a headteacher, or a member of a school governing body, perhaps you could introduce a policy to help children of alcoholics. You could consider the following points, suggested by the National Association for Children Of Alcoholics in the USA, in any guidelines. As you will see, these have applications beyond the school setting and with minor alteration could be applied in any situation where adults are temporarily in charge of children.

Of course such policies are not introduced in a day, but even if such a proposal were offered for discussion by a governing body or at a weekly staff lunch/meeting, the pieces might begin to fall into place in understanding the behaviour of some members of the teacher's class.

- Do follow through if a child asks for help. You may be the only person the child has approached about the family problem. Courses of action you might choose are:

Help the child contact a local Al-Ateen group, if they are 13 or over. Assist the child in 'thinking through' all of the sympathetic adults who play significant roles in his or her life (a favourite aunt or uncle, scout leader, vicar or church person). Refer the child to an appropriate helping professional.

- Develop and maintain a list of appropriate referrals. Knowing which organisations have resources to help children will make it easier when a child comes to you.
- Maintain a small library of books and pamphlets, and reprints of articles on alcohol-related problems that have been written for children. Please enquire from the National Association for Children Of Alcoholics in the UK what they might have available, or be aware of what is available elsewhere.
- Do be sensitive to possible cultural differences. If the child is from a different culture, it may be useful to explore that culture, including family structure, values, customs and beliefs. The cultural differences may influence how you can most effectively help the child.
- Don't behave in an embarrassed or uncomfortable way when the child asks you for help. Such a response may discourage the child and increase his or her sense of isolation and hopelessness.
- Don't criticise the child's parents or be overly sympathetic. The child may gain the greatest benefit just from having an adult friend with an understanding ear, who will advise where help can be found.

- Don't share the child's problems with others who do not have to know. This is not only important in terms of building trust with the child, but also protects the child from being labelled by peers or other adults.
- Don't make plans with the child if you can't keep them. Stability and consistency in relationships are necessary if the child is to develop trust.
- Don't try to counsel the child unless you are trained to do so. Refer the child to someone with specialist skills, or help the child to contact a self-help group, if they are 13 or over.

Information provided by courtesy of Mrs Susanne Stafford and taken from *Children of Alcoholics* by David Stafford, published by Piatkus.

Information for pupils

If you need help

The National Association for Children of Alcoholics (Nacoa)
Post: PO Box 64, Fishponds, Bristol, BS16 2UH Tel: 0117 924 8005

Helpline

The Nacoa helpline is 0800 358 3456. Calls are confidential and there is no need to give your name. You can call at these times:

Monday and Friday 10am to 7pm

Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday 10am to 9pm

Saturday 10am to 3pm

The lines can be busy but please keep trying and you will get through.

Helpline email: helpline@nacoa.org.uk

Website: www.nacoa.org.uk

If you want to ask for help by email but are worried about remaining anonymous, you will find advice on the Helpline page of the website.

If you would like to help

For others who would like to support friends, classmates and family members experiencing problems similar to those Laurence and Jay have to cope with, the Nacoa website offers lots of information. It is currently promoting the COA Week 12-18 February 2012 - Raising awareness of children affected by parental alcohol problems www.coaweek.org.uk

Supporters are invited to download the Nacoa charity single 'A Change is Gonna Come' via CD Baby: (<http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/mariamcateer2>) or iTunes (<http://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/a-change-is-gonna-come/id419196853?i=419196887>)

Listen to the words of the Nacoa charity single: why do you think Nacoa might have chosen it?

Books with more information

These books may be available in your local library. If not, ask the librarian if they can be ordered for you.

- *The Brown Bottle* – Penny Jones (Hazelden, 1983)
- *Different Like Me, A book for teens who worry about their parent's use of alcohol or drugs* - Evelyn Leite and Pamela Espeland
- *An Elephant in the Living Room* - Jill M. Hastings and Marion H. Typpo (CompCare Publishers, 1984)
- *The Secret Everyone Knows: help for you if alcohol is a problem in your home* - Cathleen Brooks (Hazleden, 1989)
- *Kids' Power, Too, words to grow by* - Cathey Brow, Betty LaPorte and Jerry Moe (Imagin Works, 1996)

Al-Anon publish some really good books and pamphlets for young people. Here are some of them:

- *Courage to be Me Living with Alcoholism* - Al-Anon Family Group
- *If your parent drinks too much* - Al-Anon Family Group
- *Alateen: Hope for Children of Alcoholics* - Al-Anon Family Group
- *What's "Drunk", Mama?* - Al-Anon Family Group