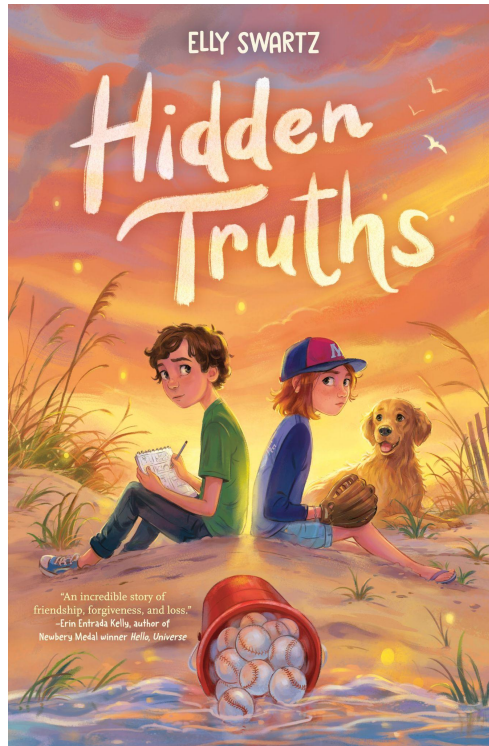


Teachers' Guide

HIDDEN TRUTHS

By Elly Swartz



Praise for *Hidden Truths*

★ "A warm testament to the healing power of mutual respect—and doughnuts."

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ "Swartz's latest is realistic fiction at its best."

—*SLJ*, starred review

"This is an incredible story of friendship, forgiveness, and loss. Readers will find it difficult to put down."

—Erin Entrada Kelly, 2018 Newbery Medal Winner: *Hello, Universe*

About the Book

HIDDEN TRUTHS follows neighbors and best friends Danielle (Dani) and Eric as they navigate middle school, their changing friendship, social media fame, mean girls, online bullying, and crushes. Written in alternating points of view, the reader gets to hear from both Dani and Eric as they have a chance to tell their side.

About the Author

Elly Swartz is the acclaimed author of six middle grade novels: *Finding Perfect*, *Smart Cookie*, *Give and Take*, *Dear Student*, *Hidden Truths*, and *Stand by Me (2025)*. Swartz's books reflect her commitment to raising awareness about mental health. Her debut, *Finding Perfect*, was named one of the Best Children's Books About Mental Health by the Child Mind Institute and her most recent book, *Dear Student*, was recommended by *Parents Magazine* and named to Publishers Weekly 2022 Children's Books for Mental Health Awareness, and selected as a finalist for the 2023-24 Iowa Children's Choice Award, the 2023-2024 Keystone to Reading Secondary Book Award, and the Crown Award. *Hidden Truths* has received 2 starred reviews and was named to Colby Sharp's Awesome 2023 Books list and Jennifer LaGarde's Best Books of 2023.

Swartz's stories have been a catalyst for conversation, change, and connection. Elly resides in Massachusetts, attended Boston University, and received her JD at Georgetown University School of Law. Connect with Elly at ellyswartz.com, on Twitter @ellyswartz or Instagram @ellyswartzbooks.

To attain specific Common Core grade-level standards for your classroom, teachers are encouraged to adapt the activities in this guide to your students' needs. You know your kids best!

Pre-Reading Questions

Write your responses and discuss the following as a group:

Hidden Truths

What do you think it means to hide the truth?
Is there a difference between lying and hiding the truth?
Why do people hide truths?
Do you think it is ever okay to hide your truth? If so, when?

Identity

What parts of your identity do you choose for yourself?
What parts of your identity are determined by others?
Can you change the way the world sees you? If so, how?
In what ways does your identity change:
- based on who you are with?
- based on what you are doing?
- over time?

Friendship

What are the pillars of a strong friendship?
What makes a friendship last?
What threatens a friendship?
Can friendships be mended? If so, how?

Apology/Honesty Letters

Everyone makes mistakes. What do you do when you make one?
When do you think you should apologize to someone?
What are the different ways you could apologize?

CCSS ELA - Language 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5
CCSS ELA - Reading: Literature 6.4
CCSS ELA - Speaking and Listening 6.1, 6.6
CCSS ELA - Writing 6.1, 6.2, 6.4

Post-Reading Activities and Questions

Hidden Truths

In the novel, each character below is hiding their truth. Fill in the table below, considering what you learned about each character throughout the story.

Character	Hidden Truth	Why do you think they keep it hidden?	Do they ultimately share their truth? Why or why not?	Do you agree or disagree with their decision?
Eric				
Dani				
Meadow				
Rachel				
Leo				
Charles Baniker President of RCarz				

In pairs, choose one of the characters from the table above. Partner A will take on the role of that particular character, explaining why they have chosen to keep their truth hidden. Partner B will try to persuade that character to reveal their truth. Partner A should respond, in character. Then, swap roles and choose another character.

Identity

Sometimes the way the world sees us is different from the way we see ourselves. For instance, in the cafeteria scene when Eric shares his plan to fix things, Dani says, “Can’t you just forget about it? Like everything else you’ve ever not done?” (p. 174) Dani is referring to Eric’s forgetfulness that often stems from his ADHD.

But Eric doesn’t see himself that way. On page 168 he shares, “That’s the part Mr. Jennings never got. He never understood that I was down the rabbit hole looking at the problem from lots of different directions: upside down, inside out, and sideways...Sometimes upside down, inside out, and sideways is exactly where the answer is...I actually think this may be my superpower.”

As Eric explains, we are so much more than the way the world defines us.

Identity Activity 1 - Stickers and Jibbitz

In chapter 24, Meadow gives Dani a charm bracelet and tells her, “This is for the person you want to be. Whoever that is.” She helps me clasp the gift around my wrist. “Every time you figure out something new that you like, you add a charm to the loop.” p. 140

Now it’s your turn. Design stickers for your computer case/water bottle or Jibbitz for your Crocs.

To start creating:

- A. Think of 3-5 things that represent how you see yourself.
- B. Come up with a design for the 3-5 things that show how you see yourself.
- C. Repeat steps a and b, thinking about how the world sees you.
- D. Complete tables 1 and 2 below. You may notice that some Jibbitz/Stickers appear in both tables below, while some may be different.

If coming up with stickers or Jibbitz for yourself seems challenging, try the activity first using a character in the book.

Sticker/Croc #1 - How you see yourself

Sticker/Jibbitz	Explanation

Sticker/Croc #2 - How the world sees you

Sticker/Jibbitz	Explanation

Extension:

- A. Create your own stickers using Avery labels or create your own Jibbitz using a 3D printer.
- B. Using maker space materials or recyclable materials create a model of your sticker or Jibbitz.
- C. Choose a digital tool that is approved for your school like Canva or Google Draw and design your own Jibbitz or sticker.

Identity Activity 2 - Comic Book Character

Eric creates a comic book character named Sideways whose superpower is the unique way he looks at and solves problems. Eric says, "... it's about a superhero kid named Sideways. A kid with his own superpower. His real name is Mickey. He's short with brown hair, loves lots of different stuff, is messy and smart but not great at school. What he is great at is solving problems." (p. 227)

Create your own comic book superhero that represents your unique superpower - and remember, that power only has to feel special to you. Tell us about your comic book character in a story, comic, drawing, or video.

Bullying

In the story, bullying takes on many different forms (verbal, social, cyber, physical), as do the roles the characters play in bullying (kids who bully, are bullied, assist, reinforce, remain silent). For more information on bullying go to stopbullying.gov.

Identify 4 scenes in the book where bullying takes place and fill in the chart below.

Page(s)	Who is doing the bullying?	Who are they bullying?	What form does the bullying take?	What other characters play a role in the bullying?	What role does that character play?

- A. In the 4 scenes above, why do you think the bully behaved the way they did and can you offer 2 ways they could have handled the situation better?
- B. In a sentence, describe the difference between being an upstander and a bystander.
- C. In the 4 scenes above, was there an upstander or bystander present? If so, who was it and why do you think they acted or failed to act? What would you have done in those circumstances and why?
- D. In the above scenes, who do you think the character or the upstander could have gone to or asked for help?

Friendship

There are many friendships in *Hidden Truths*. Some are just beginning, some are well developed, and some are at a crossroads. Let's explore the concept of friendship a bit deeper.

- A. Using nouns (trust, patience, respect, positivity, vulnerability, shared experiences, etc), list what you think are the top three qualities of a strong friendship. As you make the list, think about the difference between just being friendly and being true friends.
- B. Create a visual representation of what the class collectively thinks about friendship using an approved online Word Cloud generator.
- C. Using the class Word Cloud, let's think about some of the friendships in the book.
- D. Now, choose one friendship pair from the table below and write a paragraph defending your belief that their friendship will or will not last.

Friends	Strongest friendship quality	Example (include pg #)	Weakest friendship quality	Example (include pg #)	Do you think their friendship will last?
Dani and Eric					
Dani and Meadow					
Eric and Rachel					

- E. Friendship advice - like Dear Student-esque...maybe a nice text to text connection!!!

Elly Swartz has written another book called *Dear Student*. In this book, the protagonist, Autumn, becomes the secret voice of her middle school's

advice column. Below are 3 letters from characters in *Hidden Truths* asking for advice. What advice can you give them? Consider the qualities of a strong friendship in your response.

From Eric: My new friend who I have a lot in common with broke my trust. I asked her not to write about something personal that happened to me as part of her application essay. She did it anyway. She doesn't see why it bothers me so much. Is there any hope that our friendship can be saved?

From Dani: My best friend and I had a falling out. Well, maybe it was mostly me. I've been a jerk. Not on purpose, but maybe that doesn't matter. Does it? Does it matter that I was in pain? That he didn't listen to me? I still should have stood up for him. I did, but only in my head. Not sure that counts. Do you think we can ever get back to how we used to be?

From Meadow: I think I made a big mistake with my new friend. I didn't tell her the whole truth about something because I was afraid she'd think I was a bad person and not want to be my friend. Is not telling her the same thing as lying? How do I fix it?

Describe your life in 6 words

All of the characters in *Hidden Truths* are navigating middle school. The Six-Word Memoir project challenges people to capture their life experiences in just six words. Now, it's your turn! Choose one of the characters from the story (Eric, Dani, Rachel, Meadow, Leo) and express their life in *Hidden Truths* in just six words. Feel free to write multiple ones for each character or one for every character.

Example: Leo

Example 1: Private battles make me do it.

Example 2: It's not always what it seems.

Example 3: Sorry. I know how you feel.

Shapeshifting

In the story, you're introduced to the idea of shapeshifting - when people act differently depending on the people they are with. For instance, in Chapter 32, *Something I Was*, Dani shares that she behaves in a way that her grandmother would be disappointed in (p, 181-82).

- A. Think about how Dani may have behaved if her grandmother had been present at the birthday party.
- B. Now, gather in groups and role play.
 - a. the way Dani behaved the way the chapter was written.
 - b. the way Dani may have behaved if her grandmother had been present at the party.
- C. Go back in the text and find other moments where a character shapeshifts. Discuss how they may have behaved differently had other people been present.

Apology/Honesty Letters

Apology/Honesty Letters Activity 1 - Writing an honesty letter

Share with your class this slide deck on [Learning How to Apologize](#). Then have your students write an honesty letter like Meadow did in the story (p. 242-43). Have them write one to themselves, a friend, a family member, or anyone in your community they'd like to apologize to.

Other options: have your student give a verbal apology to this person or create an apology video for them.

Apology/Honesty Letters Activity 2 - Creating an apology/honesty mailbox for the classroom

Create a mailbox for your class. Then have students write honesty letters to place inside.

Apology/ Honesty Letters Activity 3 - Character apologies

If Rachel were to apologize to Eric what would it look like? Sound like? Feel like? Write a short letter, poem, or create a video with Rachel's apology to Eric.

Now repeat the above with an apology from any of the pairs below:

- A. Eric to Dani
- B. Dani to Eric
- C. Meadow to Eric
- D. Meadow to Dani
- E. Meadow to Millie
- F. Charles Baniker, President of RCarz to Dani

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CCSS ELA - Reading: Literature 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.6
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CCSS ELA - Writing 6.1, 6.2

Quotations to Discuss

- A. What do the quotes below mean in the context of the story? How do they contribute to the story's themes, setting, or plot?
- B. What do the quotes below mean to you personally?

"You're not climbing alone, my friend." p.67

"... I wish I had a pocket large enough to hide all the things that are hurting me."
p.67

"I sink further into my seat as all my past, forgetful, mess-ups spill between us." p.75

"Life is happening without me." p.79

"I know he thinks she's a jerk, but the truth is, people change. She's not that person anymore." p.97

"Because mad feels temporary. But sad feels like something that sticks." p.105

"So if we're really talking truth, why not share it all?" p.117

"But you can't possibly think being picked on by some brainless idiot is the same as what I'm dealing with?" p.134

"Healing is a marathon, not a sprint." p.145

"Sometimes upside down, inside out, and sideways is exactly where the answer is." p.168

"No one gets it right all the time. We all make mistakes...It's what we do after those mistakes that counts." p.207

Enrichment Activity

Dual Point of View

The ending

At the end of the story, Dani and Eric reconcile. If you agree with the way the author wrote the ending, keep going. What's next for our friends? Write chapter 47 from Eric's point of view and chapter 48 from Dani's point of view.

If you didn't agree with the way the author wrote the ending, you get to rewrite it. Write a new chapter 45 from Eric's point of view and a new chapter 46 from Dani's point of view.

Secondary characters

Rachel

In the story, you hear Dani and Eric's points of view. But what about Meadow and Rachel?

Chapter 35, page 200-201, Eric learns that Rachel used his story for her essay. The reader hears from Eric and Rachel's dad, but we never hear Rachel's thoughts. During this exchange, Rachel is quiet. Rewrite this scene from Rachel's point of view. Be sure to include Rachel's inner monologue. What is she thinking and feeling as her dad brags to Eric about her essay?

Meadow

On page 116-117, Dani and Meadow make a TikTok video. The chapter ends with "He messed up big time. You practically said it yourself, you're sad and he's selfish. So if we're really talking truth, why not share it all?" (page 117) With an approved video tool, create the next episode from Meadow's point of view. Does Meadow take her own advice and finally share her truth?

Leo

In chapter 43, Eric sees Leo's interactions with his older brother. Write a new scene from Leo's point of view where Eric and Leo have a conversation about what happened.

Podcasting

Eric works with Jade Zhang on her podcast to make change.

Write a script for an episode for Jade’s podcast about an issue that you feel passionate about. It can be anything from climate change, mental health, bullying, identity, or even friendship. Most importantly, talk about an issue that matters to you.

To extend this enrichment activity, use an approved audio or video platform to record your episode.

CCSS ELA - Language 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.6
CCSS ELA - Reading: Literature 6.5, 6.6
CCSS ELA - Speaking and Listening 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, 6.6
CCSS ELA - Writing 6.3, 6.4, 6.5

This guide was written by author Elly Swartz and educators Anna Kontos and Dr. Rayna Freedman.

As an educator for over twenty-five years, Anna Kontos has served in both public and independent schools as a classroom teacher, literacy coach, English department head, and learning specialist. She has spoken at a number of conferences on a variety of topics ranging from conducting successful student-led conferences, to reimagining the hero’s journey through literature, to designing comprehensive, school-based word study programs that enhance all students’ reading and writing. Anna holds a B.A. in Psychology from Dartmouth College and M.Ed.in Language and Literacy from Harvard Graduate School of Education. Anna currently supports and consults with individual students, families, and schools to promote positive outcomes for children in both academic and non-academic settings.

Dr. Rayna Freedman is a 5th grade teacher at the Jordan/Jackson Elementary School in Mansfield, MA. She has taught grades 3-5 and is an ITS. Rayna has a B.S. in Education from the University of Vermont and a M.Ed in Educational Technology from Lesley University. She received her doctorate through Northeastern in teaching, learning, leading, and curriculum. Rayna is the Past President of MassCUE and has been presenting at the annual conference since 2010. She is a Google Champion, Google Trainer, a BrainPOP certified educator, Flipgrid Ambassador, Fablevision Ambassador and Wakelet Ambassador. Rayna has presented for ISTE, Ed Tech Teacher, Tech and Learning, Medfield Digital Learning Day, FETC, BPLC, and BLC.