THEMATIC GUIDE
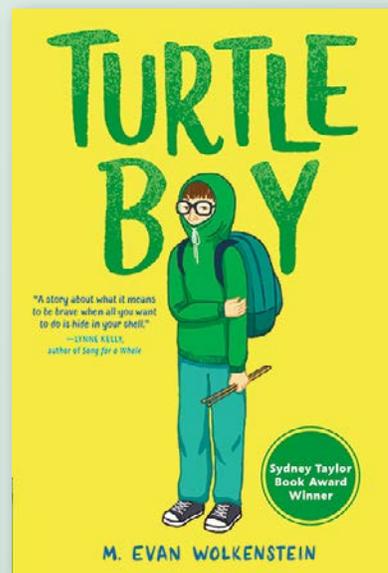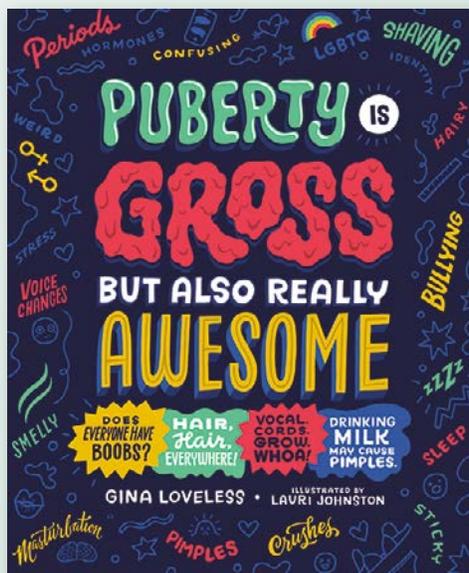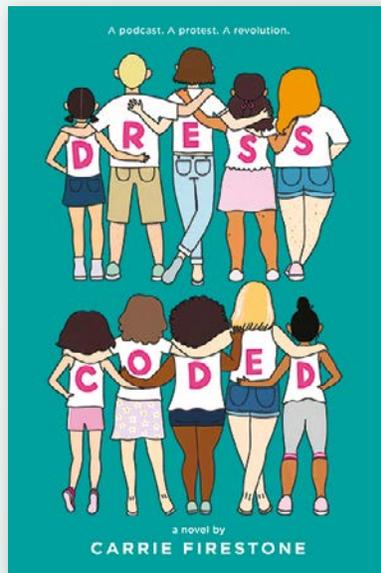## STUDENT WELLNESS

Teaching About Body Positivity and Nutrition
MIDDLE SCHOOL

CONTENTS

■ INTRODUCTION

A healthy body image has always been a significant part of an adolescent's self-esteem. But, when bombarded on a daily basis with images of airbrushed celebrities and filtered Instaqueens, it is not difficult to understand why today's teens are facing a major mental health crisis very often tied to self-image and self-esteem. Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and even Zoom allow users to filter, edit, and enhance the way they look on-screen. As a result, adolescents are not only measuring themselves against unrealistic images of celebrities and influencers; now they can measure their actual selves to their unattainable, flawless, filtered selves.

A global pandemic has made matters worse. Adolescent eating disorders surged early in the pandemic due to lack of structure, social isolation, food insecurity, and anxiety over COVID-19. Homebound teens had more time to scroll social media, eat poorly, and obsess over their bodies. Eating disorder hotline calls and hospital admissions continue to rise.

The books in this text set provide information, suggestions, and relatable characters who work toward living a healthy life and loving the person they see in the mirror. Teachers can choose one or any combination of books and strategies to use with whole-class instruction, literature circles, or independent reading as they work to build an environment where students see themselves and their classmates in their best, unfiltered light.

▪ ABOUT THE TITLES IN THIS COLLECTION

Dress Coded

CARRIE FIRESTONE

978-1-98-481645-0
Trade Paperback | G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers
336 pages | $8.99 | Lexile: 760L

In Carrie Firestone's *Dress Coded*, middle schooler Molly Frost discovers the power of her own voice when she advocates for equity in her school's dress code.

Fat Chance, Charlie Vega

CRYSTAL MALDONADO

978-0-82-344717-6
Hardcover | Holiday House
352 pages | $18.99
Also available: E-BOOK

Talented writer and curvy brown girl Charlie realizes she is her own worst critic in Crystal Maldonado's *Fat Chance, Charlie Vega*.

Puberty Is Gross But Also Really Awesome

GINA LOVELESS
Illustrated by LAURI JOHNSON

978-1-63-565353-3
Trade Paperback | Rodale Kids
192 pages | $15.99 | Lexile: 1020L
Also available: E-BOOK

With topics including body positivity, gender expression, and nutrition, Gina Loveless's *Puberty Is Gross but Also Really Awesome* is a friendly, forthright guide for navigating adolescence.

Turtle Boy

M. EVAN WOLKENSTEIN

978-0-59-312159-7
Trade Paperback | Yearling
400 pages | $8.99 | Lexile: 640L
Also available: AUDIO DOWNLOAD, E-BOOK

In *Turtle Boy*, by M. Evan Wolkenstein, seventh-grader Will Levine faces his fears for the sake of a friend and learns that life is better outside his shell.

■ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following classroom strategies promote equity and inclusion by addressing students' social-emotional learning needs at the beginning, middle, and end of class.

1. Who plays a role in contributing to or improving your sense of identity, self-confidence, and body image? Consider yourself, as well as adults and peers at home, in school, and in the community.

2. Where do you most feel like your authentic self? What is it about this place or environment that empowers you? What image, feeling, or phrase might you take from this place to feel self-confident in other settings?

3. How do the arts and other forms of self-expression provide a healthy avenue for releasing frustration, anger, and other emotions? What is your go-to form of self-expression?

4. How would you describe the social media images and videos you spend the most time viewing? How do these images and videos make you feel, and why? Which sites might you recommend to classmates for a positive self-image and healthy lifestyle?

5. What is the impact of clothing on the way you view yourself and the way you are viewed by others? How do you feel about this characterization?

6. How would you describe a healthy attitude toward food? What steps might you take to achieve it?

7. How do gratitude and positive self-talk contribute to self-image? What is one regular practice you can adopt to recognize and appreciate your strengths, talents, and gifts?

8. How are students with health challenges or disabilities at your school viewed by their peers? In what ways might these challenges impact body image and self-confidence? What are some ways to ensure ALL classmates feel included, valued, and admired?

9. What role does grief play in self-image and a healthy lifestyle? What resources for addressing the loss of a loved one are available in your school and community?

10. How might service to others improve one's outlook, confidence, and self-image? What are some community service or advocacy opportunities you are currently involved in or would like to consider?

■ CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

VISIBLE THINKING

In both *Fat Chance, Charlie Vega* and *Dress Coded*, the main character is frustrated by the idealized images they see on the screen. In *Dress Coded*, Molly feels these versions of beauty are unattainable for underdeveloped girls like her. In *Fat Chance , Charlie Vega*, Charlie Vega sees very little media representation of curvy, brown girls like herself. Using two thinking routines from Harvard's Project Zero, ask students to explore and discuss two video resources about this topic.

First, show students the Dove "reverse selfie" commercial that begins with the image of a beautiful woman before reversing the applied filters to reveal a very young adolescent girl.

As they watch, students should apply the "See, Think, Wonder" routine to analyze the images. Students should ask themselves:

- What do I see? (What details stick out?)

- What do I think? (What about the image makes me think that?)

- What does this make me wonder? (What broader questions does this image raise?)

With each question, students apply a more critical lens. Students can compare notes with a partner, small group, or the class. Topics that may arise include the age difference between the first and last image, the time and energy it took to create the illusion, and the standardized Instagram face that lacks diversity. Discuss the impact of this idealized version of beauty on an adolescent's self-esteem.

Next, show the *Allure* magazine interview, "Girls Ages 6-18 Talk about Body Image." Ask students to apply the "Text Rendering" protocol as they watch, writing down one sentence, one phrase, and one word that is significant, powerful, or thought-provoking in the interviews. Afterwards, small groups share their sentences one at a time, then their phrases, and finally their words. In this way, every student has equal talk time before the class discusses patterns and ideas that emerged during small-group sharing, such as the need for representation of all shapes, sizes, and cultures in order to redefine beauty and encourage self-esteem. Ask: "How do these videos emphasize or expand themes we see in the text(s) we are reading?"

- Reverse selfie video: https://tinyurl.com/mgguide1

- See, Think, Wonder routine: https://tinyurl.com/mgguide2

- Allure Interview: https://tinyurl.com/mgguide3

- Text Rendering protocol:
  https://coe.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/text_rendering_protocol.pdf

QUICK WRITES

Molly in *Dress Coded* and Charlie in *Fat Chance, Charlie Vega* use writing for self-expression and emotional release. In *Turtle Boy* and *Puberty Is Gross but Also Really Awesome*, writing helps teens set goals or affirm self-worth. In the classroom, informal writing provides a way to generate and organize thinking about authors' themes, as well as a chance for students to make connections to prior knowledge, their own experience, or the world around them. Ask students to respond with quick writes before, during, or after reading passages of text. Quick writes can come directly from the discussion questions included in this guide, or they might be more creative or personal in nature. Sample quick writes that align to this collection include:

- Write a letter to a family member, friend, teacher, or someone else that says all the things you wish you could say out loud.
- Write a letter to yourself that outlines all the things that are admirable or make you special.
- Make a list of everything that makes middle school stressful. Follow up with a list of everything that makes middle school enjoyable.
- Write a list of interview questions for a podcast you'd love to hear or create.
- Compile a "bucket list" of things you'd like to do or accomplish. Explain why you've included each item.
- Create a stack of Post-it notes with positive messages for yourself and others. Post them where you can see them at school and at home.

IMAGE ANALYSIS

Although *Puberty Is Gross but Also Really Awesome* tells students that physical development "is not an indicator of what type of person you are" (p. 7), social media often sends the opposite message. Show students an advertisement that represents an idealized view of beauty and ask them to analyze the image. First, students should jot down what they see, including words and phrases. Next, students should reflect and ask questions about the image. An analysis tool that can be adapted for this activity is this graphic organizer from the National Archives: https://www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/worksheets/photo_analysis_worksheet.pdf.

One example image that will work for this activity is an advertisement asking viewers to "get your summer body ready with the HCG Rapid Weight Loss Diet": https://purblissmedspa.com/get-your-summer-body-ready.

In the ad, a tall, slim woman with long legs and an hourglass figure stands in the forefront, wearing a black bikini. Her face has been left out of the frame. Students should note the model's race and shape, and they should wonder why her face has been removed. Facilitate a discussion about cultural bias, body shaming, and the objectification of females. Explain that teens are constantly targeted with these

negative self-image advertisements, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, teens who spent all day on their computers were purposely bombarded with weight loss ads that glamorized unhealthy diets and dangerous medications.

After analyzing the ad, ask students to make connections to the class texts, such as *Dress Coded*, where characters felt shamed and dehumanized due to their body shapes.

HASHTAG GALLERY WALK

In *Turtle Boy*, *Dress Coded*, and *Fat Chance, Charlie Vega*, teens find that advocating for causes they believe in helps build their confidence. Hashtags such as #DressCoded and #FatFashion become pivotal resources for the characters by advertising their causes, elevating their voices, and promoting individualism. Provide students with an opportunity to share causes that are important to them. Using Padlet, Jamboard, or another digital bulletin board, ask students to create posts naming and describing an advocacy movement they support or would like to research. Posts should include the hashtag and provide digital links. Possible hashtags might include #FridaysForFuture, #TheTrevorProject, or #BlackLivesMatter. When posting is complete, invite students to take a digital "gallery walk," stopping to read about different advocacy movements and learning about their classmates at the same time. Students can reflect and respond by leaving comments and asking questions on each other's posts. Discuss with students: What does it mean to be an advocate? How can young people speak truth to power? How does supporting a cause improve one's self-esteem? As an extension, students might read a news story about youth activism or social justice hashtags. Two possible articles are listed below:

https://vpm.org/news/articles/32011/teens-and-young-adults-are-taking-on-roles-as-activists

https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/discover-social-movements-on-instagram

MULTIMEDIA PRODUCT

Challenge students to produce an in-depth multimedia product that addresses one of the discussion questions or topics included in this guide. Students might choose to focus on eating disorders, gender identity, social media filters, bullying, or body positivity. They could inform an audience about a physical condition, such as body dysmorphia, mitochondrial disease, or micrognathia, all of which are addressed in *Turtle Boy*. The products should include research, integrate student thinking, and make connections to the class text(s). For example, students might interview classmates about social media habits and their impact on self-esteem. They could integrate the interview format from *Dress Coded* or cite research about the internet from *Puberty Is Gross but Also Really Awesome*. Or, their product might explore social issues such as curvy fashion or brown girl beauty, both topics in *Fat Chance, Charlie Vega*. The

multimedia product should reflect individual student choice and interests, and might include:

- A podcast or interview using free audio recording and editing software, such as Audacity.

- A Ted Talk–type video speech with scripted narration aided by cue cards. Students can use cell phones or tablets to record their talks.

- A digital story using iMovie or Windows Movie Maker. Digital stories combine narration and still images and can be created on student laptops or phones.

- An interactive web page that combines multiple digital features to inform an audience. Adobe Spark, Google Sites, or another web tool can be used to combine text, graphics, video, and audio.

SEMINAR DISCUSSION

To highlight relevance and elevate student voice, conduct a Socratic seminar based on a close read of the CNN article "Student protests growing over gender-equal dress codes" (https://www.cnn.com/2016/02/25/living/dress-code-protests-irpt). As in *Puberty Is Gross but Also Really Awesome*, which advocates for freedom in gender expression, the article outlines concerns over inequities in school dress codes, particularly toward female, transgender, and nonbinary students. And similar to *Dress Coded*, organized student advocates lead the way.

Prior to the seminar, students should read the article and annotate points where they agree, disagree, or question what the text says. After the close read, discuss with students what an ideal seminar looks and sounds like, including active listening and respect of multiple viewpoints. Ask students to set a class goal, such as "I will contribute to the discussion at least one time," as well as a personal goal, such as "I will mention classmates' names and extend or politely disagree with their thinking." Students should record their goals and keep them visible during the seminar.

During the discussion, take a facilitator's role. Ask a low-risk opening question to encourage total class participation in a round-robin response, such as "What is the biggest takeaway from this article?" This question might be provided the night before. Its purpose is to identify the article's main ideas. Then, move to a core question for the purpose of analyzing text details, such as "Are school dress codes inherently sexist?" or "To what extent does the article affirm, argue, or qualify this?" Encourage students to use supporting evidence when possible.

End the discussion with a closing question that promotes personalization, such as "How might the big ideas in this article impact you, your family, or our community?" Ask students to evaluate their own and their classmates' speaking, thinking, and listening. Did they meet their class and personal goals? What should the class do differently in the next seminar discussion? How did the seminar deepen understanding of the current class text?

■ **RESOURCES**

The following resources provide additional information on issues raised in this collection.

- https://tinyurl.com/mgguide4
- https://www.cnbc.com/2021/09/14/facebook-documents-show-how-toxic-instagram-is-for-teens-wsj.html
- https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/28/well/family/teens-eating-disorders.html
- https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/04/tech/instagram-facebook-eating-disorders/index.html/
- https://19thnews.org/2022/01/school-dress-code-challenges/

■ **ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE**

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