

A Curriculum Guide to

Mrs. Smith's Spy School for Girls and Power Play

By Beth McMullen

About the Series

Abby Hunter has been accepted into The Smith School for Children. Unbeknownst to her, the school is actually an elite spy training facility called The Center, filled with spy technology and resources to help thwart some of the most devious villains around. Join Abby and her friends Charlotte, Izumi, Toby, and Veronica as they survive adventures and mishaps on their journey toward becoming spies. In *Mrs. Smith's Spy School for Girls*, Abby gets a crash course in Spy Training 101 before being sent to California to lure her missing mother, an elite spy who has gone missing, out into the open. In *Power Play*, Abby and her friends must find Toby's dad, the creator of a new virtual reality game called Monster Mayhem, before his kidnapper can do any more damage.

Prereading Series Discussion Questions

The activities below particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (RL.4-7.2,9)

1. Consider the books and their cover art. In what ways do the images represent or symbolize the events that occur throughout the course of each book? How do the covers change? What clues do the covers give you as to what might happen in the story?
2. The title of the series and first book is *Mrs. Smith's Spy School for Girls*, but the actual name of the school is The Smith School for Children. What impression does this title make, and how does it shape your vision of this community and its students? The title also implies that this is a school for girls, and yet Toby is a vital character in the story. How does the author treat gender norms, stereotypes, and cultures? Are there any gender stereotypes depicted in the stories? As you're reading, find examples from both books to support your thinking.
3. Action, adventure, and spy stories are popular literary genres. Can you name other teen spies from books, movies, or TV? In what ways do Abby's style and techniques differ from these other teen spies? What makes Abby and her friends unique? Give examples to support your answers.

Author's Craft and Purpose

The activities below particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (RL.4-7.4)

1. Both books are told from Abby's point of view in the first person. If you could have a different character tell the story, who would you choose and why?

2. Both stories initially take place at the school and then move on to other places. Do you think the Smith School could be a real place? Explain your reasoning. What does the author do to help you visualize all the places Abby and her friends visit? Do you feel you know these places well? What distinguishes each place, and why they are included in the books?

3. Throughout the books the author uses phrases such as “cut to the chase,” “waiting for the other shoe to drop,” and “been to Timbuktu.” Why does the author do this and why is it important to the story? Find other examples of phrases that are unique to a spy story.

4. Each chapter of the book has a heading shared in a who, what, when, where, or why format. Explain why the author structures the chapters this way. How would you rewrite these chapter headings: “The catacombs, where I again prove my brilliance,” “Assumptions make you look stupid,” or “Always check the pockets.”

Key ideas and details

The activities below particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (RL.4-7.1,2,3,7,9) (W.4-7.6,8,9)

1. In *Mrs. Smith’s Spy School for Girls*, Abby’s mom, Jennifer, talks about self-reliance. “When things are really crazy,” she says, “that’s when you need to have the most confidence in yourself and be bold even if it's scary.” What does this mean? Find examples in the book that show how Abby has to be self-reliant.

2. In *Power Play*, Jennifer says, “You’ve got to stop breaking the rules. You make me look bad,” and “Do not even try to defend your actions and choices. That will only make things worse . . .” How has the relationship between Abby and her mom changed over the course of the book(s)? How does Jennifer’s perspective compare to Abby’s? Find examples from the book that show Abby breaking the rules. Do they support your reasoning?

3. Think about the cast of secondary characters in the books: Izumi, Charlotte, Toby, and Veronica. Which of these characters did you most identify with and why? How are their relationships changing throughout the books? What are the reasons for the changes? How is Abby changing as she adapts to these growing friendships? Do you think there are hidden sides to each character? How do they develop over the course of the series? Consider creating a chart like this:

- a. Character description - story/series beginning - evidence
- b. Character description - story/series middle - evidence
- c. Character description - story/series end – evidence

4. As Abby begins to understand more about her mother in *Mrs. Smith’s Spy School for Girls*, she realizes that her life up until now has been entirely different than she thought. Give examples

of events that happen in the story and how they connect back to earlier events in Abby's life. How do the bits and pieces of Abby's past and present fit together?

5. In *Power Play*, Jennifer is now headmaster of the Spy School. How does this change the relationship between Abby and her mom? How does Jennifer show her feelings for Abby without jeopardizing others and the mission they need to accomplish? Is Jennifer able to justify the choices she makes? Gather examples to show your reasoning.

6. What are some problems that Abby faces as she is thrust into the unfamiliar role of spy? What can you infer about Abby as she takes this on? What do these shifts tell us about her?

7. Abby thinks that she plans for her missions. Is this true? Explain your reasoning. Is Abby alert and aware of her surroundings and the pitfalls that might occur? What kind of assumptions does Abby make about herself in her planning?

8. *Power Play* opens with Abby and her friends obsessing over a new virtual reality game called Monster Mayhem. This game is similar to the Pokemon Go game that can be played with a smart phone. How does this game set the stage for the rest of the story? What are the rules for the game? Why are the rules and the game perfect for spy training? Dive into Monster Mayhem with these two activities:

- a. Design an avatar for yourself that you might use to play Monster Mayhem. With permission from your teacher, use <http://www.buildyourwildself.com> to create your avatar.
- b. One of the creatures Abby and her friends need to capture is a Skunk Ape. Using the description in *Power Play*, draw a picture of what this creature might look like.

9. How do Abby and her friends make prom fit with their search for Toby and his Dad? Do you think this mission is well-planned and well-executed? Identify examples from the story to support your answers.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

The activities below particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (RL.4-7.6) (W.4-7.6,7,8,9)

1. Abby is thought to be too young to be a spy. Do you agree or disagree? At what age should one be able to become a spy? Is age the only criteria for being a spy? Create a resume for Abby that might help her get in to spy school. What kind of information and experiences would you include?

2. In *Mrs. Smith's Spy School for Girls*, Abby faces a moral dilemma: save herself or save Suzie. How does Abby handle this dilemma, and what important lesson does Abby come away with?

3. Toward the end of the San Francisco trip in *Mrs. Smith's Spy School for Girls*, Veronica has to come and help Abby. ““You did okay tonight,”” Veronica says, ““if we overlook the parts where you screwed up.”” What did Abby “screw up” and what did she do well? Could she have done anything differently? If so, what and how?

4. In *Power Play*, Veronica is frustrated because she is taken off a mission to babysit Abby and her friends. Veronica seems disappointed in Abby. Is this true? Is Veronica a friend or an enemy? What events in the story support your thinking?

5. In *Power Play*, we are introduced to Toby's troubled friend from the past, Zachary. What do you think might have happened to turn Zachary away from his friends? Why is Zachary seeking revenge? Do you think this is a good way to reconcile the betrayal that he feels? What would you do in a situation where a friend betrays you?

6. How does Abby grow and change over the course of the books? What are some of the life lessons that she's learned? Reread chapters 23 and 25 in *Mrs. Smith's Spy School for Girls* and Chapter 35 in *Power Play*. Name the lessons in these chapters and explain what Abby wants. Do you think she makes the right choices? Use examples from the stories to support your answer.

7. In the last chapter of *Mrs. Smith's Spy School for Girls*, Jennifer tells Abby, “Parents aren't your destiny.” What is she trying to tell Abby? How can you apply this lesson to your own life? Do you see this play out in *Power Play*? At the end of *Power Play*, Drexel thanks the team for the chance to become a better father. Parents deciding to be “better” is code red, according to Abby and her friends. What does this mean? How does this tie in with Jennifer's message about parents not being your destiny?

8. Based on events that happened in this series, predict what might happen next for Abby and her friends in the third book in Mrs. Smith's Spy School for Girls series.

Extension Activities

The activities below particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (SL.4-7.1,2,3,4,5,6) (RL.4-7.5) (W.4-7.6,8,9) (RI.4-7.3) (RST.6-7.7)

1. Abby's given a crash course in spy training. If you had the opportunity to design and create a curriculum for spies, what would be in your beginning courses? Name your curriculum Spy Training 101 and include subjects such as disguises, secret codes, gadgets, chromatography, secret compartments, spy cameras, and self-defense. How might your classes incorporate subjects such as chemistry, physics, computer science, engineering, physical education, problem solving, and teamwork? Make sure your curriculum has at least four different classes.

2. Cryptography and ciphers have long been a part of sending secret messages. Using the CIA Kidzone website (<https://www.cia.gov/kids-page/games/break-the-code>), try different secret

codes and decide which would be a good fit for *Mrs. Smith's Spy School for Girls*. Using the different codes as a model, can you create a new code for the spy school?

3. Create a laser maze obstacle course for you and your friends. Using ideas from <http://www.mykidsadventures.com/string-laser-maze/> and the Catacombs from *Mrs. Smith's Spy School for Girls* building, map out how this would work and what it would look like. Design your idea on paper and create a model to represent the maze in the catacombs.

4. Design a spy gadget or turn an everyday item at home into a spy gadget.

- a. <http://www.topspysecrets.com/kids-spy-equipment-for-free.html>
- b. <https://www.savvyhomemade.com/homemade-spy-gear/>

5. Write a persuasive essay that convinces your parent or guardian why you should or should not be sent to boarding school. Be sure to keep the following ideas in mind as you build your argument:

- a. Align your interests to the person you're trying to persuade
- b. Use the same type of language as that person
- c. Know your demographics—collect data from family and friends
- d. “Quid pro quo”—I'll do for you, if you do for me

Alternatively, write a persuasive essay that convinces your parents that you are old enough and ready to be part of Spy School. Again, be sure to keep in mind the points listed above as you build your argument.

6. The Frick Museum and the Statue of Persephone are part of a clue left by Abby's mom in *Mrs. Smith's Spy School for Girls*. Using the virtual tour at the Frick Museum, start at the Garden Court (http://www.frick.org/visit/virtual_tour) and re-create the trail that Abby and her friends follow from the symbols that Abby's mom left as a “doodle.” Create the doodle itself from the description in the book and by looking at the virtual rooms.

7. The Louvre Museum with the *Mona Lisa*, The London Eye, and the Garden of Versailles are part of *Power Play*. Create a map that shows Abby and her friends traveling to capture monster mayhem creatures. Have characters take an “Instagram photo” or selfie of themselves at each of the places they visit. Use <https://www.paperzip.co.uk/resource/instagram-template/> or this Google slide template https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1yrp_oW8Q-emxYEkGlavDFmjD9EfQpSZYpi1y1CkdUPU/edit to create the photos.

8. Latin phrases are used throughout *Mrs. Smith's Spy School for Girls*. In loco parentis (in place of a parent) is a good example. What are some other Latin phrases that we encounter in our everyday lives or in everyday use? Can you find three to five that you are familiar with? Start exploring with these pages:

- c. <http://blogs.transparent.com/latin/25-latin-phrases-every-student-should-know/>
- d. <http://blogs.transparent.com/latin/ten-latin-spells-from-harry-potter/>

9. At the beginning of *Mrs. Smith's Spy School for Girls*, Abby receives a letter from The Smith School for Children. On the letterhead, there is a crest and a coat of arms (bright blue and red). Design the coat of arms and crest based on your reading of the story. What will it include? Be sure that your design is unique to the school and explain why you have included these symbols.

10. What do the following quotes from *Power Play* tell you about the series and its characters? Examine why these quotes might be important. Who do you think is responsible for each quote? What might the context or setting be?

- a. "Spying might be dangerous, but self-doubt is worse."
- b. "Keep in mind, simple is best."
- c. "Humanity has been spying since the beginning of time. I wonder what it would be like if we didn't have to."
- d. "[The] rules of the game have changed . . ."
- e. "A good spy just has to wing it."
- f. "To have friends you first have to be a good friend."

Tier II Vocabulary

Mrs. Smith's Spy School for Girls

infirmary • catacombs • madrigal • archival • disheveled • subterranean • ballistic • respective • insurmountable • exponentially • traverse • affiliated • espionage • dubious • gullible • innuendo • inner sanctum • amorphous • nemesis • inherently • gone rogue • Herculean • concussed • labyrinthine • ineptitude • freelancing • noir movie • soliloquy • bushwhacked • precariously • preposterous • condescending • minions • Luddite • auspicious • de facto • vestibule • collateral damage • delusion • incapacitate

Power Play

• trepidation • triage • aversion • precariously • quasi-mentor • vetted • roust • traipse • cynical • enigmatic • cafe au lait • intrepid • opulence • contingency • bedraggled • reconvene • mantra • iridescent • cavernous • injustice • rhetorical • copse • audacity • silhouette • perpetrating • rogue • calibrate • persnickety • deviate • muster • iconic • thwarted • lolling • ramshackle • transgressions • contrite • begrudgingly • monolingual • plausible

Read-alikes from Simon & Schuster

Spy School Series by Stuart Gibbs

- Spy School
- Spy Camp
- Evil Spy School
- Spy Ski School

- Spy School Secret Service

Merits of Mischief Series by T. R. Burns

- The Bad Apple
- A World of Trouble
- Watch Your Step

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