



# The Grinch

Movie Review

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As far back as ancient Greece people were utilizing books as methods for working through various ailments. The term, bibliography, is what we pair with the phenomenon of using media, specifically books, to help people suffering from trauma or psychological issues. While the Transfiguring Adoption is NOT claiming to be professionals in the psychological or mental health arena, we do believe that families can glean from this concept in using movies, video games, and, naturally, books, to help foster or adoptive children process their story.

## Section I

### **Why are we using books, movies, and video games to help children?**

- **Partially disengage mind from fear/problems**  
Immersing yourself in media helps you to escape from reality for a bit. This can give our minds a partial break from the worry and stress so that we have more energy to attach the issue when we come back to it.
- **Introduced to new solutions**  
We might discover new solutions to problems as we experience a character in media conquer an issue.
- **Emotional vocabulary**  
Discovering more ways to express how we feel and think can help us to communicate our own thoughts and feelings. Overall, more effective communication allows us to ask for better assistance with our feelings and issues.
- **Identify with characters/stories**  
You have heard the saying, “no man is an island.” No person wants to feel like they are alone in their thoughts, feelings, or experiences. When we discover a character in media struggling with similar issues as our own, it helps to “normalize,” our life situations and feel comforted. This can also help us to discover our own identity as a character goes through a process in their life.

## Section II

### **This Only Works TOGETHER - Parent & Child.**

Here is why it is IMPERATIVE that a parent or trusted adult walk through these questions and media with a child:

- **Trauma Triggers**

An event or language in a piece of media might remind our children of past events in their lives which were traumatic. If we are to assume that they have not yet had enough life experience to successfully walk through these situations and make sense of them, then they will need a safe adult to be able to process feelings and emotions.

Some caregiver might be nervous or scared to discuss the details of sexual abuse, physical abuse, and so on. Our children are also scared but have no choice but to live through it. Our children need an adult who can help them process through issues by listening. They need an adult who knows when information needs to be given over to a trusted therapist and other professionals.

- **Reliving Trauma**

Some media might not simply suggest or bring up past trauma but could expose a child to a similar situation as what they have experienced. If a child is exposed to such media, it goes without saying that they will need a safe adult to help them process their thoughts and emotions. They will even need a safe adult who may not have the right answers but can get the child to a professional who can help.

- **Living in a Dream World**

As much as negatively living through trauma can have a devastating effect on our children, too much of a good thing can also have a poor effect when it is experienced on their own. Some children who have come from traumatic backgrounds may have trouble separating fantasy from reality. When given media where the main character is always rescued in the nick of time, the waif always marries royalty, or all problems are solved in a neat package, our children could be given over to considering this is how the world operates and that the solutions of the characters will produce similar fantastical results. It is important to have a trusted adult on duty who can applaud the fun of a tale but also bring everyone back down to reality.

- **Never Really Find Results**

Again it can be a pitfall for caregivers to be nervous about a topic and simply hope that children will learn by experiencing a book or movie on their own. The problem is that many of our children lack the life experience to be able to connect the dots to see how a character's struggles and life solutions could be compared to their own life.

A trusted adult can help a child to glean solutions and conversations from a piece of media to make real life change begin.

## Section III

### How To Use Our Discussion Packets:

#### 1. **Exposure as a Family**

Watch, read, or play the respective media this packet discusses together before you begin the conversation. It is important that parent and child experience things together. Natural bonding and teachable moments come about when we experience things together.

#### 2. **Wait for the Right Time**

As foster and adoptive parents, many of us want to help our children so badly that when we get a new resource we want to try it out faster than a child wants to open up presents on Christmas. However, it is important to judge when your child is ready to talk about issues brought up by media.

If your child is struggling with habitual lying and just reprimanded earlier in the day at school, there might be intense feelings of guilt and embarrassment. It may not be the correct time to point out that Pinocchio gets in trouble when he lies and try to begin a discussion about how lies can harm your life. Instead wait a day or two when everything is going right in your family's world, and then try to begin a conversation.

People who are hurt, angered, frustrated or depressed due to a topic are not going to be open to having a dialogue about the issues.

#### 3. **Nudging Toward Identification**

If we look at this conversation as a swimming pool, "Nudging Toward Identification" is going to be the shallow end of the pool. The goal is to simply notice - just notice - similarities you might see in a character's life and your child's life. This step is helping our children to see that they might be able to relate with a character. The media is going from merely a source of entertainment to something we possibly - POSSIBLY - could connect with in some manner.

This might come in the form of phrases such as:

- "Hey, did you notice that in the book Sally had to figure out how to make friends at school too?"
- "Tom's brother in the movie was really good at soccer just like you, right?!"
- "Too bad you're not in the story with Samantha, because you like learning about science as much as she does, right?"

#### 4. **Emotional Involvement**

In Step 3 we helped our child to consider that they might be able to connect with a character. During this step, if the atmosphere is still good for conversation, we are going to push the similarities with the media character a bit further. We are going to take a look at specific situations and emotions. We are going to take a look at issues that characters confronted and discuss solutions and emotional outcomes. Hopefully, through this step our children will be able to more deeply and emotionally be able to identify with a character.

We might ask questions such as:

- "Sally made up stories to try and make new friends. Do you think this was the right way to make friends? Why? What should she have done differently?"

- “How do you think Tom felt when he missed the goal and lost the soccer game for his team? What would you tell him? Do you ever feel like Tom?”
- “Which do you think made Samantha feel better, winning the science fair or making new friends at school? Do you ever feel like that? Why?”

#### 5. **Continued Conversations**

Always remember that helping children walk through trauma is not a sprint but a marathon. Do not get discouraged if the right time to talk about themes in a piece of media don't turn up right away. Do not get discouraged if your child doesn't want to talk about anything “deep” or life changing.

Some people have reported that their children might watch a movie, lightly discuss it, and then a month later begin asking deeper questions about a theme or topic in the media.

As parents our job is to create an atmosphere where learning and growth can happen AND CAN CONTINUE HAPPENING. We need to equip ourselves with the tools to be ready for those small windows of time that our children are ready to discuss and learn from us.

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## Comprehensive Review

# Transfiguring Adoption's Overview:

The newest version of *The Grinch* (2018) is a fun retelling of the holiday classic that pays homage to the original short cartoon while also updating it somewhat for the modern audience. The movie is based on the original story by Dr. Seuss which then spawned the classic 1987 cartoon and a live-action version in the early 2000s. This version is narrated by Pharrell Williams and has Benedict Cumberbatch voicing the title character.

The target audience appears to be primarily elementary-aged children, though the movie really is fun for the whole family and will likely also appeal to older children/teens and even adults who grew up with the other versions of this timeless classic. While there is a lot of mild cartoon peril/physical comedy and some rude humor, for the most part the movie doesn't contain much questionable content and is likely appropriate for most families to enjoy together.

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**\*\* Spoilers Could Be Ahead \*\***

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## How Is This Relevant To Adoption & Foster Care?

This movie does not address foster care or adoption using those specific words. However, we DO see a very brief flashback where the Grinch remembers living in an orphanage. Based on his remembrance that 'no one ever wanted him' it can be concluded that he essentially aged out of whatever care he was in as a child and has been living alone ever since. Children who are in care are likely to relate to his desire for belonging and the difficulties he has watching others celebrate a holiday with loved ones while he is unable to do the same.

This version of the story also does a great job of showing Grinch's dislike of Christmas as a trauma response, which children in foster and adoptive families may also identify with. He tries to avoid any holiday activities, lashes out in anger at others and even has something similar to a panic attack when he accidentally winds up in the middle of a crowded celebration. Like the Grinch, children may have these types of behaviors during the holidays but might not be able to articulate why they are feeling this way. The holidays can be a very difficult time for children who have experienced trauma, even if they are now in a safe and loving family situation. Holidays are typically a time of family and friends and traditions- therefore the season that most view as festive may trigger memories of past experiences that weren't so happy. Or even stir up memories of happy times spent with their biological families whom they are not currently able to be with.



## Discussion Points:

- **The Spirit of Christmas**

At its heart, The Grinch is a story about coming to the realization that getting lots of presents or having fancy decorations and a giant tree isn't what makes Christmas special. It's about kindness, compassion and community. The movie is able to talk about the 'meaning of Christmas' without mentioning religion or even really emphasizing that it's a time for 'family' which can be hard for children from a background of trauma to think about because they likely have loved ones they aren't able to be with. Instead the message of the film really focuses on the idea of community, including friends, neighbors, etc. You can use this as an opportunity to talk about all the people they **do** have in their life- whether that's foster/adoptive families, biological family, friends, caseworkers/counselors, etc. and how even if you can't physically be with a loved one during the holidays that doesn't mean the love is any less.

- **Compassion for Others**

One of the main storylines in this iteration is that Cindy Lou wants to talk to Santa to ask for her very special wish- that he helps her mom. Cindy Lou's mom is a hardworking single mother who works the night shift and then cares for Cindy Lou and her twin infant brothers all day. We repeatedly see Cindy Lou trying to help out around the house and make her mother's life easier. Later, we see her extend an invitation to The Grinch to join them for Christmas dinner, even though he tried to ruin Christmas and has been mean to her and others in the past. This can be a great way to start a discussion with kids about the different ways we can show compassion to others- both those who have been kind to us as well as those who may have been less friendly in the past.

- **Learning new Holiday Traditions**

The Grinch has never celebrated Christmas before because it's always been a triggering time for him. Cindy Lou invites him to spend the holiday with her family which he does but it's all new for him and he isn't sure how to act or what to expect. He even says at one point, "This is my first Christmas dinner. What happens?" For children new to your home, they may be feeling similarly as they try to learn the behaviors and traditions that your family engages in during the holiday season which might be very different from what they have experienced in the past. You can use these scenes to talk to children about the ways in which the Grinch feels uncomfortable or uncertain and how Cindy Lou, Bricklebaum and the other Whos make him feel welcome and included. This in turn could lead to a conversation about how they can feel included in your family traditions and maybe even include a few of their own.

## Cautionary Points:

- **Shortage of Food**

In an early scene, we see Max serve the Grinch a meager meal and then the Grinch frantically searching his cupboards for more food. He has originally hoarded food supplies to avoid having to go into town to shop during the holiday season but has run out of his stores. While it is a simple matter for The Grinch to go into town and buy more- the momentary distress and frantic search he engages in may be triggering for children who have experienced food insecurity in the past, as many children from abusive or neglectful homes have.

- **Cartoon Peril/Dangerous Situations**

There is a lot of physical 'pratfall' comedy throughout the movie where characters fall or are catapulted out of windows and down mountain sides. Cindy Lou sleds down a very steep mountain street in an inner tube and flies over busses and people. Most of these instances it is very clearly unrealistic, and cartoon-physics are clearly at play, but your children are likely to copy potentially dangerous stunts or become upset at seeing characters in dangerous situations it's something to note. One scene in particular is near the end of the movie when the Grinch and his very full sleigh topple over the side of the mountain and appear to be falling to their doom before he is rescued.

- **Child shown spending holidays alone**

The Grinch has a flashback to his childhood where we see him in an orphanage all alone while others celebrate Christmas with their loved ones. For a child who has spent a holiday or special occasion alone, in a group home or hospital, or in an abusive home this scene may be upsetting to view.

- **Character experiences Anxiety Attack**

There is a scene where The Grinch accidentally ends up in the middle of a crowded Christmas festival. He becomes visibly disoriented and anxious and has flashbacks to his unhappy childhood. Children who have experienced trauma often have a heightened fight-or-flight response and have a difficult time returning to baseline after an adrenaline spike. Witnessing another character experience an anxious situation may in turn make them feel anxious, especially if they have similar anxiety triggers (such as being in large crowds of people).

- **Mild rude humor/IMPLIED nudity**

There is one scene where we get a close up view of the Grinch's rear end while he is

'twerking'. There is also a scene where one of Cindy Lou's friends loses his clothes and is holding a cookie in front of himself but appears to be naked otherwise. We also see the Grinch in his underwear during one scene.

- **“Stealing”**

Considering the movie is based on a story called 'How the Grinch Stole Christmas' this one is kind of a given. We see the Grinch, dressed up as Santa, sneak into the homes of all the Whos and steal their Christmas gifts, decorations, food, etc. If children have issues with stealing behaviors it may be important to have a conversation about the wrongness of his actions and the way in which he eventually makes amends by returning the items.

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## Discussion Questions

**1. Who is your favorite character in the movie? Why?**

Caregiver Note: This is essentially just a fun question to get the conversation started. Cindy Lou and the Grinch are the most likely answers, though this version does give Cindy Lou a group of friends as well. Younger children may not be able to articulate why they like a particular character, but if children are able, it may offer some insight into whether they relate to a particular character or wish they were more like them.

**2. Do you have a favorite thing you like about the holidays?**

Caregiver Note: Throughout the movie we see the Whos engaging in all manner of holiday activities and traditions- from decorating their homes, a tree lighting ceremony, singing together and a holiday feast. This is another question that is mostly light but could also be a way to talk about traditions they might have experiences in other homes or what parts of the holiday they are most looking forward to in your home.

**3. After The Grinch's trip into town we're told "The Grinch felt upset, but he wasn't sure why." Why do you think he is upset? Have you ever had a time where you felt like that but didn't know why?**

Caregiver Note: The Grinch has past trauma relating to Christmas so being around others celebrating the holiday brings back upsetting memories and a general feeling of unease. Like the Grinch, there are times that our children might suddenly feel upset but not realize why, because something unknowingly reminded them of their own trauma. This can be a way to talk about those situations by discussing the Grinch's trauma and how it makes him feel bad and to discuss strategies for them to use if they ever experience a similar sensation- such as talking to a trusted grown-up who might be able to help them figure out why they feel bad and how to feel better.

**4. Activity: Ornament Design/Creation**

Caregiver Note: The Whos have a huge tree-lighting ceremony where each Who brings an ornament they have made or that represents themselves to put on the tree. This can be a fun bonding activity as you and your children design your own ornaments that you would use for this special tree. This could be as simple as drawing the kind of ornament you'd like to include or if you want to get more hands on you could make your own ornaments. There are lots of DIY ornament kits out there that have pre-cut ceramic or wooden shapes that can be painted or decorated or you could make ornaments out of everything from popsicle sticks to paper. After you finish drawing or creating your ornaments, take turns talking about why you chose the design you did and how it represents you.

5. **Why does the Grinch hate Christmas?**

Caregiver Note: This is similar to an above question but as the movie goes on, we've gotten more information about the Grinch's past and his unpleasant associations with the holiday so children may better be able to answer now. Being able to identify and discuss why the Grinch doesn't like Christmas and how his behaviors relate to that is a great step towards being able to make those connections in their own feelings and behaviors as well. The Grinch doesn't like Christmas because something bad happened to him on Christmas as a child and therefore he acts out when he experiences reminders of this bad experience (i.e. anything holiday related). If children can understand and articulate how these things coincide for this character, then that is the necessary groundwork for discovering similar associations in themselves.

6. **If you were going to try to trap Santa, how would you do it?**

Caregiver Note: This is another fun question, as a break from the heavier topics. Cindy Lou wants to talk to Santa, so she and her friends devise a plan to 'catch' him. While this is mostly for fun, brainstorming ideas and discussing logistics is also a great way to practice strategizing and planning skills.

7. **How does Max feel about Fred coming to live with them?**

Caregiver Note: When The Grinch decides to masquerade as Santa, he decides he needs a reindeer and he brings home Fred. Up until this point Max has been the Grinch's only companion and he is a little jealous of the new member of the family who is now competing with him for attention and resources. This can mirror how children feel when a new sibling comes to live with them. Even though they love the sibling it's always an adjustment to having new family members, especially if they were previously an only child.

8. **Cindy Lou says, "When you listen to the music all of your sadness just goes away." Is there something you do that makes you feel like this?**

Caregiver Note: Having self-soothing activities that a child can turn to when they are feeling overwhelming emotions is important and often looks different for every child. In this example Cindy Lou shares that listening to music helps her feel better. Talk with children about the different things they can do when they are having a hard time- this could be music like Cindy Lou, writing, drawing/art, taking a walk, or doing breathing exercises or meditation. If children aren't sure what will help them try out some different activities together and see if you can find one that they enjoy.

9. **After he sees the Whos celebrating despite their Christmas items being stolen, the Grinch feels remorse and “he tried to make right what he had made wrong”. How does the Grinch make amends to the Whos?**

Caregiver Note: The Grinch feels bad about having stolen all the Christmas decorations and gifts and so he takes everything back and returns it to the Whos. He then apologizes and explains why he did it and how he knows now that he was wrong. This is a great demonstration of the process of making amends and the different steps involved and can be a great way to talk to kids about how to recognize when they've made a mistake and what to do next to correct it.

10. **How do you think the Grinch feels when Cindy Lou invites him to the feast? What about at the feast?**

Caregiver Note: The Grinch has been alone for a long time and isn't used to being invited to do things. He probably experienced several emotions when Cindy Lou extended him an invitation. He might have felt happy to be included, surprised they wanted to be friends with him after he had hurt them but also confused and anxious about the idea of being with a large group of people and participating in Christmas activities that were new to him. When he gets to the celebration, he is uncertain about how to act and what's going to happen. This can be a great way to talk to kids about how they might feel when experiencing a new situation and how all these feelings are valid. If they're new to your home, you can also use this time to talk about what holiday traditions and activities they might expect as a part of your family to help prepare them so there is less worry.

## About the Reviewer

### **JENN EHLERS**

Jenn is a central Virginia native who received her BA in Psychology from the University of Virginia in 2012. Since then she has worked for a local mental health agency and the Department of Social Services in various capacities and has been involved in her community's efforts to create a Trauma Informed Network. Currently Jenn works in vocational rehab and mentors youth in foster care. When she isn't working, Jenn enjoys writing stories, anything and everything Harry Potter, and spending time with her niece and nephew.