



BY JENNIFER A. KOKAI
& OLIVER GREY KOKAI-MEANS

STUDY GUIDE



PROVIDED BY BIRMINGHAM CHILDREN'S THEATRE

With a Special Thanks to Plan-B Theatre for help in creating this study guide.

Performance Dates & How to Use This Guide

“Zombie Thoughts”
by Jennifer A. Kokai & Oliver Grey Kokai-Means
Directed by Carlton V Bell II

Sam and Pig are avatars in the video game *Zombie Thoughts*. Armed with just a book, a rubber chicken, and the help of the audience, they try to overcome Sam’s anxiety and defeat the monsters the evil Machine throws at them. The only path to victory is if students make a series of choices that help Sam and Pig learn empathy for each other.

Note: This script has been reviewed and endorsed by a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Licensed Behavioral Analyst for its depiction of and treatment suggestions for Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

Tours are available Tuesdays & Wednesdays, October 20 - 27
and Tuesdays - Fridays, November 2 - November 12,
with possible extension thru November 19

Visit www.bct123.org for more information or to book a field trip today!

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This classroom guide for “Zombie Thoughts” is designed for Alabama students in 3rd - 6th grade.

Use this guide to prepare for your trip to the theatre with pre-show activities and a theatre etiquette guide.

After the show, further the experience with activities that can be integrated into your current classroom curriculum.

All activities in this guide are linked to the Alabama State Department of Education content standards: <https://www.alsde.edu/>

(All worksheets can be found in the “Study Guide Printables” packet provided).

Lastly, we would love to hear from you! Please have your students fill out the “Post Show Response” form in the printables packet.

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Your Role as the Audience

Dear Audience Members,

Birmingham Children's Theatre is thrilled to bring you "Zombie Thoughts", a fantastic play by Jennifer A. Kokai & Oliver Grey Kokai-Means!

A few rules we want to make sure everyone is aware of:

- To help keep our audience members safe, BCT's staff and performers are vaccinated and will be wearing face coverings. We also encourage audience members to wear face masks during the performance.
- Cell phones off! And put away - those glowing screens are very distracting.

In theatre, the audience is an extremely important part of our storytelling, and we need your help to make this the best show possible for you and your fellow audience members. This is a choose-your-own adventure story and our characters will need your help to navigate the game!

While the show is happening, DO

- Give your full attention to the actors and the story
- Feel free to laugh, gasp, and applaud!
- We need your help to tell the story! Our actors will let you know when and how to interact, and we encourage you to do so with enthusiasm!

And to make sure everyone can enjoy the show, we ask that you DON'T

- Talk to your friends and neighbors
- Wave, shout, or disrupt the performance

Stories create a world of imagination and fun, where the impossible comes to life. "Zombie Thoughts" is a wonderful opportunity for students in third through eighth grade to experience an exciting and entertaining play that grapples with complex emotions and provides tools to help young people move through their zombie thoughts.

Please note: This script has been reviewed and endorsed by a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Licensed Behavioral Analyst for its depiction of and treatment suggestions for Generalized Anxiety Disorder. We hope this study guide helps continue the conversations within this play with your students in a meaningful and impactful way.

We'll see you soon,

Birmingham Children's Theatre

About the Artists



JENNIFER A. KOKAI: PLAYWRIGHT

Jennifer A. Kokai is a playwright who currently lives in Ogden, Utah where she teaches at Weber State University. Her plays have been produced by Riverside: The National Theatre of Parramatta, Plan-B, Montana Rep, THML Theatre, Theatre Synesthesia, Wasatch Theatre Company, Building Better People Productions, Off-Key Anthem Collective (reading), and a variety of educational institutions.

She was included in the Lark Play Development Center's 2014 Playwrights Week. She has been a semi-finalist with the O'Neill, Bay Area Playwrights' Festival, B-Street Theatre, and Seven Devils. She is a member of the Plan-B Theatre Company Playwrights Lab.

"Zombie Thoughts" was co-written by Jennifer's 11-year-old son, Oliver Kokai-Means. It is inspired by Oliver's experience living with General Anxiety Disorder (GAD). Oliver has said, "I hope that kids who see the play understand that those people with anxiety aren't just scared, they're scared in a way they can't help, and you shouldn't make fun of these people for being scared because they can't help it. I also hope that if they have things they're scared about, the ideas in the play help them learn how to feel better." (Salt Lake County ZAP)



CARLTON V BELL II: DIRECTOR

Carlton V Bell II, An overall curator & facilitator of artistic expression—Named AL.com's 2019 #2 entertainer of the year, this award winning theatre artist & Artistic Director of Birmingham Black Repertory Theatre Company, is giddy to be returning to Birmingham Children's Theatre; past BCT credits include "Peter Pan", "And In This Corner Cassius Clay", and "Charlotte's Web". Recent directing credits include; "Choir Boy" by Tarell Alvin McCraney (Broadway World's Play & Director of the Year—as well as Play & Director of the Decade) as well as "One in Two" by

Donja R. Love. Ase' www.carltonvbelle.com

An Introduction to SEL Skills

Birmingham Children's Theatre's production of "Zombie Thoughts" by Jennifer A. Kokai and her 11-year-old son Oliver Kokai-Means, is inspired by Oliver's experience living with General Anxiety Disorder (GAD). Constructed like a video game, the play is interactive, inviting students to make choices throughout the play to help Sam (who has anxiety) and Pig (who is punny) progress through the game-within-the-play. The only path to victory is if students make a series of choices that help Sam and Pig learn empathy for each other. Oh...and it's really, really funny.

WHY "ZOMBIE THOUGHTS"?

The Anxiety and Depression Association of America estimates that GAD and other anxiety disorders affect 1 in 8 children in the United States. By dispelling misunderstandings surrounding anxiety for the students, teachers and administrators experiencing "Zombie Thoughts," our hope is to help your school become a safer space for each of its students. Recent Harvard research shows that social and emotional learning (SEL) is comprised of three skills areas¹:

Cognitive	Emotional	Social
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• managing and shifting attention• controlling impulses• planning and goal setting• critical thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• recognizing and expressing emotions• regulating emotions and behavior• empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• understanding social cues• prosocial behavior• conflict resolution• problem solving

SEL skills, essential for student success, work in tandem with beliefs, character, values and personality. They are malleable and sensitive to outside stimuli from infancy through adolescence. When we only focus on cognitive issues without attention to the other components of SEL, major aspects of students' social-emotional development go unsupported. Thus it is crucial to incorporate SEL into classroom activities.

WILL "ZOMBIE THOUGHTS" MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

SEL interventions impact both social-emotional skills and academic outcomes.² They have short and a long-term effects on a child's academic progress, behavioral adjustment and emotional health and well-being. "Zombie Thoughts" addresses the topic of childhood anxiety and depression, two internalizing behaviors that often go unrecognized in schools. While externalizing behaviors are more noticeable because they are more likely to lead to school and classroom disruptions, internalizing behaviors are just as serious and are easily overlooked if educators aren't primed to look for, recognize and intervene. A school environment where SEL learning is a focus both formally (in the relationships between adults and children) and informally (in the overall climate and culture of the building) will better equip our students for dealing with life's stressors.

1 [Jones, S., Brush, K., Bailey, R., Brion-Meisels, G., McIntyre, J., Kahn, J., Nelson, B., & Stickle, L. \(2017\). Navigating SEL from the inside out. Harvard Graduate School of Education](#)

2 [Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., & Schellinger, K.B. \(2011\). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. Child Development, 82\(1\), 405-432.](#)

Core Standards and Objectives

WHERE DOES “ZOMBIE THOUGHTS” FIT IN MY CORE?

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) lists self-management, which includes stress management, as one of the core competencies. Below are some of the core standards and objectives addressed by and through “Zombie Thoughts.”

GRADE 3

Standard 1: Students will learn ways to improve mental health and manage stress.

Objective 1: Demonstrate responsibility for self and actions.

- a. Identify personal responsibilities.
- b. Predict the consequences of neglecting responsibilities, such as increased stress, grades, punishment, no sense of accomplishment, impact on other people.
- c. Report the outcomes (sense of accomplishment, feeling good, contribution to cause, less stress) of completing responsibilities.
- d. Determine how positive decision making can help complete responsibilities.

GRADE 4

Standard 1: Students will learn ways to improve mental health and manage stress.

Objective 4: Explore positive options for managing stress.

- a. Define stress.
- b. Identify behaviors or situations that may cause conflict or stress.
- c. Create a personal stress management plan.

GRADE 5

Standard 1: Students will learn ways to improve mental health and manage stress.

Objective 1: Summarize how communicating with others can help improve overall health.

- a. Compare the benefits of social interaction and time alone.
- b. Communicate the need for social interaction and time alone.
- c. Adopt behaviors to help maintain mental health, such as reading, exercise, lifelong learning, abstaining from substance abuse.

Objective 4: Demonstrate constructive ways of managing stress.

- a. Explain how both positive and negative events can cause stress.
- b. Identify physiological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to stress.
- c. Predict how neglecting personal responsibilities may increase stress.
- d. Develop and apply a personal stress management plan.

GRADE 6

Standard 1: The students will learn ways to improve mental health and manage stress.

Objective 1: Develop strategies for appropriately and safely expressing emotions.

- a. Recognize the range of emotions, including extremes.
- b. List situations that elicit strong emotions; e.g., winning or losing a competition, losing a friend, family changes.
- c. Predict the effect of substance use on emotions and the ability to appropriately manage them.

Objective 4: Demonstrate positive strategies for managing stress.

- a. Identify situations or circumstances that cause stress.
- b. Recognize personal reaction or response to stressful situations.
- c. Design a personal plan that includes options for managing stress and stressful situations.

Pre-Show Activities

DEFINING THEATRE

Questions:

1. "Have you ever seen a play?"
(If they haven't, make sure to define it for them).
2. "What kinds of things happen in a play?"
3. "What kind of plays would you like to see?" or
"What would you like to see if you are watching a play?"
4. "Where do plays typically Happen?"
5. "How should the audience behave and act during a play?"
(Make a list of things a good audience member does and a list of things a bad audience member does).

Here are a few things you can discuss with your class to help them understand what to expect at a live theatre production:

- Theatre features live on-stage actors. They have spent many weeks rehearsing for the performance.
- The audience is a very important part of the performance. Appreciation and enthusiasm for the performers is shown by close attention and participation and applause at the proper times. The success of the play depends on the appropriate interaction between cast and audience.
- The theatre is a very special place. Its atmosphere is entirely different from your home where the television is always available.
- It is easy to identify with live actors. You can see how they use their bodies and voices to convey different emotions.
- Actors wear costumes and make-up to help create the impression of the characters they play.
- There is much more to most live performances than actors. Special sets, effects, lighting, music, costumes, and of course, the audience add to the total experience.

GLOSSARY/TERMS TO KNOW

- Neurotypical
- Anxiety
- Anthropomorphic
- Depression
- Mental Illness
- Empathy
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Abyss
- Apocalypse

Pre-Show Activities

THEATRE ETIQUETTE

Here are a few things you can discuss with your class to help them understand what to expect at a live theatre production:

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Introduce your students to the following theatrical terms:

Box Office	Program	Props	Lobby	Actor	Balcony
Reserved Seats	Overture	Director	Stagehand	Scenery	Orchestra Pit
Acts & Scenes	Spotlights	Stage	Usher	Makeup	Play
Producer	Costumes	Curtain Call	Musical Theatre	Playwright	Proscenium

Discuss the role of the audience and proper theatre etiquette:

- Arrive early so that you do not miss anything and so that you will not disturb the rest of the audience while trying to get comfortable in your seat. Lights go out before the curtain goes up and seating is very difficult after that.
- It is easier for you (and the rest of the audience) to see and hear the performance if you stay in your seat and listen very carefully. Be careful not to kick your feet or hit someone else's seat with your feet.
- In most theatres you are not allowed to eat or chew gum. Not only does it ruin the theater, but it also distracts from your concentration.
- Try your best to remain in your seat once the performance has begun. Be sure to use the restroom before the show starts. In long performances, there will be an intermission. However, there is usually no intermission in a performance of the Primary Players since our shows are about one hour in length.
- Although you may wish to say something to the actors while they are on stage, you need to hold your thoughts. You may disturb their concentration.
- Sing or participate if and only if you are invited to do so. Your participation is often very important.
- Listen to how the music sets the moods and affects your own feelings.
- Show the cast and crew your appreciation for their hard work with applause. Do this when you like a song or dance or joke at the end of the show.

Activities for the Classroom

1. VOCABULARY

- a. Define anxiety.
- b. List synonyms and antonyms for anxiety.
- c. Create a concept web with anxiety in the center.
- d. Repeat the process with the word stress.

2. DRAWING

Have students draw a picture of something that makes them anxious, then share those drawings in partnerships and possibly the entire class.

3. WRITING & FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Write about a time you felt anxious.

- a. What did you do?
- b. How did it feel?

Extension: Have students interview someone (a classmate, a friend, a community or family member) about an anxious experience or event and record it in writing.

SEL work is strengthened through out-of-school partnerships such as family engagement.

4. BOOK/STORY

Read one of these books aloud and discuss it.

- What To Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety by Dawn Huebner
- Don't Think About Elephants by Susanne Merritt
- Wilma Jean the Worry Machine by Julia Cook

5. DISCUSSION & ROLE PLAY

Pose a scenario and ask students to think about how they would react to the stressor. Then invite them to discuss or act out a response with a partner. Finally, invite them to share their ideas or perform their role play for the class. Suggested scenarios:

- You forgot to do a homework assignment and it is due today.
- You have the end-of-year test coming up and your stomach hurts every time you think about it.
- Your brother or sister keeps getting into your things. You are nervous about leaving your room unattended because you are afraid things will be missing or misplaced.
- You wake up with an anxious, worried feeling nearly every day and feel like you don't want to go to school.

6. BREATHING EXERCISES

Sam uses breathing to help him deal with the effects of anxiety. Try one of the following breathing exercises with your class:

- Close your eyes and take three breaths. Feel your feet on the floor.
- Feel the anchor of your breath. Now open your eyes and scan the room without speaking. What did you notice after doing this? How did your body react? How did things look after you re-opened your eyes?
- Have students use their hands as an object of focus. Each student should stretch out their hand and then trace each outstretched finger with the index finger of the other hand, breathing as they do so. This is great for a transition during class time.
- Sphere breathing allows children to pretend they are holding a balloon in their hands. As they breathe in, their fingers slowly move apart to indicate the blowing up of a balloon. As they exhale, the fingers gradually and slowly come back together.

Activities for the Classroom

7. DO'S AND DON'TS

- **Do** understand there is a difference between feeling stressed and/or anxious and an anxiety disorder.
- **Do** understand these children want to fit in, have friends and meet classroom expectations but their disorder may prevent them from doing so.
- **Do** see a child with an anxiety disorder as more than their disability or mistakes.
- **Do** understand that anxious children want you to like them; they become paralyzed by fear that you won't.
- **Do** take a moment to see and recognize strengths, not just weaknesses.
- **Do** provide accommodations that will help a child with an anxiety disorder succeed: give them a safe place to go or a cue to remember to breathe when they start to become irritable, frustrated, or upset.
- **Do** understand that a child with an anxiety disorder is a child without the executive function to overcome or cure their disorder.
- **Do** understand that a child with an anxiety disorder is not trying to challenge your authority out of spite.
- **Do** understand that if a child is anxious and you get upset or anxious in response, they will mirror your emotions and melt down.
- **Don't** tell anxious children their fears are stupid or irrational. Their brain tells them otherwise.

8. POST-SHOW DISCUSSION

Following the play, have a discussion about what happens to Sam and Pig and how this relates to students in the class:

- What were some of Sam's characteristics? What were some of Pig's characteristics? How were they similar? How were they different?
- What are some of your characteristics? How are you like Sam or Pig?
- How did Sam deal with his anxiety? What did he learn from going through all of the game's levels?
- Is there something that worked for Sam, that he learned, that you could also use to help when you feel anxious?
- What are zombie thoughts? Connect this to the topic of metaphors: Zombie Thoughts are irrational thoughts and worries that are scary, but (like Zombies) not real.

9. PROBLEM BOX

Set up a problem box to collect class problems for future discussion. Tie some of the problems to "Zombie Thoughts" and discuss how we can manage our thinking about certain situations to reduce the associated anxiety.

10. STRESS MANAGEMENT PLAN

Have students create a personal stress management plan and report back on their successes and struggles. (See "Study Guide Printables" packet, pages 2 - 5, for template)

Online Resources

ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

An international nonprofit membership organization and leader in education, training, and research for anxiety, depression and related disorders.

<https://adaa.org>

- Understanding the difference between anxiety and an anxiety disorder

<https://adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/ask-and-learn/faqs/generalized-anxiety-disorder-same-gener-al-anxiety>

- A booklet on anxiety disorders and treatment options for children

<https://planbtheatre.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Anxiety-Disorders-in-Children.pdf>

KQED.ORG | 20 TIPS TO HELP DE-ESCALATE INTERACTIONS WITH ANXIOUS OR DEFIANT STUDENTS

Classroom strategies from Jessica Minahan, a certified behavior analyst and special educator.

<https://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2016/04/21/20-tips-to-help-de-escalate-interactions-with-anxious-or-defiant-students/>

CHILD MIND INSTITUTE

An independent, national nonprofit dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families living with mental health and learning disorders.

<https://childmind.org/>

- “Anxiety in the Classroom: What It Looks Like, & Why It’s Often Mistaken for Something Else”

<https://childmind.org/article/classroom-anxiety-in-children/>

- “Tips for Beating Test Anxiety”

<https://childmind.org/article/tips-for-beating-test-anxiety/>

- “How to Help Kids Who Are Too Hard on Themselves”

<https://childmind.org/article/how-to-help-kids-who-are-too-hard-on-themselves/>

THE CALM SCHOOLS INITIATIVE

Offering educators free subscriptions to guided meditations and mindfulness exercises.

<https://www.calm.com/schools>

PURE EDGE

Education resources, curricula, and training options supporting the philosophy that all educators and students deserve to be taught strategies to help combat stress to support the development of social, emotional, and academic learning competencies with an open heart and an open mind.

<https://pureedgeinc.org>

MINDFUL SCHOOLS

Courses and curricula designed for under-resourced public schools facing high turnover rates and toxic stress; offering educators practical skills for self-care, facilitation, and connecting with youth, providing simple, effective mindfulness practices easily integrated into the school day and adaptable for diverse environments. *(requires paid subscription)*

<http://www.mindfulschools.org/>



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THANKS FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

QUESTIONS? CONTACT DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION,
JESSIE KISOR AT jessie@bct123.org
