

Talking about *The Railway Children*

by E. Nesbit · the free ebook lives at youngreaderguide.org/books/railway-children/

Warming up

Easy openers. Anyone at the table can answer these, including the youngest.

1. Three Chimneys has a railway at the bottom of the garden. What would you most want at the bottom of yours, and what would you actually do with it?
2. Which one would you want beside you in a crisis: Bobbie, who notices everything; Peter, who moves first; or Phyllis, who says the thing everyone else is thinking?

The real conversation

Pick two or three, not all of them. Parents answer too, honestly.

1. Mother decides the children are too young to be told where Father is, so she tells them nothing for months. Bobbie finds out anyway, alone, from a newspaper. Was Mother right? Where is the line between protecting someone and leaving them in the dark?
2. Peter takes coal from the station heap and calls it a mine, and gets caught. He does it because the house is cold and there is no money. Does that make it not stealing, or does it just make it easier to understand?
3. Perks nearly refuses his birthday presents, because accepting them would feel like being pitied. The children meant it purely as love. When has someone tried to help you in a way that stung, and what exactly was it that stung?
4. The children stop the express by tearing up their own petticoats and standing on the line waving them. Nobody asked them to, and nobody would have blamed them for running for a grown-up instead. What makes a person do the harder thing on the spot, without time to think?
5. Mr Szczepansky was locked up for writing a book about how poor people lived. Father was locked up for something he never did. Twice in one story, a country gets it badly wrong about a good man. How does that happen — and how would anyone know if it were happening now?

The big *one*

Save it for last.

The book ends with the narrator stopping outside the door: 'I think that just now we are not wanted there.' She won't follow the family in, because some moments belong only to the people standing in them. Which moments in this family are like that — the ones you wouldn't want anybody else to watch? What makes them yours?

Do it *together*

Wave at the 9:15. The children pick one train, at one time, every day, and send their love to their father on it. Pick your family's version — a train, a bus, the 6:40 freight, a flight path that crosses your street at the same time each evening. Everyone commits to the same one. For a week, each of you goes and waves at it whenever you can, and each of you is waving to a particular person. On the last night, say out loud who you were waving to. Then tell that person.