

Talking about *Robinson Crusoe*

by Daniel Defoe · the free ebook lives at youngreaderguide.org/books/robinson-crusoe/

Warming *up*

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

1. You get one trip back to the sinking ship and whatever you can carry. What are you grabbing?
2. Crusoe teaches the parrot to talk because there is nobody else. If you had one animal to talk to for a year, which one?
3. Would you rather be alone on the island for twenty-eight years or stuck on the ship in the storm for one night? Answer before anybody else does.

The real *conversation*

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

1. Crusoe sells Xury, the boy who escaped with him and rowed beside him for weeks, for sixty pieces of eight — and he tells you he was 'very loth to sell the poor boy's liberty, who had assisted me so faithfully in procuring my own,' and sells him anyway. He knows. What is the difference between knowing something is wrong and it stopping you? Has anyone here done a thing they'd already talked themselves out of?
2. He names the man he saves 'Friday,' after the day of the week, and teaches him to call him 'Master.' He never asks him his name. What would it have cost Crusoe to ask — and why do you think it does not occur to him?
3. The footprint terrifies him. He has been desperate for company for fifteen years, and the first sign of another human being sends him running home to hide. Have you ever badly wanted something and then been frightened when it actually turned up?
4. Crusoe writes down the bad things in one column and the good things in the other, and says it made him easier. Try it out loud about a real week somebody here has had. Does it actually work, or does it just sound like it should?
5. His father tells him at the very start to stay home and take the 'middle station of life' — not poor, not grand, no adventures. Crusoe calls his whole life afterwards a punishment for not listening. But he also gets the island, the twenty-eight years, and the story. Was his father right?

The big *one*

Save it for last.

Crusoe is alone for fifteen years before he sees another human mark, and what he does with the time is make things: a fence, a pot, a boat, a calendar, a loaf of bread. If everyone at this table were suddenly on their own with time and no help, what would each of us start making — and what does that answer say about us?

Do it *together*

Make one thing the hard way. Crusoe spends most of a year getting to one clay pot that will hold water over a fire, and the book walks you through every failure. Pick one thing your family normally buys — bread, butter, rope, paper, a candle, ink — and make it from the beginning, without watching a video first. Guess your way through the first attempt on purpose. Then write down, Crusoe-style, what went wrong and what you would do differently, in his voice: 'I found that my first pot would not stand the fire, whereupon I resolved...' Keep the bad first attempt on the shelf next to the good one. That contrast is the whole book.