

Talking about *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

by Mark Twain · the free ebook lives at youngreaderguide.org/books/tom-sawyer/

Warming up

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

1. Tom gets other boys to pay him (apples, marbles, a dead rat on a string) for the privilege of doing his chore. What's the closest anyone at this table has come to pulling that off?
2. Graveyard at midnight, haunted house, raft to an island, miles of dark cave. Which Tom adventure would you actually sign up for?

The real conversation

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

1. The fence teaches Tom that work is whatever you're obliged to do, and play is whatever you're not. Is he right? Can you actually turn a chore into play for yourself, or only trick somebody else into thinking it is?
2. Tom and Huck swear a blood oath to stay silent about the murder, and keeping it nearly costs an innocent man his life. Tom finally breaks the oath in open court. When is breaking a promise the honest thing to do?
3. The boys sneak into their own funeral and hear the whole town say how much it loved them. Why do people save those words for when it's too late? What would change if they didn't?
4. Every boy in town envies Huck: no school, no shoes, no bedtime, answering to nobody. The book quietly shows what that freedom costs him. Would you trade lives with Huck? For how long?
5. Tom shows off in everything, but his bravest acts, taking Becky's whipping and standing up in court, he does almost without an audience. Which Tom is the real one?

The big *one*

Save it for last.

Tom plays at pirates, robbers, and buried treasure all book long. Then in the cave, with the candles failing and Becky losing hope, the game becomes real and Tom is simply steady and brave. What had all that pretending been practicing him for? What are your games practicing you for?

Do it *together*

Run the fence experiment. Each of you takes one genuine chore this week and tries Tom's method on it: do it with such visible, mysterious enjoyment that somebody offers to join in. No asking for help allowed; the mark has to volunteer. Report results at the next meeting. Failed attempts must be reported too, in full detail; Twain would have wanted the failures most.