

HOUSE GANG

Study Guide for tertiary students and community groups



House Gang cast

INTRODUCTION

Comedy and drama are valuable and powerful mediums used to challenge negative stereotypes and attitudes towards differences. Changes in attitudes through the portrayal of realistic story lines and images help us to break down barriers that exclude certain members of the community, and assist to create bridges between our differences and experiences. Given the world in which we live in today it is important that we are able to draw on our own humanity and see what makes us similar to one another rather than focusing on what sets us apart from each other.

House Gang is a comedy drama series about three young housemates, Trev, Belinda and Robert, with intellectual disabilities, living in a share house. Their lives collide with Mike, their homeless landlord and his caustic daughter, Chloe, when they move in on the trio and turn the household upside down in an attempt to learn to live together.

The series and this unit will be useful at tertiary level, for studies in the area of disability, media studies, cultural studies and the humanities or related fields. It will also be useful as a training tool for those preparing to or already working within the disability sector. As well, it will be of interest to people with disabilities for its positive portrayals and representations. Overall, **House Gang** will be relevant to those interested in disability, humanities and media related issues.

This unit offers opportunities to explore concepts in disability, including decision making, stereotypes, relationships, disability awareness, values and ethics, sexuality, workers role, advocacy and facilitating empowerment, communication, the notion of person versus disability, occupational health and safety issues and ethical and legal frameworks that inform how we work. In general the series values and addresses issues of diversity and differences.

There are two different ways the unit can be used. Firstly it can be used as a teaching resource for the Certificate IV in Disability studies, as it makes links to several of the compulsory units of competency. It can be used as an assessment tool to meet demonstrated learning outcomes and identified elements. Secondly it can be used as a resource for general discussion of topics and themes and could be used to link in with

learning that is relevant to you, such as a training tool for those preparing to work in the disability sector. Learning, in conjunction with the video series, can include depth discussion and analysis, case studies, analysis of episodes and scenarios, role-play and written analysis.

The Certificate IV in Disability is part of the Community Services Training Package CHCO2. The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) funded Community Services and Health Training Australia Ltd. to develop the package, which should be used along with the National Competency standards and assessment guidelines.

http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/training_skills/policy_issues_reviews/key

The people and characters in **House Gang** have mild intellectual disabilities. In acknowledging that people have a range of disabilities, the series can be used as a discussion starting point to demonstrate themes and concepts, which can be applied across a range of work settings, with different groups of people and within relevant work practices. While working through this study guide it will be important to always keep in mind individual differences of gender, age, disability, cultural identity, personality, sexual orientation and varying life stages.

DISCUSSION TOPICS, THEMES AND COMPETENCY LINKS

1. Stereotypes attitudes, values, principles and philosophies, disability awareness and rights.

COMPETENCY LINK for Certificate IV in Disability Studies: UNIT CHCDIS1C Orientation to disability work, to provide an introduction to working with people with a disability.

2. Communication, relationships, workers role, conflict resolution, diversity and differences, person versus disability.

COMPETENCY LINK for Certificate IV in Disability Studies: UNIT CHCCOM3C Utilize specialist communication skills to build strong relationships based on trust and respect.

3. Abilities versus disabilities decision making, self-determination, advocacy, ethical and legal frameworks and sexuality.

COMPETENCY LINK for Certificate IV in Disability Studies: UNIT CHCDIS2C: Maintain an environment that empowers people with disabilities.

4. Community accessibility, inclusiveness, abilities

COMPETENCY LINK for Certificate IV in Disability Studies: UNIT CHCDIS6C Plan and implement community integration

1. DISCUSSION TOPICS, THEMES AND COMPETENCY LINKS

Stereotypes attitudes, values, principles and philosophies, disability awareness and rights.

COMPETENCY LINK for Certificate IV in Disability Studies: UNIT CHCDIS1C Orientation to disability work, to provide an introduction to working with people with a disability.



Trev (Saxon Graham) and Mike (Chris Haywood)

When we begin to work alongside a particular group of people and within a service area there are already a number of ideas, attitudes and beliefs that we bring in to the work. Therefore, it is of great importance that we explore and think about our own predetermined attitudes and beliefs, as these will underpin and shape the way we work with people with disabilities. Our attitudes are strongly present in the way we work as individuals and have also determined how disability services have been and are delivered.

Stereotypes are fixed ideas and concepts that are used to characterize certain members of our communities and can color our perceptions. Stereotypes usually express attitudes and ideas that are based on misconceptions, myths and not knowing. Negative stereotypes and held beliefs can create barriers and exclude groups and individuals in our community who are held up as different. Stereotypes stop us from seeing people as individuals. **House Gang** challenges stereotypes around disability through exposing them and showing realistic and inclusive portrayals of people with disabilities. It aims to challenge our notions of difference and misconceptions of disability.

In Episode one *Don't Call Me Stupid*, we see the character Chloe come literally face to face with her (mis) conceptions about people with disabilities. After viewing this episode identify and reflect on commonly held misconceptions about people with disabilities, present and past. This will heighten our awareness on how they may affect the way we would think of or work with different people with different disabilities.

In Episode three *Winners* Trev is training for his swimming trials. View episode three and imagine that Chloe is Trev's social educator.

- What effects would her attitudes have on the way she might work with Trev and having his needs and potential met.
- If you held a similar attitude towards people with disabilities how would this affect the way in which you would work with them? How could we minimize the influence of our

attitudes and values on people with disabilities? What work practices may assist with this?

- After viewing episode three, *Winners*, define the principles and values held about disability that might underpin the way in which Mike and Jack interact with Belinda, Trev and Robert?

In episode three *Winners*, Jack and Mike support Trev in his dream to swim in the Olympics.

- What are the strategies or skills that Jack and Mike use to exercise the principles of independence, equity and inclusiveness?
- What are some of the issues that you see Trev, Belinda and Mike facing as individuals with disabilities keeping in mind their age, disability, life stage, gender etc.
- What are some of the issues or difficulties that Jack faces in her experience as a social educator? In what instances has she been challenged?
- How has Jack and in what situations has she been able to identify the different needs of each individual in the house?
- The way in which disability has historically been thought about by society has shaped the disability service system, that is, the way that we deliver services and work with people with disabilities. Identify the way services were delivered over the last 50 years and what stereotypes underpinned the way that we previously worked with people with disabilities, for example institutionalization.
- What knowledge about disability was missing during the period of institutionalization and is now seen in how services are delivered in **House Gang**?

Hotlinks:

The World Health Organization gives the definition of disability that is used in Australian Legislation.

<http://www.who.int/en/>

Disability Awareness provides information about different disabilities, including information kits and resources.

<http://www.openroad.net.au/access/dakit/disaware/handout7.htm>

2. DISCUSSION TOPICS, THEMES AND COMPETENCY LINKS

Communication, relationships, workers role, conflict resolution, diversity and differences, person versus disability.

**COMPETENCY LINK for Certificate IV in Disability Studies: UNIT CHCCOM3C
Utilize specialist communication skills to build strong relationships based on trust and respect.**



Jack (Jeanette Cronin)

Communication happens on many different levels, through the words we speak and what we say with our body language and eye contact. We communicate a lot more than words when we engage with a person, we are also communicating what we feel, our attitudes and beliefs. Communication is a tool that shapes the types of relationships we have by conveying our attitudes, thoughts and feelings towards a person or a situation.

View episode one *Don't Call Me Stupid* and examine Chloe's verbal and non-verbal communication skills.

- Analyze what Chloe's language is communicating about her own attitudes, and experience of her housemates and people with disabilities. Identify the different skills she is using to communicate her feelings and attitudes drawing on examples.
- What type of relationship is she promoting through the attitudes she is communicating?

In contrast Jack's verbal and non-verbal language communicates a different attitude, one of respect, inclusiveness and equality.

- Identify and examine the variety of verbal and non-verbal strategies Jack uses to communicate and build strong relationships. Refer to examples from the series where Jack is able to meet the challenge of communicating and times where she may struggle.
- What type of relationship is being promoted via her communication?
- What knowledge and skills does Jack draw on to do this?

In Episode one, *Don't Call Me Stupid*, Jack has just returned from a conflict resolution course to find a real live conflict in the house.

- Identify the skills and knowledge Jack has learned at her conflict management course to manage the conflict in the house? Are there any areas in which Jack might benefit from more training?

- How has she facilitated discussion amongst the group?

Communication is a two way process, it includes listening, responding and a willingness to want to understand what is being communicated. Demonstrate your understanding of the importance of communication as a way for people with disabilities to communicate their needs, thoughts, feelings and wants.

- After viewing Episode one choose two of the characters with disabilities and identify examples of different ways that they meet the challenge of communicating their feelings, thoughts and needs.
- How do Mike and Jack meet the challenge of identifying and responding to the needs of Trevor, Robert and Belinda?

Inclusive language puts emphasis on the person rather than the disability, valuing the individual first and their personhood.

- Explore the most appropriate terminology that would express a person first attitude with people who have a variety of disabilities, from physical to intellectual. For example 'person with a disability' instead of 'disabled person'. Demonstrate your knowledge and list appropriate terminology for a range of disabilities, for example 'person with a hearing impairment' would be appropriate rather than a 'deaf person'.

It is important to take into account different communication skills required for people with varying disabilities. For example different skills are drawn on to communicate with someone with a hearing impairment and someone in a wheelchair.

- Demonstrate knowledge of the techniques, skills, aids and knowledge that you would need to communicate with people with various disabilities. Prepare a working booklet or guide on the skills, techniques and aids to communicate with people with a range of disabilities.

Resource Booklet: Communicating with People with a Disability 2005

http://mc2.vicnet.net.au/docs/Disabilities_Communication.pdf



Mike (Chris Haywood) and Belinda (Ruth Cromer)

3.DISCUSSION TOPICS, THEMES AND COMPETENCY LINKS

Abilities versus disabilities decision making, self-determination, advocacy, ethical and legal frameworks and sexuality.

COMPETENCY LINK for Certificate IV in Disability Studies: UNIT CHCDIS2C: Maintain an environment that empowers people with disabilities.



Robert (played by Chris Greenwood)

Everyday we make a multitude of decisions from simple choices of what we will wear and eat to more complex decisions involving where we live and work as well as financial and legal issues. All of these decisions impact on our lives and sense of our selves in the world. Some people with disabilities may not be able to make more complex decisions, such as financial or legal decisions, but are still able to make decisions that have an important impact on their lives. That the opportunity to make decisions is present, even at the most basic level is vital. Empowering people to make decisions where they can in their lives fosters independence and a sense of identity.

Prior to watching Episode two, *Dumped* discuss what the concept 'decision' means to you and identify different types of decisions we make in our lives, from the more complex ones to the day to day. Explore and analyze the impact it may have on you if someone else made these decisions for you.

House Gang focuses on the abilities of people with disabilities, and what they can do rather than what they can not do. The series challenges stereotypes about what people with disabilities can do, and we see the characters learning skills through a normal process of skill development, and that making mistakes is part of the process of learning. **House Gang** shows the achievements made by all of the characters through this process.

- After watching Episode two *Dumped*, choose one character, Trev, Belinda or Robert, and prepare a case study, and identify the variety of decisions that they have made in the course of episode two *Dumped*. Identify the areas or situations in which the characters experience the opportunity to make decisions, develop skills and maximize their independence.
- Imagine how that character has had the opportunity to be as independent as they are and how have they been supported to make decisions in their lives? Using your imagination identify the process that may have taken place.

- In preparing the case study, identify the skills, strategies and knowledge that *you* would need to draw on to support the character to be as independent as possible in their action and thinking, within different areas of their lives.
- In the case study identify a decision that you think your character may not be able to make. What process would you use to guide *you* in coming to this decision? What policies, legislation or agencies might you draw on for support and guidance?
- Who makes decisions about what decisions people can and can not make? Discuss the need for processes, guidelines, legislation and policies to protect the rights of people with disabilities in regards to making decisions.
- What strategies and support has Jack used to promote self-determination, empowerment and independence amongst the housemates? In thinking about this you might like to use an example from the series.
- What is the difference between advocacy and support? What is the role of advocacy? Draw on examples from the series that identify the differences.

The Intellectual Disability panel is a legal system that helps people with intellectual disabilities to get their rights met.

www.idrp.vic.gov.au

The Office of the Public Advocate is an independent body that promotes the rights of people with a disability; OPA is accountable to the Victorian Government.

www.publicadvocate.vic.gov.au

The Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal's web site gives information about Administration and Guardianship issues.

<http://www.vcat.vic.gov.au/CA256DBB0022825D/HomePage?ReadForm&1=Home~&2=~&3>

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Belinda (Ruth Cromer) and Trev (Saxon Graham)



Belinda (played by Ruth Cromer)

House Gang shows healthy and normal representations of people with disabilities and portrays the sexual needs, interests and expressions of the characters as ordinary parts of development and life. Sexuality is another aspect or expression of a person's identity, as is culture. In the broader media portrayals of people with disabilities as sexual beings are limited or stereotyped.

In Episode six, *Sex, love is in the air* and Belinda brings home a Safe Sex board game for the housemates to play. Chloe articulates many commonly held values around people with disabilities and their sexuality.

- After viewing the episode describe how Chloe perceives her housemates in relation to their sexuality.
- How would Chloe's attitudes affect the way that you would support a person with a disability to express their sexuality?
- Identify what you imagine each characters, Trev, Belinda and Robert's, experiences are of their own sexuality from what they say and their actions. Draw on examples of what is said and done to illustrate what their experiences may be.
- What are the different strategies that Mike and Jack use to support Trevor and Robert in the expression of their sexuality? For example what are they role modeling?
- How are Mike and Jack's values around sexuality imposed on Trevor and Robert when trying to support them in their relationships with their women friends?

Resources:

This web site provides a range of links to a broad number of web sites on sexuality and disability.

<http://www.accessibility.com.au/Links/sexuality.htm>

Dance Me To My Song

<http://www.vertigoproductions.com.au/dance.html>

4. DISCUSSION TOPICS, THEMES AND COMPETENCY LINKS

Community accessibility, inclusiveness, abilities

COMPETENCY LINK for Certificate IV in Disability Studies: UNIT CHCDIS6C
Plan and implement community integration



Trev (played by Saxon Graham)

House Gang focuses on the abilities of Belinda, Trev and Mike, rather than on their disabilities. The series challenges our attitudes around what we may think people with disabilities can do and how they are able to contribute to society. The house can be seen as a microcosm of an ideal society where people with disabilities are valued for their abilities through a process of empowerment and inclusiveness and are encouraged to belong and be a part of the community.

In Episode three *Winners*, we see the House Gang characters, Trev, Belinda and Robert actively participating in their community and society. Belinda works as a nanny, Trevor attends work in the community and is participating in the swimming trials for the Special Olympics and Robert also works in the community.

- After viewing the episode select one of the three characters, Trev, Belinda or Robert to use as a case study to think about the process involved in supporting that person to contribute and be a part of their community.
- Identify what you would perceive are the interests, abilities and needs of the character you have chosen.
- What would be the initial process to assess the abilities, interests and needs of the character chosen? Think about the type of information you would need and the strategies or methods of assessment you would use to help you get this information?
- What knowledge is required to match the needs, abilities and interests of your character with an appropriate match in the community? How would you go about assessing an appropriate match?
- What types of support would you imagine Belinda might have needed in the process that made it possible for her to work as a nanny?

- How do Jack and Mike enhance Trevor's self-determination and independence to support him in his swimming trials?
- What types of barriers may exist for people with disabilities to be a part of the community? Reflect on physical barriers, skills and knowledge, as well as societal barriers such as attitudes and information.

Resources:

Futures for Young Adults is a program run through the Department of Human Services. It provides support to young people with a disability for up to three years after they have left school. It assists with looking for work and/or participating in the community.

<http://hnb.dhs.vic.gov.au/ds/disabilitysite.nsf?open>

The Active Participation Strategy is a strategy to involve people with disabilities to be involved at all levels in the decision making process, including individual, organizational and within community management settings.

http://hnb.dhs.vic.gov.au/ds/disabilitysite.nsf/sectiontwo/active_participation?open

Other Resources

Internet:

From the ACTF Learning Centre, lesson plans for schools to support teaching about disability.

http://www.actf.com.au/learning_centre/school_resources/productions/tts/lesson_plans/being_different.htm

http://www.actf.com.au/learning_centre/school_resources/productions/tts/lesson_plans/capta_in_johnno.htm

http://www.actf.com.au/learning_centre/school_resources/productions/tts/lesson_plans/capta_in_johnnob.htm

The Australian Human Rights and equal Opportunities Commission: Disability Rights. The Commission deals with complaints, information and conciliation around disability and human rights issues. It provides a public forum and focus for these issues. The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 can be viewed on this web site.

http://www.hreoc.gov.au/disability_rights/

The following web site has a range of articles and research on topics of disability and media representations.

<http://www.cccs.uq.edu.au/?page=16894&pid=16231>

Different cultural groups hold different attitudes and beliefs around disability. ADEC, Action on Disability in Ethnic Communities, supports the rights of people with disabilities, and their carers, from different cultural backgrounds.

www.adec.org.au

The following services can provide information about different disabilities.

www.scopevic.org.au

www.paraquad.asn.au

Disability Rights Victoria is an advocacy organization for people with disabilities and is also directed by people with disabilities.

<http://www.advocacyhouse.org/drv/about.html>

Disability Information Victoria

<http://e-bility.com/links/general.php>

The Victorian Government's Disability Services web site provides information on Services and supports for people with a disability, information on the State Disability Plan, current disability legislation, advocacy services and more. This is a good beginning point for current information on disability and what's happening in Victoria.

<http://hnb.dhs.vic.gov.au/ds/disabilitysite.nsf?open>

Arts Access is the peak arts organization in Victoria. It provides access to the arts for people with disabilities. Arts Access developed the idea for **House Gang**.

www.artsaccess.com.au

Helen Meekosha is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at University of NSW. She specializes in the area of disability. Her web site refers to many articles on disability.

<http://socialwork.arts.unsw.edu.au/Research/Staff%20Profiles/helenmeekosha.htm>

The Disability Services Act 1986 - Commonwealth Legislation.

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

Ruth Cromer is one of the actors from **House Gang**; she talks about her life and how she experiences having down syndrome.

<http://www.dsansw.org.au/stories/RuthCromer.html>

Films:

Captain Johnno. Directed by Mario Andreacchio, 1988 (Australian Children's Television Foundation)

http://www.actf.com.au/distribution/touch_the_sun.htm#

http://www.actf.com.au/learning_centre/school_resources/productions/tts/lesson_plans/being_different.htm

http://www.actf.com.au/learning_centre/school_resources/productions/tts/lesson_plans/capta_in_johnno.htm

http://www.actf.com.au/learning_centre/school_resources/productions/tts/lesson_plans/capta_in_johnnob.htm

The Elephant Man. Directed by David Lynch, 1980 (Brooks Films / Paramount)

My Left Foot. Directed by Jim Sheridan, 1989 (Miramax)

Awakenings. Directed by Penny Marshall, 1990 (Columbia Pictures)

Cosi. Directed by Mark Joffe, 1996 (Miramax / Roadshow Distributors / Smiley Films)

A Test of Love. Directed by Gil Brealey, 1984 (Film Australia)

I Sam Am. Directed by Jessie Nelson, 2001 (Bedford Falls Productions / Blue Fish Films / Red Fish)

Forrest Gump. Directed by Robert Zemeckis, 1994 (Paramount)

One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest. Directed by Milos Forman, 1975 (Fantast Films / United Artists)

Dance Me to My Song. Directed by Rolf de Heer, 1998 (Australian Film Commission / Fandango / Intra Films / Smile Productions / South Australian Film Corporation / Vertigo Films)

An Angel At My Table. Directed by Jane Campion, 1990 (Australian Broadcasting Corporation / Hibiscus Films / New Zealand Film Commission / Television New Zealand)

Television:

ABC, *The Money or the Gun*. "The Year of The Patronizing Bastard." 1990 (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) <http://www.abc.net.au/programsales/s1134332.htm>

Reading:

Maupin, Armistead. *Maybe the Moon*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.

Boston, Lucy M. *The Chimneys of Green Knowe*. Puffin Books, 1958.

Redfield Jamison, Kay. *Touched By Fire*. United States of America: Free Press, 1993.

McNamara, Rob. *Touching The Corners*. Australia: Cath McNamara, 2005.

<http://www.touchingthecorners.com/index.htm>

The Writer- Sally Brakha

Sally Brakha currently works in the disability sector and has a background in nursing and community health, in the areas of drug and alcohol and disability. She is also a trained primary school teacher with a particular interest in emotional intelligence, philosophical enquiry and values education for children.