



# House Gang



*study guide*

House Gang is a series of stories about three young people with intellectual disabilities who are forced to share their rented house with a bankrupt builder and his vitriolic daughter.

THIS STUDY GUIDE COVERS THE CURRICULUM AREAS OF ENGLISH, SOSE, PSYCHOLOGY, CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION AND MEDIA STUDIES.

## English

Sometimes people will make decisions about other people or situations even before they have been encountered. These preconceptions, whilst sometimes preparing us for situations, can also limit our understanding. We can find it very difficult to alter our judgements or beliefs and so, even when confronted with reality, we don't change our views because they have become ingrained.

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### Points For Discussion Or Writing Before Viewing

- What do you think are some 'common' preconceptions held about people with intellectual disabilities? Make a list of these.
- How important is appearance to you when assessing the character of another person? Are there times when assessments based upon appearance or mannerisms can be misleading?

Gaby Mason (producer) feels that a lot of the 'nervousness' that people experience in dealing with people with disabilities largely stems from 'unfamiliarity'.

### After Viewing

Each episode of *House Gang* touches on some of the preconceptions associated with people with intellectual disabilities. However, the series does go beyond that and in a broader context explores some of the issues associated with being young and growing up in the '90s.

The search for an identity that suits the individual, the desire to fit in, the search for the ideal relationship and defining for ourselves exactly what is 'normal', are all raised during the course of the series.

Look at the list you produced about preconceptions linked with people with intellectual disabilities.

- Did the first episode 'Don't Call Me Stupid' raise any of these? How did the episode deal with these preconceptions? Some possible scenes to consider in discussing this could be:
  - Belinda's handling of the plumbing situation;
  - Robert's organisation of a house contract and rules;
  - the arrival of Belinda's boyfriend at the end of the episode;
  - Chloe's reaction to Trevor when he opens the front door.

#### CHARACTERISATION

It quickly becomes clear that the newly established household, like any other will be made up of a diverse range of characters. In developing an understanding of characters in either film or text our assessments will be based on observing how they behave, what they say and how characters interact with one another.



For many people, encountering someone or something new or different causes **fear or uncertainty that can lead us to make hasty, inaccurate judgements.**

- Have you ever been in a situation where you have been forced to reassess your views about a person based on getting to know that person better?
- Do you think 'fear of the unknown' can lead to prejudice? If so, how?

- Make a list of the characters in *House Gang*. Write a description of each character and select one scene from any episode that you feel reveals something important about that character.

- Compare your descriptions and selected scenes with a partner. In what ways were your descriptions different or similar?

#### CHLOE

Chloe is a very forceful presence in each of the episodes. The writer of *House Gang*, Keith Thompson said of Jocelyn Rosen, who plays Chloe, '... at the first workshop Jocelyn turned up ... she confronted them (the other actors), she called them names. She simply played it as a fifteen-year-old like Chloe, unconstrained by good manners or acceptable behaviour.'

- What is your assessment of Chloe's character? Do you feel she is a 'typical' fifteen year old? Do you feel Chloe's character changes or develops during the course of the series?
- To what extent do you think Chloe's character is used as a focus for assumptions or misconceptions about people with intellectual disabilities?

In responding to these points you could consider:

- her determination that she can force Belinda to swap bedrooms;
- her evident embarrassment when she is at the video store with Robert and Trevor.



#### MIKE

If Chloe is openly hostile about the idea of sharing a house with a group of 'morons', Mike seems a lot more accepting.

- How does Mike's initial reaction to his tenants differ from that of Chloe's?

Chris Haywood, who plays Mike in the series, said that Mike is, 'A man who is financially disabled, taken in by a group of people who have other disabilities. Through their example, he and his daughter Chloe learn how to survive.'

- Do you agree that Mike is a character who 'learns' during the series? What is it he learns, and how is he taught?

In discussing this you could consider:

- his feelings/reaction after he calls Trevor an idiot when they are fixing the kitchen sink;
- his transition from wealthy business man to struggling taxi driver.
- Imagine that Mike is approached by a local newspaper for an interview about what it is like to live in a house with people with disabilities. In pairs, devise a list of interview questions and then answer them as you imagine Mike would.

#### TREVOR

It is Trevor who opens the door to Chloe and Mike when they arrive broke and homeless. Trevor and Mike appear to bond fairly quickly. Saxon Graham who plays Trevor says of Trevor that he is, '... a nice guy,' who, 'likes to fix things around the house,' with Mike as 'Trev's helper.'

- Would you agree that Mike has a greater need of Trevor than Trevor of Mike?

Saxon Graham feels that an important feature of *House Gang* is that it will, 'show the audience how people with disabilities live. We're doing it for them. To show them how we are able to do things ourselves.'

- How do you think Trevor's character is presented to reinforce this idea?
- Select and discuss scenes from the episodes in which Trevor's independence and determination are highlighted.

#### BELINDA

Belinda emerges as an interesting and somewhat complex character.

On the one hand, she seems like something of a romantic, whose chief interest is in getting Scott to propose. However, at other times, we see that she is quite a strong minded young woman who won't be pushed around, especially by Chloe.

Unlike her house mates, Robert and Trevor, Belinda's 'growth' and 'maturity' appears to be more clearly developed.

- Discuss how these scenes establish Belinda's emerging maturity:
  - her apparent sympathy for, and understanding of, Chloe after Chloe's mother rejects her;
  - walking out on Scott at the restaurant;

- what did she tell Jack was her motivation for doing this?
- her challenge to Chloe in Episode Two entitled 'Dumped' is that Chloe is in fact the 'odd one out'.

- In small groups discuss the characters of Belinda and Chloe. Focus your discussion around this statement, 'Despite what Chloe may believe, Belinda has far greater control over her life than Chloe has over hers.'

#### ROBERT

Robert's character is presented as somewhat methodical and organised. Before he will fully agree to Mike and Chloe moving into the house he insists that a contract, setting the boundaries for communal living, is drawn up. His domestic routine appears threatened by Chloe's presence in the house and he does little to disguise his dislike of her. In an interesting twist, Robert could be described as somewhat prejudiced where Chloe is concerned.

- Do you think Robert treats Chloe fairly, or is he simply giving her 'as good as he gets'?
- In the episode 'Truth or Dare', Robert appears to have something of an identity crisis. Discuss.
- Would you say that Robert's search for a new identity is fairly typical of young men his age?
- How does the 'Big Bad Bob' image suit Robert in your opinion?
- Do you think we are given sufficient grounds for Robert's change of image? How understandable is his behaviour to you in this episode?

#### JACK

Jeanette Cronin who plays Jack said of her character, 'Jack's an enthusiasm nut ... someone who likes to think she's very self-aware but is really just as wrong-headed, as muddled as the rest of the world.'

- Jack is described as a social educator. What do you think this job would entail?
- Are there times when we see Jack specifically acting within that role, or do you think it something she does simply by being with Belinda, Trevor and Robert?
- We could assume that Belinda, Trevor and Robert have a far greater need of Jack than she does of them. Is this a view you agree with? What do you think Jack gets out of her relationship with them?

## English – Overview and Activities

Series writer Keith Thompson offered this view of *House Gang*:

‘What defines the series for me is the constant reminder that all of us are equally disabled. Everybody is insecure, everybody is vulnerable, everybody has huge insecurities about the way they relate to the rest of the world. You don’t have to be a person with a disability to feel profoundly challenged by life.’

- In small groups discuss this statement with reference to the characters of Mike, Jack and Chloe. In what way are they ‘challenged by life’?
- How does the episode entitled ‘Nightmare’ reveal some of the characters’ fears and vulnerabilities?

The producer Gaby Mason said she was,

‘... attracted to the comedy and drama of a domestic situation where everyone is at their most naked and open. The idea was to reveal people with disabilities in their own place, on their own ground. And the appeal of the house setting was that the focus of the show was to be on characters and the dynamics between them.’

We do get the opportunity to know each character reasonably well due to the confined setting of the house.

- Do you feel that an episode set outside the house would have made the series more realistic or believable?

*House Gang* could be criticised for taking such a confined view of Trevor, Robert and Belinda.

- Do you think that seeing these characters interact with characters representing the broader community would have better helped our understanding of some of ‘life’s challenges’ as encountered by people with disabilities?
- Working in small groups write and perform your own script for *House Gang*. You do not need to attempt to imitate the characters. However, your script and performances should reflect the understanding you have gained of the characters, based on your viewing of the series.

Select one of the following topics and write your own response to it.

- *House Gang* succeeds in its attempt to show how much success can be achieved or potentially achieved by people with disabilities when they are given the opportunity to do so. Discuss.
- Imagine that Jack is asked to write a report by her supervisor that discusses whether Mike and Chloe should continue to be allowed to live in the house. Write that report.

- Chloe has been given a writing assignment at school entitled ‘My House’. Imagine that you are Chloe writing that story. What will you write? (It will be important to consider at what point in the series Chloe writes this story from. Would a story she wrote by the end of the first episode be very different from one she might write by the end of the last episode?)

- Organise a class debate around the following statement -

‘The greatest disability anyone can have is prejudice.’

‘Sticks and Stones...’ Do you remember the rest of that rhyme - ‘names will never hurt me.’ Perhaps you even used it as a child in response to some playground taunt by another. Do you still believe that names, mere words, are incapable of doing any real damage?

During the first episode of *House Gang*, Chloe often calls her new house mates by names they clearly find offensive.

- What do you suppose causes them to object to Chloe’s name calling? Is it just that their feelings are hurt or is there a broader concern?
- Whilst it may be true that words alone cannot inflict any physical harm they can do damage in another way. Discuss
- Can you think of times when a ‘few well chosen words’ can actually cause distress to another person?
- How might words effectively act as barriers to an individual achieving his/her potential?

### LANGUAGE AND DISABILITY

Chloe’s use of language towards her house mates may have made you feel uncomfortable, but did it make you question what would constitute acceptable language? This can be quite a difficult and controversial area.

The Disability Council of NSW (Level 4, 169-183 Liverpool Street, Sydney 2000) has published a set of Media Guidelines designed to provide advice in writing about issues or portraying people with disabilities on television or in print.

Words can be used to evoke positive or negative connotations. Consider the following list of words: - invalid, unfit, disabled, infirm, incapacitated, defective, retarded.

- What images do you associate with these words?
- Do these words have positive or negative connotations?





The NSW Guidelines provide a list of general points to bear in mind, 'as underlying principles of fair and accurate reporting' (of people with disabilities). These points include:

- 'see people with a disability as equals and as part of the diversity of humanity'
- 'focus on what people can do'
- 'recognise individuality' and
- 'respect rights'
- In light of these general principles discuss with the whole class the following terms, focusing on whether you consider them to fulfil the principles.
  - birth defect, also congenital defect, deformity
  - wheelchair bound
  - cripple, crippled
  - dwarf
  - invalid
  - In what ways might these terms provide a more acceptable alternative? 'uses a wheelchair' or 'is a wheelchair user'
  - 'hearing impaired'
  - 'person with a disability'
  - 'person with an intellectual disability'

Increasingly in our society we are showing a greater awareness of the need to ensure equality of access to all facets of modern life for the whole range of people who make up our communities. Ramps into buildings for people using wheelchairs, tones activated on pedestrian crossings for people who are sight impaired are becoming commonplace. There was a time when the complete absence of such things effectively isolated some people in the community.

Language can act in much the same way. Words can open or close doors to people and so it is important that we continue to look for ways in our language to ensure all members of the community are spoken of or written of in terms that do not deny them full recognition as individuals.

## Psychology and Citizenship Education

The stories presented in *House Gang* challenge us to consider very carefully ideas and values which we have probably taken for granted in our lives. The series is a 'sitcom', which deliberately presents scenarios in which everyday occurrences take on a new significance. Throughout each program we may be surprised as we identify our own feelings and behaviours in one or other of the characters.

Major themes throughout this series involve Psychological concepts, especially those of attitudes, stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination. To obtain full value from your viewing of the series, it is important that you are familiar with these ideas before viewing the first program. The following activities will help you in this.

### Before viewing

#### WHAT IS "NORMAL"?

Statistically or sociologically, we have an instinctive understanding of what the term means, yet we must always question that sociologically defined concept.

- In small groups, discuss the meaning of the term "normal". What does normal mean? What does "abnormal" mean?

#### WHAT IS AN ATTITUDE?

Attitudes are mental orientations that predispose judgements about objects that we are thinking about. We may think about social issues, groups of people, institutions, consumer products or situations.



- Working in groups, brainstorm a list of such items of thought, and ask each person in the class (anonymously) to rate their attitude towards each item, from (-10) - very negative, to (+10) - very positive. For example, the police, migration policy, alcohol, Aboriginal people, weddings, and so on.
- How many items were there where everyone had a really neutral opinion (between -2 and +2)? Most times that this exercise is done, there are very few such items.

#### COMPONENTS OF AN ATTITUDE

Our attitudes are made up of three parts - the C-A-B of attitudes.

**C** - Cognitive - What we Believe about the object.

**A** - Affective - How we Feel about the object.

**B** - Behavioural - How our attitude makes us Behave towards the object.

Example - I believe cigarettes may harm my health, I feel afraid of cigarettes because of their association with illness and death, so I behave in a way which will keep me away from the danger - I don't smoke, and I stay away from places where people are smoking.

- For the items that you brainstormed in the section above, each person can analyse his or her attitude towards it in terms of the CAB as shown.

#### PREJUDICE

Of course this literally means 'pre-judgement', and is part of the definition of attitude given above. It typically involves a negative attitude held towards members of a group other than your own.

#### DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination is the act of behaving differently (generally negatively) towards a member or members of a group on the basis that they belong to that group.

- Do prejudice and discrimination always go together? Is it possible to have one without the other?

#### STEREOTYPE

- What is a stereotype? List some commonly held beliefs about members of certain groups (blondes are dumb, redheads are bad tempered, Scots are mean, footballers are stupid etc.).

Select someone in your class or group who knows a member of each of the stereotype groups, and ask them to describe that individual.

- How much does the individual described differ from the stereotype? What does this tell us about stereotypes?

#### PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Find out the meaning of Down's Syndrome.

- What is the cause of this disability?
- What is the range of effects of this disability?

Find out the meaning of Cerebral Palsy.

- What is the cause of this disability?
- What is the range of effects of this disability?
- Write a few lines to express your ideas of how people with disabilities fit into society. What are their special needs? What contribution can they make to society in general? Do they fit into a single group?

#### *While viewing the series*

Keep a diary of what happens, along the lines suggested below:

#### AFTER VIEWING EACH PROGRAM

- Who do you believe came out as the 'best person' in this episode? Why?
- How do you feel about the characters in the show? List a few words (three to five) which describe each of the characters as this episode showed them.
- Make a note of the main thing you learned from this episode.

#### AFTER VIEWING THE SERIES

Look back over your 'diary' of the series, and your earlier ideas about people with disabilities, then:

- Look at the sentences you wrote about people with disabilities. Do you still think these ideas are accurate?
- Discuss any ways in which your attitude towards people with intellectual disabilities is different from what it was before you watched the series. Do this for each of the components of an Attitude (the C-A-B of attitudes, discussed above.)

At first you might have had the idea that the series is showing 'normal' people, such as Mike, Chloe and Jack, and 'different' people, such as Belinda, Trevor and Robert. As time passes, we can see that everyone in the show is simply a unique individual.

- Choose any two relationships, such as Trevor and Mike, Belinda and Chloe, Jack and anyone, and for each individual list lessons that they learned from each other.
- Look at your lists of words for each character for each show. Rate each adjective as either positive or negative and add them up. Who scores the highest positive total? Next? ... Lowest?

- In small groups discuss the findings. How much agreement is there amongst group members? Are you surprised at the results?

In the past, people with disabilities were regarded as being 'victims', 'abnormal', 'handicapped', 'afflicted', 'crippled', 'spastic' or 'defective'. We now recognise that such a person is just an ordinary member of society who has a disability. In fact 18% of people in Australia - 3,176,000\*, fall within the definition of a 'person with a disability'.

\* Australian Bureau of Statistics

- Write acceptable descriptions of people who, in the past, would have had those words used about them.

One task which social workers, psychologists and other health-care professionals often undertake is preparation of reports and evaluations

of a person's abilities and potential. These may be useful in terms of job-seeking or referral for professional assistance.

- Referring back to the information and ideas you collected in the previous exercises, write a reference for one of the characters in the series, imagining that the person is applying for a job. You should indicate that the person has a disability, and your reference should emphasise the strengths of the person's personality, skills and abilities. Your name has been given as a referee for Belinda, Trevor and Robert who wish to rent another house. The telephone rings and the voice on the other end introduces him/herself as the prospective landlord/lady, and then says 'I don't want to let the house to anyone who's got problems you know ...' Write the dialogue for the rest of the call as you explain the competencies of the three characters and he/she offers them the lease.

## Media Studies

### Before viewing

- Make a list of all of the situation comedies and dramas that you are familiar with, that have been or are currently screened on television and are aimed at the young teenage audience.
- What do they have in common?
- Categorise these under suitable headings that you create yourself. These might include: school-based drama, neighbourhood drama, 'beautiful people' fantasy drama, family-based situation comedy. Think of more.

Think of the sorts of people and characters that we see represented on television, especially in the types of shows you've listed. Think of the community and the broader society in which you live.

- Is a certain group or type of person represented more so than others who actually make up our community?
- Make a list of the types of people most often portrayed in television shows.
- Choose one of these types and write a profile on the person. Describe the type of behaviour, personality, clothing, speech and activities usually associated with this character.
- Which type or group of people are left out, that is, very rarely or not represented in television shows? Suggest reasons.
- What is a stereotype? Identify the common stereotypes portrayed in television shows.
- Why do they exist?

Commercial television stations depend on money paid by companies for advertising space. Companies pay a lot of money to have their products advertised within shows according to timeslots, the type of audience watching at that time and the popularity of the show.

The popularity of shows is determined by ratings. TV shows need to rate well in order to attract the advertising dollar. Therefore they need to appeal to a wide audience, compete with similar shows on other stations and not do anything too different in case the audience switches off - literally.

Imagine you are a television producer/writer/director and you want to make a series of programs that are different, challenge stereotypes and confront people with real-life issues.

- What television station would you approach to help produce and then broadcast the series? Explain why.

### After viewing

The opening credits and title sequence introduce every episode of a television series in the same way.

Pay close attention to the *House Gang* title sequence.

- What does this tell us about the type of show that is to follow?
- What sort of mood is established?
- How do technical elements such as the use of colours, shapes and camera work help create this mood?

The stopping of one shot and cutting to another is referred to as editing. The frequency of this cutting or the length of each successive shot can create a certain pace.

- What pace is created by the title sequence? How does this contribute to the mood?
- Music can also create moods and messages. Can you make out the lyrics of the song?
- Explain how these and the melody and rhythm of the soundtrack contribute to the mood of the opening sequence.
- What and how do we find out about the characters from the opening?

Video covers and publicity posters are designed to grab attention and give some information about a film or program.

- Produce a video cover and publicity poster for the series or one of the individual episodes.



Collect some television reviews from newspaper TV guides and magazines. Using any one or more of these as a model, note the sort of information given about a program in a review.

- Imagine you are writing for one of these guides. Who would your audience be?
- Review one or more episodes of *House Gang*, or record a review for a radio program. To get started you could think of your initial response when watching one of the episodes for the first time and compare this to your feelings at the end of the first or several episodes.

*House Gang* takes an unconventional look at 'family' in the '90s. It uses comedy and drama in a domestic situation with the focus on the characters and the dynamics between them. Several other television programs such as *Nanny* could be said to do the same. Refer to the list you made earlier.

Think of two or three shows you are familiar with and that have popular appeal with young teenagers. Don't just focus on the situation comedies; consider shows like *Neighbours*?

- List the similarities and differences that *House Gang* has with these.
- Like most TV shows, the plot of each episode of *House Gang* revolves

around a conflict, dilemma or event. By the end of each episode the conflict or difficulty is usually resolved or overcome in dramatic and/or comic ways. For each episode complete the following table:

Conflict/Dilemma Characters' positions Climax Resolution

The setting or place of TV episodes adds important information to the story.

It is the job of production designers to create a setting. Props, furniture and the use of colours and lighting are important elements in set design.

- Describe the house that the five share. Is it a regular-looking house? Why do you think it was designed to look the way it does?
- What do the bedrooms of some of the characters, especially Robert and Belinda, tell us about them?

The audience of television comedy usually laugh at things that are seen or things that are said.

- Identify one or more funny moments in one or more of the episodes and explain exactly how the humour was created.
- Sometimes there is a serious side to jokes or comic situations. Explain any serious message that may have underlined any of the comedy you have discussed.

## Accessible Arts - disabling barriers to the Arts

Accessible Arts Inc. promotes access to and participation in all cultural experiences and art forms for people with disabilities. As the peak arts organisation in New South Wales working in the field of disability. Accessible Arts develops networks and alliances with both the arts and disability communities as an effective strategy for change and better integration.

People with disabilities face extreme disadvantage in artistic participation and in gaining ongoing arts skills, training and development. Research

and experience have directed Accessible Arts programs providing opportunities through a variety of arts initiatives. Accessible Arts involvement with *House Gang* continues the aims of the organisation by challenging the accepted notion of what people with disabilities are like and capable of. This comedy drama showcases the artistic talent and potential displayed by people with disabilities when given the opportunity.

## Credits

Producer: Gaby Mason, Director: Mandy Smith, Executive Producers: Chris Oliver and Barbara Mariotti

Actors: Jocelyn Rosen as Chloe, Chris Haywood as Mike, Ruth Cromer as Belinda, Saxon Graham as Trev, Jeanette Cronin as Jack and Chris Greenwood as Robert.

Year of Production: 1996, Duration: 6 x 26 minutes

A Film Australia National Interest Program in association with Alfred Road Films and Accessible Arts Inc. for SBS Independent. Produced and developed in association with the NSW Film and Television Office;

produced in association with the Australian Film Commission; the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs and the Department of Human Services and Health.

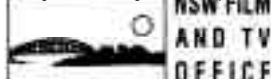
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Fax: (02) 9416 9401 E-mail: sales@filmaust.com.au

Film Australia's web site: <http://www.filmaust.com.au>

## House Gang Series

To be screened on SBS TV commencing Tuesday 7 January at 8.00pm



This study guide was written for ATOM by Rodger Edwards, Pauline White and Michelle Liddy © ATOM November 1996

