Family and Classroom Guide

Murphy Was Just the Beginning, by Jamie K. Nord

For parents, teachers and book clubs

This book teaches 34 "laws" that most adults learned one painful lesson at a time: why projects run late, why groups slack off, why the first price you hear sticks. Each chapter opens with a teen story, explains the law, shows it at work in the real world, and ends with a toolkit and a question.

This guide helps you turn those chapters into conversations.

How to use it

- **One chapter a week** works well. Each chapter takes about five minutes to read.
- **Ten minutes of talk is plenty.** Dinner, the car, a class warm-up.
- **Go first.** Share your own story before you ask for theirs. A teen who hears "I did exactly this at work last year" listens differently.
- **No right answers, and no lectures.** The book never says "you should". Neither does this guide.
- **For classrooms:** each Part works as a 1–2 week unit. The "Try it" activities can be done in pairs or small groups.

Each chapter below has:

- **Chat about it:** the question at the end of the chapter.
- **Go deeper:** a follow-up for a longer talk.
- **Try it:** something to do this week.

Part 1: Deadlines and Projects

Ch 1 · Murphy's Law: *Anything that can go wrong will go wrong, so plan for it.*

- **Chat about it:** What's the most "Murphy" moment you've ever had? What Plan B would have saved you?
- **Go deeper:** Is planning for things to go wrong pessimistic, or the opposite? Why?
- **Try it:** Fill in the Plan B worksheet for something coming up this month.

Ch 2 · Parkinson's Law: *Work grows to fill the time you give it.*

- **Chat about it:** What's something you finished super fast because the deadline was *right now*? What if you'd pretended every deadline was that close?
- **Go deeper:** When is extra time actually useful, and when does it just get filled?
- **Try it:** Pick one homework task. Set a timer for half the time you'd normally take. What happened?

Ch 3 · Hofstadter's Law: *It always takes longer than you expect, even when you allow for this law.*

- **Chat about it:** What's something you always think will be quick, but never is? How long does it *really* take?
- **Go deeper:** Grown-ups: what work project ran the most over time? Why?
- **Try it:** Guess how long three everyday tasks take, then time them. Compare.

Ch 4 · The Planning Fallacy: *We plan for the best case, not the likely case.*

- **Chat about it:** When did a plan of yours fall apart? What would the "outside view" have told you?
- **Go deeper:** Why do we trust our own plan more than what happened to other people last time?
- **Try it:** Before your next project, ask someone who's done it: "How long did it take *you*?"

Ch 5 · Student Syndrome: *Extra time gets wasted; we start at the last minute anyway.*

- **Chat about it:** What's something you keep putting off? What's the tiniest first step you could take today?
- **Go deeper:** What does putting things off feel like in the moment? What's it trying to protect you from?
- **Try it:** The "two-minute start": for one task you're avoiding, do just two minutes today.

Ch 6 · The Pareto Rule (80/20): *About 20% of the effort brings about 80% of the result.*

- **Chat about it:** What's one thing in your life where a small part makes the biggest difference? What would happen if you started with that part?
- **Go deeper:** Where *doesn't* 80/20 work, where every detail matters?
- **Try it:** Look at your last test. Which topics cost the most points? Study those first next time.

Ch 7 · The Eisenhower Matrix: *Urgent isn't the same as important.*

- **Chat about it:** What's one thing in your top-right box (important but not urgent)? When could you give it a time slot this week?
- **Go deeper:** What "urgent" things grab your attention every day? Are they important?

- **Try it:** Draw the four boxes. Sort this week's to-do list into them, as a family or a class.

Ch 8 · Brooks's Law: *Adding people to a late project makes it later.*

- **Chat about it:** What's the best group you've ever been in? How big was it? Could two pizzas have fed it?
- **Go deeper:** When *does* adding people help?
- **Try it:** Count the "lines" between people in groups of 3, 5 and 8 (the chapter shows how). What do you notice?

Part 2: Measuring and Improving

Ch 9 · Goodhart's Law: *When a number becomes the goal, it stops measuring what matters.*

- **Chat about it:** What's a number you check a lot? What is it *really* supposed to tell you?
- **Go deeper:** Grades, likes, step counts: which ones help you, and which ones trick you?
- **Try it:** For one week, track something that matters but has no number (being kind, sleeping well). How did you measure it?

Ch 10 · The Dunning-Kruger Effect: *Beginners often feel more sure than they should; experts often feel less.*

- **Chat about it:** When have you felt totally ready for something and then found out you weren't? What would have helped you see it sooner?
- **Go deeper:** Why do real experts often say "it depends"?
- **Try it:** Before a test, rate yourself from 1 to 10. Compare it with your result. Do it again next time.

Ch 11 · The Sunk Cost Fallacy: *What you've already spent shouldn't decide what you do next.*

- **Chat about it:** What's something you kept doing just because you'd already put a lot into it? If you were starting fresh today, would you still choose it?
- **Go deeper:** How do you tell the difference between quitting too early and sticking too long?
- **Try it:** Grown-ups: share one thing you kept paying for (time or money) long after it stopped being worth it.

Ch 12 · The Peter Principle: *Being great at one job doesn't mean you'll be great at the next one.*

- **Chat about it:** Who's the best leader you've ever had? Were they also the best at the activity, or good at something else?
- **Go deeper:** What's the difference between being the best player and being the best captain?
- **Try it:** List three skills a good team captain needs that a good player might not have.

Ch 13 · Kaizen: *Small daily improvements beat big rare efforts.*

- **Chat about it:** What's one thing you'd love to get better at? What's the tiniest daily step you could start with?
- **Go deeper:** Why do big New Year's resolutions so often fail?
- **Try it:** Start a 10-minute streak for two weeks. Check in together on day 14.

Ch 14 · Survivorship Bias: *We see the winners, not everyone who tried and failed.*

- **Chat about it:** What's a success story you've heard that might be missing the invisible crowd? Who might be missing from it?
- **Go deeper:** Which influencer or celebrity advice might be survivorship bias?
- **Try it:** Find a "how I got rich / famous" story online. Ask: how many people tried the same thing and failed?

Ch 15 · The Post-Mortem: *Look at what went wrong without blaming anyone.*

- **Chat about it:** What's a mistake you made that taught you something? What would your post-mortem have said?
- **Go deeper:** Why does blame make people hide mistakes?
- **Try it:** After the next family outing or class project, run a 5-minute no-blame post-mortem: what worked, what didn't, what next time?

Part 3: People and Teams

Ch 16 · Hanlon's Razor: *Don't blame on meanness what a mistake can explain.*

- **Chat about it:** When did you blame someone for something that turned out to be a mix-up? What helps you wait before you react?
- **Go deeper:** When *shouldn't* you use Hanlon's Razor? (The chapter has a box on this.)
- **Try it:** Next time someone annoys you, think of two innocent explanations before you reply.

Ch 17 · The Mehrabian Rule (and Its Limits): *Tone and body language carry feelings, but not facts.*

- **Chat about it:** Have you ever read a text in the wrong tone? What's one way you could make your own texts harder to misread?
- **Go deeper:** What's easier to say in person than in a text, and the other way round?
- **Try it:** Read the same short message aloud in three different tones. How much does the meaning change?

Ch 18 · The Ringelmann Effect: *The bigger the group, the less each person puts in.*

- **Chat about it:** Have you ever been the one who did it all, or the one who figured someone else had it covered? What's one way to split a job so it feels fair?
- **Go deeper:** Grown-ups: does this happen in meetings at work? What do good teams do about it?
- **Try it:** For the next group task, give everyone a named job written down.

Ch 19 · The Abilene Paradox: *A group can agree to something nobody actually wanted.*

- **Chat about it:** Have you ever gone along with a plan you secretly didn't want? What would have made it easier to speak up?
- **Go deeper:** How can a family or class make it safe to say "actually, I don't want to"?
- **Try it:** Next time your family decides something (dinner, a movie), everyone writes their real vote secretly first.

Ch 20 · The Halo Effect: *One shiny trait makes everything else about a person look shinier too.*

- **Chat about it:** Who's someone whose ideas you always trust? Would you still agree if a stranger said the same thing?
- **Go deeper:** How do ads use famous faces to sell things?
- **Try it:** Find three ads with a celebrity. What's the celebrity actually an expert in?

Ch 21 · Reciprocity: *When someone does something nice for you, you want to do something nice back.*

- **Chat about it:** Who did something kind for you that you still remember? What's one small favor you could do this week?
- **Go deeper:** When do "free gifts" come with a hidden ask?
- **Try it:** Do one small favor this week with no expectation of anything back. Notice what happens.

Part 4: Decisions and Risk

Ch 22 · Occam's Razor: *The simplest explanation is usually the right one.*

- **Chat about it:** What's a time you imagined the dramatic reason, and the real one was boring? Which "boring" reasons do people forget to check?
- **Go deeper:** Why are dramatic explanations more fun to believe?
- **Try it:** Pick a rumor or online theory. List the simplest explanation next to the dramatic one.

Ch 23 · The Pre-Mortem: *Imagine it already failed, then ask why.*

- **Chat about it:** What's an event that went wrong in a way you could have guessed? Who's the friend you'd ask to be your "downer"?
- **Go deeper:** How is a pre-mortem different from just worrying?
- **Try it:** Before your next family trip or class event, spend 5 minutes on "it went wrong, why?"

Ch 24 · Second-Order Thinking: *Always ask "and then what?"*

- **Chat about it:** What's a choice that felt great at first and caused trouble later? What would "and then what?" have shown you?
- **Go deeper:** Can you think of a rule (at school or at home) that had a surprising side effect?
- **Try it:** Take one decision this week and play "and then what?" three times in a row.

Ch 25 · Opportunity Cost: *Every yes is a no to something else.*

- **Chat about it:** What's a yes you said that quietly cost you something else? What's a hidden price you're happy to pay?
- **Go deeper:** Grown-ups: what did you say yes to at work that cost you something at home?
- **Try it:** Make a "what I get / what I give up" table for one choice you're facing.

Ch 26 · Confirmation Bias: *We look for proof of what we already believe.*

- **Chat about it:** Have you ever been sure about someone and then found out you were wrong? What would have changed your mind sooner?
- **Go deeper:** How do social media feeds make confirmation bias stronger?
- **Try it:** Pick an opinion you hold. Find the best argument *against* it, and explain it fairly.

Ch 27 · Anchoring: *The first number you hear sets the deal.*

- **Chat about it:** When has a first number stuck in your head, like a price or a score? What number would you want to set first?
- **Go deeper:** Why do shops show the "was" price next to the sale price?
- **Try it:** Spot three anchors in shops or online this week. Share them at dinner or in class.

Ch 28 · Choice Overload (Hick's Law): *More options make it harder to decide.*

- **Chat about it:** When did too many options make you stuck? What's your favorite trick for deciding fast?
- **Go deeper:** When are more choices actually better?

- **Try it:** Next time the family picks a movie, narrow it to three options first. Did it go faster?

Part 5: Growth and Bouncing Back

Ch 29 · Kidlin's Law: *Write a problem down clearly and it's half solved.*

- **Chat about it:** What's a worry that felt huge until you said it out loud or wrote it down? What's one thing you could write about before your next big test?
- **Go deeper:** Why does writing something down make it feel smaller?
- **Try it:** Do the chapter's "Worry Dump" before the next big test.

Ch 30 · The Matthew Effect: *Small early advantages grow over time.*

- **Chat about it:** What's something you wish you'd started a year ago? What small step could start your snowball this week?
- **Go deeper:** Is the Matthew Effect fair? What can schools or teams do about it?
- **Try it:** Grown-ups: share one small thing you started young that grew into something big.

Ch 31 · Diminishing Returns: *Past a certain point, more effort adds less.*

- **Chat about it:** When did you keep going long after it stopped helping? What's one sign that tells you it's time to stop?
- **Go deeper:** Where's the line between "pushing through" and "past the useful point"?
- **Try it:** Find your stop point: notice the moment studying stops sticking, and take a break there.

Ch 32 · Fail Fast: *Small, cheap failures beat one big, late failure.*

- **Chat about it:** What's something you kept hidden until it was "perfect"? Who could you show a rough version to this week?
- **Go deeper:** Why is it so hard to show unfinished work?
- **Try it:** Share a rough draft of something (a drawing, an essay, an idea) and ask for one piece of feedback.

Ch 33 · The Streisand Effect: *Trying to hide something draws more attention to it.*

- **Chat about it:** Have you ever made something bigger by trying to hide it? What's your go-to line for laughing off a small embarrassing moment?
- **Go deeper:** Why does the internet make the Streisand Effect so much stronger?
- **Try it:** Grown-ups: share an embarrassing moment you laughed off. How fast did people forget?

Ch 34 · The Peak-End Rule: *People remember the best (or worst) moment and the ending.*

- **Chat about it:** What's an ending you still remember, good or bad? How could you plan the ending of something you're doing this month?
- **Go deeper:** What makes a good ending to a day, a trip or a presentation?
- **Try it:** End this week's family dinner (or class) with one "best moment of the week" each.

Wrapping up the book

- Which law surprised you most?

- Which law do you think the grown-ups in your life need to read?
- Which law will you still remember in ten years?