As an aid to reflection and prayer for children and families, the following scriptural guide explores some of the most important themes raised by *The Nut Job*. It can be used for personal reflection, post-movie family talks, or discussion with school or church friends. Its aim is to help relate the fun story of Surly the Squirrel to our own personal experiences as we try to live more authentic Christian lives.
INTRODUCTION

The Nut Job tells the zany story of Suryl, a squirrel whose whole life revolves around himself, and his adventures in the city after his selfishness gets him exiled from the park.

Suryl is nobody’s idea of a hero. Thieving, manipulative, and completely unconcerned about anybody but himself, he treats his fellow animals in the park as competitors and even disregards the feelings of his only faithful friend, Buddy the Rat. Soon this selfishness ends in disaster and Suryl finds himself forced to live in the city, where he confronts a world even colder than his own heart. Bit by bit, his selfishness chips away as he recognizes that his needs expand beyond solely satisfying his hunger. In his friendship with Buddy, the mercy of Andie, the undeserved kindness of Precious, and the awakening of his willingness to put others’ needs before his own, Suryl finds the courage to offer himself in sacrificial love for others and become a true hero.

In the park of Oakton, a group of animals led by Raccoon store food for winter in a giant tree. Suryl, a selfish squirrel, whose only friend is his rat partner Buddy, lives on the edge of the group and cares nothing for their needs. Suryl’s scheme to rob a peanut cart goes awry when the good and honest Andie and the pompous Grayson try to persuade him to think about somebody besides himself. Suryl attempts to retrieve a bag of nuts while the nut cart owner is distracted by a nasty Girl Scout and a policeman, but Precious, the pet pug of the cart owner, attacks! In the confusion, Suryl tricks Precious into biting the pipe of a propane tank while Suryl and Buddy escape with the cart and Andie manages to maneuver it toward the park. In a bid to intimidate Andie and Grayson, Suryl waves a torch, igniting the gas and turning the cart into a jet-propelled rocket which strikes—and burns up—the tree and the animals’ food supply! The just and merciful Andie intervenes and tries to have Suryl tried according to the law, but Raccoon persuades the mob of angry animals to banish Suryl from the park. As a result, Suryl, whose only concern is looking out for Number One, finds himself alone.

Or almost alone. Buddy insists on leaving with Suryl, though Suryl insists that Buddy stay. He nearly gets his way, but Suryl finds he needs somebody after all when he is suddenly attacked by a vicious gang of wild street rats and only Buddy (and some not-very-bright pigeons) can help him escape. As they do, Suryl and Buddy stumble upon a nut store that promises to supply them with more food than they ever dreamed of!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

The animals in the park live by pooling their resources and letting Raccoon run the show. They put complete trust in Raccoon and he tells them what to do. They are right to understand that they need to depend on each other to survive, but mistaken to unquestioningly trust Raccoon. Have you ever been in a situation where you have had to rely on others to help you? Have you ever been in a situation where it was necessary to be “wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove” (Matthew 10:16) in deciding how much trust in others is enough and how much is too much?

In contrast to the other animals, Suryl trusts and relies on absolutely no one. He even treats his friend Buddy very badly. He sees himself as independent while everybody else sees him as selfish. As far as he is concerned, the world is divided between suckers and competitors—the nut vendor is a sucker to be robbed and the other animals are competitors to be defeated. Do you know somebody who treats others as either suckers or rivals rather than as children of God deserving of love? Have you ever been in a situation where you didn’t trust people and felt on your guard? Have you ever been in a relationship where you have treated a friend badly or been treated poorly by somebody who should have treated you as a friend?

Andie is the conscience of the animals in the park. She tries to do the honorable, brave, and sensible thing even when everybody around her is selfish, crazy, or just plain mean! Whether fending off Grayson’s advances politely, struggling against the selfishness of Suryl, or fighting to treat Suryl fairly when Raccoon and the angry animals form a mob...
The nut store turns out to be a criminal hideout where the mob boss King and his goons are residing and planning to rob the bank. Surly, of course, wants the nuts but is hampered by the presence of Precious, the pug dog. Meanwhile, with the food supply at the park destroyed, Raccoon sends Andie and Grayson to find food in the city. They, however, get separated and Andie is now on her own just as Surly was. Back at the nut store, Surly figures out that the dog whistle can control Precious—and that it drives the goon named Knuckles crazy. When both the dog and the whistle-wielding goon are kicked out of the hideout, Surly successfully gains control of the whistle. He then meets Andie, who gets the whistle and threatens to drop it in the sewer if Surly won’t share with the rest of the animals the food he means to steal. Surly grudgingly agrees and then threatens Precious with the whistle. Precious decides she likes Surly (something he is unaware of and unprepared for) and decides to help him. Andie reports all this to the gang at the park and they agree to help, although they have zero faith in Surly. Indeed, Raccoon declares that they will not honor any promises made to him. So he means to stop it and only Mole and the Cardinal know it.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:
Surly selfishly wants the whistle to control Precious. But Andie gets it first and extracts a promise from him to share the food he is planning to steal with the rest of the group. Have you ever been in a situation where you tried to get somebody to agree to act better than they might like to? Have you ever been in a situation where you needed to promise to be a better person than you might otherwise be?

It is beyond Surly’s comprehension that Precious might want to help him simply because she likes him and wants to act out of kindness. Likewise, he cannot imagine Buddy’s good qualities because he can see no further than his own selfishness. But as he tries to honor the promise he has made Andie, he begins to grow and look beyond himself. To his amazement, he even finds himself willing to risk his safety for control them! The worst thing that could happen to Raccoon would be for Surly’s plan to succeed. So he means to stop it and only Mole and the Cardinal know it.

A first attempt to rob the store fails, and Andie tells Surly that Raccoon planned on double-crossing him. Surly leaves in anger and his relationships with Andie and even Buddy are badly damaged. At the same time, we find out the truth about Raccoon: he is not interested in helping the other animals but is instead a con artist who keeps food from the animals in order to dominate and control them! The worst thing that could happen to Raccoon would be for Surly’s plan to succeed. So he means to stop it and only Mole and the Cardinal know it.

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A DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROWTH IN LOVE VS. GROWTH IN SIN

to banish him from the park, Andie is consistently the character in the story who tries to do what is just and fair, even to those who do not deserve it. Have you ever known somebody who was fair to you even when you had been unfair to them? Have you ever tried to be fair to somebody even when they treated you badly? Have you ever been in a situation where you were pressured by friends to do the wrong thing and tried to resist?

Surly takes his punishment as he has lived his life: alone. Or at least he tries to. But Buddy refuses to abandon him. When the rat gang comes after Surly, Buddy comes to the rescue and fights on his behalf. Together with Surly’s wit and Buddy’s assistance they cleverly escape. Have you ever been in a situation where you want to be independent and tough, but you realize you need other people? Have you ever had a friend who tried to isolate himself or herself but you refused to let them? Have you ever been in a situation where somebody threatened you and someone else had your back? Or have you ever come to the assistance of somebody who was being bullied?

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES TO PONDER:

Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7).

See also: Proverbs 16:18; Psalms 37:25-26.
SCRIPTURE PASSAGES TO PONDER:

Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13).

See also: Matthew 6:1-3; Philippians 2:1-11.
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