

Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key

by Jack Gantos

No matter how hard he tries, Joey Pigza can't sit still. Whether he's walking the rafters of a barn on a class trip or swallowing his house key, he knows his problems are getting worse. Will he ever find a way to stop bouncing off the walls?

THEMES

ADD, school, problem-solving, medication, family, friendship, responsibility

Young Listener Unabridged Audio

I. PRE-TEACHING

A. Have the class define and discuss these terms:

voltage, vibrate, mesmerized, hyperactive, jarred, pharmacy, prescription, puberty, brass, disruptive, focus, coma, ricochet, carom, licorice, gelled, ooze, static, maze, exceptional, peers, mummify, collided, ambulance, maniac, winced, cite, intensive, desperate, furiously, mandatory, mechanic, heave, springy, foster, rigid, medication, khaki, binge, vial, stethoscope, Chihuahua, fidget, sarcastically, clenched, souvenir, neurologically, dosage, therapies, microphone

B. Before beginning the story, discuss with the class the following questions:

1. Do you or someone you know have trouble sitting still? What might be the reason some people have trouble sitting still?
2. How does your teacher or your school deal with someone who disrupts the class? What do you think should be done?
3. What goes on in special education in your school? Why do they have special education classes? What kinds of kids go there? How do you feel when you see a special ed. kid in the halls or around school?

II. PRESENTATION

A. Understanding the Story:

1. Begin with Chapters 1-5: What does Joey do to disrupt math class? What does he do when he's sent out into the hall? What was his life with Grandma like? What is his mother's rule number 1? What are some good things he does at school? What are Mrs. Maxy's rules? What concerns does Mrs. Maxy voice in their afternoon talks? What does the doctor ask Joey? What happens to the key? Why doesn't Joey like to be asked questions? Why does Mrs. Howard make Joey wear bunny slippers? How does Joey show his kindness in special ed.?
2. Advance to Chapters 6-10: Why won't they let Joey have shoofly pie? What are some other things they won't let him do? What does eating the pie cause him to do?

What does he like about being back stage? Why does he think he's special? Why does he love Mrs. Holyfield, the nurse? What is his idea for changing the world? What rule of his mom's does he break? What are the two gifts his mom gives him? What scares Joey the most about the special school? What is the main thing Special Ed says Joey has to learn?

3. Complete the story with Chapters 11-15: Why does his mom get mad about what he tells everybody at the school? Why does Joey like the doctor right away? In what ways did Grandma abuse him? Why is his mother worried about him meeting his father? What do the tests show? What does the doctor plan? Why does Joey especially like Pablo? How does he let the school know he's back? How does he feel about rules now? What does Harold's mom say that pleases him?

B. For Discussion:

1. When Joey makes bad decisions, does he have any choice? Why or why not?
2. How does Joey show he has a sense of humor about his problems?
3. How much of Joey's problems can be blamed on how he's "wired" and how much on his home life?
4. Everyone in Joey's life has rules for him to follow. Which rules does he disobey? Which does he obey? Why does he obey some and not the others? How does he feel about rules, especially after he gets his new meds?
5. Discuss the title. Why do you think the author chose it?

III. EXTENDING THE LESSON

Give wide leeway in working with partners, groups, the whole class, or alone.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS:

A. Language Arts:

1. When Joey is sharpening pencils for the teacher, he is aware of the five senses, the sound of the wood and lead being ground down, the smell of the wood shavings, even the feel of the sharp point. As students perform an everyday action, have them notice the sounds, smells, and feelings, then write about them.

2. Talk with students about name calling. Why do we call people names or tease them? Have student write about names they've been called or they've called others. Encourage them to include positive names as well as negative ones.
3. Have students listen for metaphors, such as how Joey compares his family tree to high-voltage wires, waiting for a question to drawing an elephant beginning with the tail, or feeling like a rodeo rider on a bull when he's in the Quiet Chair. Discuss how metaphors like these enhance the description.
4. Joey uses "wired" as a pun with two different meanings. Have students collect puns from joke books, newspaper headlines, and other sources. Why are we able to make puns? What makes them funny?

B. Art and Music:

1. Have students select background music that might be appropriate to some of the scenes. Hip-hop with its repetitive rhythm might capture the way Joey feels most of the time.
2. Have students make a bulletin board about the story. They could cover the board with different colored construction paper cut in a zigzag design, cut out a giant key on a string, add a picture of a barn, pencils sharpened down to the eraser, Band-aids, a Rubic's cube, and other items mentioned in the story.
3. Joey becomes peaceful when he sees the color pink. Have students learn more about the effects of colors on moods. Have them look at a scene through different colored transparencies and talk about how the scene changes.
4. In many ways Joey is like Calvin, the boy in the cartoon strip *Calvin and Hobbes*. Bring some of these books by Bill Watterson to class and have students compare Calvin to Joey. They might create their own strip about Joey.

C. Social Studies:

1. For their field trip, Joey's class goes to visit an Amish farm. Have students learn more about the Amish, their history and their beliefs.
2. Have students talk with a reading teacher about how students are taught to read. What are some difficulties with learning to read? How can we help young children become better readers?

3. The doctor asks Joey if he does his homework and watches TV at the same time. Ask student if they do their homework with the TV on or music playing. Have them learn more about studies on this. Is this considered good or bad to be able to do this?

D. Science and Math:

1. The dyslexic sisters on the bus read and write backwards. Have students learn more about dyslexia. What causes it? How does someone with dyslexia learn to read and write?
2. Have groups of students learn more about ADD. What research has been done on this? How were kids treated before people became aware of ADD?
3. Have students find out more about the effects of sugar on behavior, especially on someone who tends to be hyper.
4. The doctor diagnosing Joey gives him a Rubic's cube. Bring some Rubic's cubes to class and time students while they try to solve them. What makes this puzzle so difficult? Who is able to solve it quickest? What does this say about this person's interests and mental abilities?

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