

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key

by
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Book Information

Jack Gantos, Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key
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To the constant disappointment of his mother and his teachers, Joey has trouble paying attention or controlling his mood swings when his prescription meds wear off and he starts getting worked up and acting wired. Book #1

Award: Judy Lopez Memorial Award for Children's Literatur; Misc./Other; National Book Award/Honors; SLJ Best Book; State Award

Topics: Community Life, School; Diseases/Disorders, Neurological Disorders; English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 9, 90%; Family Life, Single Parents; People, Family; Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies; Series, Joey Pigza

Main Characters

Charlie Joey's classmate at the special-ed center; he has deformed arms

Ed Vanness Joey's caseworker at the special-ed center downtown, who gets Joey the help he needs

Grandma Joey's grandmother, who takes care of Joey after his mother and father abandon him; she is mean to Joey

Joey Pigza the narrator of the story; a hyperactive child who is unable to control his behavior

Maria Dombrowski Joey's classmate and the class president; Joey accidentally cuts off the tip of her nose

Mrs. Howard the special-ed teacher at Joey's regular school

Mrs. Jarzab the principal at Joey's regular school

Mrs. Maxy Joey's teacher in regular school; she tries to be patient with Joey's hyperactivity

Mrs. Pigza (Mom) Joey's mother, who abandoned Joey when he was a baby; she returned to care for him not long before the story begins

Nurse Holyfield the school nurse, who is always glad to see Joey

Seth Justman Joey's classmate who taunts and teases him

Vocabulary

destined fated; predetermined

doomed condemned to ruin

mesmerized put in a trance-like state

spastic uneven or jerky movement

therapies treatments for medical problems

transdermal going through the skin

Synopsis

Joey is an elementary school student who is unable to control his behavior. While he is a good child at heart, he frequently disrupts the classroom and is sent to the principal's office. His favorite answer to questions is, "Can I get back to you on that?"

When Joey was an infant, his mother and father ran off together and abandoned him. Joey was raised by his grandmother, who is not a good caretaker and is sometimes mean to him.

One day his mother suddenly appears at the door and says she wants to return to Joey. She takes Joey to the doctor and gets medications to treat his hyperactivity. Mom and Grandma do not get along, so Grandma leaves for Pittsburgh to live with Joey's father. Joey takes his medicine to calm down, and his mother takes "medicine" to calm herself down -- a mixture of Amaretto and Mountain Dew.

Joey needs to wear his house key around his neck since he gets home from school before his mother returns from her job at the beauty parlor. One day at school, Joey swallows his key after being teased and dared by a classmate. Joey is sent to the nurse, who gives him ipecac to get the key back. But Joey

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swallows his key once again, on another dare. Because of Joey's acting up in class, he is sent to the special-ed classroom for a few hours each day to learn to sit quietly and focus on his schoolwork.

Another day, Joey's hyperactivity leads him to accidentally cut off the tip of the nose of his classmate Maria. Since he is now a danger to himself and others, the principal decides Joey must attend the special-ed center downtown. Joey is scared and feels as though no one wants him.

In the special-ed center, Joey's caseworker, Ed Vanness, who calls himself Special Ed, finds that Joey's problems are caused by a combination of an attention disorder and his home life. Ed works with Joey and his mother and sends them to get the more suitable medical help that he needs. His mother begins to recognize her own problems and works toward helping herself and doing what is best for Joey. Once Joey's medication is changed, he is able to calm down and concentrate. After six weeks at the special-ed center, Joey returns to his regular school feeling good about himself and ready to follow the rules.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why doesn't Joey's original medication work well for him? In what way does the transdermal patch work better?

Joey says that the medication works in the morning but not after lunch. It seems that the medicine has a rollercoaster effect because it does not release a steady, even dose. At times it is too strong, making him lethargic. Often, however, it is too weak, leaving him hyperactive. The transdermal patch provides Joey with a steady dose of medication to control his behavior.

Literary Analysis

Joey had several major events happen early in his life. His mother and father abandoned him, and he was raised by his grandmother, who did not treat him lovingly. What are some reasons his mother came back to care for him? How does she feel about raising him?

His mother likely returned because she felt guilty for abandoning him. She also may have returned because she is no longer interested in Joey's father. Perhaps she suspected that Joey's grandmother was not treating him well. Although she is overwhelmed with her own problems and the difficulty of managing Joey's hyperactivity, she seems to love him and wants to do what is right to make him happy.

Inferential Comprehension

How would Joey's life have been different if his mother had not returned and he had stayed with his grandmother?

It is almost certain that Joey would not have been able to get control over his behavior. His grandmother acted strangely and did not take an interest in the help that the school was trying to give him. She made Joey feel unwanted and unloved because of his behavior, which was beyond his control.

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Constructing Meaning

During the story, readers are able to sense Joey's loss of control as situations arise. How do your feelings about Joey's behavior change over the course of the story?

Before reading the story, most students would probably feel a sense of frustration watching a hyperactive child that is out of control. During the story, students generally begin to understand how Joey's body does things that his mind knows he should not do. By the end of the story, students will likely be more sympathetic because they have a greater understanding of the physical causes of attention disorder and hyperactivity. They will know that proper medications and a supportive home and school environment can contribute greatly to control behavior that is otherwise uncontrollable.

their lives. They can present a short skit to the class that demonstrates compassion toward someone who is "different."

Comparing and Contrasting Joey feels scared when he has to start at the special-ed center. He does not know anyone, and he is afraid of what will happen to him. Ask the students to think of a time when they were in a similar situation and may have felt afraid. Have them identify what they feared and what tactics they used to help them face their challenge. Each student should draw a poster picture showing the situation with a paragraph description mounted on the picture. Display the pictures around the room and have each student view all the other pictures. Hold a class discussion after the viewing to talk about comparing and contrasting their individual challenges to the challenge that Joey faced.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Joey takes a field trip with his class to an Amish farm. Have the students do research on the Amish culture. They can work in teams with each having a different focus: beliefs, customs, clothing, crafts, and other locations with large Amish populations, etc. Have them write a brief report and present their findings to the class.

Recognizing Setting The story takes place in or near Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Joey travels to Pittsburgh for medical tests. Have the students locate Pittsburgh on a map and determine its population. Ask them to compare the size, location, and population of Pittsburgh to their own town or city. Have them identify what other large cities are nearby where advanced medical care might be available.

Recognizing Feelings When Joey meets Charlie, the student with deformed arms, Charlie is polite and friendly despite his obvious deformity. Have the students work in groups and imagine how they would feel if they had a major deformity. They should discuss how they would feel, how they would want others to treat them, and how they would act when someone new comes into