

Reading guide: MOCKINGBIRD by Kathryn Erskine

Mockingbird has several themes woven into its pages. This reading guide focuses on raising awareness about what is often called Asperger's syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder.

This book provides a follow-up to The Cromwell Center's classroom program, *We All Do Things Differently: The Importance of Strategies and the Power of our Words*, usually presented to grades 5 and 6.

Mockingbird is not a "quick read-aloud", but it will engage the children in valuable discussions about what it feels like to have a disability.

The main character, Caitlin, is a fifth grader with mild autism/Asperger's syndrome. In the story, Caitlin, speaking as the narrator, shares her struggles with and confusion about understanding the people around her during a tumultuous time in her life.

Emotions, figurative language, and expectations are often extremely difficult for individuals with Asperger's to understand. Before reading the book to the class, it is recommended that a more in-depth description/discussion/review of Asperger's takes place. Information to help guide that is provided below.

There are also questions to use for each chapter that pertain to Caitlin's autism struggles that are mentioned in the chapter.

PRE-READING OF BOOK (List examples in sections 1 and 2 below on board or flipchart for students to refer to during the story.)

What is Asperger's?

- Mild autism-spectrum disorder
- Difficulties with social and communication skills
- Often have good language and cognitive skills
- Usually want to fit in and have interactions with others, but often don't know how to do that.
- Usually have average to above-average intelligence

Examples of Asperger's characteristics

- I. Language/emotional struggles
 - May understand the individual words used but not the meaning of the words together. (Take things literally)
 - May have trouble understanding facial or physical expressions of emotion (like smiles, frowns, waving, pat on the back, walking away)
 - May have some subject that they are very interested in and want to share about, even when others are not interested

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- May have trouble looking at people when they are talking or being talked to
- May have trouble changing from one activity to another

2 Physical/sensory struggles

- May not like being touched, bright lights, loud noises, or fast movements.
- May not like things touching or mixing together (food, colors, people)
- May scream, make loud noises, run away, shake hands/arms, spin around when overwhelmed
- May count things (items around them, their steps, the number of items on their plate)

READING THE BOOK

Read the dedication - *In hopes that we may all understand each other better.*

Ask: Why do you think the author wrote that dedication?

Each chapter has a Prior Knowledge (PK) question to be discussed before reading the chapter as well as a Read for Meaning (RFM) question that students should be focusing on during the reading of the chapter.

Chapter 1: “Devon’s Chest”

PK - What does it mean to take something *literally*? (*A long day would literally mean that one day is longer than another, but they are both 24 hours. Saying “It has been a long day” means it has been an extremely tiring or emotional day.*) Have students listen throughout the book for other examples of Caitlin taking words literally.

RFM- What did Caitlin mean when she said, “The gray of outside is inside”?

Chapter 2: “Look At The Person”

PK- What does it mean when someone says “My door is always open”? (*You are always welcome to come in.*)

RFM- Why is Caitlin confused by that saying? (*Mrs. Brook’s door is always closed, but if you knock she remembers to open it.*)

Chapter 3: “Let’s Talk About It”

PK- Look at our list. Listen carefully to what Caitlin says about the things that are listed there. We will talk about them afterwards.

RFM- What things did Caitlin explain? (*Don’t get facial emotions; they looked at me which I didn’t like; they touched me, which I hate; loud laughing; fast movements; go under the table to get away from her eyes; screaming*)

Chapter 4: “Life”

PK- What do you do when you need to calm down?

RFM- What does Caitlin do to calm down? (*Counts, draws, hides*)

Chapter 5: “Personal Space”

PK- What is personal space?

RFM- What happens to Caitlin when someone gets into her personal space or she hears shouting? (*Gets nervous, hard to breathe, moans, spins, shakes hands, sucks on her sleeve*)

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Chapter 6: “The Heart”

PK- Why do you like books?

RFM- Why does Caitlin like books? (*You can open and close them and they stay the same, she finds answers in them, they are safe - easy to understand - unlike people*)

Chapter 7: “Groups”

PK- What do you like about working in groups?

RFM- Why doesn't Caitlin like working in a group? (*What people say is confusing, can do a better job herself, laughing confuses her*)

Chapter 8: “Bambi”

PK- What is your favorite cartoon?

RFM- Why does Caitlin like Bambi so much? (*Reminds her how smart she is...smarter than Devon because she understood the movie better*)

Chapter 9: “No Running. Walking”

PK- What do you like and not like about recess?

RFM- How does Caitlin feel about recess? (*Dislikes recess-too noisy, too fast, too bright...makes her nervous so she sucks on her sleeve*)

Chapter 10: “Michael and Manners”

PK- What does it mean when someone says, “Remember your manners”?

RFM- How did Michael help Caitlin understand what “Remember your manners” really means? (*Yours vs. mine*)

Chapter 11: “The Day Our Life Fell Apart”

PK- What do you think this title means?

RFM- Why does Caitlin rock in this chapter? (*Makes her feel alive and she wants Devon's chest to be alive*)

Chapter 12: “Closure”

PK- When something very upsetting happens, what do you do?

RFM- Why does Caitlin shake her hands? (*To slow down her spinning world*)

Chapter 13: “To Kill a Mockingbird”

PK- When you are good at something, how does it make you feel?

RFM - What is Caitlin really good at? Why only black and white? (*Drawing, black and white is clear - colors mix and get blurry*)

Chapter 14: “My Skills”

PK- What is one thing you are really good at?

RFM- What are some things Caitlin is good at, besides drawing? (*Memorizing, remembering stuff others forget, looking things up, being helpful, [p. 83]*)

Chapter 15: “Finesse”

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PK- What is finesse?

RFM- Why does Caitlin feel like Snow White? (*She has dwarf friends who love her*)

Chapter 16: “The List”

PK- Is there someone in your family who explains things to you well?

RFM- Why was Devon so important in Caitlin’s life? (*He taught her things and explained things to her*)

Chapter 17: “Keep Your Pants On”

PK- What does that saying mean?

RFM- Why do Michael and Caitlin laugh at that saying? (*They think people actually think others are going to take their pants off*)

Chapter 18: “A Plan For Healing”

PK- Do you like (or would you like) having a younger “reading buddy”?

RFM- Why is Caitlin so angry about her class’s reading buddy time? (*She does not get to have Michael as a buddy and he gets paired with Josh, who was mean to Michael*)

Chapter 19: “Shoes”

PK- What does it mean “put yourself in someone else’s shoes”?

RFM- Why did Caitlin take off her shoes and socks?

Chapter 20: “Empathy”

PK- What does having empathy mean?

RFM- Who is Caitlin showing empathy to? (*Her dad*)

Chapter 21: “No Mrs. Brook”

PK- Who do you go to when you are upset or confused?

RFM- How does Caitlin feel about Mrs. Brook being gone? (*Confused*)

Chapter 22: “Drawings”

PK- When you draw a face what do you include in it?

RFM- Why do you think Caitlin has never drawn a whole face before? (*She has a hard time looking at people and when she is made to, she only looks at those parts - eyes, mouth*)

Chapter 23: “Lost”

PK- You are in a “public” school. What does that mean?

RFM- What kind of school did Caitlin think a “private” school was? Why did she think she might like to go to one of those? (*She would be the only one at the school; she would like that because it is hard for her to work and play with others*)

Chapter 24: “Found”

PK- What does “closure” mean?

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RFM- Why does Caitlin start shaking her hands, moaning, and screaming? Does her teacher understand her? *(No, Caitlin finally understands how to find closure - 'bringing the project to an end'- but she can't explain it to her teacher)*

Chapter 25: "Hinges"

PK- Have you ever wanted to do something RIGHT NOW and been told "No"? How did it make you feel? Did you understand WHY you couldn't do it right then?

RFM- What did Caitlin do when her dad didn't understand why Caitlin wanted to work on the chest NOW? *(Crying, screaming, hides in her hidey-hole wrapped in purple fleece)*

Chapter 26: "Eagle Scout"

PK- What is an Eagle Scout?

RFM- What does Caitlin think "quarter cut oak" is? *(Oak cut from a tree with a quarter)*

Chapter 27: "Mission"; Chapter 28 "Good and Strong and Beautiful"

PK- When people don't understand what you are saying, how does that make you feel?

RFM- Why is Mrs. Brook so upset? *(Caitlin's hands are all scraped/cut)* What actually is "quarter-cut oak"? *(The way the oak tree is cut into boards)*

Chapter 29: "Putting Our Life Back Together"

PK- What do you think Caitlin means by calling this chapter "Putting Our Life Back Together"? *(She literally thinks by putting the chest together it will put their lives back together)*

RFM- Why does Caitlin leave Devon's door open? *(She can see dust particles in the sun...maybe Devon...room looks happy again)*

Chapter 30: "Friends" (This and the next chapter are primarily about Asperger's/autism, but they are intense. There will need to be significant discussion before and after for children to develop awareness and sensitivity)

PK- Look back at the list we made about Asperger's. Ask class what they remember about what autism is.

RFM- What happened to Caitlin when she tried to "work on being friends"? *(Misunderstood, told she was special/weird, when she tried to help it was misunderstood, called 'disturbing')*

Chapter 31: "It's a Girl Thing"

PK- Why do you think Caitlin might not like PE?

RFM- Why did Emma invite Caitlin to go with her to Mrs. Brook's room? *(Mr. Mason's comments were 'inappropriate' about autistic kids and knew he was talking about Caitlin)*

Chapter 32: "Dad-Oh"

PK- How do you feel when you have accomplished something that was hard?

RFM- Why does Caitlin think closure is close? *(Dad is almost actually smiling)*

Chapter 33: "Group Project Including Other People"

PK- When you work on a group report project, what do you like to do best?

RFM- Why is Caitlin so happy about working in a group this time? *(Emma asks her to join her group and tells everyone what a good artist Caitlin is)*

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Chapter 34: “Michael’s Play”

PK- Do you have friends who are younger than you are?

RFM- Why is Michael and Caitlin’s friendship so important to both of them? (*Michael needs someone who cares and Caitlin needs someone who understands her and whom she cares about*)

Chapter 35: “Monkey Bars”

PK- Caitlin knows she is “special”, but how do you think she feels now that she realizes that everybody is special because they are alive?

RFM- How does Caitlin know that she finally understands empathy? (*Realizes Josh gets confused like she gets sometimes - rubs Josh’s back and says it’s ok so he really believes it*)

Chapter 36: “More Drawing”

PK- Do you like to get up in front of the class to share your work? Why or why not?

RFM- What happens when the class sees the drawings Caitlin did for her group’s project? (*People ask her to do drawings for the yearbook*)

Chapter 37: “No More Virginia Dare”

PK- When were you proud of yourself?

RFM- Why does Caitlin think she has to find closure for everybody? (*Mrs. Brook said, “Maybe you can come up with something...it’s your community.”*)

Chapter 38: “I Get It”

PK- How does it feel when you FINALLY understand something?

RFM- What does Caitlin finally understand? (*Empathy - understanding that others have feelings and caring about them*)

Chapter 39: “Colors”

PK- Do you think Caitlin might start using colors in her drawings? Why or why not?

RFM- Kathryn Erskine, the author, has a daughter who has Asperger’s. Why do you think the author chose to have her main character, Caitlin, have Asperger’s? (*To help readers understand people’s difficulties and to help people understand themselves*)

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