Who’s Got Game? The Ant or the Grasshopper

This story would work well for students in approximately grades 3-6. It could be used in conjunction with a unit on fables and fairy tales, friendship, or artists and authors.

Before Reading (choose one or more of the following activities):

1. Discuss with the students the definition of a fable. A fable is a short, moral story, usually using animal characters that speak and act like humans. Ask students if they can think of any stories they have read that are fables. Discuss with the class the story of Aesop. A long, long time ago (sometime between the years 620 and 560 B.C.) a man named Aesop, who was a former slave, became known for telling stories about animals and became a favorite of Croesus, a king. Although Aesop’s fables, as they became known, were never written down by Aesop, the stories were passed on from generation to generation. To this day, they are still widely read and known by many people. Explain that the story you will be reading to them, Who’s Got Game? The Ant or the Grasshopper is a more modern, urban version of a traditional Aesop’s fable called The Ant and the Grasshopper and that you will be comparing this updated version with the traditional Aesop’s fable.

2. Discuss with the class that the authors, Toni and Slade Morrison, are mother and son. Toni Morrison is known for her fiction books, written for adults, and teaches at Princeton University. Slade Morrison is a painter, who lives and works in New York City.

3. Ask the class if they have ever had a friend who needed their help. Spend some time discussing what type of help was needed, and how they helped their friend, or if they didn’t, why not? Discuss what the class thinks they should do if they have a friend in need. Explain that in the story they will be reading, they should pay close attention to how the two friends in the book, the ant and the grasshopper, treat each other, and that this will be discussed after reading the story. You may want to read some other books to the class about friendship. The following is a suggested reading list. You will need to read the books first to see which are appropriate for your students.

Suggested books about friendship:

4. Ask the students to give a definition of “art”. Be sure to remind them that art is not only drawing and painting, but writing, dancing, playing music, etc… Do they think art is important? Why? Explain that the story you will be reading is about the importance of art in our world, and that you will be discussing this idea further after reading the story.

**During Reading:**

1. Read the book aloud, all the way through, for the first reading of the story, without stopping to clarify meaning or ask questions. Tell students, before beginning reading, that you will be doing this, and to hold questions until the end. Direct the class to notice the rhythm and rhyme of the book. Let them enjoy the language and poetry of the story. When done reading, discuss the rhythm of the words, that reading this book is almost like reading a poem.

2. Read the story a second time, stopping to clarify meaning of certain passages and ask probing questions. The following is a list of words or phrases you may want to define or discuss with the class:
   - “...making music so def it drew a crowd.”
   - “I have to groove, move, prove, disprove. I have to riff and blast and shout!”
   - “Kid A munched a doughnut and scoped his friend.”
   - “You think feeling is better than dealing. But I’m standing, not kneeling.”
   - “Don’t play me. I create.” “No, you take.” “I make.” “No, you fake.”
   - “I think it best you just blow.”

Sample questions to ask as you are reading the story:
• Can you tell what the conflict is going to be between Foxy and Kid A? What do you think is going to happen? (Ask after Foxy says “he has to groove, move, disprove…”)
• Was it easy for Foxy to go to Kid A’s house to ask for help? How can you tell? Do you think he wanted to ask for help? (Ask after the page beginning “Battling shame…”)

Kid A thinks Foxy “wasted his time on those funky wings.” What do you think?

What does Foxy mean when he says, “I quenched your thirst, and fed your soul, can’t you spare me a doughnut hole?” Earlier in the story, when Kid A was preparing for winter, didn’t Foxy’s music help him in some way? How did it help?

What does Foxy mean when he says, “Art is work. It just looks like play.” Is art work? What do you think?

At the end of the story, Kid A sends Foxy away. Do you think he did the right thing? After all, Kid A did do a lot of work to prepare for winter. Does he owe anything to his friend? What does it mean to be a friend? Did Kid A act like a good friend to Foxy?

Look at the ending illustration. How did Kid A feel about how he treated his friend?

Suggested Follow-up Activities (choose one or more of the following):

1. The story ends with the question, “Who’s got game?” This question is also part of the title of the book. What does it mean to have “game?” What are the qualities it entails? Discuss with the class what they think. “Game” in these stories refers mostly to having courage. Who do they think has “game” in this story, Foxy or Kid A? After spending time discussing the reasons why, have the students write a paragraph answering this question. When done, create a graph on the board or on chart paper showing which character the class thought had the most “game.”

2. Do the authors, Toni and Slade Morrison, tell you which character is right and which is wrong at the end of the story? Actually they let you, the reader, decide on your own. Do you like books that end this way, or would you rather have the authors give you the answer? Discuss. How else could this story have ended? Working in groups, have students write alternate endings to the story. Have the groups act out their version of the story for the rest of the class.

3. Brainstorm different types of artists and list them on the board, such as musician, author, painter, sculptor, dancer, etc... Discuss how these forms of art have enriched the world and why they are important.

Break students into small groups of three or four students. Assign each group a different form of art. Explain that they will be creating posters to hang in the school that convinces people that art is important. The poster should include both drawings and words, possibly a slogan.

Discuss with class what a slogan is – a catchy phrase that people can easily remember. Give examples of slogans they may know – “Say no to drugs” or “Stop, drop and roll.” They could also try to come up with a phrase that rhymes. Brainstorm a few ideas for their posters and list them on the board to get them
started. After the discussion, give out the group placement and materials and let
the class get to work. Share the posters when completed. Display in the
classroom or hallway.

4. Ask the students if they know any artists personally. Do they know someone who
plays an instrument? A graffiti artist? A dancer? If some students cannot think
of anyone they know, remind them of the school’s art or music teacher. Assign
students the task of sharing this story with the artist they know. (Check first with
the music and art teacher in the school to make sure this is okay with them, or to
possibly set up a time for them to visit the class.) What do the artists think about
art and work? Write down their response and share it with the class.

5. Ask the class what they think “starving artist” means. Many artists spend their
lives with very little money in order to pursue their “art”. Some need to take
other jobs to support themselves in order to survive. Others did not reap the
benefits of their own work due to being paid and treated unfairly. Many artists’
work is not even recognized until after they have died. Explain to the class that
they will be doing research on various artists who fit this description. The teacher
can have the students work alone or in pairs.

After the students decide on the artist they would like to research, take the class to
the library to find books about their artist. Some of the research will probably
need to be done on the internet. The teacher may also want to visit the local
library to find some books on the artists the students have chosen. Enclosed is a
worksheet to have the students complete about their artist. Depending on the
grade level, you may want them to then take the information and write a more
detailed report about the artist. The following is a list of artists your students
might want to research:

Musicians: Franz Schubert, Scott Joplin, Erik Satie, Ruth Brown, The
Persuasions, Dmitri Shostakovich
Painters: Vincent Van Gogh, Henri Russeau, Paul Gaugia, Johannes
Vermeer
Authors: Franz Kafka, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edgar Allan Poe, Jonathan
Larson

Depending on your class’ interest in this topic, you might want to discuss “The
Rhythm and Blues Foundation,” which is a non-profit organization devoted to
helping Motown and Rhythm and Blues musicians from the 1940’s through the
1970’s with medical care and to give them financial assistance. These artists were
mostly recognized in their time, but did not receive the full monetary
compensation for their work. Many of them are struggling financially. For more
information, visit their website at www.rhythm-n-blues.org.

6. Read the class a book on ants and one on grasshoppers. Discuss how real ants are
similar to Kid A in the story, and how grasshoppers are like Foxy. Ants are
known to be hard workers. Each ant in the colony has its own job to fill. Grasshoppers, of course, are musicians, using their wings just like Foxy to produce beautiful music. Explain that many artists use animals in their stories, and the characters often have traits that mimic those of the real animal.

Brainstorm on chart paper or the board a list of animals and their characteristics that could be of use in a story. For example: rabbits – swift runners, turtles – slow moving, foxes – sly, dolphins – intelligent, dogs – loyal, birds – excellent singers, etc…Break the class into small groups and have them write a fictional story using animals, being sure to include the real character traits of that animal as part of the story. A story map is enclosed for the groups to use to plan their story. Share the stories when completed.

7. Read aloud the traditional Aesop’s Fable, The Ant and the Grasshopper. There are a variety of different retellings available. For the purpose of this exercise, find one with a moral, such as found in the book Aesop’s Fables, A Classic Illustrated Edition. (Ash, Russell & Bernard Higton, comp. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1990) or Aesop’s Fables. (USA: Grossett and Dunlap, 1947).

Compare how the two versions are similar and how they differ. Pose the following sample questions to the class: Did the characters in each version act the same? Did the traditional Aesop’s Fable tell you who was right at the end? How is the language used in the two stories different? What was the moral at the end of the Aesop’s Fable?

Discuss the moral. The general moral of the traditional story is that hard work pays off, or the lazy get what they deserve. Would the moral be the same for the Morrisons’ version? Brainstorm some possible morals to the current version of the tale, either as a whole class or in groups.

8. Sometimes a book can be understood differently depending on who is reading the story. This is especially true when it is the author reading it herself, as she knows how she wants the book to sound. Listen to the audio version of the story, read by Toni Morrison. Did the story sound different? Did it create a new understanding of the story for you? Focus the discussion on the rhythm of the language, and how it sounds as compared to the teacher’s reading of the book.
**Who’s Got Game? The Lion or the Mouse**

This story would work well for students in approximately grades 1-6. It could be used in conjunction with a unit on fables and fairy tales, elections, or bullies.

Before Reading (do one or more of the following):

1. Ask students to describe a bully. How do bullies act? Tell them this story has a bully in it, and that after reading they will discuss what makes him a bully and how he acts in the story. You may want to read your class other books about bullies. The following is a suggested reading list. You will need to read the books first to see which are appropriate for your students.

   Suggested books about bullies and bullying:

2. Ask students to describe a fable. A fable is a short, moral story, usually using animal characters that speak and act like humans. Review the information about Aesop (see *The Ant or the Grasshopper*). Tell students you will be reading a fable, and will be discussing what makes this story a fable after reading.

During Reading:

As you read, you can pause to ask questions such as:

- Do you know who the bully is yet? How do you know? (Ask after the lion says, “Listen up! Listen up! No ifs, maybes, ands…”)

Why are the animals not helping Lion when he got hurt? Do you think Tiger is really getting her baby a cone, or Elephant has a date to keep? Why did they tell this to the lion? Would you help him?

Why is Mouse helping Lion? Why would he think Lion didn’t want his help?

Do you think Lion will keep his promise to Mouse to never harm him?

Why did Mouse start feeling and acting like a lion?

If you were one of the animals in the forest, would you have been afraid of Mouse? Why or why not?

Why does Mouse start living in Lion’s den? Why do you think Lion let him have his house?

At the end of the story, Lion says, “The biggest bully in the land does what he likes, takes what he can…believes the sizes of boots and paws are all you need to make the laws. But strong or weak, big or small, a giant or an elf…Is he who wants to be a bully just scared to be himself?” What do you think Lion is trying to say? What does he mean? Spend some time exploring this concept with your class.

Suggested Follow-up Activities (do as many or as few as you like):

1. The title of the story asks the question, “Who’s got game?” What does it mean to have “game”? What are the qualities it entails? Discuss with the class what they think. “Game” in these stories refers mostly to having courage. Who do they think has “game” in this story, Lion or Mouse?

2. What makes Lion a bully? Discuss how he behaves in the beginning of the book, and how he changes his tune by the end. What makes his view change? What does he mean when he says, “Is he who wants to be a bully just scared to be himself?” Discuss in small groups, and then share with the class.

3. Ask the class if they have any witnessed anyone acting like a bully. Let them share what they have seen. Discuss whether they have ever acted like a bully themselves. Ask, “What is the best way to deal with bullies in real life?” This would be a good time to share some other books about bullies. You may want to try some from the previous list, particularly the one entitled, How to handle Bullies, Teasers, and Other Meanies. List on the board the examples of bullying actions given by the class. You may also want to list some of the following scenarios:

   - someone is teasing a friend of yours about not being able to hit a ball or climb the monkey bars, about wearing glasses, etc…
   - a bully takes part of your lunch from you during lunch time
   - someone makes all of the rules every time you play and doesn’t let you have a say
   - someone threatens to hurt you or your friend.
You can get other scenarios from the other books about bullies you might have read to the class. Explain to the class that they will be working in small groups to play act some bullying scenarios, and come up with some solutions. Break the class into small groups. Direct the groups to pick one of the ideas listed on the board. They should then, as a group, come up with how to handle the bully in that situation. They should practice acting out the scene, with the solution included. The groups will share these “mini-plays” with the class. Discuss each scene with the class after the performance, asking if there are other ways to handle the same scenario.

4. Lion is the king of the jungle, and claims to make the rules because of “my mighty paws.” Is that the best way a leader should be chosen? How do we choose our leaders in our country? Discuss how the people who want the run for office campaign; making posters, commercials, holding debates, etc… Discuss what qualities a leader should have. List these qualities on the board.

Explain that you will be having a mock election to decide on the new king of the jungle. Have a short discussion with the class about what animals may actually make a better king and why. Then explain how this election will work. The class will be broken into groups, and each group will decide on what animal they feel would make a better king of the jungle than Lion. They will fill out the enclosed worksheet explaining the qualities their animal has that makes him/her qualified for the job. They will need to make up posters for their candidate, which would probably include a slogan.

Discuss what a slogan is - a catchy phrase that people can easily remember. Give examples of some slogans other candidates have used, such as “I like Ike” (Dwight Eisenhower), “Keep Cool with Coolidge” (Calvin Coolidge), “Ross for Boss” (Ross Perot), “Building a bridge to the 21st century” (Bill Clinton), “Leave no child behind” (George W. Bush). (If you would like to view all presidential campaign slogans, go to www.presidentsusa.net/campaignslogans.html.)

Brainstorm some examples, to be written on the board, of slogans Lion could use if he was campaigning. Be sure the students understand that they cannot choose Lion themselves. Explain they can create a commercial if they would like. They should also write a speech explaining why they think their animal should win the election.

Break the class into groups and give out the worksheet. When a group has completed the worksheet, they can begin working on the other parts of the campaign. This activity will take place over the course of a few days. If possible, ask other teachers in the school, the principal, etc… if your class can present their candidates to them, and then have them vote. After everyone in the class, the visited classes, and anyone else who participated in this activity votes, tally the votes on the board to see who won.
5. There are a few good examples of similes and metaphors in this story, such as: “his heart felt like a drum in his chest,” “his teeth felt as sharp as razors,” “my paws are steel.” Discuss the definition of similes and metaphors. A simile is a figure of speech where two unlike things are compared, using the words “like” or “as.” A metaphor is similar to a simile, except like and as are not used. List some examples of each on the board. Some examples of similes are: My hands are like ice, he ran as fast as the wind, her hair is as black as night. Some examples of metaphors are: his heart was a drum, her eyes were diamonds, the floor was an ice rink. Reread the story to the class, having them signal (thumbs up or raise hands) when you read a simile or metaphor. List them on chart paper as they are discovered in the story. Have the students copy one of these, or write their own simile or metaphor and illustrate it.

6. Discuss the motivations of Mouse throughout the book. Why did he help Lion in the first place? Was he totally altruistic or did he do it at all for himself? Is he happy at the end of the book? Why or why not? Look at the illustrations on the last page of the story. What does this tell you about how Mouse is feeling? What else is going on in this picture?

7. Sometimes a book may be understood differently, depending on who is reading the story. This is especially true when the author is reading the book herself, as she knows exactly how she wants it to sound. Listen to the audio version of the story, as read by Toni Morrison. Did your understanding of the story change after hearing this version? Discuss how it compared to the reading done by the classroom teacher, and if the rhythm of the book changed.

8. Review the definition of a fable discussed before reading the story. What makes this story a fable? Discuss. Read the traditional story of *The Lion and the Mouse*. Compare/contrast the two versions using a Venn diagram, which gives the class a very visual picture of similarities and differences between two stories.
To make a Venn Diagram, you draw two intersecting circles on the board. This first circle will represent Who’s Got Game? The Lion or the Mouse. The second circle will represent the fable, The Lion and the Mouse. The intersecting area is where you list what the two stories have in common, the other parts of the circle are where you list the ideas that are only in that particular version. You would draw the circles on the board, and get the responses for each area from the students. You can also use the enclosed Venn Diagram worksheet for the students to complete individually, along with the class. A sample drawing follows:
Who’s Got Game? Poppy or the Snake

This book is appropriate for approximately grades 1-6. It could be used in conjunction with unit on fables and fairy tales.

Before Reading (do one or more of the following):

1. Remind students of the definition of a fable. A fable is a short, moral story, usually using animal characters that speak and act like humans. Explain that you will be reading a fable, which is a modernization of traditional Aesop’s Fable. Explain that after reading, you will be discussing what makes this story a fable, and comparing it to other Aesop’s Fables.

2. Should you always believe what people tell you? Do people always keep their promises? Discuss. Tell students you will be reading a story about a sneaky snake and a smart man, and to think about these ideas while the story is being read aloud.

During Reading:

As you read the book, pause to make observations and ask questions such as:

- What do you think Poppy means when he says that “paying attention is just a way of taking yourself seriously?” Tell the class that we will come back to this idea at the end of the story.
- Why did the print type change when Poppy started telling Nate the story? Discuss again at end of book.
- Why did Poppy move his truck off of Snake? Even though he’s a snake, Poppy did run him over. If you hurt someone, even if it’s by accident, don’t you have a responsibility to help them? What if the person you hurt isn’t particularly likeable or trustworthy – don’t you still have a responsibility to help them? Why would this be true?
- What did Poppy mean when he said, “He had a sassy mouth, but he seemed like a good soul underneath?” Do you find Snake to be likeable so far? Why or why not?
- Do you think Poppy took his responsibility too far by letting Snake live with him? Why or why not?
- Why did Snake lie to Poppy? (Ask this question after he bit Poppy.) Snake is claiming that Poppy knew he was a snake all along, so should have realized the danger. What do you think? Was Poppy foolish?
- Poppy says that “Paying attention is what saved me.” What does he mean? How does it relate to what he told Nate about paying attention earlier in the book? (“Paying attention is just a way of taking yourself seriously.”)
- Why did Poppy call them his “remembering” boots? What did they help him remember?
Suggested Follow-up Activities (do as many or as few as you would like):

1. The title of the story asks the question, “Who’s Got Game?” What does it mean to have “game?” What are the qualities it entails? Discuss with the class what they think. “Game” in these stories refers mostly to having courage. Who do they think has “game” in this story, Poppy or Snake?

2. Write the word “altruism” on the board. Ask the class what they think the word means. Altruism means being concerned about someone else, without thinking of oneself. Did Poppy’s actions in this book make him altruistic? How? It is important for the students to understand that sometimes doing what’s right is more important than thinking about one’s own welfare. Sometimes you have to help someone even if they are not likeable. Sometimes you have to help someone without wanting a “thank you” or without worrying about “what’s in it for me.” Discuss this with the students. Ask them if they have ever done an altruistic act – such as defending someone who is being teased, even if you don’t like that person, or helping someone who is injured that you don’t even know. A great book to use for this discussion is The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein.

3. What was Nate’s problem at the beginning of the book? Discuss how the story Poppy told about the snake might have helped him with this problem. At first, it may not seem as if the story about Snake has anything to do with Nate’s problem of paying attention at school. How are the two related? If they can’t figure out the connection, explain that paying attention is what saved Poppy’s life, and you may never know how paying attention in school could do the same, or at least help you in situations you don’t know about yet.

Ask the students if they have ever had trouble paying attention in school? What do you do? What advice would you give Nate to help him pay attention? Discuss. Have students write a letter to Nate, giving him advice to help him with his attention problem. Be sure students use the friendly letter format, including date, greeting, body, closing, and signature. A blank letter writing form is included in the back of this book for use, if needed.

4. Read the original Aesop’s Fable, The Farmer and the Snake. What was the moral of the story? Did the moral stay the same, or did it change? How did Toni and Slade Morrison change the story? There are many other Aesop’s Fables dealing with the subject of betrayal, such as: The Lion in Love, The Trees and the Axe, The Fox and the Goat, The Horse and the Stag. Read a few of these fables to the class as well and discuss what the similarities are between them. Discuss how the Morrisons changed the fables they utilized into more modern versions – the setting, language, characters, situations, etc… Then, let the students choose one of these fables, or any other fable they would like, to retell in a more modern way and share with the class.
5. What was the significance of Poppy’s boots? The authors chose not to tell you explicitly in words, but used the illustrations in the story. The illustrator of all three of the Morrison’s books, Pascal LeMaitre, uses his illustrations in all of the books to tell part of the story, particularly at the end. Look again at the ending illustrations of The Ant or the Grasshopper, The Lion or the Mouse, and Poppy or the Snake. Notice how the pictures help explain the feelings of the characters, even without any words. Explain to the class that some books are partially wordless, while others are completely wordless, using the illustrations to tell the whole story. Share some other wordless (and mostly wordless) storybooks with the class. A suggested list is as follows:


6. Read aloud the book *Doctor De Soto* by William Steig. Compare the two stories. Discuss how they are similar and how they are different. In *Doctor De Soto*, a wily fox tries to betray the trust of two very brave mice, who happen to be dentists, but just as in *Poppy or the Snake*, the mice outwit the fox in the end.

7. Sometimes a book may be understood differently, depending on who is reading the story. This is especially true when the author is reading the book herself, as she knows exactly how she wants it to sound. Listen to the audio version of the story, as read by Toni Morrison. Did your understanding of the story change after hearing this version? Discuss how it compared to the reading done by the classroom teacher, and if the rhythm of the book changed.
ARTIST REPORT

Name_________________________ Date_________________________

Name of “artist”______________________________________________

What type of art does he/she practice? (painter, writer, musician, etc…)

________________________________________________________________________

What is he/she most famous for?__________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

What makes this person a “starving artist”? How do they fit into our specified group?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Name some other interesting facts about his/her life.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Where did you get your information?________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
STORY MAP

Names of Group Members

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Characters (next to each animal, please write the characteristic you will use in the story):

Animal: ___________________________ Characteristic: ___________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Other Characters (if any):
________________________________________________________________________

Setting:
________________________________________________________________________

Problem:
________________________________________________________________________

Map out the body of your story below:

Beginning: __________________________________________________________________

Middle: __________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

End: _____________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
KING OF THE FOREST

Names of group members:__________________________________________

__________________________________________

What animal does your group feel should be king of the forest?

__________________________________________

What qualities made you choose this candidate (list at least three):

__________________________________________

What will your slogan be? (Remember, it’s a catchy phrase so that people will remember your candidate.):__________________________________________

__________________________________________

What ways will you get your message to the voters? (speech, commercial, posters, etc…)__________________________________________

__________________________________________

Use this space to plan your speech. Be sure to include reasons why someone should vote for your candidate. You may use separate paper if necessary.

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________
Now you can start working on your posters, commercials, etc.

VENN DIAGRAM

- Morrison’s Version
- Aesop’s Fable
References

**Aesop’s Fables.** Grosset & Dunlap, 1947.


