



## Adult Guide Spider Cave

### Plot Summary

Jessica's classmates are preparing for a school trip to Yosemite National Park, where they will climb Spider Rock and explore Spider Cave. In order to go on the trip, all the children must first prove their climbing ability by scaling the climbing rock in Middlebury Park. Unfortunately, Jessica is afraid of heights. But thanks to the encouragement of her friends and Zaki, the "character chameleon," she overcomes her fear. Next, Jessica is tempted to ask her mother for new hiking boots. The ones she has are very comfortable—but they are her cousin's hand-me-downs, and she's afraid the other girls might make fun of her for wearing them. With some nudging from Zaki, however, she decides to stick with her tried-and-true shoes. Later, back with her classmates, Jessica has to cast the tie-breaking vote on one of two possible designs for a T-shirt that will commemorate their class trip to Yosemite. She prefers the design by the shy but talented Simon, but the competing design was drawn by Tiffany, the most popular girl in class. At the risk of being teased or snubbed by the other girls, Jessica votes for Simon's superior design. When the day of the big trip finally arrives, Jessica does a good job climbing Spider Rock. She even helps Shawnie conquer her fears inside Spider Cave. Everything is going well until Jessica realizes that Zaki is missing and is probably still back in the dark cave. With the help of trip chaperone Mr. Lacey (who surprises the Spruce Street Six by knowing Zaki's name), Jessica bravely returns to the cave to search for their beloved chameleon, Zaki. Jessica and Mr. Lacey find Zaki safe and sound, and discover that he was courageous, too—he protected Jessica from a bat that had flown at her in the dark. At the end of the story, everyone is proud of Jessica the Brave. And Jessica and her friends have uncovered a new piece of the puzzle about the possible relationship between Mr. Lacey and Zaki.

### Moral Trials

Jessica, with the support of her friends and Zaki, must demonstrate either physical or moral courage (or both) in four very different situations. First, she must show physical courage when scaling the climbing rock, despite her fear of

heights. Jessica finds the strength to climb the rock by admitting her fear to her friends, allowing them to support her, and focusing on her goal—going on the trip to Yosemite to explore Spider Cave!

Here is a set of questions you can ask your child about this part of the story:

*What are some things you wish you had the courage to do?*

*Why is it a good idea to tell your closest friends or family members when you are afraid to do something?*

*Have you overcome a fear? How did you do it?*

The second situation Jessica faces requires moral courage. It's not easy for her to risk being mocked by her classmates for wearing old hiking boots when all the other kids have brand-new ones. But she finds courage in talking to Zaki. Zaki reminds Jessica that her boots are not just for show—they need to serve a purpose. And her old boots are both safe and comfortable. (As some of Jessica's classmates later discover, new boots are not much fun to hike in because they cause the kids to slip and get painful blisters!) Jessica realizes that it would be foolish to leave her boots at home simply because she's worried about what other people think. In fact, the old boots are exactly what she needs to enjoy her time in Yosemite to the fullest.

Here is a set of questions you can ask your child about this situation:

*Why is it hard to be different from your friends or classmates?*

*Have you ever worn or bought something just to "fit in with the crowd"? If so, how did you feel? Were you proud, or a little ashamed of yourself?*

*How can you find the strength to resist going along with the crowd?*

*If you were Jessica and someone made fun of you for wearing hand-me-down boots, how would you respond?*

*Have you ever made fun of someone? How do you think that person felt? Would you want to feel that way?*

*What should you do when other kids make fun of someone?*

The third situation Jessica experiences also requires her to show moral courage. When the class votes on a T-shirt design, all of the other girls in her class vote for Tiffany's design. Jessica knows that Tiffany is so popular that she can probably intimidate the other girls in Jessica's class into mistreating Jessica badly if she doesn't vote for Tiffany's design. Jessica also knows that if she votes for Simon's design, she risks having the other girls say that she has a crush on him. It would certainly be easier for her just to vote for Tiffany's design. But if she did, Jessica would know that she hadn't voted for the design she honestly thought was better, and she would feel that she hadn't been fair to Simon (who clearly worked harder on his design). In the end, Zaki helps her see that it is more important to be true to yourself than to follow the crowd.

Here is a set of questions you can ask your child about this situation:

*If you were in Jessica's place, would you have voted for Simon's or Tiffany's design?*

*How would you feel if you were Simon and your (much better) design lost the vote just because you weren't as popular as Tiffany?*

*Have you ever had to go against the crowd like Jessica did? If so, where did you find the courage to do that?*

*Jessica knew that if her true friends, Shawnie and Lauren, had been in the class, they would have voted for Simon's design, too. What's more important: what "the crowd" thinks of you, or what your true friends think of you?*

*Do you think you could do the right thing even if no one else did? Why or why not?*

The final situation Jessica finds herself in requires her to exhibit both moral and physical courage. At the end of the story, Jessica realizes that Zaki was left behind in the cave because he was protecting her from a bat. Even though she's afraid to return to the dark cave with just Mr. Lacey (instead of the whole class), Jessica knows she must rescue Zaki in return. It is the right thing to do. She understands that you cannot leave your friends behind—especially if they fell behind as a result of helping you! Love and friendship must be stronger than fear. Here is a set of questions you can ask your child about this situation:

*How do you think Jessica would have felt if she'd let her fear keep her from going back in the cave?*

*Have you ever heard the expression, "A friend in need is a friend indeed"? What does it mean?*

*After Jessica told Mr. Lacey (a responsible adult) that Zaki was missing, she went back with Mr. Lacey into Spider Cave to look for Zaki. Would it have been okay for Jessica to go back into the cave alone, without telling Mr. Lacey? Why or why not?*

### **Concluding Reflection**

In the end, Jessica is able to look back on her actions with pride because she found the inner strength to be brave. And she learned a valuable lesson: there is nothing wrong with admitting to your friends when you are scared. When your friends know you are scared, they can help you find courage and remind you that you are not alone. Jessica's friends do this for her at the beginning of the story, when she faces the climbing rock, and Jessica returns the favor when she helps Shawnie stay strong in Spider Cave. Jessica also learns that it takes courage to stand up to peer pressure, but that if you focus on doing the right thing rather than on how other people will react, you will be proud of your actions in the long run.

Here are some final questions to consider:

*In each scenario, Jessica finds a way to act courageously. But she does this by controlling her fears—she's not actually fearless. What is the difference between being brave and being fearless? Is fearlessness a good thing?*

*It takes physical courage to climb a mountain, but it takes moral courage to stand up to peer pressure. Do you need both kinds of courage to be a good person? Why or why not? Do you find it harder to show physical courage or moral courage? Explain.*