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Making Character Development Fun



Adult Guide
The Spooky Mansion



Plot Summary

On Halloween, Jarrett is raking leaves when he starts thinking about the annual pumpkin-carving contest to be held later that evening at the Middlebury Fall Festival. The winner will be awarded a gift certificate to Lacey's General Store—and Jarrett really wants to win. Before he finishes raking, Jarrett sees his friends Carlos and Shawnie. They are taking Jake's dog, Rex, on a walk to the Hawkins Mansion, the scariest house in Middlebury. Jarrett decides to join them, even though his work isn't done. At the mansion, Rex gets loose and runs onto the grounds. Carlos, Shawnie, and Jarrett are unable to find him. Later, back at Jake's house, everyone in the Spruce Street Six decides to search for Rex. But Jarrett thinks he shouldn't have to help. He blames Carlos and Shawnie for losing Rex and states that if he looks for the dog, he won't have time to carve his pumpkin. Zaki, the "character chameleon," turns bright red, but Jarrett thinks Zaki is being unfair! When Jarrett returns home, he finds that his mother has finished raking the leaves, *and* she has forgiven him for not finishing his chore. Jarrett is grateful for her help, but now he feels guilty about the way he has treated his friends. So Jarrett runs back to the Hawkins Mansion to help find Rex. As he searches the grounds, he is startled by a monster in the window. He jumps up, knocks himself silly, and then faints. Jarrett wakes up to find himself in the mansion with Annie Mildred Hawkins. Mrs. Hawkins—who was wearing a Halloween mask—turns out to be a very friendly but lonely lady. She takes care of the bump on Jarrett's head and sadly agrees that he should go reassure his friends he is okay. By the time Jarrett gets to Jake's house, the Spruce Street Six have found Rex, finished their pumpkins, and even carved one for Jarrett to enter into the contest. But when they hear about Jarrett's time with Mrs. Hawkins, the mysterious and legendary "Pale Annie," they want to do something nice for her. So they decide to decorate her house with the pumpkins they made for the contest and to encourage the other kids in the neighborhood to trick-or-treat at her place. That night the kids enjoy Mrs. Hawkins's brownies, and Mr. Lacey even comes for a visit. He is so proud of the kids that he gives them a bunch of gift certificates to his store—entrusting Jarrett, of course, to divide them fairly.

Moral Trials

Jarrett faces a number of moral challenges in this story. First, he must decide how to accomplish several goals in a limited time: he has a moral obligation to rake the leaves, but he also wants to carve a pumpkin for the contest and to walk Rex with Carlos and Shawnie. (Of course, this should have been a no-brainer: since Jarrett had promised his mother he would rake the leaves, he should have finished that first. When he broke his promise, he wronged her.)

Jarrett probably knew it was wrong to bail on his responsibility. But he might not have known what to do when his promise to his mother conflicted with his desire to walk Rex with his friends. After all, Jarrett could have asked his mother for permission to finish his chore a bit later, or perhaps on another day. There is nothing wrong with asking! Of course, Jarrett's mom might have said he had to finish his chore first. After all, she did rake them herself when Jarrett bailed on her. But even if she had insisted that Jarrett finish, he still could have asked his friends for help . . . and then gone for a walk. Instead, Jarrett just yelled to his mother that he had decided to leave. (Perhaps he didn't try very hard to talk to her because he was afraid she would say no!)

Our children will often find themselves in similar situations, making promises and then finding that something unexpected has come up. One thing we can teach them is to ask the person they made a promise to for permission to break the promise. Because others rely on us to keep our promises, we need to ask them to release us from those promises. (Of course, this doesn't always mean they will.) And we need to carefully weigh when it's appropriate to ask for permission not to fulfill our promises. If we do it too often, we'll lose our credibility.

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

What should Jarrett have said when Carlos and Shawnie asked him to walk Rex?

Was it okay for Jarrett to leave before finishing his chore? Why or why not?

How do you think Jarrett's mother felt when she found out he had left without finishing?

Why is it so important to keep your promises?

Have you ever made a promise you wanted to take back? What did you do? Why?

Is it ever okay to get permission not to do what you promised?

How should you ask for permission not to do what you promised? Did Jarrett ask for permission to get out of raking the leaves?

When is it wrong to try to get out of a promise?

The second moral trial occurs when Jarrett concludes that helping his friends search for Rex will leave him no time to carve his pumpkin. So he decides not to help. But that decision is unjust. The Spruce Street Six have a long history of helping each other out of tight spots. When we rely on others, we have an obligation to help them when they need it.

Jarrett also believes that because Carlos and Shawnie were to blame for letting Rex go, they should find him. But Jarrett is being petty and unfair to use their mistake as an excuse not to search for Rex. And Rex is Jake's dog. So in refusing to search for Rex, Jarrett hurts Jake at least as much as Carlos and Shawnie. Moreover, Jarrett's real reason for refusing to help—he won't have time to finish carving his pumpkin—is selfish. Fortunately, Jarrett realizes this when his mother doesn't hold his bad behavior against him. This is the essence of fairness: treating others as we want to be treated.

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

Do you think either Carlos or Shawnie was responsible for letting Rex go? If so, did that give Jarrett a good reason not to help find Rex?

Was Zaki being unfair when he signaled that Jarrett needed to help the Spruce Street Six find Rex? Why or why not?

If your brother helps you clean your room, is it okay for him to demand that you help him finish his homework?

Have you ever blamed someone for making a mistake? How do you think that person felt?

The Spruce Street Six knew how much Jarrett wanted to finish his pumpkin. Should they have told him it was okay to go?

Why did Jarrett eventually decide to help his friends search for Rex?

Why did Jarrett feel guilty when he found his mother raking the leaves?

Should Jarrett's mother have finished his chore? Why or why not?

After Jarrett searches for Rex, he returns to Jake’s house and discovers that his friends have found Rex, finished their pumpkins, and carved a pumpkin for him to enter into the contest. But Jarrett realizes that doing so would be dishonest—he didn’t carve the pumpkin! So Jarrett decides to give it to Mrs. Hawkins. Inspired, the rest of the Spruce Street Six decide to give their pumpkins to Mrs. Hawkins, too, and to encourage the other neighborhood kids to trick-or-treat at her place.

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

Why did Jarrett’s friends carve a pumpkin for him?

How did Jarrett feel when he found out his friends carved the pumpkin? Why?

Do you agree that it would have been unfair for Jarrett to enter the pumpkin?

Is it unfair to take credit for something you didn’t do? Why or why not?

Why didn’t the rest of the Spruce Street Six realize it would be wrong for Jarrett to enter the pumpkin?

Do you think Jarrett’s friends were angry that he decided not to enter the pumpkin?

Why did the Spruce Street Six decide to visit Mrs. Hawkins? Did they have to visit her, or were they just being nice?

Is it unfair to think something bad about someone before you really get to know him or her?

Have you ever had bad feelings about someone at first but then had those feelings go away after you got to know the person better?

Concluding Reflection

The Spooky Mansion illustrates the difficulties Jarrett has in treating his mother and friends with true justice, and the ways in which they respond to his unjust treatment. Fortunately, Jarrett eventually learns how to treat them fairly—in large part because of the way his mother and friends respond to his own wrongdoing. In fact, Jarrett learns how to treat his friends justly only after he has been forgiven for his own injustice. This indicates not only how important it is for our children to learn to do the right thing, but also how crucial it is to respond well when others make mistakes.