



## **Adult Guide**

### **The Big Mistake**

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#### **Plot Summary**

Jake desperately wants the latest Pathfinder watch from Lacey's General Store, but he cannot afford it yet. Mr. Lacey allows him to try it on and Jake mistakenly walks out with it, only to discover the watch on his wrist while at his friend Carlos's birthday party. Jake and his friends in the Spruce Street Six meet to discuss what he should do. They decide to sneak it back into the case at the store so that Jake won't get in trouble for stealing. But Biff the bully, who is also at the birthday party, steals the watch while no one is looking. Jessica rashly confronts Biff, grabs for the watch, and the watchstrap breaks. Now Jake is in a bind: he doesn't want to tell anyone what happened because he's afraid he'll get in trouble for stealing and then breaking the watch, but he's also unwilling to keep the watch. Zaki the "character chameleon," who serves as a moral guide for the Spruce Street Six, helps Jake realize that he can't steal and so must take the risk of getting in trouble. So Jake tells his mother what happened, and she takes him to speak with Mr. Lacey, who turns out to be very understanding . . .and even seems to know a bit about Zaki.

#### **Moral Trials**

Jake and his friends must work their way through three primary moral dilemmas. The first occurs early in the story when Jake and his mother are at Mr. Lacey's store, shopping for Carlos's birthday present. Jake really wants the special Pathfinder watch, but he knows that he hasn't earned enough money to purchase it. So he decides to manipulate his mother into buying the watch for him. He remembers how his dog Rex gets food by making a sad face and tries to do the same thing by squeezing out a tear as he whines to his mother that he'll never be able to buy the watch. Zaki lets Jake know he isn't pleased with the charade, and Jake's mother also calls him out on it.

The primary issue raised by this scenario is the difficulty we have in acting with full honesty; a secondary issue is the danger of manipulation or emotional blackmail. Jake is not actually upset enough to cry about not being able to buy the watch, but he forces himself to do so in a play for his mother's sympathy. Now Jake, like the rest of us, knows his own state of mind best. If he is sad, then he's in the best position to know that, and others have to rely on him to disclose how he really feels. When he pretends to cry, he's relying on the fact that his mom can't be sure that he's faking, so he tries to deceive her. Fortunately, his mother knows him very well and is often able to tell when he's expressing emotions he doesn't really feel or saying things he doesn't really believe. So Jake gets caught. Nevertheless, the fact that we know our private emotions and beliefs better than anyone else enables us to deceive them rather easily, allowing us to manipulate others to our own ends—particularly when they don't know us well. But this kind of deception destroys close relationships: when others find out, in unguarded moments, that we have been deceiving and manipulating them, they will have a very difficult time trusting us.

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

*Was it a good idea for Jake's mom not to buy him the watch right away?  
What might be her reason for insisting that he earn it?*

*Have you ever tried to get others to do something by faking an emotion?*

*Do you think your parents can tell when you are deceiving them?*

*Is it always wrong to be sad, and to express your sadness, when you don't get your way? What are some good and not-so-good ways to express displeasure at a decision you don't like?*

*Have others ever deceived you about their feelings to get you to do something they want? How did you feel when you found out?*

The second moral dilemma Jake and his friends face is what to do when Jake realizes that he has accidentally taken the watch from Mr. Lacey's store. At first the kids decide to return the watch without telling Mr. Lacey. Is that a morally responsible plan? Your child may well think the plan is fine. After all, if the plan works out, then no one will have been harmed: the watch will be no worse for wear, Mr. Lacey will never know, and neither will Jake's mother, so Jake won't get in trouble either. No harm, no foul. And if the plan doesn't work out, Jake

can still confess to his mother and Mr. Lacey. So is this plan simply a sensible way of getting things back to where they were before Jake mistakenly took the watch? (Of course, it would be different if Jake had stolen the watch on purpose and then felt bad about it; in that case, Jake should surely tell his mother what he'd done.)

The problem with this way of thinking is that it isn't enough just to "make things the same as they were before." Jake took Mr. Lacey's watch: it wasn't Jake's, and so Jake doesn't get to decide what should be done as a result of his mistake. It's Mr. Lacey's watch—he owns it—and so he must decide what to do when Jake confesses. Maybe he won't punish Jake when he finds out Jake made an innocent mistake. Fine. But mistake or not, Jake needs to be honest and forthcoming about what he's done and then let Mr. Lacey decide what to do as a result.

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

*Would Mr. Lacey have believed Jake if he'd admitted to taking the watch right away?*

*If Jake had kept the watch, would he have been able to enjoy it as much as if he'd bought it?*

*If you do something by mistake, should you be punished for it?*

*Do you think Mr. Lacey would trust Jake more or less if he'd admitted right away that he'd mistakenly taken the watch?*

The third primary moral dilemma Jake and his friends must solve is how to deal with the bully Biff after he stole the Pathfinder watch. At the simplest level, this is a question about how to deal with a bully. Should Jessica have confronted him even though she might have gotten hurt (or broken the watch!)? Or should the kids have gone to get help from a parent (and then risked being made fun of by other kids as tattletales)? But at a much deeper level, the scenario raises questions about how children are to understand those who don't seem to care about doing the right thing. What is it about people like Biff that motivates them to treat others so poorly? These are, of course, questions about human nature—a subject that people have disagreed about for years. Some hold that people like Biff are just misinformed about what will make them happy and therefore are mean because they just don't know any better. Perhaps they are misinformed because they've been raised poorly: Biff's parents simply didn't

teach him to care about doing the right thing. Others believe that folks like Biff are acting out of a deep human inclination toward selfishness. It's not that Biff doesn't know what to do—his problem is that he thinks he's more important than other people and therefore doesn't care that his actions make others miserable.

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

*Do you think that Zaki ever speaks to Biff? (That is, does Biff have a conscience?)*

*If he doesn't, why not? (Has Biff been raised poorly and never been taught right from wrong?)*

*If Zaki does talk to Biff, then does Biff just ignore Zaki? (Is he too selfish and preoccupied to think about the right thing to do?)*

*Does Biff hear Zaki but not care? (Some people just don't care about doing the right thing.)*

*Is it possible that Zaki is speaking to Biff but that Biff doesn't hear him? (This is a darker possibility: Biff is so used to wronging others that he is now unable to recognize the right way to act. Biff is morally blind because of his long history of moral corruption.)*

### **Concluding Reflection**

Things turn out well for Jake in the end. He returns the watch, his mother is proud of him, Zaki is thrilled, and Mr. Lacey trusts Jake more than ever. But questions remain:

*Why did Jake feel so good even though he didn't get the watch and will actually have to pay more for it? (That is, when he eventually makes enough money to buy the watch, he will have to pay to fix the broken band as well.)*

*Do you think that Jake should have to pay for the broken strap since he not only didn't break it, he wasn't there when it broke? Why should Jake be punished for what was, in fact, an innocent mistake?*