



Adult Guide

The Contest

Plot Summary

Kind Shawnie takes it upon herself to welcome Cassie, the new girl in town and Jarrett's cousin, to Middlebury. Cassie is funny and a terrific artist, but she doesn't listen to instructions, gets into trouble all the time, and drags others into her problems. While in math class, Cassie is true to form, paying little attention to the teacher's instructions and writing down almost none of the math problems. Recognizing that Cassie is about to get in trouble on her first day of school, Shawnie intends to give Cassie her answers. But Zaki, the "character chameleon," warns Shawnie not to cheat, and fortunately, the bell rings before Shawnie has a chance to do so. Later that day, Mr. Jones announces that there will be a group art competition, and that the winners will get a trip to the zoo. Shawnie wants to include Cassie in her group with the rest of the Spruce Street Six, but Jake fears that Cassie won't pay attention and will prevent them from winning. Shawnie decides to include Cassie in spite of Jake's objections. It soon becomes clear what Cassie's real problem is. She isn't willfully disobedient—she simply has difficulty hearing! Although Cassie can get by with reading lips, she is not always able to do so, and she often misses out on instructions and gets in trouble as a result. Once Mr. Jones realizes this, he makes sure Cassie can hear the competition's requirements. Cassie contributes productively to the artwork, and their team wins for the third grade. Unfortunately, the fourth grade winners include Biff the Bully. On Friday, as the kids are leaving the zoo, Biff sees Zaki visiting his relatives in the Reptile Region, snatches him, and threatens to feed him to the crocodiles. To save Zaki, Shawnie cleverly pretends to be afraid of reptiles, and Biff drops Zaki down Shawnie's shirt. This isn't exactly where Shawnie wants the chameleon, but at least Zaki is free. Everything works out well in the end—for Cassie, for the Spruce Street Six, and for Zaki.

Moral Trials

Shawnie faces three main moral trials in this story. First, she is tempted to give Cassie her multiplication answers to keep Cassie from getting in trouble with

Miss Snodgrass (the strict third grade math teacher) and from being ridiculed by her new classmates. This, of course, would be cheating. But from Shawnie's perspective, providing Cassie with her answers would prevent needless distress.

Genuinely compassionate and kind people like Shawnie might be tempted to help other people avoid suffering by making exceptions to rules when there doesn't seem to be any negative consequences. The moral point, however, is that our acts of kindness must respect the rights and obligations of others. We can be easily misled to do the wrong thing, despite having the very best motives. This is a particular danger for the genuinely virtuous.

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

If Shawnie had given Cassie her multiplication answers, would she have done something wrong? If so, what's so bad about giving Cassie a few answers?

Shawnie had promised Cassie's cousin Jarrett and the rest of the Spruce Street Six that she would take care of Cassie. Do you think her promise gave her a reason to cheat?

Do you think Shawnie would have hurt anyone by giving Cassie her answers? (Would she have hurt Cassie? The other students? Miss Snodgrass?)

Jake reminded Shawnie, "It's good to be kind, but you have to be honest." Can you think of situations in which kindness might lead you to break an important rule?

If it's possible to be kind but dishonest, is it also possible to be honest but unkind? Give some examples.

The second moral trial that Shawnie faces occurs when Mr. Jones informs the class that they will participate in a competition that requires each person to pay attention. Jake says outright that he does not want to include Cassie; he thinks that Cassie will hinder their chances of winning. Shawnie decides to include Cassie anyway, and Jake is mad at her for doing so. This raises a very difficult question: if Shawnie and Jake are supposed to be cooperating on a project, then shouldn't they agree on how to proceed? You could say that Shawnie has no right to make a group decision without the consent of the others. Or

in contrast, you could say that it's okay for her to ignore Jake's objections because they turn out to be discreditable . . . as Jake later admits.

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

Would you have ignored Jake's objections? If so, would you have done anything differently than Shawnie?

What do you think would have happened if Shawnie had listened to Jake?

Do you think Jake had a good reason not to include Cassie? Do you think he had a right to be angry with Shawnie when she ignored his objections?

Can you think of a situation in which you shouldn't do something just because another person objects (even if it's otherwise okay to do)?

The third moral dilemma occurs when Biff threatens to feed Zaki to the crocodiles. Shawnie responds by pretending to be afraid of reptiles, hoping that Biff will respond as he eventually does—by dropping Zaki down her shirt.

Shawnie saved Zaki, but she was also pretending to feel something she didn't. In doing so, she led Biff to believe that she was afraid of Zaki when in fact she wasn't scared at all. Was she wrong to do so? You might say that just as Shawnie shouldn't have cheated by giving Cassie her answers, Shawnie also shouldn't have deceived Biff, even to save Zaki! Or you could argue that Shawnie had no obligation to be forthright with Biff: by threatening to hurt Zaki, Biff forfeited any right to be treated in an upfront manner.

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

What would you have done to save Zaki from Biff? Can you think of anything else Shawnie could have done to save Zaki?

Was it okay for Shawnie to pretend to have feelings she didn't have? Why or why not?

Did Biff deserve to be treated in a non-deceptive manner?

Can you think of a situation in which it would be okay for you to pretend to feel something?

To whom do you have an obligation to tell the truth? For example, is it okay to deceive someone who is trying to hurt you if doing so will help you avoid getting hurt?

Concluding Reflection

Shawnie found herself in several situations that raise challenging moral questions! These are questions that people have been arguing about for years . . . and will probably continue to debate for many years to come. How can we treat others kindly and at the same time act in an honest, forthright, and conscientious manner? How important is it for us to strictly follow “the rules,” particularly if doing so seems to have negative results? These are difficult life questions that we—children and adults alike—will have to wrestle with for the rest of our lives.