

## CASE 5

### The Emergency Telephone Call

Near the end of the school day, Mr. Wadsworth has an emergency telephone call and finds that he must leave his fifth-grade class temporarily unattended. He puts Sandy, a particularly trustworthy student, in charge, asking her to keep the other students in their seats and on task. He also asks her to report any misbehaviors to him upon his return.

After listening to their teacher's footsteps grow fainter and fainter as he walks down the hall, many of the children begin talking and joking with one another. The longer Mr. Wadsworth is gone, the louder the volume of their chatter becomes. "Oh, great!" thinks Sandy. "Do I report *all* of them?"

Suzanne, a girl whom Sandy admires, shouts, "Hey, let's play some tricks on Mr. Wadsworth!" She runs up to her teacher's desk, grabs several tacks from the desk drawer, and strategically scatters them on Mr. Wadsworth's chair at the reading table. Sandy approaches her friend and whispers, "Suzanne, you need to put those tacks back. You know this is wrong. Mr. Wadsworth might hurt himself."

"Lighten up, Sandy. Besides, he'll never know who did it, will he?"

"It's wrong...."

"It's only wrong if you get caught, Sandy."

Suzanne sees a bottle of glue on Mr. Wadsworth's desk. Ignoring Sandy's pleas to stop, she takes several of the textbooks lying on Mr. Wadsworth's desk and glues some of the pages together. Then, hiding the empty glue bottle in her desk, Suzanne looks around to see if any of the other children have noticed what she has done, but they seem to be wrapped up in off-task activities of their own.

After pausing to think about additional pranks that she can play, Suzanne puts the class hamster, George, in the bottom file drawer of her teacher's desk. As an afterthought, she pours some water in a plastic cup and places it in the drawer along with the hamster.

"Suzanne, what you're doing isn't nice to George, to Mr. Wadsworth, or to me. Mr. Wadsworth is going to be really angry at me for letting you do these things. I know you think you're being funny, but you're not!"

"Sandy, I thought we were friends."

"We are."

"Friends trust one another and share secrets. Anyway, there won't be a problem if I don't get caught."

"Well, yeah, but I don't like keeping this kind of secret. Mr. Wadsworth trusts me. Besides, he'll probably punish the whole class for what you've done."

Ignoring Sandy, Suzanne grabs red and black permanent markers and proceeds to draw pictures of Mr. Wadsworth on the dry eraser board hanging on the wall. The class grows quiet as they watch Suzanne draw her pictures. Sandy lays her head on her desk in hopeless resignation.

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"Suzanne, those are permanent markers," Dillon calls out. "You won't be able to erase that stuff."

"Oh, come on, Wadsworth can get rid of them," Suzanne retorts. "All he has to do is use rubbing alcohol and the ink will come right off."

"Why should he clean up your mess?" Molly asks indignantly.

"Man, you're really gonna get in trouble!" Blake warns.

Suzanne turns and glares at her classmates. "I won't get in trouble unless there's a 'narc' in here."

The others look to Sandy for help, but she still has her head on her desk. When the final bell rings and Mr. Wadsworth has still not returned to his classroom, the children slowly gather their things and leave for home.

Suzanne leaves the uncapped markers on the eraser board shelf and gathers her belongings. "Do you want to walk home together?" she asks Sandy.

“No, I...uh...have to stay after school for choir.”

“Oh, I see. You’re going to ‘narc’ on me, aren’t you?”

“Uh, no, probably not. No, of course not. But I think you should tell Mr. Wadsworth what you’ve done.”

“Oh, come on, Sandy. It was all **just a** joke.”

“Well, it wasn’t a very funny one.”

After Suzanne leaves, Sandy walks to the office and asks Ms. Leary, the school secretary, for some rubbing alcohol.

“Why do you need it?” Ms. Leary asks her.

“Uh...well, you see...uh...someone accidentally got some permanent marker on the erasable marker board. I was going to clean it off for Mr. Wadsworth.” Sandy looks down at her feet.

“Honey, you don’t have to worry about it,” Ms. Leary tells her. “Mr. Schroeder, the custodian, will clean it up.”

“That’s okay, I don’t mind. I...uh...kinda like cleaning the boards.”

“No, that’s Mr. Schroeder’s job. You run on home.”

Sandy returns to her classroom to wait for Mr. Wadsworth’s return. She should have been home a half an hour ago. “Great,” she thinks, “now Mom is going to be mad at me, too.”

Mr. Wadsworth walks into the room, “Sandy, your mother just called. She’s very worried about you. Why are you still here?”

Before she can respond, Mr. Wadsworth sees the board. “What the heck...who wrote on the board with permanent markers?”

Sandy bursts into tears. “I tried to make them behave. Really I did!”

“The whole **class** did this?”

“No, just someone-just one person. But no one did anything about it, so I didn’t, either.”

Mr. Wadsworth stoops down to Sandy’s level, looks her straight in the eye, and asks, “Who did this, Sandy?”

She shrugs her shoulders.

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“If you don’t tell me who was responsible for this mess, then you will have to be the one to clean it up.”

Sandy stares at the floor.

Mr. Wadsworth leaves the room, returning shortly with a bottle of clear liquid. He hands the bottle to Sandy, “I expected better of you, Sandy. Maybe cleaning the marker board will refresh your memory. By the way, your mother is on her way over.”

While Sandy cleans the board, Mr. Wadsworth sits at his desk to grade papers. He opens the bottom drawer to look for his grading book, only to find the class hamster scampering about and water sloshing from one side of the drawer to the other. He sees, too, that all the teaching materials he keeps in that drawer have been chewed by the hamster and saturated with water.

Mr. Wadsworth explodes. “Sandy, George is in my desk! He’s ruined everything. Who did this? Tell me now!”

Sandy replies so quietly that Mr. Wadsworth can barely hear her. “She did more stuff, too. She ruined some of your books. She...uh...glued a bunch of pages together.”

Gathering his composure, Mr. Wadsworth repeats his question. “Who did this, Sandy?”

“Suzanne. She said I’d be a narc if I told. Please don’t tell her I told you, Mr. Wadsworth. **Please!**”

NOTE: Suzanne was officially charged with a misdemeanor: She was suspended three days for willful destruction of school property. The municipal court judge mandated that before she could return to school, her parents would have to reimburse the school district for the damages she had

caused. Several years after the incident, Suzanne and Sandy still weren't speaking to each other.

*Possible questions for "The Emergency Telephone Call":*

- 1 . From Kohlberg's perspective, in what stage of moral development is each of the girls?**
- 2 . Is it appropriate for Mr. Wadsworth to put Sandy in charge of the class during his absence? Why or why not?**
- 3 . Do you think the entire class should be punished for allowing Suzanne to vandalize the classroom? Why or why not?**