

Nadia Likes to Gossip

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Nadia is in grade six. She's going to be beautiful one day, but right now she's tall and skinny with long stringy hair, and she wears these old baggy sweatshirts with long arms that she keeps pulled over her hands.

Nadia has lots of friends. They cluster around her in the hallway between classes, wanting to know what she did on the weekend, and what boy she likes, and did she do her math homework. And most importantly, what has she heard about 'so-and-so', and what did 'you-know-who' get into trouble for in the playground.

Nadia likes to gossip. As her teacher, that shouldn't bother me too much. Lots of kids her age, especially the girls, like to talk about their friends behind their backs. But Nadia tells *me* all the gossip too. And I don't want to hear it.

I don't want to know that David said my legs look fat. I don't need to know that Melissa cried all night because her mother won't let her go to the school dance. And I especially don't want to know that Bobby and Kathy have been holding hands behind the playground.

I don't know why Nadia shares her gossip with me. Maybe it's because I'm a new teacher, and female, and young. Maybe she thinks I like gossip. Maybe she just likes me.

Whatever the reason, I don't like hearing gossip. If it were just silly things, I could laugh with Nadia about it, or ignore it. But Nadia can be very cruel. Sometimes the things she tells me are mean, things she shouldn't be saying about others. Sometimes I think she makes things up.

Like what she told me today, just after recess.

"Miss Jacobs, did you know that Barbara doesn't like you?"

I looked at her. "Nadia, why would you say something like that?"

"It's true, Miss Jacobs. She said you always pick on her in class. She told me she hates you, and you're a terrible teacher."

I didn't know what to say. Barbara was one of my favourite students, and very smart. I was hurt.

"Nadia, why did you tell me that?"

“I just thought you should know, Miss Jacobs.” And she turned and walked into the classroom.

OK, as a teacher, I knew I had to accept things like that. But I was new at this. I’d thought that Barbara liked me.

The next day I found Alysha crying in the boot room. Alysha is never sad ... she’s the most positive, happy kid I’ve ever met. Why was she crying?

“Alysha, what’s the matter?”

She wiped away a tear and looked up at me. “Miss Jacobs ...” She sobbed again. “Miss Jacobs, Nadia told Denise that I didn’t like her. Now Denise won’t talk to me. She was my best friend. What am I going to do?” She cried some more.

I talked to Alysha for a few minutes, and suggested that she and Denise and I could probably straighten things out. That seemed to make her feel better. But I knew I had to have a talk with Nadia too. Her gossip was hurting people.

I didn’t have to wait long. During the lunch break, Nadia found me in the hallway. I knew from the excited look on her face that she had some juicy tidbit of gossip she wanted to share. I took her into my room and we sat down.

“Miss Jacobs, do you know what I just heard about Melissa?”

“Hold on a minute,” I told her. “Before you talk to me about Melissa, I want to ask you something. Are you absolutely sure that what you’re going to tell me is true?”

“Well ... no”, Nadia said, “I just heard about it, and ...”

“All right, Nadia. So you don’t know if it’s true or not. So let me ask you another question. Is what you are going to tell me about Melissa something good?”

“Uh ... no. It’s not very good, that’s for sure ...”

“So, Nadia, you want to tell me something bad about Melissa, but you don’t know if it’s true. Let me ask you one more question. This thing you’re going to tell me about Melissa ... will it be useful to me?”

“No, not really.”

“Well, Nadia, since what you want to tell me is neither true, nor good, and not even useful, why tell it to me at all?”

Nadia didn’t have an answer. She looked at me. “But ...”

“Nadia, when you want to tell someone about someone else, remember what I just asked you. Ask yourself ... are you sure it’s true? Is it good? Is it useful? If the answers to these questions are ‘no’, then don’t say it. Do you think you can remember that?”

I wasn’t sure if I’d gotten through to her. But whenever we talk, if it looks like she’s about to share a little gossip with me, all I have to do is hold up three fingers, and she gets the message.

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The idea behind this story isn’t original, but I thought it would make a good teacher story.