

“Hi, my name is Cassandra. Do you like my thong? I love it. It feels so good.”

These words caused quite a ruckus on a sunny, pre-autumn day. It was recess for the 4th and 5th graders and the usual sounds of joyful freedom that drifted into my office from the playground suddenly changed tenor. A principal can tell a lot about the climate of the school just through the sounds that float down hallways, creep out of classrooms, fill the cafeteria, and cover the playground. Today something was wrong. So I headed out the door to see what was going on only to be stopped within 10 feet of the exit by a group of 5th grade boys who were almost dragging a crying 4th grader toward me.

“Mrs. C. Tell Shawn that he needs to shut up before we punch him!”

Not exactly the mediation skills we had been practicing but at least they hadn’t punched him yet.

Asking for a spokesperson from the 5th grade group, I headed to my office with the tearful Shawn and a pumped up Chris.

“Ok Chris. I need to hear your side of the story. Shawn, I’m going to take notes and then we can go point-by-point through my notes and I’ll write down your side,” I said handing him some tissues and a bottle of water.

Chris proceeded to tell me the horrors of his much loved recess. Shawn came over to where the cool guys were hanging out and introduced himself. In a high, squeaky voice Chris imitated the opening conversation. “Hi, guys. I’m new here. My name is Cassandra. Do you like my nail polish? It’s called *Kiss Me on My Tulips*.” Apparently at this point, the 5th graders started laughing and according to Chris asked Shawn to leave them alone.

Needless to say, Shawn bristled and tried to interject, but with my one finger in the air, he stopped and folded his hands after waving his bright fuchsia fingernails at me.

Chris continued, “Next thing he says is that he’s wearing a turquoise thong. He wants to show it to us. He even reached into his shorts and pulled up the elastic. He said that it felt really good on his skin. Mrs. C, what were we supposed to do? It’s disgusting! What boy wears a thong? Not even the girls talk about their underwear. Here he was showing off his stupid pink fingernails and trying to show us his thong. That was all we could take. We shoved him a little and when he wouldn’t leave, we dragged him to see you.”

With my finger still in the air, Shawn settled back and let me speak. “Chris, I’m going to read your statement back to you. Now is the time to change anything or add anything. Once you accept that what I’ve written is what you believe happened, you will need to sign it. OK?”

Chris made a few minor changes and some incriminating additions. Some of the boys had called Shawn a fag and gay boy when he pulled out the thong. He also changed the “shoved a little” to “pushed him away and Shawn fell backwards”. Signature done.

Now, to hear Shawn's side of the story. All the while I'm trying to beat down the inner voice that kept questioning my decision to become a principal, to ever believe that elementary principalship would be less stressful than my former middle and high school positions.

Shawn agreed with most of Chris' revised story. He started off by stating that he had the right to be anyone he wanted, and today he wanted to be a girl named Cassandra. He thought that he looked cute and had hoped that the 5th grade boys would think so, too. He added that the thong was his mother's and she'd be upset that he was wearing it.

What's a principal to do? Well, this one handed Chris the consequences for inappropriate language sheet and the one for hands on another sheet. Chris went to the side office to read them. He then left the office to get the other boys who were involved and to await my presence. He knew that he and the others would be "doing time" and making apologies, but I think he hoped that he'd have his peaceful recesses back when all was done.

I explained to Shawn that he didn't do anything technically wrong, but that he had put himself in harm's way. I expected him to know that the 5th grade boys would not find his nail polish, new name and thong to be easily accepted. I also told him that I'd be calling his parents and arranging a meeting. In the meantime, I needed him to stay away from the boys involved and to refrain from talking about or showing his thong to anyone. He agreed and as he was leaving he asked me if I thought he should paint his toe nails to match or should he go with a completely different color.

Since Shawn's parents are divorced and have no ability to be in the same room together, I arranged for each to come in at separate times. Dad was the first to arrive. He's what one might call a rural New England man's man. He wears work boots, plaid chamois shirts, a ball cap. When I went through the situation at recess, he quickly started in on how this was all the mother's fault. She was weak and had no control over Shawn. She used him like a best girlfriend and talked about things that she shouldn't. Not with a 10 year old boy. He, on the other hand, took Shawn hunting and fishing. He even made sure that Shawn stumbled across a few Playboy issues, so that he'd start thinking about girls. When Shawn insisted on showing him nail polish or talking about girlie things, he punished him.

That was the limit of what Dad could do. Get Shawn to man-up and knock off the crap.

Mom was next. She immediately denied that Shawn was gay. "He's creative. He likes to experiment. He sees me doing my nails or putting on make-up and he wants to try it. We're good Christians and Jesus does not recognize queers. In fact, we pray every night for all the gay people to become straight. Those other boys were wrong not to accept Shawn. You have to keep him safe and let him spread his wings. Plus it's up to you to make sure that everyone knows he's an artist not a fag."

Thank you, mom and dad. It was going to be a long year!