

How To Stop A Bully At Christmas When You Won't Be Four Until March

*South Jersey, USA
December*

Steps have to be taken when it is nearly Christmas and you won't be four until March and the baby-sitter's son, who has only just turned three, bites you on the arm, the face, the back, the leg, the stomach.

And each time his mother draws him back with a fond smile and coos, "Oh, Rafael! You shouldn't do that."

Mother finally sees bite marks when I am having a bath with my little brother. The marks are very red on my arm and Mother tells me not to worry, they will not happen again.

I hear Mother talking to the baby-sitter the next morning.

The baby-sitter laughs, "Oh, don't worry! I have read a book about psychology. I know all about children! I am going to get a college degree because of my life experience in early child education and behavior. I am an expert in this field!"

She walks with Mother to the car where Rafael is already strapped into a car seat, "It is illegal to hit a child in New Jersey. It is also very important never to punish a child. Trust me, it'll work. The situation is under control."

Rafael smiles at me.

The baby-sitter smiles at Rafael, “See! They really are all very good friends!”

“Oh, I am so relieved to hear that!” Mother pats me on the head and buckles me into the baby-sitter’s car next to my little brother.

But in the evening I have a round bite mark on my face.

Mother decides to take steps, but she is sneaky about it. The baby-sitter needs a few hours the next morning to go to yet another funeral and Mother suggests she drop off Rafael at our house and Mother will watch all three boys until the funeral is over.

The baby-sitter likes this idea a lot and laughs. Then she remembers that her grandmother’s cousin’s husband has died and so she thanks Mother and nods her head sadly.

The next morning the baby-sitter turns up dressed in black but with a lot of pink stuff all over her face. When she comes into our house it smells like it did when I dropped a bottle of Mother’s perfume on the bathroom floor. Rafael is pushed through the front door and tries to grab hold of the baby-sitter but she just nods at Mother, who takes Rafael’s hand and closes the door.

The minute Rafael is inside our house Mother is watching him, watching and waiting for him to dare to make a move. We can hear Sesame Street on the television as we lead Rafael holding Mother’s hand downstairs into the basement.

My little brother jumps off the bottom step and starts playing with building blocks that we had left on the carpet in front of the television and I decide that I will, too. Rafael unattached himself from Mother, goes to the other side of the room, picks up some little cars and takes them over to the car carpet and is soon driving them around and around the streets.

Mother is watching Rafael while she sits on the sofa with some books and a computer. Mother starts working with her computer and looks up every minute or so to make sure that everyone is happy.

When Sesame Street ends Mother decides that even though it is nearly Christmas it is warm enough for us to all go outside and climb trees. She is pulling Rafael in the red wagon. My little brother is climbing into the lowest branch of the dogwood tree.

I am sitting next to Rafael in the wagon thinking about climbing up into the tree when suddenly Rafael lurches forward with his mouth open and is about to bite me.

Mother sees him before I do and screams at him so loudly that I have to cover my ears. She stops screaming, but I can feel threats and punishments that must be coming from deep in the center of the earth because Rafael turns very red and gets smaller and smaller while Mother is standing there with her arms folded, shaking.

Rafael sits back in the wagon. He looks up at Mother in awe and fear until the baby-sitter turns up a few minutes later.

The baby-sitter is smiling and laughing and looking like she has just been to a terrific party even though she is still dressed in black and smells of dead flowers. She does not notice that Rafael is a lot smaller and quieter, but that all changes when we are in her car and Mother has already driven off to work in her own car.

Rafael is strapped into the front seat next to the baby-sitter and she is talking to him and telling him how terrific he is and what great presents he is getting for Christmas because he is always so good and I see him becoming less red and growing bigger.

When we get to the baby-sitter's house Rafael is just as big and as pale as he ever was and so, the minute the baby-sitter closes the front door and we all have taken off our coats, Rafael bites me.

The next day it is Christmas Eve and Mother tells my little brother and me that this is the night Santa will come and give us presents if we are both very good! So we do not complain when Mother puts into the trunk of the car a lot of brightly colored packages that are the shapes of trucks and balls and books and then she straps us into our car seats. She sits in the passenger seat as Dad gets into the driver's seat and then Dad starts complaining about what a waste of time it is going through the snow and slush to Collingswood.

I hope Santa does not hear Dad, because I think it would be just dreadful if he did not get any presents.

Soon we are driving past the bank at the corner of the baby-sitter's street and I cannot believe it but we are parking in a cleared space next to the baby-sitter's house unloading all those gorgeous packages from the trunk and actually carrying them inside the baby-sitter's house.

We are quiet and good and we go inside with Mother and Dad and listen to the baby-sitter show off about her house and her tree and her cooking and her Christmas lights. Now, the Christmas lights make up for everything, my little brother and I are just amazed that such a huge tree could suddenly be inside a house and grow so many beautiful colored lights and so much tinsel. But the best is the angel on top of the tree. The angel is so high up and so golden and red and silver and white and so beautiful.

"Nineteen sets of lights!" the baby-sitter's husband proudly

tells us, nodding in admiration of the glowing, heavy laden tree, but how does he know? How can magic be counted?

Well, of course as the baby-sitter's husband pours wine into glasses with stems for Mother and Dad, Rafael glides past me grinning. He grabs his Christmas present from the pile on the coffee table and rips off the wrapping paper. He throws the wrapping paper on the ground under the Christmas tree where I am sitting next to my little brother. He reaches down next to my feet and pretends to pick up the wrapping paper and sinks his teeth into my arm.

I start crying, but as quietly as I can because I know that Santa is getting ready for Christmas and he can hear me. At this late hour I am not about to jeopardize my pile of presents. But it really, really hurts.

The wine and the glasses of the grown-ups reflect the golden light and the red and silver balls on the tree and as the baby-sitter swirls her wine in her glass the lights reflect on her face as she stares deep into the Christmas tree. I think that everyone is just looking at themselves in the tree decorations and that no-one has noticed that I have been bitten except my little brother who tugs on Dad's trouser legs.

When Dad looks down at him my little brother says, "Up. Please, up."

The baby-sitter slowly turns around and looks at Rafael lovingly, and picks him up, kissing his cheek and presses his cheek next to hers, "Ah, Rafael, you really should not bite. Remember, Santa's coming tomorrow and Santa likes children to behave themselves."

She turns their faces back towards the Christmas tree and smiles at Rafael's face reflected next to hers in the round silver bauble hanging off a pine branch, "Santa loves you, you

know!”

“I know,” purrs Rafael.

“It is Christmas,” the baby-sitter laughs at her reflection. She looks around at Mother who is standing with her wine glass in her hand, watching me and wondering why I am sitting so quietly with my head down, “What am I going to do?”

My mother’s face closes in on itself, but she is British and manages to be polite as she picks me up with one arm and hugs everyone and wishes everyone a joyous Christmas, “Well, Rafael. No more biting please? Merry Christmas everyone! Let us rejoice in Jesus’ birth! The light will return!”

She carries me and rushes my Dad who is carrying my little brother into the car for home.

When I am in my car seat I look through the window back across the snowy front yard at their front porch and before we drive away I see Rafael on his mother’s hip in the open front door. She is waving and laughing and he is grinning widely as the lights from the Christmas tree behind them give them halos of light around their golden hair.

Humbug, I think.

But then I see the angel on top of the Christmas tree behind them smiling at me and promising me that Santa is already on his way and that Rafael’s days as a bully are numbered.

The day after Christmas the baby-sitter comes back to take my little brother and me back to her house while Mother and Dad go to work. The baby-sitter chatters to my Mother, telling her that our Christmas tree decorated with pink and white peppermint candy canes is just so cute and that she just

needs some peanut butter for sandwiches and that Christmas had been wonderful and thank you for all the gifts. By that time we have already climbed into her car and buckled ourselves into the car seats and soon she gets into the car and backs the car out of the driveway.

Mother calls after us, "Be good, beautiful baby boys!" as she climbs into her car and drives to work for a day of doing something that she thinks is much more important than preventing her son being chewed up by the baby-sitter's son.

Sure enough, it does not take long. We are all in front of the television after eating our peanut butter sandwiches for lunch. My little brother is looking through a book at the pictures and I am playing with some little tiny cars. Rafael has brought his new truck from his bedroom, but he has left it next to me so he can go into the kitchen and have his hair stroked by the baby-sitter while she speaks on the phone. I hear the baby-sitter as I pick up the truck.

"Oh, she doesn't mind me baby-sitting other children. I bring the boys here to my house. Andy's in nursery school in the morning so I take him there and bring him back at 11:30. What's that? Yes, cash. I don't pay income tax, are you nuts! It's great, we've been able to pay off a lot of our credit card."

I don't hear any more because I feel a searing pain down my back and realize that Rafael has snuck in behind me and bitten me. I must have been screaming loudly because I hear the baby-sitter drop the phone on the ground and rush in screaming hysterically. By that time my little brother is crying too and he has his arm around me and Rafael has grabbed his truck and has crawled underneath the Christmas tree, looking mean.

"Andy! Those toys belong to Rafael! You can't just take something that doesn't belong to you without asking! Now

Rafael, you should try not to bite. I know that what Andy did was wrong, but that is no excuse. Andy and Mick, you're obviously very tired. I want you to go to bed for your nap."

I start walking up the stairs, and I turn around to see if my little brother is following me and I suddenly see the angel on top of the tree. The angel is smiling at me and I remember its Christmas promise. I feel a lot better and so I go up to bed and lie down at one end and my little brother lies down on the other end on top of the covers.

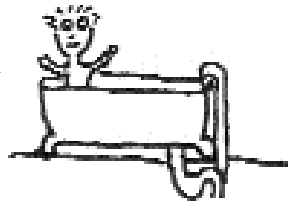
Downstairs we hear Rafael varooming his new truck and the sound of the baby-sitter's favorite soap opera coming from the television. My back hurts a lot but I keep thinking about the angel's promise and suddenly we are being awoken by the baby-sitter who tells us it is time to go home.

When we are home, Mother is there and she thanks the baby-sitter for bringing us home safely and then she takes us upstairs for a bath before dinner. That is when she sees the bite mark on my back.

"This is unbearable. I talked to your father about the baby-sitter. I want to find a new lady to care for you both but your father said no. He thinks she takes good care of you. I want to stop working and care for you, but your father says no. So what I want you to do is to beat up Rafael any time he hurts you. When he hurts you."

"But I can't hit him. He's littler than me."

"You have to. He is not littler than you are because he has the baby-sitter helping him. That makes him bigger. I'll show you how to defend yourself."



After we have finished our baths

and dressed and after Mother has given us dinner she brings us into the sitting room and that is when the lessons begin.

“OK. I am Rafael and I am just about to bite you. Argh!”

“No, don’t bite me!” I say as I bring my hands over my face.

“No, Andy. Beat me up! Hit me as hard as you can and keep hitting and don’t stop! Let’s try again. I am Rafael and I am coming over to you to bite you. Argh....”

I am still not sure. I stand still in my blue bunny pajamas, holding my big teddy bear, watching Mother.

“You certainly don’t hit him unless he’s getting ready to bite you. Because that makes you worse than he is. But if he attacks or when he bites you, this is what you do...,” Mother swings at the air and kicks it and finally falls on the ground still hitting but not biting, “No biting or scratching. No sticks, knives, trucks. Pulling his hair is good, because it gives him pain but doesn’t do damage. Not too much though. Don’t shake his head or hit his head. You’re just trying to make him stop biting you, not give him seizures.”

Now I am ready. Mother comes at me again pretending to be Rafael and so I pull some curls in her hair.

“Wonderful! Don’t stop! Hit me!” she says, smiling.

After a few tries, it is easy. It feels good beating up pretend Rafael, and will be even better beating up real Rafael.

My little brother gets in on the act too, and soon he is helping me beat up Mother, who is rolling around the floor laughing.

The next morning the baby-sitter’s husband comes to get us because the baby-sitter is far too tired to get out of bed.

Mother smiles at me as she puts on my jacket and kneels down so she can look directly into my eyes.

“Andy, remember what I said. No-one is allowed to bite you. Or bully you. Ever,” she buttons my jacket and kisses me on my cheek, my brother on the cheek. She stands up and smiles at the baby-sitter’s husband.

I think about beating up Rafael.

Rafael is a little worried when he sees me. I am not cowering in a corner the way I usually do. I walk straight through the front door past the Christmas tree in the dining room into the living room and right up to his truck, which I pick up and start playing with.



I turn around to Rafael and tell him, “It’s my turn.”

My little brother is watching Rafael defiantly and then picks up some blocks and starts building a cannon aimed at Rafael. Rafael is standing with his back on the stair banisters but then he squats next to a small car, which he flips over and starts concentrating on figuring out how to remove its wheels.

When the baby-sitter finally clumps downstairs in her bathrobe she sees three little boys playing quietly in one room in what she thinks is harmony. I hear her whispering to herself that she has handled the biting problem so expertly, since the boys are all playing so calmly together.

The baby-sitter’s husband is sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee and smoking a cigarette, waiting nervously for the baby-sitter to emerge so he can go to work.

The baby-sitter stumbles into the kitchen, grabbing onto the refrigerator when she nearly trips on four small car wheels that I have seen Rafael carefully remove from his car and

place in a line in the kitchen doorway. I watch her sit on a stool at the kitchen counter and pour herself a cup of coffee, when I suddenly feel a familiar searing pain in my leg.

I jump on top of Rafael and start hitting him, hitting him and my little brother is shouting encouragement when the baby-sitter's husband runs in and separates us. Rafael starts crying but I am still mad.

"He bit me again. You won't stop him biting me, Mother told me that I had to hit him," I am standing under the Christmas tree with the baby-sitter's husband holding my arms.

The baby-sitter's face contorts. She starts screaming at me, "You hit Rafael! Of course Rafael shouldn't bite you, but what you did was really terrible."

She sends me to time-out but I do not mind. I sit on the bottom step and my little brother comes over to me and gives me his teddy bear to hug and we both sit looking at Rafael who suddenly has become too small to be a bully anymore.

Rafael understands what has happened. He understands that the baby-sitter is too small to shield him and that something enormous is protecting me.

The angel and the Christmas tree are gone a few days later but I know wherever they have gone, the angel is still smiling at me. I know now that adults may not keep their promises, but that Christmas tree angels always do.

Rafael never bites me again and I never have to hit anyone else.

And that is the first time that I understand that adults can be remarkably stupid and that it is sometimes possible for them to lose a lot of power.

