

How to use a fire extinguisher (a cautionary tale)

The annual arrival of the dentist van to Mark's school was not something that was particularly memorable. Except for that one visit when Mark was nine years old. The dental surgery was a transportable building towed by a truck, which then spent the next week or so parked in the school's carpark. While it looked rather plain and ordinary on the outside, inside it was a fully kitted-out dentist surgery. There was a small reception area where children would wait their turn. The dental nurse bustled in and out of the surgery, helping the dentist but also welcoming the new children as they arrived. The dental surgery was complete with a dentist chair that the dentist adjusted before he or she decided that the position was just right, before shining a bright light on your mouth and asking you to say 'ahhh' so you could have your teeth inspected. There was a small white sink next to the chair and, after everything was done, you would be able to rinse your mouth and wipe away any drool using the paper bib tied around your neck. Often, you would be given a sticker or sometimes, if you were really lucky, you would be given a new toothbrush! Everyone knew about the school dentist. There wouldn't be a child living at that time who didn't visit the school dentist.

On this occasion, the dental van was visiting a small outback town where Mark lived. Mark was a 9-year-old boy with mousy brown hair and freckles, and like most boys his age, he loved sport. In the winter he played Aussie Rules Football, and in the summer he played cricket. On the weekends, like his other friends, he would attend church. Mark was like all of the other boys his age, except for one thing. He was obsessed with reading. Like all children, his bedtime routine would usually involve being read a chapter or two from a library book by one of his parents. This quickly progressed to him reading his own books. He read everything. He was one of those rare individuals who read every sign in a museum. He would read at any opportunity. He would be so absorbed in his book that he would forget to get ready for school. He read books about geography and knew all of the Prime Ministers of Australia. He devoured books about sport and futuristic stories. However, this superpower caused him some trouble the day that it was his turn to visit the dentist.

Mark was sitting quietly in the dentist surgery, waiting his turn. Wanting to amuse himself, he looked around the waiting room, searching for something to read. There was children's artwork depicting the usual things like people, houses, and gardens pinned neatly to the wall behind the receptionist's desk. However, apart from the artwork, the room was bare. The only thing to read was the label attached to the fire extinguisher, so that is what Mark focused on. Except there was a problem. The label detailed the instructions for how to use the fire extinguisher. However, without really

thinking through the implications, Mark not only read the instructions, but began following them.

1. Pull the pin to break the seal.
2. Aim the nozzle or hose at the base of the fire.
3. Squeeze the handle.
4. Aim the nozzle at the base of the fire

Suddenly, water shot from the fire extinguisher across the room, hitting the children's artwork so that the pictures were now just streaks of paint dripping down the wall.

Mark, with his mouth hanging open, stared at the soggy paper and dripping paint as the dental nurse ushered him into the dental surgery. He was sure that any minute now he would be interrogated about the mess. However, no one mentioned it, and he left the dental van and returned to class, slightly shaken, trying to pretend that everything was completely normal. He settled back to work, staring at his text book intently. He had convinced himself that the dentist would appear in his classroom demanding to know what had happened. However, that wasn't to be. In fact, no one ever questioned him. Did they not notice the dripping paint down their walls? Did they think that surely a polite little boy with mousy brown hair would never tamper with fire equipment? One will never know.