

## The rule's the rule. Is that okay?

Today we have a story to share with you. We'll be doing lots of thinking in question time, and we'll be hearing from other children, too.

Are you comfortable? Let's get started with the story.

This is a story about something that really happened, about 65 years ago, in Alabama, which is a state in the south of the United States of America.

After a long day of work, Rosa Parks gets on a city bus to go home.



She walks past the first few empty rows of seats marked 'whites only'. It's against the law for black people like her to sit in those seats. She sits in the middle of the bus, where black people are allowed to sit, as long as no white people are standing.

The bus goes on and before long, it's pretty full. Now all the seats in the 'whites only' section are taken. Then, at the next stop, another white person gets on. The driver orders Rosa Parks and the other black people in her row of seats to move to the back of the bus, where there are no empty seats. All the black people in that row of seats get up - except for Rosa Parks. The driver shouts at her, but Rosa Parks refuses to stand up. The bus driver stops the bus, walks over to her, and says 'Will you stand up?'. And she says 'No, I will not.' The driver says that he will have her arrested. Still she does not move. So, he leaves the bus, and comes back with two policemen. Rosa Parks describes what happened next. This is what she said:

"The driver told the police that I would not stand up. The policeman walked down and asked me why I didn't stand up, and I said I didn't think I should stand up.

'Why do you push us around?' I asked him.

And he said, 'I don't know. But the law is the law and you are under arrest'.

As soon as he said that I stood up. One of them picked up my purse, the other picked up my shopping bag. And we left the bus together. It was the first time I'd had that particular thing happen. I was determined that I let it be known that I did not want to be treated in this manner. The policemen had their squad car waiting, they gave me my purse and bag, and they opened the back door of the police car for me to enter."



*When Rosa asked the policeman 'Why do you push us around?', the policeman said 'I don't know. But the law is the law...'. What do you think he meant when he said, 'The law is the law'?*

Let's listen to what some other children are thinking.



**Mac:** I think he meant that she can't argue with it. He was just following orders.

**Sragvee:** And it doesn't matter if you understand why it is the law, or if you agree with it or not, you still have to obey it.

**Anna:** Yeh. I hate it when people say: 'A rule's a rule!' It's like saying it doesn't matter if it's right or wrong – just do it.

Let's find out more about Alabama and how these laws came about.

By the 1860's, one hundred years before the Rosa Parks incident, Alabama had become largely a land of slaves and slave owners. The white owners of cotton plantations needed workers and they would buy slaves from Africa and then ship them over to Alabama to work on their plantations. The black Africans slaves were not free to do and go where they wanted.

Alabama was forced to free the slaves after the end of the American civil war. The slave owners were angry because now they had to pay people to work for them. Even after the slaves were freed, many white people continued to think that black people were inferior to them. As a result, the government of Alabama made laws aimed at separating white and black people (who they used to call 'coloured'). It was illegal for black people and white people to marry.

The laws treated them differently so that white people had better opportunities. Blacks were banned from attending certain white schools, from going to certain white churches, restaurants and hotels, from sitting with white people at a concert or a movie, and from using the same toilets. There were even water bubblers labeled 'white only', and other bubblers labelled 'coloured'.

Black people had their own schools, hotels and so on but they were often of a lesser standard, and where blacks and whites couldn't be separated, as we have already seen in the case of buses, there were separate sections.

This was called segregation.



*Do you think the segregation laws were good laws? Or do you think they were unfair? And can you explain why you think that?*

Let's hear what some other children are thinking.



**Sragvee:** Well, it depends on the reason. We have girls' schools and boys' schools. I think that's okay because they might have different needs, but it's not okay if it's done so that one group gets less than the other group.

**Mac:** With boys' and girls' schools, you have a choice because there are other schools. These segregation laws are unfair because it was based on the colour of their skin – and you don't have a choice about the colour of your skin.

**Anna:** I think the segregation laws were unfair. The blacks were supposed to be free but there were still laws that stopped them from doing what they wanted and having the same opportunities as white people.



*Okay, so if there was a rule that you thought was unfair, should you follow it, because 'A rule is a rule', or might it be okay to break that rule?*



**Mac:** I'd probably follow it anyway, because I didn't want to get into trouble. If a policeman thought the law about blacks was unfair, he'd still have to arrest people, otherwise he'd lose his job.

**Sragvee:** Well, if it were me, it would depend on who made the rule - whether it was someone I trusted. My coach has some pretty weird rules, but we all follow them because we think she knows what she is talking about.

**Anna:** No, you shouldn't follow it just because a rule is a rule. If you think it is unfair, you should find out the reasons for it, and if reasons are rubbish, then you shouldn't follow it.



*Rosa Parks deliberately broke the law banning black people from sitting in the middle section of the bus when there were white people without seats. Is what she did wrong?*



**Sragvee:** Yeh, she broke the law. If she didn't like it, there must be other ways of getting things changed. Or why didn't she just stop travelling on the bus or move to a different state where the laws were different?

**Anna:** Well if she just put up with it or moved, things would never change. I don't think she was wrong – she did what she had to do... and she didn't hurt anyone.

**Mac:** It was a horrible law, but I still think she did the wrong thing, because it was a big risk.



*Imagine that you were in Rosa Parks' position. Would you have felt scared when the police arrested you? If so, what would you have been scared about?*



**Sragvee:** Yes, I think so. I might have been worried that the other people on the bus would shout at me for not doing as I was told by the bus driver and creating a big fuss.

**Mac:** Yes, I'd be scared of the police because they might be angry, and I might end up getting a fine ... or even get sent to jail.

**Anna:** Maybe Rosa thought it was worth it, so she was scared and determined at the same time.



*Do you think it was important that Rosa Parks made a stand against the way she and others were treated because of the colour of their skin?*



**Mac:** Before I said that I thought it was wrong to break the law, but I've changed my mind, because I do think it was important. But I think she'd have to be very brave to do it.

**Sragvee:** And it was something that was really important to her. She was totally fed up with being pushed around and badly treated.

**Anna:** If you are not willing to say something or do something different, things probably won't change.

It turned out to be very important, although Rosa Parks could not have known just how important her action would be.

The next day, a friend of Rosa Parks called a meeting of black leaders to discuss how to get bus segregation changed. Knowing that the city bus system relied heavily on the fares from members of the black community, they decided to protest – not with violence, but by simply not travelling on buses. Instead they walked, rode bicycles, and even rode mules to get to work. It was hard for them – it meant that it took them much longer to get to work and back, and by the time they arrived home at the end of the day, they were very, very tired and aching. But... they managed to bring about a huge change: One year later the Supreme Court ruled segregation on buses was illegal, and this in turn triggered further challenges to unjust laws.

We heard some really thought-provoking ideas today! Thank you for joining us. You might like to keep thinking about whether it's important to question a rule or a law if you think it's unfair. Have a talk to your family and friends about what they think, too.

*Photo credit: [Associated Press; restored by Adam Cuerden](#)*

*Thank you to our wonderful actors Anna, Mac and Sragvee who helped us to hear different points of view. While sometimes these points of view might have reflected their own opinions, at other times they were asked to express an opposing view in order to help us think more deeply about the topic.*