

## Introduction

Every year we teachers have some students who present challenges to themselves, their classmates, and to us. Sometimes it's the student who refuses to do schoolwork and wanders around the classroom distracting others. Sometimes it's the child who shouts out in group lessons and makes noises as she walks across the room, providing a raucous soundtrack to our days. At other times it's the child who takes others' possessions and insults classmates. It's our responsibility to teach these children, helping them get better at managing their behaviors and become effective students, while still meeting the learning needs of their less obviously demanding classmates. Our challenge is to be there for each and every one of our students each and every day.

My book *Solving Thorny Behavior Problems: How Teachers and Students Can Work Together* offers strategies that a teacher might use when children persistently misbehave. As I wrote it, I often thought of a former student of mine, "Sammy." I used every strategy offered in *Thorny* and more with Sammy. Over time, these strategies helped him grow in both the social and academic arenas. After I finished writing *Thorny*, I decided that it might be helpful to teachers if I told the story of Sammy's year.

If you've read *Solving Thorny Behavior Problems*, you'll find some familiar strategies in this book. I hope reading about Sammy will help you gain a more nuanced picture of which strategy a teacher might use when, and why. I hope you'll gain new insights about how the strategies fit together. I hope you'll see how I used failures as well as successes to revise and refine the ways I worked with Sammy. I also hope you'll notice how the strategies I used with the whole class created an atmosphere of calm and respect, giving Sammy the environment he needed to become more calm and respectful himself.

Although this book tells the story of one particular child in one particular school, it contains some universal good practices that apply to the

teaching of any child with challenging behavior in any classroom. These are practices that I learned from wise colleagues or discovered myself through trial and error. Though I didn't use them perfectly every day—no teacher can—I anchored my teaching with them the year I taught Sammy, and every year. Some of the most important of these universal practices are:

- Genuinely liking the child (there's something to like in every child; we just have to look to see it)
- Stopping often to observe the child
- Having genuine conversations with the child; listening more, talking less
- Trying to see things from the child's point of view; taking that point of view seriously even if it differs from our own
- Holding other children to the high standard of respecting all classmates, including ones who may be a little "different"
- Offering a developmentally appropriate, engaging curriculum (yes, this is indeed possible even in an age of testing and standards)
- Understanding, and helping the class understand, "fairness": building an effective learning community is not about giving every child the same thing, but giving every child what he or she needs

There is one final most-important practice: forming a strong student-teacher relationship. The bedrock of my work with Sammy was our relationship. As I came to know and appreciate him, we were able to work together to solve some of his difficulties in school. As my relationship with Sammy grew, so did his relationships with the other students in our class. Friendships with peers did not come easily to him, but our class worked hard on becoming an accepting community, supporting all of the students, and by the end of the year Sammy was able to say "I made some friends."

The story of my year with Sammy is told from my point of view. Events described are events that I observed or participated in. However, it takes a whole school to work effectively with a child with significant behavioral and academic challenges. Our administrators created an adult

community where the staff felt safe sharing our ups and downs and our successes and failures with each other. Sammy's teachers from previous years shared effective strategies as well as strategies that had been less successful. Art, music, and physical education teachers as well as paraprofessionals who had known Sammy for several years provided invaluable suggestions. Special educators and our school psychologist shared insights based on their specialized knowledge and understanding. Sammy attended a lunchtime social skills group led by our school psychologist. All these supports and the classroom's social and academic curricula combined to help Sammy grow.

### **What about Sammy's privacy?**

As I contemplated this project, my first concern was how to write such a book in a way that would honor Sammy and his family. First, I spoke with them, explaining what I wanted to do and why. Together, they then discussed their thoughts and feelings about such a book. Ultimately, Sammy and his parents decided that they'd like to help teachers work effectively with children who have behavior challenges, but that they wanted Sammy's privacy to be protected. I myself saw preserving his privacy as a paramount goal. "Sammy," of course, is a made-up name. I've also changed many details that might identify him.

On the other hand, the events that I describe, both Sammy's behaviors and my responses, really happened. My goal was to tell the story of his year truthfully, preserving the essence of our year together, our ups and downs, our goals met and unmet. Sammy's family and I hope that by reading the story of his year, you'll gain new ideas about how to work with your own "Sammy."