

Love is patient and kind...

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When Ryan was in grade one, Ms. A made him stay in at recess time to do his homework. It worked—he did better. Fast-forward to grade four, where Mr. D made him stay in at lunch time to do his homework. It worked—he did better. Fast-forward to grade seven, where Ms. G kept him in detention to do his homework. It worked—he did better. Now we are in grade 9, where Mr. K kept him from playing on the basketball team until he got his work done. It did not work—until Ryan had to do the work in detention. Then he did better.



Ms. A. is a loving, caring teacher. She says the problem was immaturity. Mr. D. is a loving, caring teacher. He says Ryan was lazy. Ms. G. is a loving, caring teacher. She says he is unmotivated. Mr. K. is a popular, caring man. He is sure Ryan is lazy, unmotivated and in need of discipline. Ryan does not see himself as a kind, thoughtful boy. He thinks he is lazy, unmotivated, and stupid. So do his parents. So do his classmates. Shockingly, Ryan hates school. Imagine that!

It is important to note that virtually all of Ryan's teachers have tried to help him. With all the best intentions, they have been unable to find a way to prevent this sad outcome. Ryan's parents are distraught—totally unable to shake his determination to quit school at the earliest legal date. All the adults in his life would be highly offended if anyone suggested they were part of the problem; they know they have done everything they can to overcome his laziness. Unfortunately, they are wrong.

The good news is that something can be done for Ryan and for the many students like him. The bad news is that it requires time, a lot of work, and a difficult change in the philosophy of many adults. For those willing to make the attempt, the first steps may be especially hard.

First, we must decide to see Ryan's difficulties as something we can help him improve. When I say help him improve, I do NOT mean find more ways to punish him. That has only succeeded in alienating him.

Second, we need to examine our core beliefs about behaviour. Many of us believe that behaviour is driven by choice. Since Ryan makes many poor choices, he might be characterized as lazy, or perhaps even sinful in his work habits. If we concede, however, that he does not know how to do better, that would put a totally different light on it.

Third, we must entertain the possibility that occasional success does not mean that Ryan has the skills to succeed regularly. As Rick Lavoie points out in "FAT City", it is very common for students with learning disabilities to do well occasionally and be totally unable to replicate the success later. If we are to succeed on this long journey with Ryan, we must not let short-term success blind us.

Fourth, we must figure out what Ryan needs to be taught. He may need intensive help with such simple concepts as putting the right books into his bag before he leaves school. It will take time and effort to figure out what interventions he needs.

Fifth, we must try to make a long-term plan. As you saw earlier, temporary success when he is being directly watched is the pattern of Ryan's school life. Obviously this temporary success came at the expense of long-term change.

Sixth, we must find a way to help him want to do this. Positive reinforcements are significantly better than punishments, and do not carry the same danger of alienation. The goal is for Ryan to experience enough success that he no longer needs more than intermittent rewards from others.

Seventh, we will have to decide to discipline ourselves. Ryan should start with such small steps, ones that he can do at least 80% of the time. That means we will have to consistently acknowledge the slow and incremental improvements he is making.

These are only seven steps in a long, frustrating process. "Love is patient and kind... love never gives up," but we may find ourselves needing a lot more prayer time to change the way we work with God's children. I would challenge myself and any others who are willing to make the effort to find one struggling student and start TODAY.

PBS (Producer) & Lavoie, Richard (Director). (1991) *How Difficult Can This Be? F.A.T. City--A Learning Disabilities Workshop* [VHS]. United States: Public Broadcasting Corporation