

## "IT ONLY TAKES A SPARK"

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Learning has always been an enjoyable part of my life. During the primary years, I grew up in a small rural community and attended a one-room school. My teacher and my mother impacted my learning so positively, during those early years, that I decided that I wanted to make learning a permanent part of my life. Both these individuals, with only very basic qualifications, managed to make learning meaningful and fun. By the end of grade two, I knew I wanted to be a teacher.

My teacher was a humble Christian lady, who would always greet us with a smile and who would regularly take time to speak with each of her students. She was a strong disciplinarian, in the sense that she maintained good order in the classroom and managed to have the respect of all her students. If we happened to be away from school, due to illness, she would visit us. If we were having difficulty with a particular subject, she would stay after hours to give us further assistance. Each day, she would remind us that she cared about us and that we were, each, very important individuals. She took the time to build a relationship with her students.

My mother was a busy, work at home, mom. She embroidered house linens for brides. Before seeing us off to school, each morning, she made sure that my brother and I ate a healthy breakfast. At noontime, she would bring us a hot lunch. Then, every afternoon, our front yard became a learning center. When we arrived from school, with the exception of rainy days, everything would be in place. A table would be set with healthy snacks. A few minutes later, some of our classmates would join us. We would eat and play for a few minutes and then we would all sit around the table and discuss what we had learned that day. My mother would have us go over our dictations. We would do our writing assignments and finish our arithmetic. When our friends left, we would help with the chores. After dinner, either Mom or Dad would tell or read a story to us and we would go off to bed with our prayers, and a good night kiss. My parents made time to be with us, to talk with us, and to show affection.

I recall that, well into middle school, students were well adjusted, curious about life, and excited about learning, with the occasional exception. We did not want to miss a day of school, for any reason. Even the slower learners were healthy, happy, respectful children.

Three and a half decades have come and gone and today, surveys show that a high percentage of students, even at the primary level, are unhappy, unmotivated, and disorganized. Many are physically unfit, have low self-esteem, often seem depressed, lack manners and other social skills, and have difficulty respecting and obeying authority. Various students are often dishonest and have difficulty controlling their temper. Some come to school seemingly angry at the world.

What has happened to make children's attitudes change so drastically?

There are many theories out there and much has been published to try and rectify the problems. Yet, parents continue to complain that they do not know what else to do. They do not understand their children's poor grades in school or their mind-set. Teachers are frustrated with the lack of effort, the disrespect, and the social inadequacies of their students.

Let's consider the fact that today's parents seem to be giving their children everything. They have supplied them with comfortable homes, fashionable clothes, allowance money, more food than they can ever consume, computers with Internet access, video games, their own TV, CD walkmans, cell phones, and everything children their age want.

In order to give their children all these things, however, many parents have exhausted the one gift that can never be replaced, their time. Most of today's parents have to dash off to work in the morning. Children are hurried out of bed and are dropped off at school with little or no breakfast. There isn't even time for a morning kiss. During the day, parents are busy at work. In the evening, they are too tired from overworking and are overburdened by all their financial affairs. At night, children are rushed off to bed with minimal discussion, no hugs, and often, not even a prayer.

In today's fast-paced culture, this cycle is repeated day in and day out, and parents fail to realize that their children will soon grow into adults and that they will never regain this precious time. Ultimately, children want more than "stuff". They want a real relationship with parents who have the time to listen, to advise, and to love.

As educators, we do not have the power to change what happens in the homes of our students. We can, however, change what happens in our own classrooms and modify our approach in dealing with our students. Through prayer and determination we can make life and learning more pleasant for our students and ourselves. We can follow the example of Jesus, the Master Teacher. He took the time to build relationships with His students.

We can begin by greeting students with a warm smile and by taking time to find out how they are feeling each morning. We can inquire as to why they might seem happy, sad, or stressed. We can take time to pray with them, not just with the class as a whole, but also with individual students. We can take time to interact with them on the playground. When a student is troubled, we can ask her/him if s/he believes that Jesus can help her/him. Then we can be Jesus' voice, feet, and hands by giving them what they are missing; time, advice, and affection.

Let's keep in mind that, "It only takes a spark to get a fire going." For many of our students we can be that spark. And "soon all those around will warm up..." By showing a true interest in the needs of each individual student, by reminding them, regularly, of how much we care and of how valuable they are to God, we can begin to make a difference in each of their lives.