

"Dear Parent: About THAT kid..." by Amy Murray

Dear Parent:

I know. You're worried. Every day, your child comes home with a story about THAT kid. The one who is always hitting shoving pinching scratching maybe even biting other children. The one who always has to hold my hand in the hallway. The one who has a special spot at the carpet, and sometimes sits on a chair rather than the floor. The one who had to leave the block centre because blocks are not for throwing. The one who climbed over the playground fence right exactly as I was telling her to stop. The one who poured his neighbour's milk onto the floor in a fit of anger. On purpose. While I was watching. And then, when I asked him to clean it up, emptied the ENTIRE paper towel dispenser. On purpose. While I was watching. The one who dropped the REAL ACTUAL F-word in gym class.

You're worried that THAT child is detracting from your child's learning experience. You're worried that he takes up too much of my time and energy, and that your child won't get his fair share. You're worried that she is really going to hurt someone some day. You're worried that "someone" might be your child. You're worried that your child is going to start using aggression to get what she wants. You're worried your child is going to fall behind academically because I might not notice that he is struggling to hold a pencil. I know.

Your child, this year, in this classroom, at this age, is not THAT child. Your child is not perfect, but she generally follows rules. He is able to share toys peaceably. She does not throw furniture. He raises his hand to speak. She works when it is time to work, and plays when it is time to play. He can be trusted to go straight to the bathroom and straight back again with no shenanigans. She thinks that the S-word is "stupid" and the C-word is "crap." I know.

I know, and I am worried, too.

You see, I worry all the time. About ALL of them. I worry about your child's pencil grip, and another child's letter sounds, and that little tiny one's shyness, and that other one's chronically empty lunchbox. I worry that Gavin's coat is not warm enough, and that Talitha's dad yells at her for printing the letter B backwards. Most of my car rides and showers are consumed with the worrying.

But I know, you want to talk about THAT child. Because Talitha's backward Bs are not going to give your child a black eye.

I want to talk about THAT child, too, but there are so many things I can't tell you.

I can't tell you that she was adopted from an orphanage at 18 months.

I can't tell you that he is on an elimination diet for possible food allergies, and that he is therefore hungry ALL. THE. TIME.

I can't tell you that her parents are in the middle of a horrendous divorce, and she has been staying with her grandma.

I can't tell you that I'm starting to worry that grandma drinks...

I can't tell you that his asthma medication makes him agitated.

I can't tell you that her mom is a single parent, and so she (the child) is at school from the moment before-care opens, until the moment after-care closes, and then the drive between home and school takes 40 minutes, and so she (the child) is getting less sleep than most adults.

I can't tell you that he has been a witness to domestic violence.

That's okay, you say. You understand I can't share personal or family information. You just want to know what I am DOING about That Child's behaviour.

I would love to tell you. But I can't.

I can't tell you that she receives speech-language services, that an assessment showed a severe language delay, and that the therapist feels the aggression is linked to frustration about being unable to communicate.

I can't tell you that I meet with his parents EVERY week, and that both of them usually cry at those meetings.

I can't tell you that the child and I have a secret hand signal to tell me when she needs to sit by herself for a while.

I can't tell you that he spends rest time curled in my lap because "it makes me feel better to hear your heart, Teacher."

I can't tell you that I have been meticulously tracking her aggressive incidents for 3 months, and that she has dropped from 5 incidents a day, to 5 incidents a week.

I can't tell you that the school secretary has agreed that I can send him to the office to "help" when I can tell he needs a change of scenery.

I can't tell you that I have stood up in a staff meeting and, with tears in my eyes, BEGGED my colleagues to keep an extra close eye on her, to be kind to her even when they are frustrated that she just punched someone AGAIN, and this time, RIGHT IN FRONT OF A TEACHER.

The thing is, there are SO MANY THINGS I can't tell you about That Child. I can't even tell you the good stuff.

I can't tell you that his classroom job is to water the plants, and that he cried with heartbreak when one of the plants died over winter break.

I can't tell you that she kisses her baby sister goodbye every morning, and whispers "You are my sunshine" before mom pushes the stroller away.

I can't tell you that he knows more about thunderstorms than most meteorologists.

I can't tell you that she often asks to help sharpen the pencils during playtime.

I can't tell you that she strokes her best friend's hair at rest time.

I can't tell you that when a classmate is crying, he rushes over with his favourite stuffy from the story corner.

The thing is, dear parent, that I can only talk to you about YOUR child. So, what I can tell you is this:

If ever, at any point, YOUR child, or any of your children, becomes THAT child...

I will not share your personal family business with other parents in the classroom.

I will communicate with you frequently, clearly, and kindly.

I will make sure there are tissues nearby at all our meetings, and if you let me, I will hold your hand when you cry.

I will advocate for your child and family to receive the highest quality of specialist services, and I will cooperate with those professionals to the fullest possible extent.

I will make sure your child gets extra love and affection when she needs it most.

I will be a voice for your child in our school community.

I will, no matter what happens, continue to look for, and to find, the good, amazing, special, and wonderful things about your child.

I will remind him and YOU of those good amazing special wonderful things, over and over again.

And when another parent comes to me, with concerns about YOUR child...

I will tell them all of this, all over again.

With so much love;

Teacher.