



Working Together to Reach Kids with Autism

By Torrey Mahall

A+: Working Together to Reach Autistic Children

The day I was hired as a teacher at Wilson Elementary in Greendale, Arkansas I didn't know I was about to ride the wildest rollercoaster of my life. It was merely an experiment, a test, to see if I could make the cut for teaching. Apparently, I did. The principal hired me just days after the interview, and I was relieved. I would not have made a good shoe saleswoman. I'm sure of that.

Due to my "energetic personality" and "positive attitude" I started right away. I could see all the other teachers through the windows, setting up their rooms. They all looked so bland, with nothing but posters, rules, or vocabulary on the walls. I used colorful posters, put decorative borders around the rules, and printed vocabulary on colored paper, then arranged it in a rainbow. This was second grade, not boot camp, right?

I sat down, and looked around. I was proud of my work. But I wondered what would happen on the first day of school. What if the kids didn't like me? Would I be too strict or too laid back? Would they put a thumbtack on my swivel chair like they always do in the comics? I walked out the door with all these thoughts still muddled up in my head. I was not prepared for what was to come.

Finally the dreaded day arrived. The first car rolled into the parking lot at 7:00. It was mine. After that, teachers started gradually showing up. I didn't bother with meeting anyone, I just ran straight to my classroom and made sure everything was perfectly organized. I got all the lessons ready, and practiced talking in front of the whiteboard. I combed my hair (for like the sixth time this morning). Then I sat down at my desk and just waited for the bell to ring. The clock seemed to be amazingly slow.

When the bell did ring, I went out to the playground to pick up the class. A sea of young faces greeted me there. I instructed them to follow me, and they did. When we got there, they sat in their seats, which I had arranged in alphabetical order. I started my "beginning of the year speech" which I had practiced multiple times in front of the whiteboard already.

"All right, class. Well, good morning, and my name is Ms. Stevenson. Or you can call me Ms. S. if that's too long. And yes, you might have heard, I am the new teacher. I have substituted before at lots of other schools, so I have some teaching experience, but this my first day actually being true teacher. So, I'd like to start by writing my name on the board here..."

I began to write 'Ms. Stevenson' on the whiteboard, but before I finished the M, a little boy in the front row started to cover his ears and repeat "no, no, no," over and over.

“Is there a problem?” I asked.

He stared at me with large brown eyes. His brown hair was already tousled, but he reached up and scratched at it some more. I peeked over at his name tag.

“Christopher?” I said. “Is there a problem?”

He hung his head, looking sad. Then he shook it no.

“Okay,” I said. And I continued on writing my name. But Christopher kept his ears covered the whole time.

When the second graders were lining up to go to recess, Christopher was last in line. He repeated “no, no, no” to the beat of the tapping of his shoes on the tile. When all the other children were outside, he stayed in, still shuffling his feet. That was when I started to believe something was wrong.

“Don’t you want to go outside to play with your friends?” I asked.

He looked up at me and said, “No.”

I walked over to him and gently touched his arm. “Are you feeling all right today?”

He jumped back, startled. “No!” he screamed. “NO TOUCH!” And he ran outside the classroom, as if I were a contagious disease or poisonous bacteria. I was confused and surprised at the same time. *Why was Christopher acting this way? Maybe he’s just in a having a bad morning,* I thought. *The first day of school is usually hard for kids.*

I let it go for now and didn’t think about it. But his strange behavior continued throughout the day. And the next week. And the week after that. When I rearranged the toys in the back shelf, he got upset and started crying. He never raised his hand and often repeated “no, no, no” at random times. Whenever he was touched, he screamed. And he always covered his ears when I was writing on the whiteboard. I was beginning to get concerned. What if it wasn’t just a bad mood? What if it was permanent? It could be something serious. I finally decided to talk to the other teachers about him.

That day, in a meeting, I brought up the subject of Christopher when I said, “There’s a little boy in my class, Christopher. He’s acting really strange, and I don’t know how to help him. So, if any of you have had him before in previous years, do you have any suggestions?”

“Oh. Christopher, huh?” another teacher asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Well, I had him last year, in first grade,” she said. “He was a real challenge. Never said a word to anyone. Except “no”. He always said no. I asked his mom what was wrong, and she said the doctor diagnosed him with autism. It’s a mental disorder where you don’t understand what’s going on around you. And you can’t link words to their meanings. I’ll bet it’s real frustrating to go through all that. And he never got a good grade. I won’t be surprised if he never gets an A+ in his life. Yep, that was a tough year, dealing with Christopher and all.”

“What did you do about it?”

“I just put up with him.”

“You didn’t do anything to help? You just...just let him suffer?”

“Yeah. It’s too hard to reach him. I don’t have to time to sit there with him and figure out how his brain works. He’ll eventually understand things. Someone will help him. Some overpaid tutor or medical genius. Don’t worry about it.”

I was appalled. How can a person say that? You have a mentally challenged kid sitting there in your classroom and you don’t give a care about what happens to him? You just let him sit there, confused and lonely, and you don’t reach out to help? *What kind of terrible person are you?* I wanted to ask her. She didn’t care about him. To her, Christopher was just an autistic child that she was too busy to help. Just a child. One of the many she had taught. But if she was a teacher, why didn’t she bother with teaching him? For me, that was when teaching went from an experiment to a mission for me. I was on a mission to somehow, someday, reach Christopher. Outraged, I stormed out of the room immediately.

I sat in my desk for hours after school let out, racking my brain for a solution. I could not reach Christopher alone. I would need the help of others, but none of the teachers at this school were willing to help. It just seemed like I was arguing with myself, and getting nowhere. Doctors, tutors, psychologists – they would all be able to reach him. But we didn’t have the money for that. And they wouldn’t care. We couldn’t search the nation for someone who cared. Or could we? I left my classroom that day with a fuzzy bit of an idea starting to grow.

I woke up early the next day. I was determined to start something. Something big. Just like a tiny spark can start a huge fire, a tiny idea can start a huge change. After a slightly rushed breakfast, I dressed quickly, and headed to the nearest school supply store. I picked up lots of brightly colored paper, markers, colored pencils, and stickers. I had the perfect plan.

That day at school, I gave the kids a silent activity to work on for a portion of the day so I had time to work on my project. I used the largest pieces of paper as posters, then decorated them with all the other things. They said things like “Together we can reach autistic children – Join the AHAG” or “Working together to help kids with autism – Join the AHAG” or “Changing futures and lives with teamwork – Join the AHAG.” On each one, there was a message at the bottom that said, “If you would like to join the AHAG (Autistic Help Association of Greendale) please call Wilson Elementary School and ask to speak to Anna Stevenson.” Obviously my main goal was to get people to join the AHAG.

After school, I taped the posters to the bottom of the traffic lights nearest to our school. That way, people would see them when they were crossing the street. When I was driving home that evening, I got a phone call from the principal of the school. He said there was someone calling for “Miss Anna Stevenson.” Something about the Artistic Kelp Association of Greendale. I didn’t care when he pronounced that wrong. I was too busy jumping with joy.

After that, the calls just kept trickling in. I was overwhelmed by all the people hoping to join. I all told them the same thing: the meeting would be this Friday as soon as school let out. I also gave Christopher a notice that said I needed him to stay after school a little longer that Friday. I hoped he would give it to his parents.

Friday morning, I wondered anxiously about what would happen. It was worse than the first day of school. Much more serious than teaching for the first time. I was about to potentially change a child’s life.

Finally the time came. Christopher gave the notice to his parents, and they showed up. Then all the people started to come. There were teachers from different schools, doctors, psychologists, tutors, and people that just wanted to help. I was amazed and touched when they told me how much they cared.

I began the meeting with a speech. “All right, everyone,” I started, “We’re all here today because we wanted to show how much we care about autistic children. You see, children with autism don’t understand the world around them. It’s hard to communicate with others, since they can’t link words with their meanings. Their brains are wired differently than everyone else’s, so they experience life in a different way. And Christopher here is autistic. He knows what it’s like. We all need to work together to help him.”

Some people nodded in response. A doctor said, “I have a theory about learning to reach children like this. So, if it’s all right with his parents, can I take him into the next classroom, alone, and just...try it out?” Christopher’s parents agreed.

The meetings went like this for the next few months. We got some more members and we all did our best to help Christopher. And whatever all the doctors and psychologists were doing seemed to be working. His grades slowly improved. I was proud, not because I had formed the AHAG, but because the members of it had all worked together to assist him. By the end of the year, he got his first A+. It was such a difference from the usual F he got. When he received that test back, his smile was bright enough to light up the whole town of Greendale. And if there was a grade for smiling, I would have given him an A+ in that too.