

# Student Support

Pembroke's Friday Freebie

## The 3 Habits of Highly Successful Reading Teachers

A QUICK AND EASY APPROACH TO HELPING ALL STUDENTS SUCCEED



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Reading



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## Awareness

As humans, we are extremely adept at reading others. Our students have a good sense of what we think of them, if we believe in them, and what we expect of them. If we really believe that certain students are smart, we indicate this in the classroom. These students know that they are expected to do well. We spend time conversing with these students. Do we do the same for all students? If you really look closely at what you believe about your kids, and the things you do, surprising information will emerge. If you think your students do not know how you really feel, think again. We indicate our true feelings all the time. Expressions on our faces may be fleeting, but they are there and others are easily able to pick them up and ascertain what they mean. It is vital to know how much you can affect the students you teach and how well they do.

As educators, we certainly hope that we convey positive messages to our students. However, if we were to study our words and actions carefully, we would probably be shocked by the messages we send some of the time. Our messages often come from the subconscious part of our brains, and our awareness of these messages may be minimal.

Awareness is the first step. How do we become aware? Think about what you really believe and what your words and actions really say. Reflect on the words you use and the way you behave with your most struggling students. What internal dialog is going on? How are you feeling when you interact with the student? When I first started with struggling students, I was dismayed at how difficult reading was for some of them. I worked hard to help them remember one word, just to find that they couldn't recall the same word a minute later, and it left me feeling very frustrated. Although I did not intend it, I'm sure my body language and expression indicated that I had no faith in their ability.

Things won't change overnight, but if you believe — and I mean truly and deeply believe — that every child can learn to read, and you establish the habits of successful reading instruction, then that will become the reality. What you convey will directly affect your students and ensure that the child believes in himself or herself. Try recording your thoughts, feelings, and observations in a journal to help you understand what you are feeling and, thus, what you are conveying. Another good idea is to use a mirror. Close your eyes and visualize yourself teaching a struggling student. Remember how you felt. Imagine that you are teaching the child now. Look in the mirror and study your expression. I've tried this, and what I saw in the mirror surprised me. I was taken aback by what my facial expressions revealed. We often think that we are able to mask our feelings. In *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell describes how we often are surprised when somebody reads our expression. Gladwell states that "if we knew what was on our face, we would be better at concealing it." (2005: 210) Try the mirror; take note of what you see.

## Changing the Messages

Once we are aware of what we are conveying to our students, we can then make any necessary changes. Change can be difficult. It is not that we don't want to change; it's that we often don't realize there's a need for change or how to go about making the change.

Kegan and Lahey (2001: 70) discuss the big assumptions we hold to be true with absolute certainty, to the point where we don't think "to look for a different reality." The authors tell the story of an Australian woman living in the US who was having a hard time getting used to driving on "the wrong side" of the road. One day she got in the car, only to find the steering wheel was not in front of her. "My God," she thought, "here in the United States things have gotten so bad, they are even stealing steering wheels!" As humorous as it is, Kegan and Lahey note that the truth was just "an arm's length to her left." We don't think to look for the truth if we are certain we already know it.

We can apply this thinking to the assumptions we hold about our students: if we believe that a student is not capable, we essentially open the wrong door of the car and go nowhere. If we don't believe our students can learn, why would we teach them? Perhaps we need to begin by bringing our big assumptions down to where we can at least challenge them — as assumptions "whose truth status is uncertain." (Kegan and Lahey, 2001)

How do we buy into change? Most professional books and articles about change view change as an unwelcome beast that does not happen without much pain and work, and this is usually the case. It is often believed that we change by first "buying in" to the idea, and then our actions will change. My experience has led me to believe that if we change our actions and have positive experiences, the end result is the "buy in."

In order to change our actions we need to attend to our internal dialog. Pause and listen to your thoughts. Choose to stop the negative thoughts of what a child can't do and change them to a positive view of what the child can do. Do this several times a day. Then, focus on your external dialog, what you say to your kids. Record the words you use to encourage your struggling readers. When you start to implement the 3 Habits, you might choose to use the script that you will find in this book. We have to convey, at least by our words, that we believe in all of our kids. The script uses positive words and phrases. Use of the script will ensure that you are reiterating what the child *can* do and that the language is always positive. Saying "No, that was wrong, try that again," is much different from, "You know that word. Here it is. Let's read from here." When we take away the negatives and make an effort to change what we say, the impact is huge.

When we consciously change what we say, our body language will start to change with it. Our expressions will start to mimic the message we send orally. When you see a teacher conversing with students, you hear the positive message in the oral remarks. If you're not within earshot, it is still obvious that the teacher is thinking positively about the child. The teacher's expression and posture convey what he or she is feeling.

When we see the changes in our students due to the positive messages they are receiving, and witness the progress they start to make, our belief in their ability will begin to change as well. It is difficult to believe in all of our kids all of the time, as the learning can at times be slow and laborious, but it is important to make the effort even when it's hard. Similarly, parents can find it difficult to be positive all the time. As a parent, it is easy to think of the times you helped your child with homework and when, despite your best effort and time spent, your child just wasn't getting it. The frustration you felt was tremendous! Being aware of how we're feeling and what message we are sending is the first step. In the end, we all come to the same conclusion. Our kids are capable — sometimes we just have to teach in a different way.

## Looking through a New Lens

When I present the 3 Habits to teachers, there is sometimes skepticism. But, despite reservations, these teachers start to look at reading with a new lens. What is there to lose? They have students for whom conventional programs have proven ineffective so they give it a try.

Feelings of skepticism are normal. It takes time to believe that all students can be successful. As you start to work with your students, and see the success, you will start to change your thinking and marvel at how capable your students really are.

The LIFE program, on which the 3 Habits are based, has been used by classroom and resource teachers with great success from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 8. The program has also been successful with second-language learners, and students identified with exceptionalities and speech delays. Most students begin to read well beyond grade level. All students, struggling or not, tend to learn to read at a much quicker pace than when using other programs.

Besides asking teachers to look at reading in a new way, we discuss the importance of looking at students in a new way. We have to believe all students can learn to read. It's well known that physical development in children occurs at varying rates and ages. Puberty can begin as early as nine in some and almost twice that age in others. This whole range is considered normal. Would it not seem likely or normal that children could also have different rates in their mental development? If a child's visual memory wasn't as easily stimulated as another's, should we say that child can't learn? Should we just lessen the load and lower the bar? Perhaps it is not that there is something wrong with the child. Perhaps it is the way we approach the child.

What about children with memory problems? Does the program work for them? In my experience, if a child can communicate verbally, he or she certainly has the mental capacity required to read. Take the example of computer processing: software is available that allows computers to read text. This technology has been available for some time. Although the voice may sound unnatural, there is no doubt that a computer can perform this skill. On the other hand, developing software so that computers can converse (not just talk) is a major hurdle in computer science that is currently being tackled by some of the greatest minds in the field. Reading is a simpler task than communicating.

When a child struggles to learn to read, it is often thought that the child lacks the ability to read. I have found that this could not be further from the truth. Some children lag behind in the reading process due to many factors, such as lack of motivation, confidence, and visual memory — but certainly not because of a lack of ability. Regardless of the complicating factors, it is our responsibility to provide them with the skills to ensure they succeed.

Some teachers wonder about students who have been diagnosed with multiple problems. Some have been identified as being learning disabled; some are hard to understand because of their speech problems. How do they fare? What about discipline issues? We teach the program to all kids who are reading below grade level, regardless of diagnoses and problems.

It doesn't matter where your students are from or how much income the family earns — all students can learn to read. Reading has to be treated as the single most important thing to master. If not, the child will be set up for a life of failure. Changing the at-risk student statistics begins with reading success. A child won't be able to do anything in school if he or she cannot read. What the child will do at school is misbehave.

Students start to feel successful from the start and disruptive behaviors drop dramatically. Students feel good about themselves. All students will jump several reading levels, and most will read at grade level in a very short period of time, regardless of the diagnoses and problems. For many students who struggle with reading, this is the first time they experience any academic success at school.