

Can Do
By: Jackie Cooke

His eyes had a look of panic as he entered our first grade classroom midway through the school year. "This is Billy," our school secretary said. "Billy, this is Mrs. Cooke. She'll be your teacher for the rest of the year."

I bent down to greet him. "Hi, Billy," I said as I shook his hand, "Welcome to our school. Let me show you where to put your backpack and then I'll have you come sit at this table next to Michael. He can be your guide for the day in case you are confused or not sure where to go. Feel free to ask him any questions."

Things settled into the morning routine and I became busy with the myriad of tasks a teacher needs to take care of each morning. Everything was humming along, when out of the blue, I heard a commotion from one side of the room. Looking over, I saw Billy lay his head down and begin to wail. "Yikes!" I thought, "Who would have guessed such a little guy could make such a big noise?" I went over to his table, knelt down, and asked Billy what was wrong. He only wailed more loudly. Michael turned to me and explained, "He said he doesn't know how to write. He didn't have to do journals at his old school."

At that, Billy attempted to speak between gulps and hiccups. "I don't know what to write about. I can't do it. I don't know how to write. I'm only a first grader, you know."

I coaxed Billy to at least try to start the assignment by drawing something. "Maybe you could draw a picture about you coming to your new school? Once you have the picture done, we'll see what we can do about turning it into a story," I encouraged.

"You can do that?" Billy asked in amazement and picked up a blue crayon and began to draw. And that's how things went with Billy. Every new thing was an occasion for tears. His "no-can-do" attitude defeated him before he ever started.

One day, as the ear splitting wails again pierced the air in our classroom, I went over to stand by Billy, as he sobbed, "I can't do this math problem. At my old school, no one ever asked me to explain my thinking. I'll never get this finished. I'll probably still be working on it when the class goes out to recess. It's too hard!"

In desperation I said, "Billy, we've got to find you a new Can Do attitude. Believing in yourself and sticking to the job even when it gets hard, is what is needed here. Would you like to hear a story about a time when I was a first grader like you and I was having trouble getting a job done?"

Billy sniffed and scrubbed at his eyes. "I guess so," he sighed.

I invited everyone to come to the Gathering Spot and while the class was seating themselves on the carpet, I walked over to the chalkboard. I picked up a piece of chalk and began to write. I called out each letter name as I wrote it on the board. "P-E-R-S-E-V-E-R-A-N-C-E. Does anyone know how to read this word?" No one had a clue, so I pronounced it and asked my class to repeat it after me. Then, I asked if anyone knew what it meant. Again, no one raised a hand. "If you stick with a job that's really hard for you to do and you get it done, that's perseverance. Listen now as I tell you how I learned about perseverance when I was a little girl just about the same age as all of you."

Jackie and Terry loved their bedroom. Since they were only eleven months apart, they had shared a bedroom for as long as they could remember. One Saturday afternoon, they were playing in their room. Color books and crayons that had spilled

from the box were lying in a corner over by the window. Dirty clothes were scattered all over the place and their dresser drawers were opened with clothing items hanging out over the sides of the drawers. Dirty dishes and wrappers from snack items they'd eaten over the last few weeks were interspersed with the clothing, books, shoes, a doll or two and little game pieces from a board game that had been set up and then abandoned. Right now, they were in between their two unmade beds, building a city out of Lincoln Logs.

Mom poked her head in the door and said, "Girls, I asked you yesterday to get your room cleaned up. This is not acceptable. Clean your room up right now or you will be sent to bed by 6:00 p.m."

Jackie stood up and eyed their room with dismay. "Jeesh. What a mess. I hate going to bed early but this room is a total disaster. How are we ever going to get it cleaned up in time?" Jackie thought for a minute and then said, "Aha! I've got it." Grabbing a pile of dirty clothes off the floor, she tossed them out the door into the middle of the hallway. Then, she picked up a stray shoe and chucked it out the door. Terry, understanding Jackie's plan, grabbed handfuls of crayons and they followed the path the clothing had taken. Books, dolls, dirty dishes, snack wrappers, old smelly socks, everything went flying out the door as the girls got into the rhythm of the task at hand. "Shooooom, shoom, shoom shoom, shoom," Jackie called as she tossed Lincoln Logs out the door one at a time."

"Hey, Jackie," Terry called out, "Watch this." Terry began to strip her bed and threw the bedspread, blankets, sheets, and pillow onto the growing pile outside their door.

"That's nothing," Jackie replied, "get a load of this." Jackie walked over to their bookshelf and grabbed an armload of books and then walked out the door and dumped them on the pile. Terry, not wanting to be outdone by her big sister, grabbed handfuls of clothing from their dresser drawers and they too found their way to the pile in the hall.

Sometime later, sweating and panting, Jackie stopped and said, "Wow, it's so clean in here you can hear an echo."

Terry said, "Yeah we did such a good job. Mom is going to be really proud of us."

With satisfaction Jackie turned in a circle surveying the room. As she turned toward their bedroom door, she caught sight of the huge mountain of their things that had been removed from their bedroom. She staggered toward the gigantic pile and collapsed on top of it, crying in desperation, "Oh no! We have to put this all back. We'll never make it by 6:00 p.m." Terry threw herself next to her sister and both girls began to wail.

Just then, the girls' big sister, Stefani, walked up the stairs. "Girls, what are you doing? You've totally blocked the hallway with this pile. I can't get to my room. Why are you guys crying?"

Between sobs, Jackie explained about Mom, the 6:00 p.m. bedtime, and trying so hard to clean up the huge mess they'd had in their room.

"Well, there's only one thing to do," Stef said. "I'll help you put all these things back. I can't get to my room until they are out of the way. What should we start with?"

"Well, all the bed clothes take up a lot of room. Maybe we could start by making our beds?" Jackie asked.

"Good idea," Stef said.

Stef helped the girls approach removing things from the mountainous pile in small steps. She suggested they look for one kind of item at a time and to put them away and then start on another kind of thing. Slowly the pile began to diminish.

"Done," Jackie proclaimed as she finished mopping the last section of the tile floor. She looked around and saw that Terry was just finishing up arranging the last few books that needed to be put back on the bookshelf. Stef was wiping off the last few streaks of window cleaner with a paper towel. "This room really is clean now and smells good, too," she proudly stated.

"See, I told you girls you could do it. The hardest part of a job is getting started. You just have to roll up your sleeves and start somewhere."

Jackie replied, "Thanks Stef. It really helps that we have a nice big sister like you to show us how to do it."

"And so class that was the day when I learned all about the meaning of the word perseverance," Mrs. Cooke finished. "Now, everyone return to your tables. You have about 15 minutes to finish up your math before it's time to clean up to go to recess.

Just as the bell rang fifteen minutes later, Mrs. Cooke caught sight of Michael giving Billy a high five. She overheard Michael say, "Way to go Billy, good pefeversince or whatever that word was that Mrs. Cooke was talking about. Look, you stuck with it and now you are done. Hey, let's go out and play together on the Monkey Bars.

"Hooray, we're free" the two boys shouted as they headed out the door.

Discussion Questions:

Have you ever had a job to do that was really hard? What was it? Did you stick with it until it was finished? Why or Why not? Do you know someone else who has a hard job? How do you think they get their work finished? What do you think Jackie's older sister Stefani meant when she said, "The hardest part of a job is getting started." Stefani also suggested that the girls break the job apart into smaller pieces by sorting for one kind of item at a time to put away. What other strategies could be used to help with tackling a big job like this?

Perseverance means having the self-discipline to continue a task in spite of being confronted with difficulties. Albert Einstein said, "It's not that I'm so smart, it's just that I stay with problems longer."

The following are classroom activities that promote perseverance:

1. Lead a discussion on what perseverance means and does not mean. For example: keep working until the assignment is complete, instead of trying only a few times and quitting. With the help of students list the steps that are needed to learn a new skill such as riding a bicycle, learning to swim or memorizing the multiplication table.

2. Read the following: Abraham Lincoln said, "People are about as happy as they make their minds up to be." Mr. Lincoln experienced successes in his life, but he also failed in business in 1831, was defeated for legislature in 1832, lost his bid for congress in 1843, lost his run for the Senate in 1855, and was defeated for Vice President in 1856. Yet, in 1860, Mr. Lincoln was elected President of the United States. List and discuss the qualities he must have had. For example: positive attitude, tenacity, diligence, courage, boldness, self-discipline, and determination.

3. Have each student write a report on a person of their choosing who demonstrated perseverance. Some examples are: Albert Einstein, Helen Keller, Thomas Edison, Harriet Tubman, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Mother Teresa, Madame (Marie) Curie, Ray Charles, Rosa Parks, Lance Armstrong, or Christopher Reeve.

Have them answer the following questions in their report:

How did he or she show perseverance?

In what ways are you like the person in your report?

In what ways are you different from that person?

What did you learn about yourself from writing the report?

4. Read and perhaps act out "The Tortoise and the Hare," "The Little Engine That Could," or another story of your choosing. Have children divide into groups to write a simple poem, song or a short story that exemplifies perseverance. Have them perform their works for each other or for children in lower grades.

5. Have the students locate newspaper or magazine articles concerning a person who demonstrated perseverance after experiencing failure. Ask them to report what they learned.

6. Have the students write or draw a picture illustrating a time when they persevered and succeeded even though they felt like giving up. Then

discuss the feelings associated with their achievement, for example: pride, happiness, self-confidence, and self-esteem.

7. Use puppets or students to role play situations where individuals demonstrate perseverance. Examples: a child who stutters and keeps trying to speak fluently, a child who has learning problems yet puts forth much effort to learn, a student in a wheelchair who tries to do new things.

8. Lead a discussion on how negative comments from others can influence a student's attitude toward learning. Discuss what children can do to prevent these remarks from hindering their efforts. Talk about ways one can be successful in spite of them. (See Encouraging Thoughts.)

9. Ask a respected, community member who overcame obstacles to speak to your students about his or her life. Ask the individual to discuss the principles that led to his accomplishments. Then have the children compose and send a thank you card or letter.

10. Ask the students to make out a list of things that are difficult for them and easy for them. Then discuss the fact that every child has strengths and weaknesses, but if the children keep trying they will most likely be successful.

11. Brainstorm and list obstacles, habits, and attitudes that prevent people from accomplishing their goals. Then have the children write down or draw a picture of what they want to be or do when they grow up. Divide into pairs and have them share their ideas. As a group list the general steps they will need to take to fulfill their dreams.

12. Have the students create a list of questions that they would like to ask an older relative or family friend. For example:

What was the most important thing that you learned from your mother or

father?
What values are most important in your life today?
What are you most proud of doing?
Name a mistake you made.
What did you learn from your mistake?
Can you describe a time when you kept trying even though you felt like giving up?

After completing the interview have the children write a report on what they learned.

Ways educators can encourage perseverance in students:

1. Believe in each child's ability to achieve.
2. Expect them to finish what they start.
3. Avoid accepting excuses for unfinished work.
4. Give positive feedback when a child puts forth extra effort.
5. Help students realize that everyone makes mistakes, but what is important is to keep trying (See the Kelly Bear Behavior book).
6. Teach children how to regroup and start over.
7. Motivate them to try new things.
8. Encourage children to take responsibility for themselves and make constructive choices.

Since perseverance is a necessary ingredient for student achievement, it needs to be encouraged. Helping children learn to be patient and to persist in spite of failure are attributes that will contribute to their future success.

Then I'd have your "Can Do"
> story accompany the section as a box or sidebar. Right now, my
> thinking is we could shorten the section that comes before the
italics,

> if you're okay with that. Or we could keep it as-is.

I think it all is of a piece and should stay together but I'd be willing to look at what you are suggesting.

>I'd I could ask
> for your approval for any changes before submitting anything to
the
> publisher. I would definitely LOVE to add the discussion questions
and
> follow-up paragraph, which sound great.

Here's some sample discussion questions:

Have you ever had a job to do that was really hard? What was it? Did you stick with it until it was finished? Why or Why not? Do you know someone else who has a hard job? How do you think they get their work finished? What do you think Jackie's older sister Stefani meant when she said, "The hardest part of a job is getting started." Stefani also suggested that the girls break the job apart into smaller pieces by sorting for one kind of item at a time to put away. What other strategies could be used to help with tackling a big job like this?

>
> How does this sound to you? Let me know your thoughts. And
thanks
> again. I'm really excited about this.

>
> Lisa
>
>
>
> On May 10, 2007, at 9:05 PM, jmcooke@comcast.net wrote:
>
>> Hi Lisa,
>> Let's start by my sending it so you can decide if it's even what

you
>> were thinking about. It's more like 1500 words. I haven't done the
>> discussion questions I usually add in a follow up paragraph at
the end
>> of each of my stories and I haven't done anything with an intro.

>> Figured I'd wait to see if you decide it's what you were hoping
for.
>> JC
>>
>> ----- Original message -----
>> From: Lisa Holewa <lholewa@earthlink.net>
>>> Jackie,
>>>
>>> If you could send it as a Microsoft Word file -- or whatever word
>>> processing program you use -- that would be great. I'll end up
>>> double-spacing it for the final manuscript I send the publisher,
but
>>> if
>>> you work better a different way, that's fine with me. As for word
>>> count, how long do your stories usually run? i was imagining
them
>>> rather short -- 500 to 700 words? -- but if they're usually longer,
>>> let
>>> me know and we can discuss. E-mail would be perfect for
sending it,
>>> either as an attachment or within the body of an e-mail that I'd
cut
>>> and paste. Your credit would appear within the chapter where
the
>>> story
>>> appears, in an introduction before the story, and with a
copyright to
>>> you. If you want to write some sort of introduction explaining
how
>>> you
>>> use your stories in the classroom, that would be wonderful.
>>> Otherwise,
>>> I can put one together. It would be great if you also have
>>> suggestions
>>> for parents who'd like to make up their own stories -- some
elements
>>> they might want to include, any things they might want to avoid,
>>> suggestions to prod their imaginations. (You can send this to
me as
>>> notes, if you prefer, and I'll put it together for the chapter.) As
>>> for what rights you'd lose by allowing us to publish this first, I'll

>>> doublecheck with my editor. But my understanding is that you'd retain

>>> ALL rights -- you'd have the copyright, etc, but other publishers
>>> likely would want to know that it has appeared elsewhere first.

You

>>> certainly would still own the story -- able to use it personally, or
>>> submit it anywhere you'd like.

>>>

>>> Thanks again,

>>> Lisa

>>>

>>>

>>> On May 10, 2007, at 2:35 PM, Jackie wrote:

>>>

>>>> Hi Lisa,

>>>> I'm working on the final draft of the children's story right now. I

>>>> haven't heard back from the other publishing company that

asked me to

>>>> prepare a prospectus to send in, so I decided I'd go with the

new

>>>> story on perseverance rather than take a chance that it would

cause

>>>> issues down the line if one of the Sister Stories had already

been

>>>> sent to another publisher. I wondered if you might answer a

few more

>>>> questions before I send it. Do you need it in any certain kind of

>>>> format? Double spaced? Word count? Electronic Word

document file or

>>>> hard copy? How would I be given credit in your book for this

story?

>>>> Could I write some kind of introductory paragraph explaining a

little

>>>> more about how I use these kinds of stories in my classroom?

If I do

>>>> give the story to you, does that mean that I couldn't share it

>>>> anymore? I've never done anything like this before so please

forgive

>>>> my ignorance. As soon as I finish, I'll get the forms filled out

and

>>>> sent back to you.

> >>> Sincerely,
> >>> Jackie Cooke
> >>>
> >>
> >
> > <Perseverance.doc>
>