

Reaching Out: Teacher to Students  
by Diane Davis

Three years ago the Chapter I aide at the elementary school where I worked, volunteered to take six little second grade boys that we suspected were drug-affected children and teach them all day long, for the last two weeks of school. She was finished with all the program for her other students, so was able to devote all of her attention to these six boys, all of whom had been in lots of trouble, both academically and behaviorally, for most of the school year.

Thelma Valentine was the name of this gifted woman. Without any formal training about FAS/FAE, she knew instinctively what to do. First of all, she arranged the boys' desks in a horseshoe fashion. Her desk was between the two ends of the horseshoe so that the boys would be able to see her well and vice versa.

Thelma was very clear in letting the boys know her rules, her expectations, and what the daily routine would be. She informed them that if one student had to go to the bathroom, they would all go with him, and that they were to stay together and under her supervision at recess and at lunchtime.

Academically, she did not push them to do work that was clearly beyond their comprehension, but she expected them to do what they were capable of, and to do it well. They were then rewarded with dimestore toys or treats to eat. When they did especially well, they got to watch a video and have popcorn.

What Thelma discovered was that the boys were very responsive as long as she supervised them closely. If she just turned her back for a minute, however, most of them would not be able to stay on task. They needed her to keep them "grounded."

Thelma also realized that one of the reasons the boys had so often gotten into trouble on the playground was because they had no understanding of game rules. As a result, they would run around aimlessly and bother other students who were playing. With Thelma present to explain game rules to them and to help them learn how to play together, their harassing of other children stopped and they began to enjoy playing games with each other.

By the end of the two weeks, five of the six boys had made considerable progress in their academics, behavior, and social skills. They were smiling and feeling good about themselves, rather than hanging their heads because once again, they had gotten into trouble. The sixth boy was often tardy or absent. His family took little interest in his schoolwork or his emotional well-being, so consequently, he didn't do as well as the other students.

When school began the following year, four of the six boys returned. They looked for Thelma but she had transferred to another school. They told me how much she had taught them, and how well they were going to do in the coming year because of what they had learned from her. They sincerely meant what they said - I could see it in their eyes - but within two weeks, they were all sliding downhill. They needed the constant supervision that Thelma had given them, as well as the smaller sized classroom, the structure, order, and routine, and Thelma's belief in and love for them.

There are many children like the six boys Thelma taught. We know what they need from the school system. We owe them the opportunity to learn in a safe environment that is set up to meet their special needs. The impact can be very positive and rewarding. We must continue to advocate for the classrooms these children learn best in, and the teachers who have the patience, skills, and insight that Thelma had.

(This article is reprinted by permission from a chapter in the book, Reaching Out to Children with FAS/FAE by Diane Davis. Her book may be purchased from Prentice Hall for \$20 by calling 1-800-288-4745. This is an excellent resource for teachers, counselors and parents. )

