

# Behind the Label

*The following piece was written by a teacher after attending a workshop with Kim. These are her reflections on a student's transformation - and what moved him from "disorder" to "quirk."*



## A teacher's reflections...

As I reflect on last weekend, I find myself, as I did the entire weekend, thinking of a child I had the opportunity to bond with last year. Billy (not his real name) was one of those “labeled” students who is targeted by staff as a “problem” student. He is from a single-parent home. Billy lives with his mother and older sister. His father is not a part of his life even though he does live in the same city. He does spend limited time with his paternal grandparents, but this is not a positive environment for him. Billy gets yelled at a lot and his grandparents use inappropriate language in front of him. His mother means well and truly loves her children. However, she, also, uses rough language and becomes very stressed perhaps due to the pressures of being a single mom. She has a full time job and is doing her best to provide for her children. His maternal grandparents are his most positive influences and he does spend a great deal of quality time with them. Billy talks a lot about the time he spends with his maternal grandfather. His grandfather is certainly a positive male role model for him.

Billy has struggled in school and is viewed as a bully and trouble-maker. He came to our school in first grade. His first grade teacher had a difficult time understanding his needs and thus engaged in many power struggles with him. Billy is diagnosed with ADD and takes Ritalin on a daily basis. Billy is also very impulsive, argues with adults, is not trusting of adults, and is a “fighter”. In first grade, he struggled with all academics. He was only interested in topics that had to do with snakes.

## The labels

As I reflect on last weekend's class, I realize now how Billy must have been feeling inside. I see many of the characteristics of ADD in Billy. Even though he is diagnosed with ADD, I got many "aha" moments in our workshop. Examples like, *becoming angry, agitated, anxious, difficulty with transitions, not appearing to be listening to speaker, trying to control situations*, etc. all reminded me of Billy.

## Billy's Story: First Grade

While Billy was in first grade, the only real contact I had with him was during my lunchroom duty one day a week. I saw a child who seemed to have a wall up and was very angry. Not knowing if I was going to have him in second grade or not, I decided to try to begin a relationship with him. I knew this was not going to be an easy task. He was not a warm fuzzy type of child. So, I decided to use a slow approach with him which began in March. I began by just saying "hi" as I walked by his lunch table. Sometimes I would get a wise remark from him. I chose to ignore the remark which I have to say was difficult. I really wanted to say to him "you have no right to speak to an adult like that." However, I also knew by acknowledging him I would just be adding fuel to the fire. So, I continued this brief interaction for a few weeks. I would also make a point of going out of my way when I saw him in the hall to say hello. At first he would not acknowledge me, but eventually he would say "hi" back. By June of his first grade year he would invite me to sit at the lunch table with him and his buddies. This was a huge step for him. Again, adults were not his favorite people.

Also in June we were given our class lists for the following year and Billy was on my class list. I was excited about this. However, his first grade teacher made some very disturbing comments to me. She would say, "good luck with that one" or "he has some real issues" and then she would bring his mother into it by saying "she'll be on your case all year". Normally, these comments would have made me nervous, but I simply said back to her "oh, I think we'll be fine. Billy and I have been bonding in the cafeteria." I left it at that. I did not want this child starting out a fresh year in second grade with his first year baggage.

## Second Grade

Establishing that bond in first grade was critical in beginning our successful second grade year. Billy had been diagnosed with ADD, but as I reflect on other disorders, he could very well have had pieces of attachment strains and some signs of very significant accumulated stress/trauma from the two divorces his mother went through and from his father's refusal to see the children and even from how he was viewed in first grade by his teacher and other staff members.

I continued to take things very slow with Billy. When he was part of any negative situation in the classroom or out of the classroom, his anger would overtake the situation. So, he and I did many role playing activities to try to get him to take some deep breaths before he responded to any situation. This was definitely difficult for him. These were the times I saw a child swing toward the disorder side of the spectrum. Especially, if he felt he was not being heard by the adult in the situation. The problem with Billy was he had established a reputation for being a "behavior" problem. He and I worked very hard and in the classroom and he was a joy to have. This child began to trust me and as this trust grew he became more open in the classroom. He even made a comment to his mother that Ms. Smith is the only one who will listen to me. That brought tears to my eyes. I don't understand why we, as educators, do not take the time to listen to the children. Billy became one of the nicest friends/helpers to his classmates. He had a wealth of world knowledge that he had kept bottled up inside him. Now he was beginning to share all that information with his classmates and you could see how proud he was of himself when he received positive reactions from his friends. Other staff members were also seeing the difference. They would comment to me on the great year Billy was having. His mother thanked me numerous times for believing in her child. She also was seeing a difference at home. He was not as disobedient and began helping his mom with chores. He continued to struggle in reading, but was becoming more confident and willing to work hard in this area.

I stayed in touch with Billy over the summer as he was on the same swim team as my own son. He also started to become attached to my husband and would ask me if Mr. Smith would be coming to see his races. He would always look for us when he got out of the pool after his race with a huge smile on his face.

## Third grade

Billy is now in third grade. His classroom is just two doors down from mine. I still see him often and we have lunch in my room together every once in a while, so I can catch up with what is going on with him. He continues to do well. Reading is still a difficult area for him, but the angry, disobedient, impulsive side has subsided. He still

gets angry at times, especially if he is wrongly accused and not given the chance to explain, but he is definitely a different child than when he came to me at the beginning of second grade. He seems to be keeping himself on the quirk side of the spectrum after a long, long, journey from the disorder side. I think of Billy as my success story. And, really, all I did was show this child that he could trust me, showed him strategies he could use to get through his day on a positive note, and “love” him no matter what. In turn, Billy began to love himself and be proud of who he is.