

An Unsung Hero

Louise McCabe. Have you heard of her? Probably not. She is an unsung hero. Let me tell you more.

Ms. McCabe works with special needs children. She started 21 years ago as an Educational Assistant, the last 12 years as a Child Youth Worker. She currently works with multiply diagnosed children in an autism program. Three years ago, Duncan was placed in Ms. McCabe's classroom.

Duncan has ADHD, ODD, autistic-like behaviors, etc. He is an intelligent, hyperactive child who must be persuaded to perform even mundane tasks. He has ever-present distractibility issues that can lead to meltdowns (crying, self-abuse, throwing objects, etc.). Duncan came to Ms. McCabe's class wanting to learn but with a frustration level that would try the patience of Job. In the beginning, he disrupted class continually with his daily meltdowns and melodrama. School was hard for him and he was especially hard on his teachers.

Patient persistence. These are Louise's bywords. She has taken Duncan from resistant to willing when it comes to his schoolwork, specifically, but in his life as well. She started off creating a bond. That special bond, which takes great pains to develop, has allowed Duncan to blossom before our eyes. Initially, he didn't want to read but he is now reading the Spiderwick Chronicles (and enjoying them). An inability to play with peers at all has turned into enjoying playing with others. The meltdowns, while still present, have decreased markedly making his life more harmonious. Expressing even the simplest of emotions (once impossible) is now second nature and they flow from him freely. Duncan states, "Ms. McCabe is my favorite teacher" and he likes her "cause she's cool." Huge praise from a 9-year-old but even more impressive when you learn he wasn't able to convey these types of thoughts even a year ago.

Ms. McCabe's secrets to success include use of errorless learning techniques (prompting responses so correct answers are said first), differential reinforcement (positively reinforcing behaviors almost before the child can initiate an inappropriate behavior), a token and reward system (fading rewards slowly) and giving the child choices so the child feels they have some control. Her wonderful sense of humor and sharing her own experiences helps her to connect with these children on their level.

When asked what she liked about working with Duncan, specifically, Ms. McCabe stated "his amazing character, personality, sense of humor, curiosity and effort through difficulty. Also, I admit, I love the challenge". Step by step, day by day, over the course of these last three years, Ms. McCabe's love of the challenge has helped conquer the negativity and foster positive outcomes from a little boy that so many had insisted was unteachable.

How do you thank someone who persevered when others gave up? You can't, but you can change them from an unsung hero to one that is (now) sung. Ms. McCabe, you are a Hero.