

SYLVESTER AND THE GRUMPS: How to Dump the Grumps

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Some old but good books.

For 10 years, as a former preschool, elementary school, and K-8 enrichment teacher, I answered many questions from parents about their children's moods. I have also seen a variety of moods each day in the classroom. One mood keeps reoccurring at home as well as in school – the grumps.

Grumps can spread like weeds among flowers until not a flower or a smiling child is left. Put-downs can have a withering effect on any budding talent. But, luckily, young students can, and do, support one another once they find out how rewarding it is.

I saw an amazing change in my second-grade students when I first started using a story I created about "put-ups." The "I'm better than you" statements (put-downs) slowly changed to "I like the way you do that" statements (put-ups) as children gained an awareness of each other's feelings and growing potential. Parents testified that children began to thrive on the recognition of their own assets. I noticed that my primary grade students were able to take more creative chances, perhaps because of a gradual lessening of fear of peer criticism. They learned to receive and give affirmations without undue stress, as well as to protect their classmates from barbed put-downs. They would say to a friend, "You don't have to take that. That's just a put-down." And they walked away!

Since the effectiveness of a group depends, in part, on how each member feels about him or herself and his or her place in the group, I wanted the children to recognize each other's potential for improvement, accomplishment, and kindness and to develop a classroom atmosphere in which children received encouragement and compliments from each other. In short I wanted their gifts and talents to flourish. Many types of intelligences deserved to be recognized.

Actually, before I introduced put-ups, there were weeks when I ran out of time trying to solve the hundreds of social problems that cropped up. Students were often preoccupied with hurt, anger, and worry about not being liked.

The story of Sylvester the grumpy monkey provided an imaginative creature with whom the children could identify. What child has not, after all, woken up with the grumps at least one day in his or her short life? I use a monkey puppet to begin the story. His face is malleable and can look mean or friendly, happy or sad. I explain that Sylvester is my friend and that he is very shy. Sylvester then hides under my arm and around my neck. To help Sylvester overcome his shyness, I ask the audience to give him a friendly hello. The puppet then whispers into my ear and I explain that Sylvester has a story, but he wants me to help him tell it.

The book is available from the author.

Another book that I use with children is called *Simon's Hook*. This book can be used with all ages but is especially good for elementary school. The author helps students see how to avoid "biting the hook" when put-downs" are thrown out.

A third book that hits home to many children is called *Don't Laugh at Me*.

A portion of the proceeds of this book goes to an organization to rid bullying through malicious laughter. The CD sung by a well-known folk singer is thrilling as are the illustrations.

References. Old but Good.

- Burnett, K. G. (2000). *Simon's hook: A story about teases and put-downs*. Felton, CA: GR Publishing.
- Herman, G. N. (1982, 1986, 2020). *Sylvester and the grumps: How to Dump the Grumps*. Available from author: 166 Lodge Circle, Swanton, MD 21561.
- Herman, G. N. (2007). *Stories and songs of creative creatures* [CD]. Available from author. gnherman@gcnetmail.net 301-501-0044.
- Seskin, S. & Shamblin, A. (2002). *Don't laugh at me*. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press.

Other Important Resources

- Harrison, A. (1992). *Easy-to-tell stories for young children*. Jonesborough, TN: National Storytelling Press, 132 Boone St., Suite 5, Jonesborough, TN 37659, (423-753-2171). www.storynet.org 1-800-525-4514.
- Contains easy-to-tell multicultural folktales. "The Three Butterfly Brothers," German folktale adaptation, teaches acceptance of our differences. "The Gossipy Child," a Jewish folktale adaptation, and "The Boy Who Became a Caribou," an Inuit folktale adaptation, both show how hurtful name-calling and put-downs can be. The story "North Wind and the Sun" reveals the power of kind and gentle behavior.
- Hartwood Institute. *An ethics curriculum for children*. The Hartwood Institute, 425 N. Craig Street, Suite 302, Pittsburgh, PA 15213 (412-688-8570).
- Ellie Childs, a Pittsburgh criminal defense lawyer, realized many young people did not understand the attributes of courage, loyalty, justice, respect, hope, honesty, and love, which we need to survive in a democracy. The program uses stories of folk literature, legends, and hero tales from many cultures to help teachers establish a caring classroom. One district created a storytelling bus. What a treat!
- Paley, V.G. (1992). *You can't say you can't play*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. A kindergarten teacher, who received the MacArthur Foundation award, describes how she used storytelling each day to reinforce her belief in inclusion and the Golden Rule. Her only rule was, "You can't say you can't play." Nurturing kindness and concern grew out of that!

Smith, C. A. (September, 1986). Nurturing kindness through storytelling. *Young Children*. In the National Association for the Education of Young Children's journal, Charles Smith says, "It is a 'your pain-in-my heart' reaction, an identification with another's suffering" that happens when we tell stories. I believe the stories we tell help children feel other people's emotions because we describe them with our voices and faces, the most powerful type of communication.