
LEARNING ABOUT LEARNING DISABILITIES

THIRD EDITION

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CHAPTER 18

Understanding Learning Disabilities through a Father's Perspective

J. D. Mashburn

Silver Springs, Maryland

CHRISTINE GREENHAW MASHBURN INSTITUTE, 2000

When my wife, Mary Lou, and I make our annual pilgrimage to this verdant campus and these hallowed halls to participate in the Christine Greenhaw Mashburn Institute, our presence often stimulates the curiosity of the teachers in training. How did it happen that a physician and his wife developed such an interest in the field of special education, and specifically in the area of minimal learning disorders? Through the years, our answer has been brief and general. After two of our four children endured the burden of this dysfunction, we dedicated our modest means and talents to the assistance of children in the schools of Arkansas who also share this heavy load.

Today, now that we have had over 30 years of experience, I will give to this group a detailed natural history of this disorder and how it impacted one of our sons and his parents. It is my hope it will be of benefit to you as you work with the affected child in your classroom and help you to understand how this mission evolved in our lives.

Learning about Learning Disabilities, Third Edition

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The apostle Paul wrote these words in his letter to the church at Rome, "Tribulations bring about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope."¹

With that thought, we begin our story.

Following a normal gestation and delivery, our third son was born on September 12, 1961, in the Methodist Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. They said he looked just like his daddy. He was named Zack, after his paternal grandfather.

There were no problems during the neonatal period, and he progressed well in the next 12 months into a healthy infancy. In fact, there were a few indications of precocity, walking at 8 months and saying his first words at 11 months.

The early childhood years were happy and active. He was our only child who awakened every morning with a smile on his face. He had the usual curiosity and "business" of a 2- to 3-year-old, helping his dad by dropping grass clippings into the gas tank of the lawn mower, and assisting his mother by marking the couch with brown shoe polish.

When Zack reached his 5th birthday, there was every indication he was ready for limited, organized learning, and he was enrolled in a small, private kindergarten. Zack enjoyed these activities and completed the 9-month course without any major difficulties. At the year-end parent-teacher conference, we were told he had some difficulty in letter recognition, but the teacher felt confident this would correct with age, and she recommended that he proceed into first grade.

The following fall we enrolled Zack in the first grade with all of the happy excitement and expectations that accompany the introduction of your 6-year-old to the educational system. Little did we know that he was entering a door to a long, dark, lonely passage filled with frustration, fear, and heartache.

The first-grade year confirmed the kindergarten teacher's concern about letter recognition, but did not fulfill her optimistic prediction of correction with time and older age. The first grade is usually not the bull pit of competition which some instructors make of higher grades. However, even at this early, gentler level of learning, Zack's teacher was worried about his progress when compared to other students. There were no alarm bells going off yet, but there was some discussion about possibly repeating the first year; you know, letting more maturity and time correct the problem.

Even at this stage, we were sensitive to the stigma repeating a grade might place on a six- to seven-year-old. However, we were facing a move from Memphis that summer. We reasoned that Zack would be in new surroundings and among new students. No one would have to know except him. And,

¹Romans 5:3,4.

besides, it was not unusual for parents to hold their child until the age of 7 before beginning school. So, after our move, we enrolled Zack in the first grade again, in the new school.

Do you think this was a "non-event" in his eyes? Let me tell you, each year for the next 10 years, Zack would remind us that actually he should be one grade ahead of where he was.

Lesson Number One. Never underestimate the impact of failure on the psyche of a 6-year-old.

In spite of the continued difficulties, Zack was promoted to the second grade. In retrospect, I think several factors were at work here. First, he was a very intelligent child. This is the paradox which defines the condition of word assimilation defect (dyslexia, minimal learning disability, etc.) This intelligence is a two-edged sword for the student. One edge of the sword creates an intolerable dilemma for this intelligent student, who is forever trying to understand why he/she cannot learn. The other edge convinces the instructor that this obviously intelligent student could do the work if they would only try. Clearly, they are indolent, indifferent, and have priorities other than learning. The teacher becomes just as confused and distraught as the student, a perfect formula for disrupting the teacher's hard-earned lesson plans and earnest patience.

And so the student is promoted in spite of the obvious deficiencies in the mechanics of reading and writing. First, because he/she is intelligent. Second, because it is time for some relief for the long-suffering teacher. Time to let the next teacher have their turn trying to solve this unsolvable problem.

Of course, this "social" promotion is the only way to handle the non-learning child in a school system unequipped for special needs students. You cannot keep a child in the first or second grade forever. At least they will benefit from the social interaction of their peers. Or will they? But, I am moving ahead of my story.

The second grade was a seminal year for all of us. It was very clear now that Zack was not learning to read or write. There was a problem. It was as much of a mystery to us, or more so, as it was to his teacher. Why could this son, who was as intelligent as his two older, high-achieving brothers, not learn? Of all the many theories we have worked our way through over the years to explain this perplexity, not once did we, his parents, ever blame indolence, indifference, or lack of motivation. We knew our son.

As he faced this accusation of not trying each year at school, he did find some relief at home. I take comfort in this fact. But my heart aches for the minimal learning disabled student who must return at the end of the day to a home where he or she will face the misguided accusations.

This is not to say that Zack's evenings at home were all peaches and cream. Although we recognized that he really was trying, our own ill-advised

efforts to force the learning process often transformed the tranquil home scene into one of tension, frustration, and mortification—sadly, a continuation of the same emotions he was experiencing during the day at school.

As Zack passed listlessly into the third grade, we all moved vigorously into a period of testing and alternative treatments. After all, we were only human. Like everyone faced with an illness, we wanted a shot, pill or operation to solve the ailment immediately and completely. Unfortunately, and as a physician I knew, that life, in most cases, simply is not that easy.

First, we went to the ophthalmologist to make sure his eyesight was adequate; next to the otolaryngologist to confirm normal hearing. Over the following two years, we contributed to the coffers of numerous child psychologists and psychiatrists. I remember Zack spending literally hours in the testing room. He would come out with a glazed look in his eyes, totally exhausted. If he had any doubt from his school experiences, this period of extensive testing confirmed in his mind that he was damaged goods.

We were told that he had a learning disability. Surprise! Mention was made of a condition known as dyslexia, a term becoming fashionable in the 1970s, in which the child reverses the letters. All right, but what do we do about it? Vague, generalized comments were made about finding teachers who understood the problem. One consultant, a neurosurgeon who had developed an interest in learning disorders, did give us one bit of good, solid advice. He told us to stop the lesson assignment studies at home. It was much more important for the family to provide a haven of peace and love as a refuge from the turmoil he was experiencing at school. We followed this wise recommendation, to the great relief of us all.

In the early 1970s, we were unsuccessful in finding a local teacher or system familiar with or sympathetic to the problem of dyslexia. It was still the consensus, even in the so-called enlightened Washington, DC, area, that a child who was not learning was simply either dumb or lazy or both. So I launched into the audacious plan of teaching the teachers. At the beginning of each grade school year, I would sit down with Zack's new teacher and give a brief course on dyslexia, as if that would take care of the problem for that year! Of course, nothing changed, except that my name became anathema among the staff of our school.

By the fifth grade, we entered the phase of alternative methods of teaching, learning, and correction. These were the times of after-school trips to tutors and fringe clinicians, such as the clinic that offered improvement to dyslexics through eye exercises. The latter endeavor did accomplish one thing. It gave him dull headaches after each exercise in the afternoons while his peers were refreshing themselves with after-school recreation.

In the seventh grade, he was still trying mightily to make a passing score. This is the beginning of relatively complicated math problems and literature assignments. I remember reviewing one science paper he brought home.

It consisted of multiple questions requiring interpretation of the discussion-type question and application of mathematics to arrive at the correct solution. He had filled three handwritten pages in a herculean effort to achieve success. And what did his instructor give him in return? A large red X over each of his exercises and hard-earned answers, and a large red zero at the top of the front page for his grade.

I thought that I understood what my son was experiencing until I sat down and had a memory session of my own experiences in the educational system. I had always been a high achiever, based on a little talent and a lot of work. I remembered how one red X could put a pretty bad taste in my mouth. But I had never failed a complete test, never. The emotional response to such an experience never imprinted on the electrical circuits of my brain. Until I entered medical school. Then one time I received a test paper with a large red F at the top. The shock of failure and futility was so overwhelming that it is very clear in my memory (and recurring dreams) to this day. Then the thought hit me. This is what my son is experiencing every day at school, and there is nothing I can do to help him.

Another description to help understand what Zack endured was described to me by another person with word assimilation defect. He likened the typical classroom with its blackboard figures, pages filled with words, and verbal cacophony between teacher and students to someone trying to make sense out of watching the visual part of one television program while listening to the sound track of a different program.

But still he kept trying. It was our custom to read a bed time story to Zack before going to sleep. One evening as he sat by me on the bed, he began to follow the words as I read them aloud. As long as I was reading to him he could follow the words very well and was emboldened to say, "Now, Dad, let me read." He began with confidence, but as he continued down the sentence the words came slower and slower until finally he fell back, burying his face in his pillow, crying softly, "I just can't do it."

The eighth grade was another landmark in Zack's dark passage. This was the year he did stop trying, confirming the self-fulfilling prophecy of his many teachers. You see, it is really very simple. If you do not try, you cannot fail. And Zack had had all the failure his sanity could handle. One day, his mother picked up his shoes with intricate patterns on the rubber soles. She noticed how he had outlined the patterns and filled in the dozens of spaces with his ballpoint pen. This is what he was doing to fill the empty, meaningless hours of his classes.

But he was still struggling with this monkey on his back. An intelligent person who cannot learn. A reasoning mind locked in a dark room without doors or windows.

Zack changed in other ways as well. He no longer smiled when he awakened in the morning. It was a real struggle to roll him out of bed in

time for school. He was discovering the sweet narcosis of sleep as an escape from his tribulations.

By the ninth grade, natural sleep was not enough. We could tell from his blood shot eyes, hacking cough, and musty body odor that he also had discovered marijuana. He was drifting inexorably into the rock culture of the 1970s.

Zack had demonstrated a real talent in drawing. What a contradiction. He could not connect what he was seeing with the word association areas of his brain, but he had excellent eye-hand coordination. Accordingly, we engaged a tutor for drawing and enrolled him in a school of art. But nothing took. This was not manly enough. Athletics was out because he had inherited the incoordination of his dad. Even the playground gave him no relief from the classroom failure, as he was always the one picked last for the ball team.

By now, the testosterone was rising and he was seeking a better way to demonstrate his manhood among his peers of long hair, loud music, and mind-altering drugs.

At the end of the tenth grade, Zack requested permission to drop out of school and begin work as a front man in a service station (the days of self-serve had not yet arrived). This may come as a surprise, but there was an element of relief for us all at this moment, knowing that it would bring an end to this charade of formal education. Of course, deeper in our hearts, we cried bitter tears of sorrow and anxiety, knowing what awaited anyone without an education at the end of the twentieth century—a life on the fringes economically, culturally, and legally.

Lesson Number Two. Never underestimate the impact of failure on the psyche of a 16-year-old.

For the next one and a half years, Zack had his introduction to the world of manual labor. To be sure, it was different from the heartache and frustration of the cerebral classroom. But the service stations and body shops had their own brand of demeaning environment for the unskilled, topped off with long hours and low pay. He found the grass outside of school considerably more brown and dry than he had thought.

Then Zack did something so typically human. If he could just change the scenery, everything would fall in place. So he packed his things and joined his older brother in a move to California in the fall of 1979. His brother was going out to medical school, and Zack would go out to seek his fortune.

Our reaction to his departure again was bittersweet. We feared for what awaited him in a far and distant land. And yet, at least the dissonance of his lifestyle would be removed from our home. So we gave him a big hug, wished him well, and then went into our house to begin a vigil of prayer and hope which would continue for the next 10 years.

Very soon, Zack tasted the withering life of poverty produced by the low income of unskilled labor. His jobs drifted from service stations, to door

factory, to paper carrier, to fast food joints. He lived in slum rentals and an abandoned house. He knew what it was to be hungry and thankful for a handout baked potato at the back of a restaurant where a friend worked. But he never once asked for financial help from us. He was so desperate to prove that he could succeed.

After three to four years of wandering in the low-level job market, Zack settled into a position of courier at the same large teaching hospital where his brother was training. Although he demonstrated a degree of regularity and persistence in this post, he could never make his peace with the fact that it was at the bottom of the pile in a building filled with high achievers. There are a thousand and one ways society has of reminding the intelligent observer of his position in life. A pretty, young student nurse was attracted to Zack as he came and went on the different wards (he always was a handsome young man, if I do say so). After the initial bilateral flirtations, casual conversations followed. As soon as she learned that he was a full-time courier, she lost all interest in continuing the friendship, even on a platonic level. This made such an impression on Zack that he shared this with us in one of our many telephone visits.

So, Zack continued to search for ways to prove his worth and abilities. He became convinced of the opportunities offered in the rug-cleaning business, if only he had a vehicle. In 1983, we decided to use the money I had inherited from my mother to help him purchase an Isuzu Trooper so he could try his hand at cleaning carpets. The rug cleaning venture was not successful, but placing a vehicle in his hands certainly had unforeseen results.

One night, Zack took a friend to a 7-11 store to purchase some milk. He waited in the Isuzu while the friend went in to make the purchase. There were four young men milling around outside the entrance to the establishment. As Zack's friend passed by, eye contact was made, words were exchanged, and, since the testosterone was running high on both sides, a physical altercation developed. Zack was desperate to help his friend but realized they were no match for the four hoodlums. Using poor judgment, he started the Isuzu and ran it up on the sidewalk toward the scuffling group, hoping to disperse the assailants. At that point, the aggressors pulled out handguns and proceeded to arrest Zack and his friend. It turns out the four young hoodlums were undercover police, there to protect the community! His friend was released, but Zack was charged for assault with a deadly weapon, to wit, an automobile, and incarcerated in the county jail. The police were able to report a successful night "protecting" the community. But it certainly ruined ours when Zack's friend called to give us the news.

The next week was consumed with multiple calls to California to find a criminal lawyer, arrange for bail, and agree to a recommended plea bargain, which would bring this rueful and, we felt, unfair, episode to an end.

Zack returned to the hospital as a courier and his struggle for self-esteem. Mind-altering chemicals continued to play a role in this struggle, but not in the way our friends and professional therapists thought. We knew he was not heavily into the so-called hard drugs. We knew that drugs were not the primary problem; and so, to the surprise and consternation of some observers, we never pursued a course of drug rehabilitation. We knew our son.

The drug which began to play a large role in his life was dextroamphetamine (Dexedrine, speed). Zack obtained this easily on the street and found that it had a surprising effect compared to the other chemicals he had tried. As all college students and long-distance travelers know, this drug clears the mind in preparing for finals or night driving. Some pediatricians use it in certain minimal learning disabilities. Is it any surprise that Zack became a regular customer of the Dexedrine street vendor? Here was a chemical which cleared his mind, lifted his spirits, and even improved his reading and spelling! And so, as a pediatrician might, Zack began to treat himself.

Of course, without the supervision of a professional, this led to abuse of the drug. Withdrawal after high doses results in excessive lethargy and depression. Prolonged high doses may produce mental dysfunction. One of Zack's friends told me that Zack's life became a seesaw between highs of exhilaration and lows of severe depression. His friend said he had never before seen such severe depression.

One night, while driving the Isuzu, Zack began to hallucinate. He thought the light of an oncoming car was Christ returning to earth. He drove toward the lights, hoping to be embraced in the arms of Jesus. The resulting crash opened another chapter in his life.

Fortunately for everyone involved, each vehicle was traveling approximately 10 miles per hour, so no one was injured physically. According to the police report, when they arrived, Zack was still sitting in the Isuzu holding on to the steering wheel and praying incoherently. They pried his hands from the steering wheel, pulled him out of the car, and forced him onto the ground, where he was handcuffed and arrested.

This episode would prove to be much more serious than the previous encounter with the law. Zack was transferred from the county jail to a large regional prison. He requested a public attorney, not wanting us to spend any more money on his difficulties. This proved to be a major mistake. He could see from the start the lawyer assigned to his case was totally incompetent, disinterested in his plight, and actually hostile toward him. Can you imagine the dismal outlook of someone charged with a much more serious crime, such as murder, forced by poverty to accept such a person to prepare for his or her defense? Zack was lucky. His crime did not come under a category as serious as murder, and he had a family who would remove him from the ominous shadow of the public attorney.

Now followed another round of telephone conferences with the same criminal lawyer we had used before. We were becoming well acquainted with each other! He recommended obtaining a statement from the psychiatrist who had counseled Zack in his teenage years, confirming that he had a learning disorder. Hopefully, this might have a positive bearing on the outcome. When I called the doctor, he refused to give us a statement. Instead, he lectured me on the necessity of letting go, ending the enabling, and applying tough love. He told me of his own nephew who refused to stop taking drugs and eventually was killed in an automobile accident. Some things we just have to accept.

The wheels of justice do indeed grind slowly. For some trapped in the maze of our current court systems, it stops altogether. The days turned into weeks, and the weeks into months, as Zack went through several hearings and postponements. In the meantime, he was experiencing life in a large prison. The atmosphere is that of punishment rather than rehabilitation. Keep in mind, he had not yet been legally convicted! Physical and emotional abuse from guards is ever present. The prisoner has only five minutes to consume his plate of food at each meal. This turns each mealtime into a scene similar to pigs at a slop trough. If there is any humanity in a person before entering these places, it is dehumanized out of him as he passes through. And this is in the enlightened state of California. I am severely depressed when I think of the inhumanity in a Cummins Farm of Arkansas, where headless corpses have been unearthed, or a Texas Plantation Prison, where an inmate has had the fingers of a hand axed off by a fellow prisoner in order to be removed from the control of a sadistic guard. These institutions are a reflection of you and me, of us all, of the society in which they exist.

Finally, after one year, Zack was released on probation with a felony conviction on his record. His supervisor of couriers at the hospital (a man whose life truly exemplified the character of Christ) was willing to re-employ him. We flew out to help him try to put his life back together. We sold the Isuzu for junk. We found a small condominium within walking distance of his work and paid the rent each month until Zack could get back on his feet.

Things settled down somewhat, no doubt in part to the fact that Zack did not have an automobile to complicate his life. He was still using Dexedrine to get through the day, but fantasy also began to play a larger role in his coping with life. He had tinkered with a guitar and rock music for many years, but now he began to believe that he actually was destined to become a rock star. He savored the scenes of his fame. He assured us when he reached the top he would build a beautiful home for his mom and me in Beverly Hills. He practiced with several groups, and even appeared in a few local "gigs," as they call the programs.

But Zack was just setting himself up to taste failure one more time. You see, he had inherited his dad's harmony genes as well, which was bad news

for his dreams of stardom in the musical world. When the cold, hard fact of dissonant chords finally broke through his fantasies, it was the last straw. After 10 years of seeking his fortune in California, we received his call. He said, "Dad, I give up. I can't make it. Will you come and get me?"

The advice of the psychiatrist kept racing through our heads. As enablers, were we actually contributing to his dilemma? Would bringing him into our home really solve the problem? The next day, I sought the counsel of another psychiatrist, a personal friend whom I knew on our hospital medical staff and in whom I had much confidence. I explained to him the history and situation. His response was, "This story most likely will end tragically. You must accept it, and let him sink or swim on his own." In other words, stop enabling. It seems we had heard that somewhere before.

And so—we packed our bags, again, and flew out to help him move back home.

When we walked into his condominium, we were not prepared for the scene. In his world of fantasy, he had created a recording studio and sound system throughout the residence. There were wires everywhere. The drawers were filled with well-organized fuses and transistors. The walls were covered with foam material to prevent the loud rock music from disturbing the neighbors. It took his mother and me three days to dismantle the material and make the residence acceptable to the landlord.

All during this time, Zack was in a state of withdrawal from Dexedrine, lying on the floor asleep. We stepped over his body coming and going as we carried things out to the rental car or the dumpster. In one of his wakeful moments, we were driving to a local music store to sell the valuable sound system, a very painful experience for him. He said, "Dad, do you know what verbal abuse is?" I replied that I understood what he meant, but I was sure I had not had the experiences he had had with such authority figures as police, prison guards, employers, supervisors—and teachers. He said, "I am so confused. I have positive feelings toward you for the help you have given me, and yet I have such anger toward you in all of this." I said, "I know, son. I understand. To you, I am one of the authority figures."

Finally, we severed all of his ties with California and, at the age of 28 years, Zack returned with us to his home in Maryland, and a very uncertain future for us all.

Lesson Number Three. Never underestimate the impact of failure on the psyche of an adult.

We found a clinic specializing in training and finding employment for young people unable to function successfully in the standard educational setting. During the evaluation interview, Zack sat tensely with his toes turned inward. The psychologist remarked that it was obvious his self-esteem was in the cellar. The clinic felt it had something to offer and agreed to enroll him immediately.

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All three of us arose the next morning with hope in the air. His mother prepared a sack lunch and I dropped Zack off at the clinic at 8 A.M. At 11 A.M., I received a call from Mom with distress in her voice. She said Zack had walked out of the clinic and was somewhere on Wisconsin Avenue. She was preparing to find him and bring him home. I was stunned. My mind filled with doubt and despair. Were the psychiatrists right? Were all of our efforts just prolonging the misery, set-ups for false hopes followed by continued failures? For the first time, I also experienced another emotion for my son—anger. Why could not he just give this clinic a try, just show up? That is all we were asking.

When I arrived home that evening, all of these emotions were very visible in my voice and body language. Zack told us they had placed him in a group of young, troubled teenagers. Their first assignment was to draw a picture and then explain its meaning to the group. The whole scene came crashing down on him as confirming the opinion that he really was abnormal. He could not handle the thought that he was one of these silly, babbling teenagers. So he walked out.

It was not long before our conversation degenerated into a useless verbal battle. I was the authority figure once again and he was the victim, a scenario with which he was all too familiar. Zack challenged me to a physical settlement in the backyard. At this point, his mother walked over, enveloped him in her arms, and said, "No one knows all of the abuse you have had through the years. We understand, and we love you very much." We all had a good cry, and then made a stab at eating our supper. I do not know how a family handles their crises without a mother's love.

While in California, Zack had obtained a sixth-grade English workbook which he had studied on his own, without much success. He just happened to have brought this back with him to Maryland. After looking it over, we all agreed that this might be a good springboard for some home schooling in place of a structured program like the clinic. Zack would be given an assignment for the day. Each evening, I would go over his work with him and write a grade in red at the top of the page. I always gave some form of A such as A+, A, or, if he missed an answer, A-, which he actually began to earn after a few days of one-on-one guidance and encouragement. If the work was perfect, he received an A+, with much hoopla and celebration. He enjoyed these exercises and looked forward to each day's assignment. These became happy times over a 3-month period.

When we completed the workbook, Zack felt so encouraged that he bought a set of GED books and ordered material from the State Department of Education to obtain his high school degree. This material contained sample tests similar to those given at the time of the GED examination. A few days later, Mom met me at the door as I arrived home from the hospital. She said, "There is a problem. Zack is in the garage. He attempted

the sample essay test and did not do very well with the spelling and sentence structure." I walked out to the garage and found this grown man pacing in a circle like a caged tiger. When he saw me, he said, "Dad, it's no use. It's just like forcing myself to be a rock star. I cannot learn to read and write any more than I can play a guitar. I might as well face it. I've got to find something I can do without it." To my dismay, I realized that, once more, we had set him up for failure. How much more could this man take?

We went into the house, sat down, and began to discuss his options. His mother had noticed an ad for a truck driver's school in Baltimore. He liked that idea, and we agreed to pay the tuition and provide the transportation so he could enroll the next day. That evening, we had another one of those quiet, flavorless suppers. Our hearts were heavy with thoughts of a hard, lonely life on the interstates of America.

Then the telephone rang. There is something about a ringing telephone that is intriguing to the imagination. The challenge of the unknown. You really do not know for sure how your life will change when you answer that ring. It may be, and usually is, something as mundane as a confirmation of your next dental appointment. But it could be, as it has been before, the tragedy of a death in the family. Or even, as it has never been before, that you have won the million-dollar jackpot!

The voice on the other end asked for Zack. He explained that he was a friend of a friend who told him Zack might be interested in a job. There was an opening as an assistant lineman in the communication company where the caller worked. Would he be interested? Would he! Zack asked, "When do I start?" Well, first he has to be interviewed. (Dear God, please do not let this be another set-up for failure.) The clothing required on the job was blue cotton shirt with collar and clean blue jeans. He should report to the office for the interview at 7 A.M.

We went over to Sears that night and purchased the shirt and pants. Zack arose at 5:30 A.M. the next morning without any urging. He was on his way before sun-up in our old pickup truck, a holdover from our daughter's horse days. He returned in 2 hours and told his mother he had been hired to begin work the following Monday. There was a cautious, subdued celebration that evening.

From the beginning, Zack arose at 5 A.M. and was leaving our driveway at 6 every day with no help from us. One day, I was up as he was going to the truck. I watched him walk across the driveway and saw that he had a smile on his face—and this is when going to work! What is going on here?

Of course, as parents, our curiosity about his work and activities had risen to a fever pitch. We peppered Zack with questions at the supper table. He created a rule which became a family joke. He said we were limited to three questions per day. When we asked a question at the beginning of supper, he would say, "That's number one!" and we would all have a good laugh.

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ve had another one of those
vy with thoughts of a hard,

g about a ringing telephone
llenge of the unknown. You
change when you answer that
undane as a confirmation of
e, as it has been before, the
t has never been before, that

He explained that he was a
interested in a job. There was
munication company where
ould he! Zack asked, "When
(Dear God, please do not let
required on the job was blue
He should report to the office

used the shirt and pants. Zack
ny urging. He was on his way
ver from our daughter's horse
er he had been hired to begin
ous, subdued celebration that

d was leaving our driveway at
was up as he was going to the
y and saw that he had a smile
What is going on here?

work and activities had risen
tions at the supper table. He
said we were limited to three
at the beginning of supper, he
ld all have a good laugh.

We learned that the work consisted of installing telephone, computer, and fiberglass lines in intricate patterns from elaborate, complicated control boards to telephones and computers throughout large office buildings. The lines had to be concealed to prevent disruption of the interior decoration and, at the same time, not disrupt the basic structure of the building. One time, the decision was made to use an old, tall, abandoned chimney as a conduit for the cables. Zack took the cables and "walked" down the long chimney by bracing his feet on one side and his back on the other. This is called commitment to your work! It seemed that wiring control boards and buildings came natural to him. Remember the condominium converted to a recording studio in California? This time, he was paid a salary to do it, plus gaining a sense of accomplishment.

And what does a little success do for a person? I'll tell you what it does. In 6 months, he was named employee of the month. At the year-end Christmas dinner, he was awarded the Golden Reel as the employee of the year. A few days later, Zack was called into the office of the CEO. The chief told him he was being promoted to foreman, the first time in the history of the company this had happened to an employee with only one year's experience.

And the rest, as they say, is history. Zack has been in charge of jobs in Alaska, Seattle, Hawaii, New York, and Little Rock, resulting in letters of commendation from these places back to the home office. His latest assignment was the huge headquarters of Nortel Corporation in a suburb of Washington, DC. He was responsible for the team that installed 53 miles of communication lines in that facility.

Zack has established solid credit, first with a bank account, then a credit card, then an automobile purchased with a loan. He has married a wonderful lady, whom he met while installing lines to her office. Together, they are buying a nice home with a swimming pool in the backyard (his pride and joy—he is still a kid at heart).

This year, they presented us with a beautiful baby girl. When the CEO of his company called to see how things were going shortly after her birth, Zack's wife told him Zack was making a very good father. The chief replied, "Well, Zack is cut out of a different piece of cloth from the rest of my workers. If he is just half as good at being a parent as he is at his job, he will be a great dad!"

Lesson Number Four. Never underestimate the impact of success on the psyche of anyone, regardless of their age.

And, you know, Zack still cannot read or spell. Well, not fluently. It just isn't in the genes. But does that, somehow, make him not a whole person? He can read the technical instructions of his job with their basic sentence structure. And he can write out reports for his company. And, you know what? The company doesn't make red marks over his misspelled words.

They know what he is saying, and they know they can depend on it. And that, my friend, makes all the difference.

Let me ask you, which teacher was most successful; the one who taught Zack, or the professor who taught the brilliant Michael Milken, the famous convicted thief of Wall Street? You see, you are dealing with more than numbers and letters each day in your classroom.

There are 6 billion people in the world today, and no two are exactly alike in mind or body. There is no common formula for handling the problem student in your classroom. But I can tell you this, each and every one of the six billion on this planet, including those problem students in your classroom, have a common need, that for success and approval.

Pastor Mel Rees had taught in a small church school in his early years. One day, a man called the church office to make an appointment with him, explaining that he had been one of his students years ago. Pastor Rees said, "Of course, I remember you. Please come over. I will be happy to see you again."

When the man arrived, they exchanged warm greetings. After taking a seat in the office, the visitor said, "Pastor, I have been carrying the burden of a guilty conscience for a long time. I want to get rid of it."

"Years ago, you gave our class a final examination in mathematics." "Yes," the Pastor replied. "I remember that time." The former student then said, "Well, I want to tell you that I cheated on that examination, and I am sorry."

There was a pause, then the pastor said, "I know you did."

The man looked up with surprise and exclaimed, "You did!?"

The pastor explained, "Yes, but I knew you were not a cheater."²

The classes you have attended these past two weeks are designed to give you additional tools for affirming to the learning-challenged student that they are not sediment at the bottom of the class and for helping them find this success and approval they need so desperately.

And now you know why there is a Christine Greenhaw Mashburn Institute.

Thank you,

J. D. Mashburn, M.D.

²Sermon, WGTS Radio Station, Takoma Park, Maryland, circa 1988.