

Category: Life's a Stage/Building Self-Confidence

Genre: Picture Books

Oasis Tutor: Lynn M

Student/Grade: Millie/ first grade

Summary: Lynn loves making up and telling stories to children. She honed her skills with her own children and grandchildren, the youngest of whom is now 11. She was a natural fit for working with first graders. One of them, Millie, stands out for Lynn. Millie needed help with many reading skills and her teacher thought she would benefit from a one-on-one relationship with an Oasis tutor. But Millie also had loving parents who were concerned about Millie being singled out for extra help and resisted the tutoring idea. Millie herself was also reticent to work with a tutor. Read Lynn's story to find out how she not only won Millie over, but Millie's parents as well. Spoiler alert: it was a book and a wonderfully creative idea that made all the difference.

The Story: When Lynn met Millie, she had already heard that Millie need help with phonics and sight vocabulary skills. Millie's parents sounded well-intentioned regarding their aspirations for their daughter. But they wanted her to do everything perfectly which is impossible when you are 6 and just learning. As a result, Millie was afraid that she would do or say something wrong. In other words, she lacked self-confidence.

When the teacher asked permission for Millie to work with Lynn, the parents refused. They apparently didn't want their only daughter singled out and possibly made fun of by the other children. When Lynn found out, she asked if she might meet the parents. The teacher agreed, as did the parents.

Millie's mother is native American and her father is Anglo. Lynn's assessment of the couple was that they were reserved people fearful of subjecting their daughter to teasing by the other children. Lynn explained to them that she had one primary purpose: to have fun with Millie and help her to learn to love to read. It was not to be a graded experience. Apparently, Lynn did an excellent job of selling herself and the low-key Oasis approach, undoubtedly speaking from the heart about reading to her own kids. Millie's parents agreed to the tutoring arrangement.

Millie, it turned out, wanted to be the best at what she was doing and apparently had an unrealistic view, when she first met with Lynn, of her reading abilities. While Millie thought she could read at a fifth grade level, Lynn quickly assessed that she was having difficulty with first grade materials. Throughout the Fall, Lynn had a hard time getting Millie to trust her or even talk to her.

To make matters more difficult, Lynn and Millie met at a table in the hallway right outside Millie's classroom. Her classmates, on their way to the restroom or water fountain, would survey the tutoring sessions as they moseyed by. Lynn decided, almost immediately, to make all the onlookers from Millie's classroom envious of the things that she and Millie were doing. When a student would invariably ask what they were doing, Lynn would say they were having

lots of fun and that she was so sorry the onlookers were not able to join them in all their activities.

Lynn had made more progress with Millie than she realized. After the Winter break, Millie greeted her tutor with great enthusiasm, in front of her classmates, giving Lynn a big hug. Millie was even excited about “going out in the hall.”

Lynn had found the Elephant and Piggie series, a wonderful set of picture books by author/illustrator Mo Willems. The illustrations are endearing; the text bubbles are color-coded to the speaker; the vocabulary is limited; the story abounds with children’s humor. Millie really loved the books in this series and, during their time together, they read many of them.



Toward the end of the school year, Lynn asked Millie if she would like to read a book to her classmates. Millie was excited by the prospect, but only if Lynn was there with her. Millie decided she wanted to read her favorite Piggie book, *There Is a Bird on Your Head*. The book, a dialog between the two characters, lent itself to a staged reading, so to speak. There are certainly other ways to tell this story as well. The duo practiced several times, which gave Millie a chance to read both characters. But Millie decided she wanted to perform as Piggie, and Lynn agreed to read Gerald, the Elephant.

Lynn went to Michael’s and found some props: a little bird’s nest, some eggs and even some little birds. The “play” was a huge success, even when the props accidentally fell off of Lynn’s head. They just picked things up and continued on, like real troupers. The children laughed in all the right places. Millie read her lines with assurance and pride.

The class loudly applauded at the end. Millie asked to take the props home. Lynn agreed on the condition that Millie and her mother perform the book for Millie's dad. Millie's parents were so impressed that they sent a note of appreciation to the teacher who relayed the parents' gratitude to Lynn. The self-confidence that Millie had gained from the experience was beyond amazing.

Lynn's Discoveries:

- "No" doesn't always mean "no." Reaching out to reluctant parents and being proactive with regard to the intent and benefit of the Oasis tutoring program helps one more child to succeed.
- It's possible to make a sub-optimal tutoring venue the most envious and enjoyable spot in the entire school.
- Never underestimate the attachments that students make with their tutor. Giving a student your undivided attention for an hour a week has a bigger impact than you realize. It also impacts family members as well as the teacher.
- You can get a lot of mileage out of a successful, book, lesson or experience that can be repeated with subsequent students over the years.
- If you're going to choose an Elephant and Piggie book to reenact, it works best if the child is the character who can get visual clues from the text that will help make their reading more fluent. Also, rehearse your parts at least once before going onstage so there won't be any major gaffs.
- Six year olds are very forgiving.

About Lynn:

Lynn is a lover of stories. She told them to her own three children when they were young and the tradition continued with her four grandchildren. Lynn was a stay-at-home mom, who was involved with the PTA, among other things. She clearly took an active role in her children's schooling and their lives. For four years, Lynn has tutored first graders at Bandelier Elementary, the same school her own children attended. Lynn has a creative streak and a knack for turning simple ideas into fun-loving, meaningful, and educational happenings.

Other Recommended Books or Materials:

Books:

- There are 25 books in Mo Willems' *Elephant and Piggie series*. Titles include: *I Broke My Trunk, Should I Share My Ice Cream, and Waiting Is Not Easy*. Lynn likes these books because they are very appealing to children—and adults too.
- Don Freeman's *Cordoroy* and *A Pocket for Cordoroy*. There are a few others in this classic series about a beloved stuffed bear that were written by other authors, but based on Freeman's character.

- *The Little Engine that Could* by Watty Piper This book was first published in 1930. Some things simply never go out of style.
- *Danny and the Dinosaur* by Syd Hoff was published in 1958 and still has incredible appeal. Also part of a series starring Danny's large, but gentle, friend. Great books for young dinosaur lovers.

Materials:

Rhyming word families: Lynn has an inventive use for the Oasis Journal we use with our kids. She draws, or has the student draw, a house for each rhyming word family such as the IN family and the AT family. The child creates the words that end in IN or AT and writes them on the corresponding page, along with the house. Later on, after doing numerous word families, Lynn gets the student to make up a sentence using many of the words.

This idea can also be done with cards resulting in a card game in which players make sentences using the cards each was dealt.