



Lori Gard

Teacher, Blogger, Contributor to Power of Moms Website, Contributor to Yummy Mummy Club

What Students Remember Most About Teachers

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Dear Young Teacher Down the Hall,

I saw you as you rushed passed me in the lunch room. *Urgent*. In a hurry to catch a bite before the final bell would ring calling all the students back inside. I noticed that your eyes showed tension. There were faint creases in your forehead. And I asked you how your day was going and you sighed.

"Oh, fine," you replied.

But I knew it was anything but fine. I noticed that the stress was getting to you. I could tell that the pressure was rising. And I looked at you and made an intentional decision to stop you right then and there. To ask you how things were *really* going. Was it that I saw in you a glimpse of myself that made me take the moment?

You told me how busy you were, how much there was to **do**. How little time there was to get it all done. I listened. And then I told you this:

I told you to remember that at the end of the day, it's not about the lesson plan. It's not about the fancy stuff we teachers make -- the crafts we do, the stories we read, the papers we laminate. No, that's not really it. That's not what matters most.

And as I looked at you there wearing all that worry under all that strain, I said it's about *being there for your kids*. Because at the end of the day, most students won't remember what amazing lesson plans you've created. They won't remember how organized your bulletin boards are. How straight and neat are the desk rows.

No, they'll not remember that amazing decor you've designed.

But they will remember **you**.

Your kindness. Your empathy. Your care and concern. They'll remember that you took the time to listen. That you stopped to ask them how they were. *How they really were*. They'll remember the personal stories you tell about your life: your home, your

pets, your kids. They'll remember your laugh. They'll remember that you sat and talked with them while they ate their lunch.

Because at the end of the day, what really matters is YOU. What matters to those kids that sit before you in those little chairs, legs pressed up tight under tables oft too small- what matters to them is you.

You are that difference in their lives.

And when I looked at you then with tears in your eyes, emotions rising to the surface and I told you gently to stop trying so hard- I also reminded you that your own expectations were partly where the stress stemmed. For we who truly care are often far harder on ourselves than our students are willing to be. Because we who truly care are often our own worst enemy. We mentally beat ourselves up for trivial failures. We tell ourselves we're not enough. We compare ourselves to others. We work ourselves to the bone in the hopes of achieving the perfect lesson plan. The most dynamic activities. The most engaging lecture. The brightest, fanciest furnishings.

Because we want our students to think we're the very best at what we do and we believe that this status of excellence is achieved merely by doing. But we forget- and often.

Excellence is more readily attained by *being*.

Being available.

Being kind.

Being compassionate.

Being transparent.

Being real.

Being thoughtful.

Being ourselves.

And of all the students I know who have lauded teachers with the laurels of the highest acclaim, those students have said of those teachers that they **cared**.

You see, kids can see through to the truth of the matter. And while the flashy stuff can entertain them for a while, it's the steady *constance of empathy* that keeps them connected to us. It's the *relationships we build* with them. It's the *time we invest*. It's all *the little ways we stop and show concern*. It's *the love we share* with them: of learning. Of life. And most importantly, of people.

And while we continually strive for excellence in our profession as these days of fiscal restraint and heavy top-down demands keep coming at us- relentless and quick. We need to stay the course. For ourselves and for our students. Because it's the human touch that really matters.

It's you, their teacher, that really matters.

So go back to your class and really take a look. See past the behaviors, the issues and the concerns, pressing as they might be. Look beyond the stack of papers on your desk, the line of emails in your queue. Look further than the classrooms of seasoned teachers

down the hall. Look. And you will see that it's there- right inside you. The ability to make an impact. The chance of a lifetime to make a difference in a child's life. And you can do this now.

Right where you are, just as you are.

Because all you are right now is all you ever need to be for them today. And who you are tomorrow will depend *much* on who and what you decide to be today.

It's in you. I know it is.

Fondly,

That Other Teacher Down the Hall