

James “A Success Story with RSVP “ASAP”

When I first met James, a second grade student, I couldn't help but notice his aversion to homework. It caused him pain and frustration; it took away precious time when he could play; it made him feel stupid and killed any self-confidence he possessed. Why would he want to do it?

James tested my patience when I helped him with his homework. He was the proverbial tortoise in the homework race, plodding, woefully along, stalling in his answers, extending the time to full completion to well over an hour. Although James worked slowly, he could change character in a flash, becoming the quick-footed hare, running away from the table and having to be called back again and again. His tortoise-hare personality helped him cope with his aversion, and his homework was completed, but never in a short period of time. On some occasions, James would still be working when one of his parents arrived to pick him up.

Focus was not his strength. Rather, he was strong at distracting me from staying on task. He had many tricks up his sleeve. Often, in the middle of a worksheet, sometimes when I was in mid-sentence, he would suddenly interject, “Can I have a break now?” My goal was simply to complete the task, so I would answer, “When we finish this.” One other volunteer mentioned how often he dropped his pencil in the course of doing homework. Aha! Another distraction with time spent picking up the pencil and beginning again. And, of course, no one can deny a child from using the restroom. James used that trick, too, when he didn't want to go on. His favorite distraction centered on eating extra snacks. “I can work better if I have a little more to eat.”

The saddest part of working with James was observing his frustration: seeing his tears roll down his cheeks and watching his shoulders tremble. In the beginning he didn't believe he had the skills. He felt he couldn't complete the assignment. He had to be taught that he was bright, that he had skills, that he could complete anything the teacher gave him. Teaching him to believe in himself took most of the school year. It came in strong, positive, reinforcing choruses from every volunteer who worked with him. “Way to go, James! Wow! You did that right! How smart you are, James!

Before school year ended James gained self-confidence. He offered his homework immediately after snacks and seemed ready and willing to tackle what the teacher gave him. He stopped running away. Even though he still asked for a break, he and I never quite got around to taking one. He persevered. He believed in himself and his skills. His grades improved.

On our last day together before summer vacation, we met at his school playground. His teacher, Mrs. Pettini, walked out to talk to the volunteers. She thanked us all for making such a wonderful effort in helping James with his work. “There wasn't a day that James did not hand me his homework when he entered the classroom.” She congratulated us on our success.

I believe James deserves all the credit.

By Diana Mendel, RSVP ASAP Co-Chairperson

Upon exiting the ASAP Awards Ceremony, I requested from Diana a story about a student that would have excelled this year, she immediately said she would submit a story about James. I was then passing James's father also at that time and asked if I could get his point of view. He offered to assist. He stated, "James started the program in 2009. When entering the program he was struggling with doing class work on time as well as homework. I got him into the afterschool program and while in school Mrs. Ferrell helped him with the reading program. He has showed a lot of improvement and started completing his homework. He also showed an improvement in grades. When he started school his first report card showed 2 C's and 2 D's. His last report ending the school year his grades improved to 1 A, 1B and 2 C's. He really likes to go to the ASAP program, likes the activities. We had to sometimes use the ASAP as a correction tool as positive initiative. When he wasn't behaving, we kept him home on Fridays, he was not allowed to go the ASAP. At end of year, he always completed his home work; the RSVP volunteers really helped him. James did have a lot of homework; he would also have classroom work he didn't get completed in school. The program also helped James's mother with not having to struggle with children in getting homework done and having to do her public job as well."

Parental Follow Up by Angela Kocher, Director RSVP