

Danny

by Sylvia Keepers

I'm a private reading tutor, so my job is to teach students to read and write. Simple. Well-defined. It doesn't sound as if there would be a lot of leeway there. But what if you had to help a child learn to act like a human being before you could teach him to read? That would be Danny.

Danny was a strikingly handsome boy. He was eight years old when I met him, and he had big, dark eyes with long lashes, and the beginnings of the facial structure that made his parents knock-outs. But his good looks seemed like a cruel promise, when taken in the light of his behavior.

Before I even met Danny, his parents made sure I understood the difficulty I would experience working with him. He had been kicked out of every pre-school they had ever enrolled him in: four or five in total. That was because he would never sit in any one place for more than a minute or two, screamed repeatedly at the top of his lungs (not in anger; that was just how he played), seemed not to hear directions at all, and avoided looking at people. Now he was in second grade at a small private school. I wondered how the teachers managed to cope with him in the classroom. And then there were his parents. How were they even surviving? Danny was an only child. His mother and father told me outright that they were afraid to have another child and that in any case, there was no energy left over to care for one. Danny took 100% of their attention and then some.

I was told that he read only a few words because no one could even get him to sit still long enough to look at a book. Also, unlike most kids with serious problems, no one seemed to have a diagnosis. Or rather, there were half a dozen not very convincing ideas as to what was wrong.

Our first lesson was a blur. Probably for Danny as well as me. He spun around at dizzying speed in my swivel office chair, ran up into my bedroom and grabbed objects off my dresser. I teach in an office in the basement of my home, and the upstairs is off limits to kids. But the closed doors and the rice paper and wood screen that say "stop!" to most kids were no barrier to Danny. So I chased after him and managed to get him back into the tutoring room. He had quit spinning by then, but sat with his back to me.

Good lord! How was I ever going to teach the boy anything? I addressed an inward plea to the saint of impossible educational causes, Annie Sullivan. Miss Sullivan was the woman who taught the blind and deaf girl, Helen Keller, to "hear" through her hands using sign language and to speak. Sullivan also taught Keller to read Braille; but most striking of all, it seemed to me, was how Sullivan was able to guide (or in some cases, wrestle) her pupil back into the land of humans. The child had been having spectacular and frequent temper tantrums, so

this took some doing. You can understand why I might invoke Helen Keller's tutor.

The next two or three sessions with Danny weren't much better than the first one. The only difference was that I stood between him and the door so he couldn't run out. Then I happened to hear an interview on NPR with Temple Grandin. Grandin, as you no doubt know, has autism herself but has been able to manage or overcome her condition so that she is high functioning in her daily life and has become an advocate for others with autism and Asperger's. She is also an animal rights activist, and to hear her explain it, the two are not unrelated. I did not hear the entire interview, but I heard enough to get me started thinking.

Surprisingly, I wasn't sensing anger or even rebellion from Danny. I didn't even think he was what could be called neurotic. There was something else going on. Combining my hunches with a process of elimination, I began to wonder if he might have Asperger's.

In the interview, Temple said that when she was a child she found lights and noises, in fact all kinds of sensory stimulation, to be overwhelming. Then someone at the school she attended tried having her wear a lead vest to see if the weight might calm her down. Temple reported that wearing the vest was indeed calming and gave her the first taste of life that was tuned down enough to be tolerable.

Still, I wondered, why would a child like Danny run and scream if he was feeling overstimulated? Wouldn't he just want to sit in a quiet room in the dark instead? In other words, why was he adding to the chaos in his own life? Then I remembered something similar from twenty years earlier when my husband ran a play therapy group for grade school kids. I used to assist him, and I remembered one boy, about eleven years old, who spent most of the therapy session shrieking. After a time or two of this, my husband and the boy talked privately, and my husband learned that the boy hated the noise that the other children were making in the therapy session, and that this child was screaming to try to drown out noise that was disturbing him. My husband arranged for some quiet time in the play therapy session, and the boy stopped screaming. Maybe Danny was similarly trying to fight fire with fire.

A lead vest was not exactly a household item. But wait! There was something similar I could try. Next lesson, I showed Danny a picture book and asked him to tell me about it. I wanted him to turn the pages and tell me the story the pictures told. It was a lovely book about two children and their experiences in a rainstorm, before, during and after. Danny wouldn't or couldn't even look at it.

All right, time for my plan.

"Come on, Danny, let's go in the other room."

He smiled, looking in my general direction. Not at me, of course. This was good, he was probably thinking. I didn't usually let him out of the tutoring room.

The other room is a kind of waiting room for my office, with a couch and a TV set. We sat down on an old green fabric sofa, and I tried handing him the book once more. His hands fell away limp and his eyes slid off to one side.

I explained what I was going to do, then proceeded to pack him into a corner of the couch using the couch pillows. I kept an eye out for distress, but he looked fine, so I continued. When I finished, all that could be seen was Danny's head. His arms, legs and body were all covered with green couch pillows. Then, to make sure the pillows stayed in place, I sat right up next to him and leaned in. All right. We were ready for the next step.

"Danny," I said. "Take a look at this book." I opened it and held it a foot from his face. "What do you see?"

"A boy and a girl."

"What are they doing?"

"They're playing."

I turned the page. "Now what's happening?"

"It's starting to rain."

Bingo. Not that he'd had much of a choice. No, I take that back. The kid always has a choice. As my husband used to say, "Ultimately, the child holds the last card. He's the one with the veto power. If he wants to, he can scuttle any plan."

I kept turning pages and Danny kept "reading" me the pictures. He looked interested in what we were doing. I had to try hard not to shout in triumph. Or laugh at the sight of Danny's head emerging from the pillows as if he were the stuffing in a couch taco.

When we were done with the book, I unpacked him and said, "Good job!" He smiled, I believe, at my throat.

I worked with Danny for more than three years. Eventually he learned to read at grade level, or close to it. That success made me happy for him, of course, but before we reached that benchmark, there were many other small but remarkable successes that were, if anything, even greater joys. I count among those the times he first looked me in the face, really saw print on the page, sat still in a chair, and carried on a conversation. Learning to read, the main goal, never would have been attained without these small, very human first steps.