

## The Word That Made a Difference

*How just one word of praise helped a shy student break through a mental block.*

By Gary Smalley and John Trent

Sixth grade hadn't been a banner year for Eric. Never very confident in school, he had a particular dread of mathematics. "A mental block," one of the school's counselors had told him. Then, as if a mental math block wasn't enough for an eleven-year-old kid to deal with, he came down with measles in the fall and had to stay out of school for two weeks. By the time he got back, his classmates were multiplying fractions. Eric was still trying to figure out what you got when you put a half pie with three-quarters of a pie...besides a lot of pie.

Eric's teacher, Mrs. Gunther-loud, overweight, and terrifying-was unsympathetic. For the rest of the year she hounded him with ceaseless makeup assignments. When his mental block prevented his progress in fractions, she would thunder at him in front of the class, "I don't care for your excuses! You'd better straighten up!"

The mental block, once the size of a backyard fence, now loomed like the Great Wall of China. Eric despaired of ever catching up, and even fell behind in subjects he'd been good at.

Then came the remarkable moment.

It happened in the middle of Mrs. Warwick's ninth grade English class. To this day, some twenty-five years later, Eric still lights up as he recalls the Moment.

The fifth period class had been yawning through Mrs. Warwick's attempts to spark discussion about a Mark Twain story. At some point in the lecture, something clicked in Eric's mind. It was probably crazy, but it suddenly seemed like he understood something Twain had been driving at-something a little below the surface. Despite himself, Eric raised his hand and ventured an observation.

That led to the moment when Mrs. Warwick looked straight into Eric's eyes, beamed with pleasure, and said, "Why, Eric...that was very perceptive of you!" *Perceptive. Perceptive? Perceptive!*

The word echoed in Eric's thoughts for the rest of the day-and then for the rest of his life. Perceptive? Me? Well, yeah. I guess that WAS perceptive. Maybe I AM perceptive.

One word, one little positive word dropped at the right moment somehow tipped the balance in a teenager's view of himself-and possibly changed the course of his life, even though he still can't multiply fractions.

Eric went on to pursue a career in journalism and eventually became a book editor, working successfully with some of the top authors in America.

Many teachers are well aware how praise motivates children. One teacher said she praised each student in her third grade class every day, without exception. Her students were the most motivated, encouraged, and enthusiastic in the school. I remember what happened when my high school geometry teacher began to affirm me regularly. Within six weeks my D average climbed to an A.

It's wonderful when a teacher has the opportunity to inject a word of affirmation into a child's life. It's even better when that opportunity is seized. But perhaps the greatest honor of any teacher is seeing a child's eyes light up when they discover something new about themselves and about the world around them. It's what kindles their pride in being called "teacher."