

Playground Perspective

Each May, Rivendell Parents sign up to commit volunteer hours to the school the following year during "Core Hours." Core Hour responsibilities include serving on the playground, in the lunchroom, in the office and around the school as an adult presence during morning drop-off. The following article urges Rivendell parents to consider using their volunteer hours as a Lunch or Recess volunteer in service to the children and their teachers. Parents who serve in these roles are often surprised by what they see: both great moments of character, caring, and joy, and sometimes a few not-so-great moments. Each day is a new adventure for these parents, and an opportunity to encourage, remind, train in righteousness, and delight in Rivendell's masses. Overseeing lunch and recess is also an opportunity to pray for our children, as parents take time to remember that God is always at work and that it is our privilege to be partners in God's redemptive work.

"That's a special place, Rivendell," my friend and former Rivendell parent commented for a *second* time in our conversation. Although it has been nearly 10 years since he did parent involvement hours at Rivendell he repeats this phrase every time we talk (and we talk almost every month).

He went on to recount a story we have re-told several times with each other over the years about the day he and I observed a young Rivendellian who was having a rough day. We were standing in Hobbit Hollow after the morning charge had been shouted by all assembled: "This is the day that the Lord has made!" As the children headed to class, we spent a few minutes catching up with each other. It was then that *she* rushed grumpily by. She was in a hurry to catch up to her classmates and get upstairs and seemed a little bit frazzled because she had been dropped off for school a few minutes after 9. A quick "Good Morning" from me accomplished little more than to cause her to briefly lift her chin and force a smile. Her backpack looked uncomfortable, her uniform appeared to have been thrown on speedily, and I thought I noticed a bit of her breakfast that had spilled on her jumper. While she politely and perfunctorily acknowledged my greeting, it was evident that she would have preferred not to have been greeted at all.

Later that morning she made an "I need a little bit of attention and love" trip to the office for a band-aid. By lunchtime when she dragged herself across Hobbit Hollow to a vacant table, things appeared to be going even further south. I often monitor the lunchroom, and I passed by her unnoticed and quietly inquired about what was wrong. She looked up, not teary eyed, but simply sad. Her lunch wasn't what she had hoped for, her friends seemed to pay not enough attention to her, and to make matters worse, she was feeling misunderstood from an earlier conversation during which she was perceived as being bossy. I listened and gave a brief hug as I noticed my friend from morning drop-off had returned to Hobbit Hollow to serve as the Lunch and Recess volunteer that day. A few minutes later, we monitored the lunchroom together but our attention was focused almost exclusively on her. We ached and hoped things might improve. "If only we can get her through lunch and help her escape to the playground at recess!" he noted. He gave a valiant effort to gently approach her to check in just as lunch was winding down. But that seemed to only make the situation worse. She simply kept sinking into a self-imposed prison of solitude.

As the students were called to line up for recess, she slunk to the back of the line, hung her head, and silently waited for the death march to the playground. Our hearts broke for her.

Once we were out on the playground we maintained vigilance, we encouraged others to engage her, and we prayed. But whatever we tried, we couldn't fix things for her. Even our hope that time outside in the sunlight and fresh air might brighten her spirit were crushed as she headed off to sit on a bench alone.

All around her the other kids were running, yelling, and playing games. Several times her sweet friends tried to help with an, "Are you OK?" But she wouldn't budge. She sat alone, immersed in a cloud of gloom. After a few minutes of sitting companionless, a sweet little brother of a Rivendell student (who had accompanied his mom to volunteer with us at recess) sidled over and stood in front of her. Naively, he asked what was wrong and received the same "Nothing" as an answer. He persisted and asked if she'd like to play, and she harrumphed "No!" Undeterred, he shuffled his little body mightily up onto the bench next to her. Talking hadn't worked with her, so he seemed to be content to sit with her and wait things out. A few minutes passed before she lifted her chin off her chest and asked what he was doing. Her little friend smiled, and she smiled back, then sat and listened and listened, and listened as she unloaded her burdens. By the end of recess, we adults were amazed by the transformation that had taken place before our eyes. The two children laughed and walked together back toward the school as my friend and I held back tears of joy and gratitude.

Miracles happen on our playground daily. They happen when a child demonstrates kindness. They happen when children figure out how to play and win a game with grace or lose without getting bent out of shape. Sometimes miracles happen because imaginations are inspired and God's created beauty is discovered. And sometimes the quiet, the space, the colors, the joy, and the ever-present work of the Holy Spirit converge to orchestrate a subtle but surprising miracle. Many of these miracles we may never actually see. This day, however, we witnessed the life-transformation that can take place by showing up, sitting down, and listening.

So, Rivendell Parents, I encourage you to consider signing up for "miracle duty" next year. When parents show up to prayerfully engage with our children, to love them with joy, intentionality, compassion and patient, repetitious reminders, God uses this fertile soil to do His miraculous redeeming work. Please commit to joining us in this particular way as we seek to follow through on our Distinctive that each child Be Known. Plan to bring your unique gifts and your unique story to the lunchroom and the playground. You may discover that God needs you to serve in these sacred places to bring your unique gifts and perspectives to our children. And you may also discover that serving at lunch or recess is an opportunity for God to provide a few unexpected moments of grace through which our young ones just might minister to you.

- Byron List, Headmaster 2002-2022