S10E6- The Teacher Who Saw Me

Close your eyes for a second. I want you to think back. Think back to a classroom. It might smell like chalk dust if you're of a certain age — cheap carpet, whiteboard markers, hand sanitizer. It doesn't matter when. Just go back there.

Now think about whether, in that room, there was a grown-up who saw you. Not just your grades, not just your behaviour or your reputation, your uniform or your surname, and the connotations that came with all of that — but saw you . The actual you. The one you were still figuring out.

If somebody just came to mind, hold onto that feeling, because today's episode is for them and for you. And if nobody came to mind, this episode might be the most important one you've heard in a while — because we're going to talk about what happens when a teacher does show up like that, and the science of why it changes everything.

I want to tell you a story about a boy called Jamie. Jamie is a composite — a character built from dozens of real-life stories I've come across from research, from conversations with teachers, from people who've written to me, and from clients I've worked with. So if you hear yourself in Jamie, that's because he's made up of all of you.

Jamie is eleven years old. He's in Year Six — his last year of primary school. By every official measure, he is a problem. An issue. A challenge. He doesn't sit still. He talks when he shouldn't. He's the kid teachers warn other teachers about: "Watch out for Jamie in 6B — he's a handful. He doesn't listen. Home life complicated." That last bit is usually said in hushed voices, as if a complicated home life were contagious somehow.

His file is long. He's had exclusions, interventions, a referral that got lost somewhere between pastoral care and the SENCO. His mum tries — God, she tries — but she's working two jobs, and by the time she gets home, Jamie's already shut down for the night.

The kids in his class have mostly stopped trying to be his friend. It's not that they don't like him; it's that Jamie is unpredictable. One day he's the funniest person in the room, and the next, he's flipping a chair and crying in the corridor. Nobody — not even Jamie — seems to know why. And he's been told, not always in words but in sighs, in seating plans, in the way a teacher's eyes slide past him when hands go up, that he is too much. That he is a problem to be managed, not a person to be known.

And then, in September, he walks into Mrs. Smith's classroom.

Mrs. Smith has been teaching for fourteen years. She's not new or idealistic — she's experienced, and she's intentional, and there's a difference. She's seen burnout. She's seen colleagues leave. She's also seen what happens when a kid gets one adult who refuses to write them off. She's seen it change the whole trajectory of a life. So she pays particular attention to the ones other people may have given up on. Especially those ones.

On the first day, she doesn't make Jamie sit at the front so she can watch him. She doesn't hand him a behaviour chart or modified worksheets before he's even sat down. She just asks him something.

"What's the one thing you know more about than most people your age?"

Jamie blinks. Nobody has ever asked him that before. He's a little suspicious, but he says, quietly, "Football stats. Historical ones — not just now, but going back decades."

"Okay," she says. "So we know you've got a good memory, and we know you care about history. I can work with that."

That's it. That's the moment. It doesn't sound like much — but to Jamie, in that instant, something shifts. Not fixed. Not yet. But seen.

Now, why does this matter? I want to pause Jamie's story for a moment, because I want to give you the why behind what Mrs. Smith has just done — because it isn't accidental.

Whether she knew the research or not, what she was doing is something science absolutely backs up. There is a concept in psychology called mattering — the sense that you are significant to others, that you are noticed, that your absence would be felt. Dr. Gordon Flett at York University has spent decades studying this, and his findings are striking. Young people who feel like they don't matter — who feel invisible — are significantly more at risk of depression, anxiety, and disengagement from education.

And here's the statistic I want you to sit with. In 2021, the Education Endowment Foundation found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds who reported having at least one strong, consistent relationship with a teacher were 52% more likely to remain engaged in learning throughout secondary school. Fifty-two percent — from just one relationship. One adult who showed up, like Mrs. Smith.

Then there's the work of Robert Pianta, who studied teacher-student relationships and found that children with behavioural difficulties who experienced warm, low-conflict relationships with their teacher showed marked improvements — not just behaviourally, but academically. By the end of the school year, the relationship was the intervention.

This connects beautifully with something many of you will have heard of: Stephen Covey's emotional bank account, introduced in The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People and widely applied in education. The principle is that every relationship has an emotional bank account. Every time you make a deposit — through kindness, trust, listening, noticing — you build a balance. And when conflict happens, when things go wrong, or when a child acts out or lets you down, you make a withdrawal. The key is that you need far more deposits than withdrawals to maintain a healthy relationship.

For a child like Jamie — a child who has experienced mostly withdrawals from adults in authority — his emotional bank account is overdrawn. He doesn't trust easily because trusting has cost him. Mrs.

Smith's question on that very first day was a deposit. Small, perhaps — but into an account that had been running on empty for a long time, it mattered enormously.

I want to take a moment here to give you some practical tools — whether you're a teacher, a parent, a youth worker, a coach, or anyone who works with young people.

One: Notice specifically, not generally. Don't just say, "You're great." Say, "I noticed you helped that kid find his book, and you didn't make a big deal of it. That's the kind of person you are." Specific praise lands differently. It says: I'm watching you, and I like what I see. Instead of a generic "thank you," say, "Thank you for helping Johnny today."

Two: Ask questions that assume competence. Mrs. Smith didn't ask Jamie what he struggled with — she asked what he was good at. That reframe is everything. "What do you know? What do you love? What could you teach me?" These questions tell a child: I believe there is something in you worth finding.

Three: Repair quickly and openly when you mess up. When you're sharp, when you snap, when you misread a situation — say so. Out loud. In front of them. In front of others. "I got that wrong. I'm sorry." This is one of the biggest deposits you can make, because it models accountability. It shows the child that the relationship matters more than your ego.

Four: Protect their story. Don't share what a child has told you in confidence in staff meetings unless safety requires it. Don't let your frustration with a child seep into conversations with other adults where they might overhear. Children notice. They are always listening. Betrayal is a massive withdrawal.

Five: Show up consistently. Trust is built in small moments — the daily hellos, the remembered details. "How's your hamster today?" The follow-up on something they mentioned last week. "How did your granddad get on at the hospital?" Consistency is the language love speaks in institutional settings. It says: You can count on me. I'm not going anywhere.

Back to Jamie. It doesn't become a fairy tale overnight — that's not how this works. In October, he has his worst week in years: a blow-up in PE, tears in the corridor, a letter home. Mrs. Smith doesn't send him to the head teacher. She sits with him instead, outside the classroom. Just the two of them.

She doesn't say, "Why do you always do this?" She says, "Something's going on for you this week. You don't have to tell me what — but I need you to know that one bad week doesn't change what I know about you."

And he tells her. Slowly, in fragments. His dad has been calling again — the dad who left, who was unpredictable, who made everything feel unsafe. And when things at home feel unsafe, Jamie arrives at school already in fight-or-flight, already primed for threat and survival. The slightest thing can tip him over.

She doesn't fix it. She can't. But she names it. "That sounds exhausting — carrying all that." And she helps him make a plan: a signal. If he's coming in on a difficult day, he'll put a yellow sticky note on the corner of his desk. Nobody else will know what it means, but she will. And she'll adjust.

That small thing — that private language between just the two of them — changes the rest of his year.

By springtime, Jamie's attendance is up. His writing, which had been a source of real shame, has improved, because Mrs. Smith found a way in: sports journalism. She let him write match reports. She let him do history projects on the 1966 World Cup. She met him where he was, and walked him forward from there.

At the Year Six leavers' assembly, he gives a short speech. It doesn't mention his grades. It doesn't mention tests. He says:

"I want to thank you, Mrs. Smith, because you're the first teacher who didn't already know who I was before she met me."

And the room goes quiet.

That line stayed with me. She didn't already know who I was before she met me. Because that's the thing, isn't it? The kids who need us most are often the ones who arrive pre-labelled. The file precedes them. The reputation arrives before they do. And adults — often exhausted, under-resourced, doing their absolute best — respond to the label rather than the child.

There is a psychological phenomenon called the Pygmalion effect — or the Rosenthal effect. Named after a landmark 1968 study, researchers told teachers that certain students had been identified as intellectual "bloomers," likely to show dramatic academic progress. Those students were chosen at random. And yet, by the end of the year, the students their teachers believed in showed significantly higher IQ gains than the others. The teachers hadn't done anything dramatically different. They had simply expected more — and without realising it, communicated that belief in a thousand tiny ways.

What you expect from a child shapes what they become. Children will rise to expectation, or they will lower to it. When we expect disruption, failure, the next incident — children feel that, and they perform to it.

Mrs. Smith chose something different. She chose curiosity over judgement. She chose to be the adult who hadn't already made up her mind.

I want to end this episode by speaking directly to the teachers — the ones listening on their commute, between planning and marking, feeling like there aren't enough hours and not enough of them to go around.

I see you. You are doing one of the most important jobs that exists. And one of the hardest — in a system that doesn't always give you the support you need to do it well.

I know you can't be Mrs. Smith to every child every day. I know you're human, and you're tired, and some days you're in survival mode too. But here's what I want to leave you with.

You don't have to change a child's whole life with a grand gesture. You just have to refuse to write them off. To stay curious about who they are — even when, and especially when, they're making life really difficult for you, for the children around them, and probably for themselves too.

Because somewhere in your classroom right now, there might be a Jamie. A kid who has been managed and monitored and warned about, whose home life is too big for their small body to carry, who has been told in a hundred silent ways that they are too much and not enough, all at once. And they are waiting. They might not even know they're waiting. But they are.

They're waiting for the adult who asks the right question. Who doesn't already know who they are. Who makes a deposit when everybody else has been withdrawing.

And you could be that person. Not perfectly. Not every day. But enough. Enough to matter.

That's it for today on The Resilient Kid Podcast. If this one has landed for you, I'd love to know. Share it with a teacher in your life — or a parent, or anyone who needs to hear that small moments, those micro-moments in a day, are never truly small. They build trust. They make deposits in the emotional bank account.

I'm currently writing the teacher's edition of my book — about three-quarters of the way through — and this episode felt important to share in the middle of that process, because I see the work that teachers and educators do. When I say "teachers" today, I mean everyone in a school setting, whatever your role. I see you. I hear your stories. And I'm here with a hand at your back.

If you'd like to go on the waitlist for the teacher's book on building resilience in the classroom, drop me a message on social media or at ashley@theresilientkid.co.uk — that's A-S-H-L-E-Y — and I'll add you to the list.

Take care. Speak soon. Lots of love.