

## Kids Just Want a Chance

Kids just want a chance. They want to be on a par with other children their age, especially in a public setting like school. Yet, life isn't always fair. Some people have more advantages than others. Children from low income homes can't dress like their peers. The worn, hand-me-down clothes have seen better days. The pair of shoes they wear to school they also wear to gym class, because that is all they have. The obvious difference in appearance puts them behind their peers from day one at school.

The more disheveled appearance often translates to a poor self-image. No wonder why some kids don't achieve. They perceive themselves as without worth because they don't have what others have.



The Kernersville YMCA runs a program that takes the neediest children shopping for school clothes. It is called YMCA Bright Beginnings. Children are identified by the schools and are paired up with a YMCA volunteer to go shopping for school supplies. The experience of shopping with a caring adult does wonders for the child. For some children it is a rare occasion that an adult dedicates undivided attention to affirm the youngster and to make him or her feel valued. It is fun to watch the youngster, with a bounce in their step, go from rack to rack in the store. On this one day they can select clothes previously only others could afford.

The day is not without boundaries. Children are given the opportunity to make real-life decisions. They have \$75 to spend and can be coached in their decision-making process. What a valuable life lesson! Instead of a blanket statement of "we can't afford that" they now have the opportunity to make choices.

The YMCA Bright Beginnings experience also includes a meal. One youngster told his adult chaperone that he "didn't deserve dessert, because he was bad." The adult reassured him, "You've been a good boy today. I want you to have dessert with me." Quickly, the youngster gobbled up not one, but several desserts. His entire mood and self-image changed because of a reassuring, kind word from an adult. Not only that but he realized the adult *wanted* to spend time with him. The boy may have been told many times in his life that he was bad, and he believed it. Telling him he was good today affirmed that he *can* be good. Kids need to hear a voice of encouragement.

Near the end of the experience tears began to flow when the same youngster told his adult chaperone, "I want to go home with you." When asked why, he said, "Because I love you." We show God's love when we help others and we love because God first loved us.

The experience is meaningful to the adult, too. One of the college-age volunteers helps with this program every year. Her mom, who also is a volunteer chaperone, told me that her college-age daughter makes the family come back early from vacation every year, to be part of this program.

We can be a light for someone else. A small candle can transform an entire room into the light of God's love, especially for an impressionable youngster in need of encouragement. Seek ways you can be encouraging to others.

**Question:** How can you share God's love with people in need of love?

**Scripture:** *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:16-18).*

**Prayer:** Lord, we thank you for opportunities to affirm others. Our kind words can brighten a youngster's day and his perspective of himself. Amen.