

JAMIE'S FRIENDS



"Just think! You're going to have a whole new class of kids whom you can befriend." It was the first day of the new school year, and Jamie's mother was driving him to school.

"It doesn't work that way," said Jamie, grumbling. "Nobody wants to be friends with me. Everyone thinks I'm weird." Jamie wanted to have friends. He wanted to be invited to sleepovers, camping trips, and cookouts with the other boys. But Jamie's legs were stiffened by arthritis, and he was forced to wear leg braces, which gave him an awkward limp.

"You are not so different from the other kids. Your legs might be different, but that doesn't

make you as a person weird. The kids just don't know that—and you have to show them. As you reach out with friendship to the other kids, I know you'll make some friends. But you have to do your part. You can't expect the other kids to do it all. It takes two to be friends."

Jamie knew he certainly hadn't given the situation much cooperation. When the other kids would tease him, he would become sullen and upset. Surely that couldn't make them want to be friends with him.

Most of the kids at school have probably never seen me smiling or happy. They likely think I'm always sad and upset.

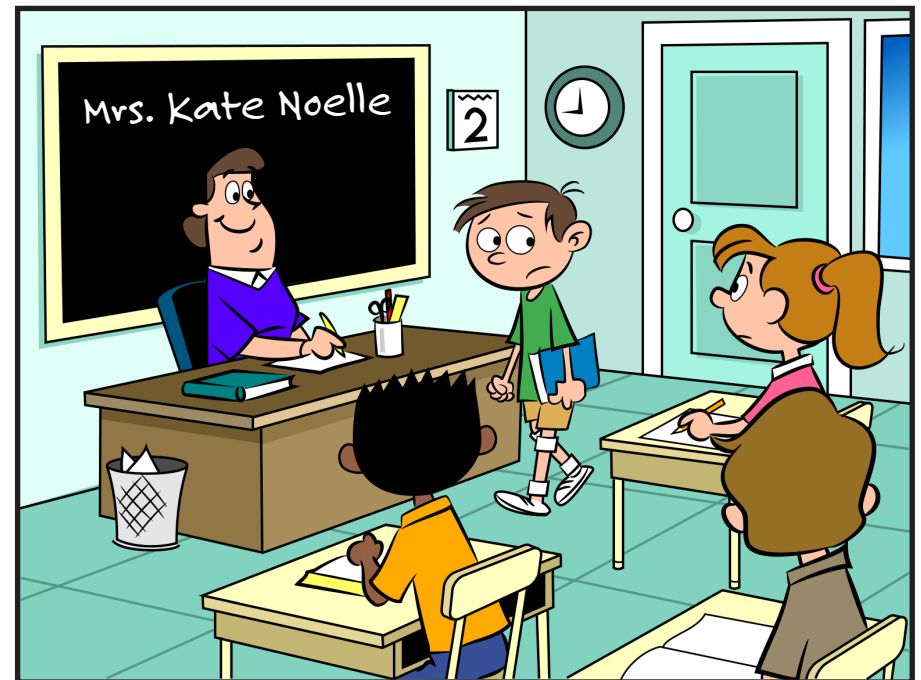
A smile came over Jamie's face as he made a decision. *I'm going to try to start this school year off right. I really want friends, so I'll try to be friendly.*

When Jamie arrived at his assigned classroom, most of his new classmates were already seated and roll call was about to begin. His new teacher looked kind. "Mrs.

Kate Noelle" was written in elegant cursive on the blackboard behind her.

As Jamie walked across the floor, he tried to look as friendly and normal as possible, yet he couldn't help but think that everyone was staring at him, wondering what in the world was wrong with his legs and why he was limping.

He sank down in his chair. *Why would any of these kids want to be my friend when they could be friends with someone who can walk properly?*



"Roll call," said Mrs. Noelle, and she began to read through the list of students. As each name was called out, that student stood, acknowledging they were present.

"Jamie Lee Wilster!" Jamie struggled to push his chair back from his desk, in order to stand up. The seconds seemed like hours, and he felt every eye in the room being focused on him. He could hear what he thought the other students were thinking...

Look, he can't even stand up!

What's wrong with him, anyway?

Boy, he's not going to be any fun at all.

There's a handicapped boy in my class!

Once Jamie had freed himself from his chair and was again seated, Mrs. Noelle said, "Thank you, Jamie. In future roll calls, you do not need to stand."

"Special treatment for the handicapped kid, eh?" a voice called out from the back row.

"Billy Kenter!" Mrs. Noelle said sternly. "That comment was not called for."

When the recess bell rang, Jamie stayed inside the classroom but looked out the window to see Billy—soon to become his personal "bully"—round up all the other kids in order to play a game of his own choosing. It was obvious that the other kids listened to Billy's every word.

"Don't let Billy bother you."

Jamie turned to see a girl standing a couple of desks across from him, holding a book in her hand.

"Hi, I'm Jenny Mariner, one of your classmates. Nice to meet you."

"Uh-uh, nice to meet you too. Aren't you going to go play outside?"

"I take ballet lessons after school, so I like to save my energy. And besides, I prefer to read. How about you?"

"Oh, yes ... I mean, reading is one of my favorite things to do, too. I've got quite a library at home. You should ... s-see it."

"Perhaps I will," Jenny responded. She sat and began reading intently.

Jamie's heart was pounding. Someone had actually talked to him. Someone had actually taken an interest in him. Someone had come up to him and said "hi."

Jamie thought back to a couple months earlier when the last school year had ended. He had received all of the honor awards there were to receive, but that didn't matter to him. He had no friends. He had not been invited to any of the after-school parties that all the other kids were talking about and preparing for. He had felt so left out.



One night, while on a camping trip orchestrated by his parents to pull him into a better frame of mind, Jamie had prayed: "Dear Jesus, Dad and Mom tell me that You love me and that You care for me. I believe them, because I know that they love me, and that they would never tell me something that wasn't true. I don't know if You can do this for me or not—maybe I'm too bad for You to hear me and answer my prayers—but my prayer and wish is that You would send me a friend. I don't know how to be friends with the kids at school, and I need help. Would You just help me somehow?"

Is this the answer to my prayer? Is Jenny the friend that God is sending me? Could He really be answering my little prayer from that night, so many months ago?

"Class time. Let's get out our history books."

Jamie opened his textbook. When the school day ended, and the students filed out of the classroom, Jamie was last to leave, absorbed in taking notes on what to study further at home.

"Jamie," Mrs. Noelle said, "you are a most attentive student. I like that, and I think we'll have a lot of fun learning together this year."

"Thank you, Mrs. Noelle."

Jamie was alone, or so he thought, when he felt a hand tap him on the shoulder. He turned to see Jenny standing beside him with book in hand.

"Oh, you surprised me! I thought I was alone in here."

"I just wanted to say goodbye. See you tomorrow!"

"Uh, goodbye!" Jamie said, a wide smile stretched across his face.



Days passed, and Jamie and Jenny became better friends, and even though Billy would bully Jamie, having Jenny as his best friend made the rest not matter much.

One day Jenny said to Jamie, "I have something to say, but I don't think you're going to like it."

"What is it?" Jamie cautiously asked, awful thoughts racing through his head. *Perhaps she doesn't want to be my friend anymore*, he thought and cringed.

"I'm very happy to be your friend," said Jenny, "but I don't think it's right for you to not care about any of the other kids. It doesn't matter to you whether or not they are your friends, or whether they say good or bad things about you. I know that some of them are not being very nice to you, but you're not going out of your way to be friendly or nice to them either. Sometimes it seems you pretend they're not really there."



It's true, Jamie thought. I don't care about the other kids. I don't care if they're mean to me. And I don't want to try to be nice to them.

"I guess you're right," said Jamie. "But why am I supposed to be the one to be nice to them when *they're* the ones saying mean things to me? I don't think that's fair."

"Just because things don't seem fair to you, or it seems like someone else is being mean to you or unkind doesn't mean that you shouldn't be kind and friendly to them. You'll never get any friends like that. The way to make friends is to be friendly, even if the other person doesn't seem to appreciate your kindness or respond right away."

Jamie finally replied, "All right, I think I can do that with all the kids, except for Billy."

"What do you mean, 'except for Billy'?"

"Billy is such a bully. He's always picking on me and calls me bad names in front of the other kids. There's no way I'm going to be friendly to him. Besides, he can do all the things that I've always wanted to do, but can't. Then he picks on me, and I can't do anything about it. It's not fair that I have to be the one to be nice to him."

"What are all the things that he can do that you can't?"

"He can run and play sports. He's on the baseball team, and I've always wanted to play baseball. He's tough and has all the kids around him all the time. I've never had any friends. You're one of the first friends I've ever had. Plus, he's cool."

"A lot of kids might think that Billy is cool. But you're cool too. It's all those nice things inside you that made me want to be your friend. It's your kindness and patience. You're such an interesting person, and you're not immature and silly like some of the other kids. Plus, almost anybody can be cool on the outside, but Jesus makes you cool on the inside, and that's what you are."

Jamie thought about what Jenny had said, but it seemed it would be so difficult to be nice to Billy. What if when he tried to be nice to Billy and talk to him, Billy would just make fun of him all the more?

"Come on, I know you can do it. Please try! I believe that things can and will work out, and you'll be so much happier once you and Billy can be friends. Just start with something simple; be kind, or say something nice to him. I know it's going to be hard, but it'll be worth it."

"Okay. I'll think about it."



Billy wanted to try, if for no other reason than that Jenny was his friend and had asked him to.

The next day there was an extended recess, so the boys gathered in the school yard for baseball practice. Jamie sat watching through the window. He saw Billy get up to bat and make an incredible hit. *How can he play so well and be so good at everything when he's such a jerk? It's not fair!*

Then he remembered what Jenny had told him: "Just start with something simple—be kind, or say something nice."

I can't be thinking bad thoughts about Billy, or I'm never going to be able to say anything nice to him.

Soon recess was over, and Billy and the boys were coming back inside when Billy tripped and everything he was carrying flew out of his arms and landed on the floor. Billy's cap was jostled, landing close to Jamie's feet.

What should I do?

He paused, then bent down to pick up Billy's cap. The hallway grew silent as everyone knew how Billy picked on Jamie. Billy slowly walked over to Jamie. Jamie gave a hesitant smile and held out the cap to Billy.

Billy didn't smile. He snatched his hat out of Jamie's hand and proceeded to open his locker and stuff all his things in it.

"Um, Billy, you played really well today. I was watching you."

Billy was surprised. "Uh, thanks. You were watching me?" Then Billy realized that all his friends were standing around him. "Well, yeah, it's my game after all. It's certainly not yours."

Jamie had tried to be kind, and it seemed to have almost worked for a moment, but it hadn't lasted. Jamie told Jenny what had happened.

"I'm so proud of you!" said Jenny. "I'm sure Billy appreciated your kindness. He probably couldn't let himself show it because his buddies were around, and he wouldn't want them to think that he's getting soft."

Days passed, and Jamie kept up his efforts of being kind, not only to Billy, but also to his other classmates. Similar instances occurred with Billy, where he seemed to be almost friendly toward Jamie, but then would revert to his former self.



Yet Jamie had to admit that Billy, although not totally friendly, was certainly not as rude and mean as he was before. Billy had stopped calling him names and didn't pick on him or bully him. So maybe his efforts had been worthwhile after all.

Jamie was happier too. Not only did he have Jenny as a friend, but he also knew that he was doing his best to be friendly to his classmates, even if they weren't always so nice to him in return. Things had gotten better between him and his classmates, and he was glad about that. Yet he wasn't prepared for what happened next.



It was Friday afternoon and the last day of school before winter break. Mrs. Noelle told everyone to put away their books and pack up their belongings.

"Isn't it time for grammar review?" Jamie asked.

"Yes, but we're doing something different today."

Jamie looked around the room. This was very unusual, though his classmates appeared unfazed.

"Once everyone is packed up, head to the gym," Mrs. Noelle said. "Jamie and Jenny, you two can go to the library and read."

As his classmates filed out of the classroom to the gym, Jamie turned to Jenny, "Why are we going to the library?"

"Maybe it's because Mrs. Noelle knows that we are bookworms," Jenny answered, "so she's just letting us do what we enjoy. Let's not worry about it."

"All right," Jamie said, and they made their way to the library.

Within about fifteen minutes, the hush in the library was broken by Mrs. Noelle. "Time is up! Back to the classroom."

"What happens now?" Jamie asked Mrs. Noelle.

"No questions!" was the only response.

Jamie and Jenny approached the darkened classroom door.

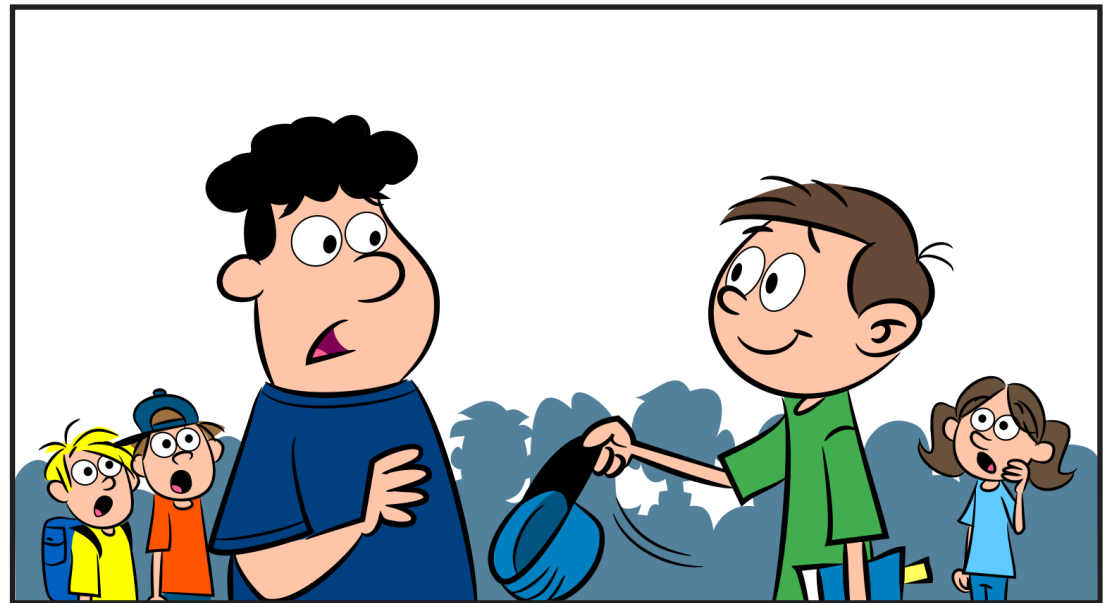
"Why are the lights off?" Jamie questioned.

Jenny pushed open the door and pulled Jamie in by the hand.

"Surprise! Surprise!" shouted all his classmates.

The lights turned on, displaying a festively decorated classroom and all his classmates standing near the blackboard, smiling. On the blackboard were written the words, "We think you're the greatest, Jamie!" Jamie's classmates each had brought to class a small gift that they'd gotten for him. And on one of the tables were cakes, cookies, biscuits, juice, and other treats.

This was all for him? He couldn't believe it. He must be dreaming!



He glanced around the room, and yes, there was Billy! Even Billy had a party hat on.

"Jamie, sit down here at the front of the classroom," Mrs. Noelle said cheerfully. "Who wants to tell Jamie what's going on?"

"I do! As you all know," Billy began, "I hardly ever talk to Jamie. So this is meant to make up for all those times when I wasn't nice to you—or even worse, when I said bad things to you, which I'm really sorry for.

"We had been talking about how when school first started, we weren't very nice to you. But now that we know you better, we've all seen what a nice guy you are. We've unanimously decided to make you our 'favorite student of the year.'

"We also think you're the bravest, too. All of us, we don't have anything to complain about, and we're ashamed that you were the one who was kind to us, when we weren't nice to you. So we all want to apologize for that, and especially me, because I think you're a really great guy. I want to be your friend—we all do. This party is to say how nice we think you are!"

"I don't know what to say! I couldn't want any better classmates than you all. Thanks a million!" Jamie exclaimed.

Then Jamie remembered. "Billy said he didn't know how I did it—being nice to you all, even when you all weren't nice to me. Well, a couple of months ago, I prayed and asked Jesus for a friend. He answered my prayer, and He gave me a best friend—Jenny. Jenny helped me learn how to be nice to all of you. So I can't take much credit. God answered my prayer and gave me a friend who taught me how to be friendly."

Jamie had learned how to overcome his disability and how to find love and friendship—by giving love and friendship to others.

The End

