

Tomasito Is Too Big to Hold Hands

Narrator: It was early spring, and the final round of parent-teacher conferences was over. Linda Brady, in her 6th year as a classroom teacher, was cleaning up her classroom at the end of the day. She tucked inside Tomasito's second-grade portfolio his most recent story, about traveling to a distant planet with his school friends.

Like the rest of his work, this was excellent. Pausing in her chores, she leafed through his portfolio. A smile spread over her face. His carefully drawn self-portrait: a tall boy, looking very big, standing proudly with his best friends in the background. Copies of his many Good Citizen school awards. Then she came to his math work. For the first time a shiver of concern ran through her – his math test results seemed so erratic. Was it possible that his math learning wasn't that solid? Was he even slipping in math? Yet his homework was always perfect. What was going on with Tomasito?

Ria: (Español) Tomasito, mi hijo mediano, es mi hijo maravilloso. El es noble, generoso, y no es egoísta. Tomasito le gusta tener amigos, y las personas que tienen amigos tienen todo - ¿sí? Mi esposo Tomas, y yo pensamos que ser noble es la cosa más bonita en el ser humano y queremos que Tomasito sea así para toda su vida.

Ria: (English) Tomasito, my middle child, is my most wonderful son. He is noble – kind and unselfish. Tomasito likes to have amigos, friends, and people who have friends have everything, right? My husband Tomas and I think being noble is the most beautiful thing in a human being, and we want Tomasito to be this way for the rest of his life. His teacher says, 'If I had twenty Tomasitos in my class, I would not have any problems.' In meetings with her, the first thing she always says is that Tomasito is respectful, cooperative, and knows the rules. So maybe his personality has helped him win the teacher's approval?

Linda: The most distinctive thing about Tomasito is that he is such a nice, kind, good little boy. I do not think he has ever said anything bad about anybody in his whole life. He helps all the kids and gets along with everyone in the room. I have at least two kids in the room I'd call clinically misbehaving, who demand a lot of my time, so it is a joy to have Tomasito, who is quiet and obedient. He is probably the most popular child in the room. Although he is the oldest in the room, he is very shy. He never speaks in class unless he is called on, which makes him a model student in a way.

He is also doing well in school academically. Most of my students are not on grade level, but Tomasito is. He is very conscientious and hard working in all his subjects. My sixth sense, though, is that we need to look at him closely in able to figure out what is going on. It is not because of his language skills, since Tomasito is virtually fluent in English. I have not signaled to Tomasito my concern about his math, since he is trying as hard as he can, and sometimes his self-confidence is not all that strong.

Ria: I call him 'Tomasito two-side' because he can be shy out of the house, but at home he is so talkative and expressive. With Tomasito, everything he sees and hears outside of the house, he tells us about. He told us the teacher uses his work as examples for the class. At home, what a mimic he is! But at school he does not always participate. This is because he is reserved, like his papa. He is not like me – I have a strong personality, I like socializing with all people. When I went to school I loved participating in all the social actividades.

Linda: At home, I think if I am right, Tomasito is the oldest child. My sense is that he has a loving, supportive family that takes wonderful care of him, getting him to school everyday on time, clean and well fed. While he has parents, my guess is he probably does not have an academic role model at home. Other than that, I cannot really say.

Ria: We are a very happy familia. I have vowed not to be harsh and neglectful with my children as my mother was with us in Mexico. We tell our boys that they are nuestros muñequitos, our little dolls, the most precious thing we have in life. I try to kiss and hug my Tomasito a lot. When I am cleaning shops part-time, my husband takes care of the children; we have never ever used a babysitter. It is importante that our sons have love and attention and what pleases them. But sometimes I worry if I am doing all the right things? Should I have rules about watching TV? I like it when experts give me advice. Once his first-grade teacher told me I should let Tomasito read to me everyday, and I appreciated that. I also learn a lot from watching other familias and analyzing what they do.

Tomasito: My teacher tells me I am good at school, and I like it when I get a lot of homework stickers for perfect homework. I am great at math, and my friends at school and I share our Mario Nintendo games. I wish I had Nike shoes like one of my friends – you know, stuff that is in style and not cheap. When I grow up, I want to be a football

player like on TV. Being an eight year old is boring. You cannot go to any countries, and I like to travel. I cannot drive a car. I cannot have a wife.

Linda: He is a pretty reserved little guy and compared to most of his classmates, does not share anything about his home life with me. All these second graders are pretty good talkers by now and most of them are not self-conscious about what they say. When we go around the room on Monday mornings talking about what we did over the weekend, and again on Fridays when the kids can volunteer for Show and Tell, I sometimes learn a good bit about my kids' life outside school. But not from Tomasito – all he ever talks about is playing Nintendo over the weekend, and he has never once participated in Show and Tell.

Ria: In the last conference, Ms. Brady just said that Tomasito was doing fine in all his school subjects. But Tomas and I share a worry about the math. Sometimes Tomasito just seems confused or he forgets what he has learned. I just don't know why it is so hard for him.

Linda: Even though he doesn't chit-chat to me, I do have my special teacher radar, and it tells me that somebody at home is following up and making sure Tomasito does his homework. It is always very neat, correct, and thorough. I have never asked Tomasito anything about his homework, partly because I have never been that concerned about him, and because whatever he is doing is looking fine.

Ria: When Tomasito does his homework, we allow him to do it whenever he wants in the afternoon, but he is supposed to finish it before his papa gets home. Tomasito often gets caught up with television, or playing Nintendo, or with telling stories and his homework just sits there. Or he is doing his homework and he gets distracted by his baby brother who is a lively toddler and wants to play. Tomasito needs a lot of help with his math homework. I am not much good at helping. At his school there are special math classes for parents to explain the math teaching, but I have not been to them. Eduardo is the one who helps Tomasito with math most of the time. If it is still needed help, my husband helps him when he comes home from work. Sometimes Tomas has to explain two, or three, or four times! Eduardo is so quick, but it seems so much harder for Tomasito to do math. I just discovered that Eduardo had been doing Tomasito's math homework for him. I came so close to spanking Eduardo! I said to Eduardo, 'I told you to help him – not do it for him.' I put a stop to it!

Tomasito: Edward and me like to watch football with our dad. Edward and me do a lot of stuff together. He is great at drawing, and I like to color in the pictures that he makes. I also like to watch him play Mario. He is so great and gets to really high levels! Sometimes he even helps me when I play it. In our bedroom we share and bed, and we even have our very own VCR.

Tomas: We have children of different ages, so that really helps us to see that children change and go through different stages as they grow older. In kindergarten, Tomasito was delighted to have his mama come into the classroom. Then that changed in first grade. Now Eduardo is in fifth grade, and I am volunteering once a week in his classroom, because the teacher really needs help with the older kids. And Eduardo accepts this.

Linda: I was standing in the classroom doorway just before the start of school, when an odd thing happened. Tomasito's mother comes running in, waving a book. It was classroom library book that Tomasito had borrowed and was due in today. I gathered his mother had just dropped Tomasito off outside, and that he had forgotten the book. Well, I never see her in the building like that. And I should add that parents often casually hang out in our building – our school has a nice village-like feel. Anyway, Ria Montero blurted out that Tomasito had been 'careless with the book,' embarrassing him right in front of all his friends. Tomasito darted out from behind me, grabbed the book, and ran back into the classroom. I tried quickly to take advantage of Mrs. Montero being there, and suggested that she come in sometime and chat with me. Who knows, maybe this would help me sort out what is going on with Tomasito and his math. But as soon as I invited her, she scurried away.

Tomas: My wife told me the other day how mortified Tomasito was to have her come into the school unexpectedly to bring him the book. She saw the terrible expression of embarrassment on his face – this made her turn around and leave right away. Later that evening, Tomasito said that his teacher and classmates would think he was not obeying the rules because he was not careful with the classroom library book.

Poor Ria, she feels sad that not long ago, Tomasito would squeeze her hand tightly while crossing the street and close his eyes. He was little and scared and needed his mama. But now he leaves her in the street, while he goes into school by himself. She thinks maybe he is ashamed of her. She herself would have thought it a wonderful thing if her mother had ever taken her into school. I tell her this is because of his getting older. He does not want his mama being in school with him because this embarrasses him in front of his friends. But I don't think he would want me there either.

Tomasito: Having your mom come into the school building – that is definitely for Babies! If your dad comes in, well that is maybe, well that is not that bad. That's like kids' stuff, I guess. Both are pretty bad, though. After mom brought me this book at school, that night I told her not to bring me any stuff when everybody is at school. Mom

brings us to our school every day, but Edward and me now make our mom leave us off and wait for us way over at the curb outside. Before she used to cross us, but now I tell her that the crossing guard is there. I used to hold the crossing guard's hand, but since I'm in second grade I do not.

Tomas: Still, I can see that there are times when he seems pleased that we are in the building. At open house – that is when all the parents and little brothers and sisters come in the see the children's schoolwork – Tomasito seemed very proud to be showing us what he had done. The teacher had told the students how to show their work to the families. Tomasito and Eduardo had said the week before 'Hey, Mommy – let's go to the open house, you know you have to.' And Tomasito does not protest when Ria and the baby go to the big awards ceremony every month.

Ria: But I have a problem in participating with Tomasito's teacher, and with doing things in the school. The problem is that my Inglés is not good, like my husband's, and Ms. Brady doesn't speak Español. Tomasito says that classroom helper speaks Español, but I am not certain who he is. I can says things to Ms. Brady okay, but I have trouble really understanding her. When I returned the book, I just couldn't understand what Ms. Brady was saying to me – she was talking quickly, and there was lots of noise. I would like to learn Inglés as well, so I could volunteer for the teachers and help them in the classroom. Also, if I knew Inglés, I could be a better helper to my children with homework. I would like to be able to volunteer also so I could see how the teachers teach, what the environment is really like. Maybe they need someone to help clean up? And I could bring my baby son with me?

Linda: Apart from those formally scheduled things, like parent-teacher conferences, open houses, or awards ceremonies, his parents simply don not set foot inside the school. I am not making a value judgment, but when we have a class party, poor Tomasito lugs in heavy bags of food all by himself, while his classmates' parent carry in the stuff for their kids. I know that Tomasito gets dropped off at school and picked up by his mother everyday, but all this happens outside at the curb. I have a bunch of parents who come inside for drop off or pick up, and I get to chat with them. I have several parents regularly volunteering in my room, but not Tomasito's parents. I really like it when parents come in. Being able to have those informal chit-chats feels like the best way to build up good relationships with parents. And when you have good relationships, it is just so much easier to really talk about some things.

Ria: With Tomasito's teacher, I don't know if it is because I don't understand Inglés well, or who knows, but she always says in the meetings that Tomasito is doing things well, that he is improving. But that is all. Also, she talks mostly about his behavior. I used to get very excited about those little certificates. But then they give out so many to Tomasito, all for being a good citizen, for following the rules. I wish the teacher would let us know as much about his academic progress as about all those awards. It is true, after all, that Tomasito is not that far ahead in his schoolwork. And I wish he would tell us what to do about his math.

I do like getting notes. Since my English is no good, this gives me the chance to slowly understand things. And the notes, not like phone calls, you can share with your husband, or you show it to the child and tell them – 'Look, this is what the teacher says.' Most of all, I wish we could just talk together at school. But then Tomasito doesn't like that.

Linda: Speaking of notes, one thing his parents do is respond to notes. I always send them notes via Tomasito reminding them about when he will be getting Good Citizen awards at the assemblies. And he dutifully brings me back little thank-you messages from them. It is partly thanks to Tomasito that we can communicate like that. Nothing ever gets lost in that backpack! Also, when I sent classroom parents notes home recommending the use of flash cards at home for math, Mr. and Mrs. Montero wrote back immediately, 'Thank you, teacher, for this advice. We have started to use the flash cards with our son.' They certainly took what I said very seriously."

Well, Mrs. Montero's behavior when she brought in the book surely was odd. There was another odd encounter with them, at the fall open house. Mrs. Montero approached me, asked me how Tomasito was doing in school, and I said very well. Then she proceeded to tell me how Tomasito's handwriting was bad. Whaa?? I was amazed that his parents seemed to believe that he was not doing well academically. That just didn't fit in with the Tomasito in my class. I was surprised that they were so critical of his ability. It just made me wonder that maybe they don't appreciate how great their son is.

Narrator: Linda Brady needs to connect with Tomasito's family to figure out the sources of his math difficulties. Parent-teacher conferences are over for the year. With summer fast approaching, she feels she needs to do something soon to prevent any further slippage over the summer months. What should she do?