



PHOTO BY H. ARMSTRONG ROBERTS

WE'RE PROUD OF YOU!

These wise parents learned the transforming power of positive words.

It wasn't until after we had accepted a position as houseparents at a home for abused and neglected boys that we realized the enormity of our task. Most of the sixteen elementary school boys had received very little love, discipline, or "upbringing." Many had been openly rejected by their "loved ones" and were simply left at the boys' home indefinitely.

David was one of those boys. No one seemed to know where his mother was. She'd left the family years earlier. His father didn't feel he could care for David and his ten-year-old brother.

Tiny for his eight years, David had blue eyes that sparkled, and he always seemed to smile. He had thin, white-blond hair which was always a mess. But then, nearly everything

about David was usually a mess.

He knew nothing about table manners or even the basics of personal hygiene. Wearing clothes right-side out, zipped, or buttoned mattered not at all. His bedroom and clothing drawers were in total disarray; freshly laundered shirts were tangled with dirty socks and underwear. Clean slacks were so wrinkled, they had to be laundered again before being worn. There was not one item in its right place.

Despite his sloppiness and coarse and uncouth ways, we had grown to love David. We wanted to help him learn to live in an acceptable manner, but where do you begin with a child who has such a collage of problems?

Scolding and punishing had not worked. He'd probably been reprimanded

all his life. We had heard that positive reinforcement was the best way to deal with many problems, so we decided to compliment him on each and every positive effort he made, no matter how small.

We had to wait a while before we saw any small effort, but one day it happened. No, he didn't straighten his drawers up like the other boys, but he did put his dirty underwear in the laundry and he hung his pajamas on the hook in the closet! It wasn't much, but we were ready to let him know that he had done something right.

With our arms around his shoulders, we said, "David, this is great! You hung up your pajamas and we're proud of you!"

What an unforgettable reaction he had to that simple encouragement. His expression clearly showed his unfamiliarity with compliments and his hunger for them. He looked pleased with the commendation but he wasn't quite sure it was sincere.

The next day we were the ones to be surprised. Completely on his own, without any nagging, he straightened up one of his drawers. It wasn't very neat, but David tried, really tried.

Again we complimented him: "David, we really liked the way you folded your blue jeans. You might end up being one of the neatest boys in this house!" Shaking his head as if to be sure he wasn't dreaming, he said, "When you say those things about me, it makes me feel so good inside!"

Our "experiment" had been a success. Deep inside him, buried below years of criticism and abuse, was an inner well of self-respect, and we had tapped that well.

We rarely had to correct him about his bedroom again. He was never tidy, but he kept things reasonably neat. Occasionally we'd whisper in his ear something like, "Your room looks great. Keep up the good work." Or we might lightheartedly announce as he entered the room, "Here comes one of the neatest boys in the West."

The pride he felt was obvious. Was this the first time he had felt a sense of accomplishment? We saw to it that it wasn't the last.

—Larry and Debra Harrold

Larry and Debra Harrold live with their three children in Mesquite, Texas.