

Director's Corner

Things We Have Learned Along The Way Parenting a Child with Learning Disabilities Differences

by Beth Hall

I was recently asked to speak about what I have learned along the way in trying to support my son with language-based and visual-motor processing learning differences.

This journey began for me when my husband and I met our three-day-old soon-to-be son in a hospital and fell in love with him. Early on his life there were signs of learning difficulties. His speaking developed slowly and he had trouble learning his letters and numbers. He was still not able to read by the end of second grade. He was pulled out of his mainstream 3rd, 4th and 5th grade classes to address his reading needs so often that he literally received no math instruction for an entire year. He is now an A and B high school freshman whose test scores have increased by four grade levels in two years. He has served on the student council at his middle school and not only understands his own learning style but plans to attend college! This is what I have learned in the years since that very first day we met.

Never hand over the reigns of deciding what is best for your child to anyone else. The questions began when our son did not use any words by the age of three. He communicated through a series of hand signals and voice inflections. I will never forget reading his first evaluation. The words *Severe Expressive Language Delay* jumped off the page. The experts said this meant that even with speech therapy he might not ever be able to speak functionally. I was devastated. It took several days of absolute panic before I took stock (with the help of my husband and other close and supportive friends) and reminded myself that I knew this sweet energetic child better than the testers whose reports were scaring me so badly. I knew that he was a good communicator with a unique way of expressing himself and an adept social being who had lots of friends and got along well with his teachers. I had temporarily lost sight of his abilities when I let the experts define him in terms of his disabilities, as if they knew more than I.

Using our knowledge of him as a whole person, of which this diagnosis only represented a small part, we mobilized to get him some speech therapy and teach him to use words. I regained my own faith, which in turn gave him the faith that

he could succeed where the experts predicted he could not. Six months later, when he was reevaluated, we were told "we have never seen a child turn around so quickly or so completely from a diagnosis like this before." The lesson: never let the so-called experts tell you who your child is and certainly never, never let anyone who does not 100% love and back your child tell him who he is. Get help, network, and talk to others. The experts are tools just like a computer or a book. They can be incredibly useful, but in the end we parents need to take the primary role in helping and guiding our children. I have learned most by listening to everyone, reading what I could find and applying what made sense in our situation.

Get over your own stuff and find the joy in who your kid is (not isn't). I wept my way through a couple of crisis times, but that was my own sense of panic that somehow I was a failure or bad parent because my child had "issues." Our son didn't need my disappointment or pain. My job was to support, protect and guide him. I needed support groups and sometimes professionals to help me sort out my feelings, but it was always important to distinguish between what was my stuff and what was his. This made a huge difference in terms of being able to focus on his strengths instead of my own baggage.

Place the highest emphasis on self-esteem. No one knows this kid or LOVES this kid like we do.. In the end, he needs to become a proud man who loves himself, is a good person and finds ways to make a difference and be happy in the world. How he performs in 4th grade spelling or even 8th grade math is only a small part of what will make that happen.

Don't let this one area of challenge overwhelm your relationship or your thinking to the point where you can't see all the other aspects of who your child is. How parents view a child has a huge impact on how children view themselves; our faith in them is critical.

Educate yourself and your child about learning differences and styles. One's capacity to learn and think is different than one's learning style. Reading Mel Levine and later Jonathan Mooney together, not only with our son but the whole

family, helped us all understand the way minds work and feel confident that future success does not have to be dependent on the ease with which one performs in school. What I learned is that there are “tricks” (this was the term we used with our son) to learning to read or doing math or spelling. My son loved learning the tricks and felt powerful and smart when he could consciously master a trick that enhanced his skills. This approach allowed him to differentiate between having a different learning style and being stupid. His power can only come from knowing and understanding his own issues. I find that I learn a great deal from him about what helps and what doesn't. He learns by talking with other kids. He loves to watch and listen to other kids to hear what works for them as well as what doesn't. If he is going to learn to advocate for himself he has to first recognize his own strengths (and challenges.) We tell him that a school is supposed to know how to teach kids and if they aren't doing a good enough job for him it is their failing not his.

Demand accommodations & strategies that help, in the nicest but firmest way. I found it helped if the teachers felt comfortable with our family, and felt we were not blaming them for his issues. I did my best to look to them as partners and as such was always interested in supporting them while getting the accommodations my son needed. As a result, I found them more open to hearing we wanted and what we found that worked. When we ran into teachers or others who were not able to understand and make accommodations to my son's needs, we avoided or removed contact – a teacher's negative attitude could severely undermine his self-confidence.

A few of the practical matters we took control of have included:

1. Avoiding testing (like spelling tests) often, and later, when it became unavoidable, asking for extra time.
2. Use the IEP (Individualized Educational Plan which is required by law for students who have diagnosed educational disabilities) as a means to getting child's needs met, NOT an opportunity for his teachers or school administrators to tell us what was going on. I always come in to these meetings with a strategy and my own goals for what my son needs to succeed.
3. Getting homework assignments ahead of time so that we can prepare and do a little each night, instead of a lot all at once.
4. Getting technology accommodations including a calculator for math, a laptop in class (we actually had it added to his IEP) and special software like Inspiration and Draftbuilder for writing.
5. Revised spacing on homework often leads to better focus for him.
6. Permission to dictate some writing assignments to us for transcription rather than forcing him to write or type them himself.

Where we are now. My son still doesn't love school but he sees himself going to college because he has “big” plans, as he often tells us. He is doing his best and is happy with himself. His dad and I are very proud of who he is. This is what my son wrote for his high school application:

My personal challenge is that I have a learning difference called dyslexia. Dyslexia is a learning issue that affects how I learn but does NOT mean I am not as smart as anyone else. There are some big super-stars that have dyslexia like Thomas Edison and Danny Glover.

My first challenge is reading. I am a slow reader so when there is a book report I have to start earlier than my classmates so that I have time to finish the book and the report. I think this has made me more organized. It helps when teachers give me a heads up on what projects are coming so I can get started early. I usually need longer on tests than other kids. I had to learn that I am as smart as anyone else in this world. I learned that from my teachers when they tell me I am doing great and also because there are so many people that have this issue that have succeeded in their careers and hobbies.

Learning differently has made me patient because when you have a learning disorder you take longer to get some things than other kids, like multiplication facts. Frustration is one of the biggest things you'll run into if you are teaching a kid with learning disabilities. I remember when I was younger that homework would only take my other classmates ten minutes and it would take me twenty to thirty minutes. I wouldn't be able to go outside until my homework was all done. I would get so mad that they got to play and I didn't.

Another thing I have learned is to be more understanding of other people's struggles - even if they are different - I can relate. Sometimes you have to learn to fight for yourself because the people who are trying to help you under estimate you. Sometimes I have to speak out and say, “this is too easy, can I please have something harder?”

Over all I feel that I am a better, stronger person with more understanding of others who are challenged because of my own learning differences.