



The Horizon

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Shelton School and Evaluation Center

From the Director's Desk

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What Can Parents Do?

There is a story about a couple who planned a trip to Italy. They studied the geography, history, language and customs, and when completely prepared, they embarked on their trip. Somehow their travel agent confused their trip with that of another client and the couple landed in Holland. Needless to say, they were shocked and disappointed. They were counting on their treasured dream of Italy.

As they realized there was nothing they could do but adjust, they slowly began to love and appreciate many things about Holland: the beauty of the countryside, the lovely flowers and the friendly, practical people. Holland did not have the flamboyance of Italy and the couple grieved somewhat about the differences. The longer they stayed, the more they enjoyed their unique experience in this place called Holland.

This allegory exemplifies the feelings and experiences of many parents when they discover that their child has a learning difference due to Dyslexia or a related disorder. As parents absorb the diagnosis and try to project what that means for their child's education and future, they need the guidance of professionals in the field.

Having worked with students with language and learning disorders for over 40 years and having two children and grandchildren with learning differences (LD), I would offer the following guides.

Be Informed

Ignorance is not bliss. The more you know about learning differences and how they are remediated,

the more you can help your child. Read, go to lectures and conferences to find out the accurate information about what treatments are research-based and what programs are questionable.

To understand learning differences, it is important to know that they are caused by difficulties in processing spoken and/or written communication. The brain is normal but different in its anatomy and functioning. The intellect is normal and, for some, above average or superior. Even though intelligent, the student is handicapped by the reduced speed and frequent errors that occur in processing visual and auditory information and integrating that information in the process of reading, writing, spelling, and, in some cases, math. Many of these learning differences are genetic and are seen in multiple family generations. Worrying about the exact cause is non-productive. The important thing is to learn what to do to help the child as early as possible and to minimize the difficulties through well-prescribed specific instruction.

For over 70 years specific instruction for dyslexic individuals has been developed and used to lessen their difficulties. These programs are called Multisensory Structured Language (MSL) approaches.



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There are a number of different approaches, but all have the same content and principles of instruction. For a list of these approaches, please contact my office. It must be clearly understood by the parent that these approaches are therapeutic; they do not cure the student, but help him to become functional in the academic areas of his processing difficulty.

For example, an unremediated individual with Dyslexia may have a second- or third-grade reading level in high school, while a remediated individual will be close to grade level performance, at grade level or, in some cases, above grade level. Most dyslexic individuals can attain grade level performance in reading with remediation, but most are low average in spelling throughout life. In today's world, this poses less of a challenge, in that technology has provided the computer and the software for spell check and grammar check.

In addition to the MSL approaches for language skills, there are specific instructional programs for math. Other areas in which LD students may need specific instruction are organization and study skills, social skills and motor skills.

In my experience, about 70% of the students with the specific learning difference Dyslexia, also have Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. ADHD can be seen in three categories: Inattentive, Hyperactive, and Combined types. If a student cannot sustain his attention for a typical amount of time for his age, it of course affects learning. If the student is not focused as a lesson is presented, it is not stored in memory. It cannot be retrieved later to be used.

These programs designed for LD individuals caused by processing disorders do not cure, but do effectively improve academic skills.

If, as a parent, you become informed about the characteristics of learning differences, the challenges presented by these differences and the

specific instructional approaches and strategies to improve a student's academic skills, you will find, I believe that you feel more confident in helping your child. Knowledge does set us free from our needless worries. A learning difference is a challenge, but it is not the worst problem in the world.

Be Realistic

Helping a student with a learning difference is not a fast process. It takes years of hard work on the part of the student and the teacher or therapist to attain average to above-average performance in academic subjects.

If a student is dyslexic his greatest challenges are reading, decoding (breaking words apart and blending sounds together), spelling and written expression (writing sentences, paragraphs, essays, reports).

When a student is instructed using an MSL approach, reading decoding usually improves first. As decoding becomes more automatic, most students show improved reading rate and read more smoothly. Spelling improves slowly and will always be a challenge. Written expression requires a combination of language skills. Levels of writing ability from sentences to compositions take several years to improve.

Help Your Child Develop Patience And Perseverance

During the process of remediation the parent can assist the most by helping the student learn to persevere and be patient with himself. The teacher or therapist will work on this also. It takes a lot of practice to read more accurately and rapidly. This is a difficult skill, which most take for granted, because most individuals can do it with relative ease. Not so for the individual with Dyslexia. It is a slow, laborious and unsatisfying task, and he would rather avoid it. To improve takes disciplined practice. The parent and teacher must keep the student encouraged. Praise for effort — *good try, good job, you are doing better, I'm here to help, we'll get there* are words they need to hear.

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If a student has a related disorder, you may see average or above-average reading decoding and speed, but difficulty in reading comprehension and math, some weaknesses in spelling and difficulty in organizing thoughts for a written assignment.

Seek Knowledgeable Professionals/ Be Aware of Quick Fixes

If it seems too good to be true, it probably is not true. Helping the LD student is not fast. There are a whole group of difficulties that must be addressed individually and assimilated in order for a student to have average or above language skills of reading, writing and spelling. Some programs work on just one aspect of the total profile of the learning difference. They may help partially, but they are not comprehensive therapeutic approaches. Research has not proven that visual or motor training result in improvement of the individual's reading, writing and spelling. Many LD students do have motor coordination deficits and motor programs are helpful to remediate these weaknesses. It is not clear that there is coordination deficits and motor programs are helpful to remediate these weaknesses. It is not clear that there is carry over from motor training to academic subjects. Remediation must be specific. If there is a motor problem, do motor training; if there is a written language problem, teach reading, writing and spelling with a program written specifically for written language disorders. The most accepted programs for written language disorders are the MSL approaches. If the student has a math disorder, the instruction should be multisensory and given by a person trained to teach LD students.

One of the best things a parent can do is to ask the remedial program directors for a list of other parents they can talk to about their child's experience and improvement. Also ask for any research or evidence that is available on the efficacy of the remediation.

Collaborate With the Student's School

Most schools will work with the parents. Some are difficult. If at all possible try to communicate calmly and rationally with the school in getting services for your child. If you are in a public or private school you will find different levels of knowledge from school to school. If you cannot get services because your child does not qualify, I advise not to waste your child's time while you try to improve that situation. Try to find services within your community that begin to help your child while you negotiate with the school.

If your child is in an LD school the communication needs to be completely open between you and the staff. Don't try to hide information or play games with the staff. They are knowledgeable and will figure out that they are not getting the full truth from a parent. You have to become a team for your child. Work with the professionals. They have seen many children with similar difficulties. They will do their best to help you and your child face and improve his challenges.

Empathize, Don't Sympathize

Tell your child you understand that some things are really difficult for him or her. Reassure him that you will find help for him and that you will support him. Understand his feelings of frustration and help him learn to deal with them. We all feel frustrated at times. We have to learn to control our feelings, calm ourselves, take a break and start over. An LD child will not succeed if he lets anger or anxiety get the best of him. Teachers and parents have to help with these skills. Never tell your child that he is unable to learn certain things and, therefore, you will not expect him to try. Don't tell his teachers not to expect too much either. Let an experienced professional guide you in what you can expect and what is realistic for the student to achieve. In short, understand how your child feels, but do not feel sorry for him and try to protect him from the world. The goal is to find help for your child and to help your child cope.

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