

## Voices from the Field

### Parenting a Child with Learning Disabilities: A Viewpoint for Teachers from a Teacher and Parent

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#### Introduction

When I adopted my son, I was an early childhood educator with a Master's Degree who had taught young children for eight years and directed a child care and infant-toddler center for seven. I thought I knew something about children. Actually, I had a great deal to learn. It took years for me to learn about his needs. He slowly teaches me, but it took time to understand what his behavior was telling me, how to listen to the underlying messages and filter out my own wishes. Perhaps even more than these typical parenting questions, it took time for me to recognize the signs of a learning disability. I continue to learn, as he nears his 24th birthday. In offering the story of this journey from the perspective of a parent who is also a teacher, I hope to evoke in other teachers new, perhaps deeper, understanding for the child and the family who are dealing with learning disabilities.

#### As We Grew: Jan's Early Childhood and my Early Parenthood

When Jan was a toddler and preschooler, we had various difficulties. He was obstinate, wanting his way ferociously, which was, in my

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mind, typical for a two-year-old. He hit children in preschool, which mortified me. I think it was as much the reflection on me that upset me as it was the fact that he was hurting other children. He wanted what he wanted when he wanted it. At the time, I thought this was “normal” and tried to “tell/teach” him to wait and not behave this way. Of course that didn’t work, since lecturing rarely works. It took years for me to use that lesson I knew from my work experience. I could practice as a teacher much that was infinitely harder to use at home where more of my own feelings were involved.

### **Recognizing Learning Disabilities in Early Childhood**

When Jan was small, I had no idea he was developing in anything other than a typical manner. Being new to parenting, I accepted everything as part of development. I got annoyed with him for not listening or not responding quickly enough. In retrospect, I recognize some of the early hints of learning disabilities I missed. For instance, when he was three or four, I remember asking Jan what he wanted to eat and him repeating back to me slowly what I had offered (tuna, macaroni and cheese, pizza...) before pausing and then making a choice. Only now, looking back, do I know that he was having difficulty processing the choices. Even today, the connection between learning disabilities and processing difficulties is not well understood, partly because each child manifests this connection so differently (Dean & Burns, 2002, Green, 1998). As early childhood educators, we need to be more aware of children’s processing time. It may surprise us when we consider this in the children we think are “not listening.”

Later in early childhood, when Jan was learning to read, he had trouble remembering a word he had just known on a previous page. I didn’t know that that was a symptom of learning disabilities. As many parents and teachers do, I thought he was not paying attention or being lazy, and chided him for it. I now know this made him feel stupid. I should have remembered what I knew as a teacher, that children do want to succeed and laziness often has a deeper reason. Young children who don’t want to clean up, for instance, may need more explicit instructions on where things go. Or, when Jan took so long to answer me when I called him, I thought he was being disrespectful. I believe I (and other parents and teachers) turn this processing time into disrespect when I label the longer time he takes to register the request as disrespect and respond to it as if it were.

Processing weakness is a vague term, not easy to understand. I am not suggesting that it is easy for teachers to ascertain. However, they

can do what early childhood has always recommended: spend time observing children and listening carefully to what children and parents say and how they say it to see if there is an underlying problem.

### Understanding Learning Disabilities

As an early childhood educator, I did not know what learning disabilities looked like, since most are diagnosed at school age. I was not even sure they existed. I thought an early environment rich in language and reading could avoid most problems. How naïve I was. My belief that children in good environments don't have problems also made his problems my fault, a common feeling for parents. That is one of the extra layers of difficulty it is often hard for teachers to understand, the guilt and heartache parents experience. A good parent, even when he or she recognizes and finally accepts a problem (and acceptance takes more time than many teachers can stand for it to take) still has much to overcome to be able to think clearly about it. Parents have a multitude of emotions on the way to understanding that their child has learning difficulties and those emotions change constantly, as they gradually accept the challenges, learn what the difficulties mean and how to help.

In her article on coming to terms with an invisible disability, Crast-nopol (2009) writes about the issues she and other parents grapple with. In a heart-wrenchingly accurate passage, she asserts:

The parents are likely to experience overwhelming compassion for the child but also frustration, anger, distaste, and at times even disdain... The parents will under-protect and overprotect, be sensitive and dulled to the child's pain. They will feel resentful of the child's heightened dependency, and then ashamed of that...resentment. They will be envious and ashamed of envying those with typically-abled children. (p. 475)

For all those reasons, parents are often slow to accept the reality of a learning disability. It was not until Jan was in second grade and not even beginning to read that I realized he needed to be tested. It was then I began to face his "learning" difficulties, better termed life difficulties, as they affect his whole life from applying for a driver's license, a job, or a passport to having and keeping even a simple job. Even then, I thought he could "overcome" them in time. Understanding he would live with learning disabilities all his life has been a lengthy and painful process for both of us, as it is for most parents and children.

Furthermore, the results of the tests did not help me as much as they might have. I didn't understand what "processing difficulties" were and *I didn't know I didn't understand, so I didn't know to ask* (Dean & Burns, 2002). I didn't realize what such a low percentile score simply on

spelling would mean to his reading and writing for the rest of his life. I thought spelling wasn't that important and his very high score on comprehension would overcome everything else. Even with my background in education, I did not really understand what the tester was explaining to me about Jan's abilities and disabilities. Nor do most parents, because learning disabilities are still not well understood (Tremaine Foundation Report, 2010) and every child manifests them in different ways. Dean and Burns discuss the lack of a "clear consensus" among researchers themselves even on the *definition of the term* "processing" (p. 173). Teachers should understand that it can be extremely hard for parents to decipher when a processing difficulty is occurring. We may be able to help if we break down the issues for parents, sharing specific examples of occurrences in our time with their children and trying to involve them in finding solutions.

When I was able to move beyond blame and accept that Jan needed more help in learning to control himself, I got a brainstorm from my training as an educator and began a campaign to teach him to wait. I trained myself to be patient when he asked for something, and to say nicely, "I'll be there in a minute." Then I gradually increased the time before I came to help him. This strategy worked. However, one summer when, he was four, he began to sing to himself the then popular song, "Bad boy! Bad boy! What'cha gonna do when they come for you!" It hurt my heart to realize he thought he was a bad boy. I knew I had to do something more. I said, "Jan, you are not a bad boy and I'm going to show you. We are going to make a book with a page in it for everything good you do." I would catch him doing something good, however small, print a sentence about it large on a piece of paper and have him draw a picture about it (something from my teacher training that helped). Soon we had a book with many pages we could read to show him he was good. He loved it and it seemed to work. When he came back to school after that summer, his teacher said, "What did you do? He's a different child!"

Like other effects of learning disabilities, however, trouble with impulse control, does not end (Van Hook, 1975). To this day, Jan can act in a rough or thoughtless way, then regret it and apologize profusely a moment later. Van Hook, among others, says, "The child with a learning disability is frequently an unhappy, frustrated child, who feels personally inadequate. He feels he is failing his parents" (p. 71). I can only imagine how much harder it must be for biological parents, who often had these same difficulties as children, to feel their child's pain in addition to their own frustration, confusion, and guilt. We must remember, if children can be "good" they usually want to. If they are not, they are unhappy, too.

As teachers, we need to be cognizant of the possibility that processing issues might be factors in misbehavior. If they are, we must slow down and give children time to process our requests. We must put ourselves in the shoes of the child and the parent and notice how difficult it is for them, when even we, as trained educators, are frustrated by the behaviors. Teaching children with learning disabilities requires us to teach behavior as well as content more consciously and explicitly, and repeat what we expect more often, if we want to get the learning and change we hope for.

### Jan and I: Working with Successes and Failures in Later Childhood and Adolescence

The previous examples show some of my successes, but I made plenty of mistakes and often resisted understanding what Jan needed. Besides chiding him for not being able to do something he could not yet do, I too often screamed when I was frustrated with him, not realizing that he was more frustrated and even getting despondent about his deficiencies. In high school, he developed some depression, which may have been related to his disabilities and my response to them.

Homework in elementary and middle school was a nightmare. We spent many, tension-filled hours on it. After being in an inclusion class in middle school, when he went to a high school specifically for kids with learning disabilities, the teachers urged me not to help him with homework, to let him do what he could and stop so they would know what he understood. This changed our lives! No longer did we spend hours every night struggling with assignments he couldn't complete. If only more teachers understood how to take children's inability to do homework as a sign to differentiate (read "change") their instruction, more families might have peace at home at night, and more children might get enough sleep and learn during the day.

### Jan and I: Working with Successes and Failures into Adulthood

Jan now points out to me how his continued struggle with reading and math affects his whole life. Like some people with learning disabilities, directions are difficult for him. Thus, going to new places can be a problem. Learning difficulties can be pervasively intrusive in adult life, from counting change and figuring discounts to remembering the myriad numbers that define a person: telephone, social security, address, dates. Uncorrected spelling can be off-putting to prospective employers and even friends. Memorization can be another arduous task. Teachers

would do well to remember that children who have trouble with memorization can often learn concepts when a subject is made meaningful. In speaking, Jan's language-based difficulty is not always apparent. It interferes in subtle ways (Green, 1998). He may use the wrong word or say what he doesn't mean. Green puts it this way, "Language-based disabilities occur in endless permutations and combinations" (p.1).

### Jan's Struggle to Use His Strengths

Fortunately, Jan has many strengths. He has been extremely resourceful in many ways that help him in life. He has become very adept at social graces (unlike some people with learning disabilities), made many friends, and is well-liked by his professors. He has always been very sure of what he wants and this has been more useful in adulthood than I could have imagined. As an adolescent, he quickly picked up photography and knew he would major in it in college. He was also sure exactly which college he wanted to go to after only a few visits, and it has proved to be a good place for him, despite its lack of full services for people with learning disabilities.

Jan has a superb sense of humor. I suspect this, too, may be partially connected to his learning disability. He thinks in ways that are a little different than other people and is quick to see potential for humor. This trait has stood him in good stead. It is part of his charm and creativity and infectious to his peers. It demonstrates his quick intelligence, which is not always visible in other ways. Since my sense of humor is not as strong as his, I believe this is one of the gifts he received from his birth parents.

An additional strength is his uncanny ability in science, even before he could read. When he was tested in second grade, he performed at kindergarten level in reading and math, but at seventh grade level in science! This was incomprehensible to me. How could he know so much science without being able to read? Clearly, he was finding ways to learn information without reading.

Jan is caring and considerate about the people he loves and helpful to others. He has a keen sense of right and wrong and acts on it as much as he can. I believe all of this is partially a *product* of his disability, revealing its positive side. There are many positive sides to learning disabilities when strengths and talents are recognized and nurtured.

Teasing out parenting issues from learning disabilities has been a continuing journey. Because Jan is adopted, I find some things more difficult and some easier. He is a little more complicated for me to understand than a biological child might be. But, he also brings strengths

he might not have had if he were my biological child. Fortunately, since the passing of his adolescence, Jan has been loving, grateful for my continuing efforts to help him learn, and able to change when I change my approach. I recently received a text message from him saying, "You care so much, it makes me feel safe." What more could a mother ask? Of course, it was spelled correctly only because of the speech to text function on his cell phone.

### Helping Teachers Work Successfully with Parents of Children with Learning Disabilities

To help students in my graduate early childhood education classes understand how a parent might feel when he/she has a child with special learning needs, I often share with them a brief article comparing having a child with special needs to planning a wonderful trip to Italy and landing in Holland (Kingsley, 1987). It is an effective metaphor. The author speaks about how parents are excited and hopeful when they are expecting a child. Then, as they begin to find out the child has special needs, whenever those realizations come, that hope can change to worry and even disappointment, until they can learn to accept and enjoy the beauty and talent in the child they do have (the trip to Holland). The process of accepting the disability, learning to enjoy its positive side and deal with its negatives, can be long and, at times, painful. It is often fraught with mistakes.

Teachers sometimes mistake parts of this process as parents being in denial or not caring. Sometimes, parents avoid parent conferences or resist testing, leading teachers to make assumptions about their parenting skills, usually incorrectly. Learning what a child needs, what s/he can and cannot do and what constitutes support, is a slow process. Figuring out what a child and family need should be a collaborative process. It requires that teachers find in themselves the respect parents deserve, and suspend judgment so together they and the family can find what will help the child learn. It is hard work, but it has satisfying rewards.

Teachers can help children by:

- Looking for lag time that might indicate processing difficulty;
- Instructing children in detail about what to do rather than chiding them for not doing it;
- Trying not to raise our voices;
- Noticing repeated mistakes that look like "not paying attention";

- Slowing down and simplifying instructions;
- Not shaming children by asking them to read out loud;
- Using homework as a barometer of our success in teaching, making it clear we want children to do only as much as they can on their own;
- Finding alternatives to memorization;
- Instructing students in ways that make the material meaningful;
- Observing and listening carefully to behavior as well as words; and finally
- Acknowledging the difficulty and soliciting help and support from colleagues.

### Final Thoughts

Learning disabilities can present serious roadblocks to a satisfying life both in childhood and adulthood. Children suffer from constant failure and often ridicule, as my son did and does, because of their inability to live up to their peers' school achievement levels. Adults with learning disabilities who did not get sufficient help as children (or have lucky breaks, such as discovered acting talent) struggle to hold jobs and fulfill ordinary life requirements. Some populate the prisons out of proportion to their percentage in the general population. Some self-medicate and cost society in lost contributions.

On the other hand, children with learning disabilities who are helped to find success can contribute much to the innovative thinking and problem solving sorely needed in our world today. As you may know, Einstein, Cher and many others had or have learning disabilities. The challenge to help these children is complex, but teachers who struggle with this problem can make a significant difference in children's lives and possibly in our world. I, too, continue to grapple with these dilemmas. I do not have enough answers, yet. I hold hope that we, parents and educators together, can help find them.

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