

Let's Talk Learning Disabilities

EPISODE 01

Laurie and Abbey spend their days talking about dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, and ADHD. They talk to parents of struggling students and adults who have had a lifetime of academic challenges. They want to share those stories along with their own insights with you. So, let's talk learning disabilities.

Laurie: Welcome to Let's talk Learning disabilities, this is officially our very first episode because the introduction was episode 00. Today we are going to talk about dyslexia. It is all about dyslexia. We're gonna talk about it today like we would talk about it with the parents and adults that call in to get more information. We're not going to use any textbook definitions. We're not going to give you what you could read on the internet. We're just going to explain it to you like we would explain it to any one of our clients. We both feel like that's probably the best way to approach all of the disabilities we're going to be talking about, because we want it to be as understandable and as relatable as possible. So Abbey, when someone calls in and wants to know about dyslexia what do you tell them?

Abbey: I tell them it depends on the age of the person that is a struggling reader. Typically people are calling in saying my child is struggling to learn to read. In the young ages you know Pre-K, kindergarten, first graders, are oftentimes still struggling to remember their letters and their letter sounds or associate the sounds that go with the letters. They're struggling to blend sounds together and read words more fluently. They're struggling with spelling, they're struggling remembering what they read. Often times they're just memorizing sight words but they can't attack a new unfamiliar word they can't do what's called decode and use those phonics strategies to apply it to a new word. I'll tell them they're typically people with average to above-average intelligence and that dyslexia is the reading difficulty that is unexpected in relation to their other abilities. They're progressing in all other areas they're probably average in math and they are doing okay in science, except for the reading portion, but they're struggling with reading. And it often times in later grades, second and beyond, it transfers it carries over into difficulties with writing and it's affecting spelling abilities, word finding abilities. Sometimes these individuals struggle with thinking of the right word to say or they have limited vocabulary. They just can't pull out that word they're thinking of or they don't have the ability to use their context clues to choose

appropriate vocabulary words that would make sense and what they're thinking or what they're reading or what they're saying.

3:00 Laurie: Well when you talk about spelling, I feel like we have a lot of people that will say, "Oh well he gets a 100 on every spelling test." But my question is always, right but then can he spell that same word the next week? Because you know they memorize, that's what they do is they memorize. They have amazing memories and they've learned to compensate. They've learned how to kind of hide it by memorizing. Oftentimes when you're reading the same book over and over again all week, they've memorized it. If you pull out a new book, with the same words, they don't have any idea what they are in the other context, because the words aren't in the same order but the spelling is the one that they can memorize it. They can drill and practice those words for the whole week, take their spelling test make a 100, and then when they go to write it in a sentence they can't spell that word.

Abbey: Or they can read a word in one instance and then they can't read it again you know 30 seconds later halfway down the page. So they've just memorized it or they guessed based on the first letter they saw, which can be a good strategy for reading when you're trying to read. It can really frustrate parents.

Laurie: And I think that's how we typically tell them is that at its root it's an inability to assign the sounds to the letters and understand how those sounds and letters come together to make words. Something we get questions about too is aren't there lots of different types of what we call phonological Dyslexia. That's the most common type, that's what the schools will typically test for, and that's what the different programs typically address. So we're just going to really focus today on the phonological type. Maybe in a later episode, we can dive into what those other ones are. So how do you diagnose it?

4: 50 Abbey: Well that's a good question Laurie. Diagnosing dyslexia really needs to start with a comprehensive evaluation. You want to look at all of an individual's abilities and not just focus on reading skills. You want to see what is going on with their processing skills, how they're processing information and making sense of information, synthesizing information, and you want to test all academic areas as well to try to get to the root of the difficulties to see what their other abilities are. You want to be able to prove that this is an unexpected underachievement in the area of reading. So, really a comprehensive evaluation from start to finish that looks at cognitive processes and academic processes of learning.

Laurie: You want to rule out that it's not an attention issue, right? And you want to rule out that this isn't an auditory processing issue or a visual processing issue. So auditory processing means maybe they're just not hearing the sounds correctly, and I certainly can't teach somebody the sounds that make up a word, if they can't even hear them. So we've got to go back and address that issue first before I try to teach them how to read. Same with vision, it may not be, and we'll get into this again later, but it may not be that the words might be moving around on the page or there might be something going on with how they process what they see. They may have 20/20 vision, they may not. We want to look at all of those things too, to make sure that we're not sending them down a path that's not going to be helpful, putting them in a program that reteaches reading if they're not seeing or hearing the stuff correctly, is going to be extremely frustrating and they're going to get to the end of a program and waste a lot of time and have made zero progress or very little progress. So the full evaluation then, helps us rule out auditory processing, visual processing, attention and focus, or another type of learning disability. So you are exactly right, we have to really look at all of those things to show that nope, it's just this compared to everything else. Everything else looks great. Just this at the phonics level they're struggling. Now what you and I talk about a lot too with some of the older kids, is that it's amazing the strategies that kids can develop to hide or to compensate and so those strategies may work all the way through Elementary School you make it to middle school and then the work is too hard and their strategies aren't working and that's when you start to see the struggles. Then it's like, well we've never seen this before until now. It may be that they can go even further. I actually had my oldest student that I've diagnosed was a junior in college, and you know Mom had always suspected there might be some reading struggles, but she always blew all the testing out of the water. She did great all the way through until she got to her junior year, which is where they started taking those courses in her major, so brand new vocabulary, a lot of reading, brand new words that she had never seen before. Words that she hadn't memorized. Whatever strategies she was using, they just stopped working and it was such a relief to her to find out that ok, this is something you know, it's not that I'm just not good at this.

Abbey: Right, there's a word that goes with what I am experiencing.

Laurie: And she was able to go and I found out from her mom later on, that she was able to go on and graduate. I believe she was in accounting, but she went and got her Master's Degree. You know and it's so crazy to me that you can go that long, but she was able to do it so you know if you have a student or if you are an adult and you've always thought reading is hard you've always struggled with reading your spelling is terrible. It is not unbelievable for it to be dyslexia and have it go undiagnosed.

That is very common, and it's not too late to diagnose it. No, and like we said, it does look a little bit different at every age because of those compensatory skills and strategies that kids develop that it tends to hide it. Do we know what causes dyslexia?

Abbey: We do know that there is a huge hereditary component, so it is hereditary within families and typically if you search through your family's history there is someone else that has had dyslexia diagnosed or undiagnosed or reading difficulties. It also can happen from premature birth. It can cause low birth weight and make those individuals more predisposed to different learning disabilities or trauma at birth, but really there aren't known causes. There are different aspects of the brains of dyslexics when they get brain scans, different areas of the brain are affected, but there is really no known cause besides the fact that we know it has a huge hereditary component.

9: 30 Laurie: Yeah, I know I've had lots of parents say I just don't think that we have any but then they could do some research and say you know my grandmother said that she struggled with reading, or they just go back far enough and nobody was being diagnosed at that time. So that's pretty typical. I think one thing I really want to talk about is what dyslexia is not. So one thing that we get tons of phone calls about is letter reversals, B&D reversals, p&q reversals, number reversals, transposing numbers, transposing letters, reading backwards. I would love to find the person that started that rumor. I don't know who they are but they have got everybody believing that writing backwards, we'll even joke about it if we write something wrong I go, oh there's my dyslexia. Which it really is nothing about dyslexia. Letter reversals are totally appropriate developmentally through the end of second grade. I have a child who has a later birthday, and he was doing them into third grade a little bit, but I knew because of his May birthday I might go a little bit over that second grade mark. But they're totally normal, and so if you've got a child or you're a teacher and you see you got kids in your class that are reversing letters all the way through second grade, it's totally normal. After second grade if it continues, then we're talking more about a visual processing issue, how their brain is interpreting what their eyes are seeing, but it really has nothing to do with dyslexia. Isn't that funny? Again, I really wish we could find the person that started that rumor. But, what about testing students who are in pre-k, like what if I think my pre-k, or four-year-old has dyslexia?

11:05 Abbey: Well really, you want to see if we are looking at someone who has had what I'd call the educational opportunities. So have they had education or instruction in the foundational skills of reading? It is too early to diagnose

dyslexia in my opinion on a Pre-K student that hasn't had the exposure to phonics instruction, sight word instruction, the foundational reading skills, learning through that multi-sensory approach of all the different sounds of the letters and associating each letter with its sound and putting those sounds together. It's also developmentally at 4 years old and in pre-k 4 and 5 also, their brains developmentally aren't ready to be reading at four years old. They're still learning through play and through tactile sensory input and their brains are not fully ready to learn to read that's why the curriculum is designed to start Teaching letters and sounds of letters in kindergarten.

Laurie: And all of the stuff that we use are standardized meaning that they compare you against other people or other kids or whatever your same age so four-year-old turn expected to be reading yet cuz Riley Tessa four-year-old they're going to look pretty average cuz it's not expected right there below average know it can be really hard to be below average when nobody's reading yet. Our rule of thumb is always by the garden because I feel like that gives you a full semester of formal instruction and learning your letters now if you have a summer birthday or really young for kindergarten. The whole another conversation to two. Manager developmentally the right age for the second semester kindergarten I feel like then you got to you got a chance it's showing that you're behind it's really hard to be behind when nobody learned anything yet we've had it I think the schools in a better job of starting to screen in first grade for a while I think there are still some school that will say we don't have until the end of second grade but I think is way too late because when you get to third grade you're not learning how to read anymore, you're reading to learn but you don't want to spend your entire third grade year learning how to read while everyone else is moving on and reading to learn. Most dyslexia programs which we have really gotten into yet are at least that I'm familiar with are usually around a two-year program it takes about two years and they go back and teach phonics and the way that I explained that the parents, cuz I am not a dyslexia therapist at the way I explain it is that they teach phonics in a language that a dyslexic brain understand the traditional Creek elem the way that phonics traditionally in the school's a person with dyslexia it's like they're teaching in German they may as well be speaking a different language so that is Lexia program goes back through and start over with a Apple app but it does it in a way that teaches them in a language they understand that their brain understands it's a multi-sensory and that's that's the way it is Lexi brain I just like the green learn teaching them the way they learn best they're also because they struggle to learn the sounds and the apply the phonics strategies and rules they do teach them the underlined reading rules of the English language they teach them different learn the different different reading rules that associate with these vowel combinations or this letter or why this letter makes this certain sounds so it gives them some underlying reasoning behind certain sounds and

how they're made and why they occur so that's why I often times and in many schools they say the you know a lot of struggling Learners they say that they may or may not do well in dyslexia programs because you want to be able to have a decent memory and at least average intelligence to remember all the different strategies and rules your tots dyslexia therapy intervention programs but it can be corrected and really remediated through dyslexia therapy intervention programs like Laurie said, they're multi-sensory programs that are also taught in a very structured very systematic way that again, is geared towards the brain of an individual with dyslexia.

Laurie: They fascinate me how they have they really do they work through it as such a methodical method which is why it is so important to me for dyslexia if your public school or your private school offers I just like the program that could replace their regular reading instruction because going to reading again is like going to French, they don't understand it. They need it to replace that time, that would be the best but the best part about it is that when they're done with that program they have all the same tools that I have to decode a word they just they just a different way and so it's pretty cool so the sooner you do it the right I've noticed the sooner these kids get those intervention unless the struggles are later on you know if we've got a kid coming in here for testing so that you know they need updated testing for whatever reason they're in 10th Grade and I know that they were diagnosed in first grade they went through the dyslexia program their struggles now are much less than they would have been had they not done the program or done it much later right. So I feel like diagnosing it at an early age with dyslexia is so important because you want to get that reteaching the teaching in the method that they understand completed so they can just keep moving on with their peers. Now will they ever loved to read I don't know maybe not will there ever be great spellers doubtful they always drug list spelling is typically the last skill to come for individuals with dyslexia and that's what we've got the most help and that's what's most socially acceptable so the sooner you can get that help, the less its going to impact you long-term you know now does that mean that is 12 greater or a junior in college which is likely that there a lost cause no because there are different ways than to address it at an older age I'm not going to go back to go back with a junior in college and teach them "a apple a" fairly certain they've got that but there are pieces that go in and figure out what is missing where are the gaps and how do I plug goes in and help them understand the language better so that they can move forward and spell and decode words easier.

15:50 Abbey: And they also in those later grades like you said Laurie, there are reading to learn and so comprehension is key if you're expending all your mental energy by breaking down every single word you're confronted with them by the end by the end of that sentence or that passage or that page you can't remember anything

you've read and you have no comprehension again. Another reason I'm in support of that early intervention is so that by the 3rd grade they are reading to learn because reading comprehension in Reading is in every single subject they're going to be in and it's going to affect them in all subjects and in all content.

Laurie: And, I think it's important to know that you don't have to be completely done with a dyslexia program by the time you start third grade but if you can have a chunk of it under your belt you know some of the get through the first half of it or even the first quarter of it I can get done prior to that point is to I think just going to make life easier for you when it comes to all the reading that happens. It's not always possible though. There's lots of reasons why kids have to wait and do these programs later on. Does it mean they're less effective now? No, it just means they had more years of struggle.

Abbey: That's right, and there are different programs for older students versus younger students so I just like seeing a therapist is going to look at the age and experience of the individual also so the way teaching through dyslexia therapy interventions in middle school is very different sometimes of what they're teaching in the early Elementary grades

19:50 Laurie: It is definitely personalized for each student but it is really important to say that it just doesn't mean that you have to do more practice and reading and go to a place like Sylvan or Kumon. Those are great for other needs and issues, for dyslexia, it's not because just going back and reteaching somebody phonics in the same way they learned it the first time, is not going to help. And we had that we had kids that have repeated grades. It's not going to help because their brain doesn't understand the way it's being taught. You have to use that specialized instruction. There are private therapists, there are some great centers that do like an Orton Gillingham type language-based dyslexia therapy. And then there are individual dyslexia therapists that have been trained and are certified in the ways of Dyslexia therapy.

21:00 Abbey: That's right, and there is a lot of curriculum that has been developed and based on a lot of research on individuals with dyslexia. So when we say dyslexia intervention, or reading intervention it is not just reteaching phonics. It is using one of those research based curriculum programs that are available that are based on what Laurie mentioned, the Orton-gillingham method that has been around a very long time and have done a ton of research on dyslexia and dyspraxia intervention programs and dyslexic brains. So any type of reading program that is Orton-Gillingham based is going to be one of the most beneficial programs for individuals with dyslexia. Once

you've diagnosed it, we're working on correcting it, but in the meantime while we're working on correcting it how can you accommodate individuals with dyslexia? How can you help them be successful day to day in the classroom setting or adults in the workplace?

21: 50 Laurie: Because yeah, once you get diagnosed then you've got to figure out a way to manage now, while you work on that program to improve those skills. Typically we talk about classroom accommodations which are just ways to kind of level the playing field for these kids. I think it's super important to have an opportunity to have stuff read to them. Whether they're using audio books, whether they've got Mom or Dad reading homework, adults for sure have audio books, you can have the software on your computer that reads emails to you or that reads text on your computer. Any type of help in that, to me, that's the very best thing. The reading is the hard part, how many kids are even adults are great at comprehending if you read it to me, but then once you made me read it, now I'm lost in the words and I can't tell you what it said. So that's a big one. They need more time to practice, more time to finish assignments, more time to take tests, things like that because they are going to have more time if they are forced to read it themselves. They're going to have to read it more than once before they understand it but by giving them that time, they're not getting that anxiety of "Oh great everyone else is done and I'm only halfway." And not counting off for spelling mistakes unless it's a final draft is something is when we always talk about too. They're going to make spelling mistakes but if someone helps them then they're able to turn in a final draft or final copy of something. Or just not counting off on spelling unless it's a spelling test. But in that same breath, spelling tests should be modified because they should not be expected to memorize the same 20 words everyone else is doing. They should have a modified list and honestly in a perfect world that list should respect the rules that are being covered in their dyslexia program. So those to me are the big ones.

23:30 Abbey: Maybe a teacher picking the most important words. Oftentimes learning sight words that you have to memorize is more important than spelling words. When you look at modifying a spelling list, extra time on assignments does come to mind but also extra time to respond to questions asked oftentimes is helpful for individuals with dyslexia. They are processing information a little bit differently and they're processing language a little bit differently and so extra time to respond, extra time to complete assignments.

24:00 Laurie: This one should go without saying but, make sure that they're not picked to read out loud because it happens and sometimes not on purpose of the teacher, they just forget. But making sure that there's some way for them to know

that they are not to be asked to read out loud for the class because that's mortifying for those kids. They already feel bad enough about themselves then to share it with the rest of the class.

Abbey: Allowing them to use a place marker oftentimes will help also because they need to follow along underneath the words that they're learning. They're practicing again, decoding each and every sound usually in the beginning of their Intervention Program so sometimes just covering up the rest of the words and the rest of the page and focusing in on one line you're reading can help your brain focus in on those words and decode those words slowly and efficiently.

25:05 Laurie: One thing I forgot something to do with the audio books is have them follow along. Not just have the audio version but have the paper version so that they can literally with their finger, follow along. I think so many good things happen if you follow along while someone else is reading to you so whether you have the audio book or you have someone reading it to you because you're seeing the sight words. Our language is a hot mess and there are words that you can't decode and don't follow any phonetic rules of how to spell because phonetically I get it wrong every time. So there's those words you just have to memorize over and over again as you follow along but also I always feel like most of the audiobooks are read at a pretty average rate so if you're pacing yourself, like if I want to run an 8 minute mile Lord help me, I would find a group that runs 8 Minute miles and I would run with them. And in the beginning I would die. So, if you're following along with somebody who was reading at an average rate in the beginning it's going to be a little harder but eventually you're going to keep up and up training those muscles in your brains so that when the reader is gone that's kind of the rate you should be reading at. It's like having a good model. I think the following along piece, like listening when you can't follow along, there isn't a paper book available or you're driving and you can't follow along and that's okay. It's great to listen but when you can follow along a lot of good things can happen if you follow along.

26:30 Abbey: That does go back to that approach for the dyslexic brain, it's multi-sensory. They learn best and they remember best through a multi-sensory approach. So the more senses that are involved in learning the more it's going to help them understand and remember the skill or concept. So seeing it, hearing it, touching it, all of those are hitting all the senses.

27:00 Laurie: Well if you read out loud these kids get more fluid with reading and recognizing their words that they can read out loud to themselves. Then they're seeing it, saying it, hearing it and potentially touching it, and the more likely

they are to remember what it is that they're reading. I want to talk about advocating because kids already feel bad about themselves they don't want to remind the teacher, "Don't forget, I get to take my test in the other room where I have more time or where someone goes and reads it to me." So it's super important for kids to understand dyslexia and know that it doesn't mean that they're not smart and it doesn't mean that they aren't capable. It's just that their brain learns differently and so they're going to be taught in a way their brain understands. Until then, we're going to need to do some things a little bit different and it's okay and they need to be okay with that and they need to be learning to advocate for themselves.

27:44 Abbey: You know, once we've made a diagnosis parents will often ask "Should I tell my child?" or "How do I explain it to my teenager?" and so it is important for an individual to understand their own difficulties and understand the challenges that they experience. Putting a word to it sometimes, giving it a name, makes it easier to really grasp and be okay with and accept and understand. And then you can talk about how it is just that your brain learns differently and it's not anyone's fault. It is not that you're dumb or that you're not smart. They see their friends sitting next to them not struggling the same way that they're struggling. So again, you can't advocate for your own needs unless you know that you have those needs and that those needs are okay. It's okay to ask for this help because you're entitled to it. Again, accommodations are not a crutch, they're just leveling the playing field. They're making sure that everything is fair for everyone learning. And so to be able to advocate for your needs and ask for your accommodations, you have to know that you're entitled to them and why.

29:15 Laurie: You gotta understand it I think I can't tell you how many kids you can just see when we explain it I don't say but when you explain it just like their face changes it's like a relief like oh it's just dyslexia. When they don't have a name for it then their mind goes everywhere and so, I agree, I think from parents, we do get asked a lot if we think it's important for all ages. I think you inform them with words and vocabulary in ways that are appropriate for their age. You're not going to go into a whole scientific explanation of Dyslexia with a four or the six-year-old, but you're going to give it a more advanced encryption to an adult. So you want them to have the knowledge and you know there's some really great YouTube videos out there that I think are great for kids, I love YouTube. I love the way to explain things if you want it explained away. The Great Wave is a great resource for kids to go to to be okay and then maybe even talking about some of the famous people that have dyslexia because there are a lot of famous people. Albert Einstein had dyslexia. A lot of successful high-end business Executives, successful business people, famous people and that's something for kids I think is helpful to show them that they can be

successful. I think that a very impressive question we get a lot is "Will they be able to go to college?" Absolutely, as long as they know what kinds of accommodations are going to be helpful and that we get some kind of program in place to help fill in whatever gaps are there that's appropriate for how they learn, then yeah the sky's the limit. There's no cure, it does not ever go away don't worry. No it doesn't, it's there forever but it can affect you a lot less the more you fill those gaps with the right kind of instruction. The more you understand and learn about it and I do feel like we all college or high-school students are probably not going to major in journalism. It's just not something that they're interested in because they've never been good at it. And those are going to be our teachers so I do feel like you tend to gravitate toward what you're good at but you can go as far as you want, but it doesn't ever go away. It is always there and if you have it then you know that you have a really good chance, probably 50-50, of passing it on to a child so you then can be more aware of the signs as they develop and get into that fit. Get into school age and attend school then you know the things to look for and you will be more aware and on top of it. I think dyslexic people make some of the very best dyslexia therapists because they understand the struggle. So if you have any other questions about dyslexia or if there's something that you want to suggest maybe for another episode please feel free you can email us at LetsTalkLearningDisabilities@gmail.com. My name is Laurie, my name is Abbey, thank you guys for joining us today and we will look forward to seeing you or hearing from you or are you hearing us at our next episode thanks so much have a good day, bye.

Length of episode 33:28