

Let's Talk Learning Disabilities

EPISODE 06

Welcome to Let's Talk Learning Disabilities with Laurie Peterson and Abbey Weinstein. Laurie & 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: Hello happy new year today. It is officially 2021. Welcome to let's talk learning disabilities. I Abbey.

Abbey: Hi, welcome. Happy new year, happy new year.

Laurie: This is very exciting. We're excited to finally have made it to 2021. We're hoping for a really great year. Put 2020 behind us. It's a big year for me though, 2021. When I get to turn 50. So I'm a little freaked out by that. It's a big year. Like no way is it already here, but it's a milestone.

Abbey: It's a huge milestone.

Laurie: Exactly. So, okay. So today we're going to talk about something a little bit different. We're going to go down the road of visual processing disorders. And so we actually see a lot of kids and adults that have a visual processing disorder. And while that sounds like something that you only go to the optometrist for, it's where you end up, but it's not always where you go first when you have these kinds of issues. So I thought it'd be good just to kind of talk about what we see, what kinds of, what are the red flags people complain about or what are their chief, you know, symptoms of a visual processing disorder and then how we identify it and what they can do about it. Okay. So, Abbey, what are some of the things that we hear when we have people that come in and they're concerned about something that turns out to be a visual processing problem. What are their usual complaints?

Abbey: I think the most common complaints we hear are the reversing letters. The student is reversing letters, or the adult is reversing letters. They're seeing words backwards or reading words backwards, or they complain that the words are moving on the page, or the letters are moving on the page.

Laurie: They see the word "saw," but they read "was."

Abbey: They read backwards. They write backwards. They often times will skip words when they're reading, skip whole lines when they're reading passages or paragraphs. And so those are, I think some of the most common complaints we hear when. People call in or come in and they suspect that it might be dyslexia.

Laurie: And why is it that they always think it's dyslexia?

Abbey: Well, because there is that myth out there that dyslexia is reversing letters, reading backwards, writing backwards, seeing words, moving on a page, which is totally a myth. So, when we hear that, we often, because we've experienced so many different clients with visual processing disorders, we often times have that little red flag go up that, Oh, we need to look carefully at their visual processing skills and see if it might be a visual processing disorder.

Abbey: The other thing I think we get a lot of is kids who can't spell. Because at the end of the day, what, what people forget is that spelling is very much a visual task. Like when you spell a word, you look at it and say, Ooh, that doesn't look right, but you never say that doesn't sound right. And so when kids spell phonetically, because we've already talked about dyslexia and how it's a phonetic, you know, it's a diff it's difficult to understand in phonics and how letters and sounds come together to make words. So when somebody spells very phonetically. Well, that's a sign that the phonics piece is intact, but they're not recognizing that the word looks wrong.

Abbey: Especially with words with irregular patterns that you just have to memorize that visual sequence, which is in essence what it is. It's a sequence of visual symbols, which are the letters that they have to memorize. And they're having trouble seeing those visual sequences and memorizing those visual sequences.

Laurie: So, when we have someone that comes in and they are complaining of disfluent reading difficulty with writing spacing when they write, like they cram all their words together, or they leave giant spaces in between their letters and words. Sometimes they have a hard time keeping their letters sitting on the line and they float up off the line. One of the ones I think is pretty common too that people chalk up to other issues is that when they're doing their spelling list or making a list of things on the paper, the list slowly makes its way to like the right of the page, right. Start on the left. And then they slowly, by the end, they're writing all the way on the right side of the page. So unable to kind of keep that line. And so by

ruling out dyslexia, right, by telling them that look phonics, look great. You understand how the words come together? But it's how you're seeing the words and what we often end up seeing too, is that they'll rub their eyes complain of headaches or that their eyes get tired.

Abbey: Eye strain even we'd see, oftentimes too, when they're reading, they'll take a break from what they're reading and look away often throughout their reading. They'll look away as if they're giving their eyes a break. Or they're visually overstimulated or they put their head in their hand, like they're just mentally so exhausted that from reading it, it is exhausting to them and overstimulating to the eyes. I'm sure it is, it's exhausting to them.

Laurie: They also will complain of those headaches. And it's always interesting too, because after we talk to them about the visual processing and how we really feel like that's what the main issue is. All of a sudden, they begin to think, Oh, that's why I have to use my finger when I'm reading or that's why it takes me so long to copy stuff from the board or copy things from one place to the other.

Abbey: Or I make my font one inch on my iPad or my Kindle or my phone. I increased the font size. Yup.

Laurie: They tend to do better when things are bigger and less is on the page.

Abbey: So, Laurie, let me ask you this. Why is it that many kids come in with perfect vision and their pediatrician didn't catch something like a visual processing or even the eye doctor.

Laurie: A lot of the kids that we see adults too, they've already been to the eye doctor because they feel like there's something not right, but they have 20/20 vision and we're not talking about acuity. They may see 20/20. But they may see 20/20, and the words may be moving around on the page. They may be clear as day, but they're moving. And so it's not about the acuity. And I think that's probably what's so frustrating for most people that we diagnose is that they've been to the eye doctor. They can see, and it's crazy to me. And I know, um, hopefully our next guests will be, uh, Dr. S was going to come in and talk to us a little bit more about how he diagnoses the different aspects. Uh, visual processing disorders, but parents and adults even get very frustrated. They're like, we've seen the eye doctor. And that's just not something that they look for. And so, I'll be real honest. I mean, there are so many different aspects of visual processing, um, the way the eyes accommodate or make, um, you know, focus in on what you need and the way that they track across the page, the

way your two eyes work together as a team to move across the page. And so those are things that a typical optometrist, they're not looking at that.

Abbey: Focusing at the same rate on the same signal, are they looking at the peripheral the same. Are they moving out and moving in at the same rate? Right?

Laurie: One example that Dr. S gave me, to help parents understand is that like, if we're standing across the room from each other and I throw you the, and I'm getting ready to throw you a ball before I throw the ball, you see me and you see everything around me behind me, as I throw the ball, your vision closes in and to just where you only see the ball, so you can catch it. But then you look back up and everything opens up again. Sometimes the eyes don't close fluidly, so they get, people will get very visually overwhelmed because while they're trying to read this one line, everything around that one line is getting in the way. It could even be something happening on the other side of the room. So guess what often gets misdiagnosed there?

Abbey: Attention.

Laurie: Right. Because if I'm constantly looking around every time I see something, it doesn't have to be, I hear it. But if I see it and I'm like, Oh, what's that that's not attention. That's my vision. I can't close it in. Also sometimes we've had a couple students, especially younger kids where their vision almost gets stuck in that closed place. So they're only seeing two or three letters at a time, their eyes won't kind of open to see the whole line.

Abbey: They're trying to hyper focus on a few letters at the same time.

Laurie: Yeah, you can't decode a word two letters at a time and you can't recognize a word three letters at a time. And so again, it's back to that choppy. Disfluent reading. They're trying to sound every word out. Um, they look very dyslexic and, and sometimes it's really hard to help somebody understand. Now, can you have this and dyslexia? Sure you can have both. And that's a bummer because that's, you're like a double whammy when it comes to reading. Right? So, okay. So then what, like, so we determined that it's, that it's the visual processing issue. We know it's not dyslexia. So now what do they do?

Abbey: Well, it's actually very easily treatable. There are optometrists that specialize in learning related vision issues and they do, like you said, a very thorough evaluation of your visual processing. They determine to the extent you have this visual processing disorder and how it is definitely impacting you individually

and how your eyes are working and not working at the rate or the pace or at the focus that they need to be focusing in. And, and so they oftentimes will recommend vision therapy.

Laurie: Which sounds really hokey.

Abbey: It sounds hokey, but we've heard so many success stories of parents calling insane. Oh my goodness. That's what it was all along. And my son or my daughter went through vision therapy and it's like the light bulb went off and now everything's great. And they're reading and making success and making progress and having successes. Um, they also can. Be, um, treated with certain lenses can be prescribed that can help with, depending on your type of individualized visual processing disorder.

Laurie: We actually had a student in not that long ago, sometime in this past calendar year who she was a third grader and she had on some glasses. And they just had the slightest bit of tint in them. And, um, she was one of the rare kids that they caught a visual processing issue prior to seeing us. Cause that doesn't happen that often. But I asked her, I'm like, tell me a little bit about your glasses. How do they help you? And she's like, well, when I wear my glasses, I can see the spaces between the words, but without my glasses, everything runs together.

Abbey: That's interesting.

Laurie: And it's something about the way the light refracts and the tint. Makes that just enough change to where everything kind of opens up for her. So that was one, another interesting story. Cause I liked that was the whole point, I wanted to share stories. Um, we've had two different high school boys come through and they were either like a senior or junior or even get ready for college. They were baseball players. And they both had noted, not just academically were they having some struggles, but they noticed that there they're hitting their batting was, had kind of dropped, fallen off a little bit. And what we realized at the end was. At some point in learning your baseball skills and as you improve and get older, you have to start being able to read the pitch, see how the pitcher has their fingers and watch how the ball rotates towards you. That's when they stopped being able to hit the ball because they couldn't read the pitch anymore. You know, they couldn't ever read it, but once it became an important skill for them, They couldn't do it. And so everyone else was starting to be able to read pitches and they were going to move it on and their batting was improving and they stayed stagnant.

Abbey: So it can definitely impact you in other areas other than just academics.

Laurie: It really can impact like what I call kind of the fine motor of a visual processing, you know, the tracking across the page and seeing spaces, but it can also impact the big stuff. Like not knowing your place in space and bumping into furniture all the time. Um, yeah, we had a student, um, who came to us. This has been a couple of years, but she had actually been diagnosed with ADHD, but the way that they made the diagnosis is with this computer test, that's supposed to measure your ability to stay focused. And it keeps showing these different stars, like an eight pointed star and a 12 pointed star. And every time you see like the 10 pointed star, you're supposed to hit the spacebar. And it reads like how slow you do it, or if you're impulsive and it really fast anyway, well, she had terrible visual processing. She couldn't tell the difference between an eight pointed star and a 10 pointed star. So she actually left there with an ADHD diagnosis and she didn't have any ADHD, but her parents said she was, so she was clumsy. She bumped into things and she probably had the worst visual processing we had seen. So it's, it's amazing how it can go completely undiagnosed. All the way into adulthood because we've seen adults with it. And so, yeah, it's just something that I think most people don't know about it.

Abbey: We recently also evaluated a college age girl that was struggling academically. I think she was in college or high school and it turned out that. It was a visual processing disorder. She had all the signs and symptoms. She had some really good skills, but when, when I was reviewing the results with her and I started talking about visual processing and all the signs and symptoms and implications, she had this little epiphany and said, Oh my goodness. I've been telling my mom for years that I can't see things on the board and she sits in the front row. She sits as close to the board as possible, and they've gone to the eye doctor and had her eyes checked. And her visual acuity is just fine. And so when they heard visual processing disorder and all the signs and symptoms. The light bulb went off and they were both mom and daughter were like, Oh my goodness, that must be exactly what it is. And they were so excited to know that there was an optometrist that can help them. And that could treat the visual processing disorder.

Laurie: Well, I think it's awesome that the prognosis is so good that most of these kids and adults can go get the vision therapy. They can get the lenses. They can get back to where reading is fun. I had a mom call me and say, you know, we had this particular student. I'm getting lenses and now she just wants to read books all day long. She can't stop picking up books. And it was like, Oh, that's so awesome to know that it was such an easy fix, right. It's something that can be completely fixed.

Abbey: Yeah. And I love that, you know, and oftentimes too, we see it affecting math skills, not just reading skills. So missing the signs, the plus sign, the subtraction sign, the multiplication sign. It can affect being able to really hone in on those fine details.

Laurie: Well and keeping your work lined up, keeping those numbers and columns lined up. Those are those kids that can do all the math in their head but when they go to show their work, they can't, it confuses them. And so they're the ones that are constantly getting, counted off or not showing their work. Yet, the answers are always right. They have amazing mental math. They also have listening skills because they've learned to listen for the information because the visually overwhelms them. So it's pretty cool. So yeah. You know, I'm excited to hear, I have Dr. S come on and give us a little bit more information, but we kind of wanted to lay the groundwork of what exactly visual processing is, how we see it every day. He'll probably give us a little bit more of the technical jargon.

Abbey: Yeah, good to have a medical background in there.

Laurie: I think it's super important to kind of spread the word about this, because I do feel like so many kids are getting misdiagnosed with dyslexia, with ADHD, with other things, um, that when it really comes down to it, it's just the way their eyes are working together. The way their eyes are communicating with their brain. And it's, it's something that can be completely fixed. I'm excited we got to have this conversation today.

Abbey: Yeah, me too!

Laurie: If you want more information about visual processing, you can visit our website at diagnostic-learning.com. Abbey, thanks for being here with me today.

Abbey: Sure. Thanks for joining me. I hope everyone has a happy and a healthy new year ahead.

Laurie: Absolutely. Thanks for joining us. Happy new year and have a great 2021. Thanks. Bye.

Thank you so much for joining us today. In our show notes you can find information about today's talk, as well as links to the resources and other episodes. If you have questions about today's talk, have ideas for future episodes or just want to stay connected, you can contact us through Diagnostic Learning Services on Facebook,

Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram. So, Let's Keep Talking Learning Disabilities. This podcast is sponsored by E Diagnostic Learning. You can find more information at www.ediagnosticlearning.com.

Length of episode 17:07