

Let's Talk Learning Disabilities

EPISODE 10

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: Hey everybody. Welcome to let's talk, learning disabilities. This is Laurie.

Abbey: and I'm Abbey.

Laurie: And today we are going to talk about dysgraphia. So this is a pretty common learning disability, that we really do hear a lot about because dysgraphia really at its root would be really messy handwriting. Right. And it affects a lot of kids. Now, messy handwriting can be sometimes just I've rushed through my work. So my writing looks like crap, but it can also be, I don't know how to form my letters. I don't know how to space my words. So Abbey, if a parent asked you what is dysgraphia or I think my child has dysgraphia. What are some of the symptoms you're wanting to hear from them?

Abbey: Um, that. They do struggle with handwriting, even when they do slow down and take their time. And they're trying hard and putting in effort that their letters are not formed correctly, that they're watching that they can't form those letters correctly. They don't start at the bottom of the line and go up or they don't start at the top and come down and around. And those letters look like they're misshapen and poorly formed or invariably formed. We also see, oftentimes they struggle with spacing and there is inappropriate spacing where they'll just write all their words, blending altogether as one big, long sentence. And you can't see a word in you can't see. You can't decipher the words within the brake, the brake. Yeah. Oftentimes too. You'll see a lot of erasers and cross outs where they're constantly catching their own mistakes, correcting something. They're having struggles with retrieving those words from their brain. There's some kind of disconnect between the brain and the hand and the pencil. And so they're you know, struggling there. And so we do see a lot of erasers cross outs, heavy pressure, you know, you'll see a lot of really dark

print or they're shaking their hand when they're done writing because it's painful and hurting and they've been pressing way too hard.

Laurie: They also might hold their pencil funny. Right? That's made everybody, you will see some weird pencil grips. We've seen lots of weird pencil grips, but there's kind of a general set that works pretty efficiently, but it says like fist grips or, um, when they have like a, what do you call that? A tripod where all your fingers coming together at the bottom.

Abbey: And there's just no way to control a pencil that way ring finger and their thumb is way too far forward over it. Yes. So yeah, that we do see that often with, um, individuals with dysgraphia, that inappropriate pencil grip.

Laurie: Something I think you may have mentioned is we also see where they start at the bottom and work their way up when they draw their letters instead of like draw, you know, we all learned back way back when, you know, you start at the time. I remember the, remember the alphabet that was above the, um, or have the arrows . So like for, you know, for your P you start at the top and you draw down, then you go back up to the top. And I think the reason why you see so many erasers is that, or erasures is that the process of writing is so hard for these kids, that the content tends to get lost, or the spelling gets lost. And so they make lots of mistakes because they're just trying to think about, did I leave enough space? Did I make that letter correctly? Wait, how do I spell that word? That writing is so overwhelming for them that, they make lots of mistakes and the content, they just don't want to write very much. So if they're going to write a sentence for us and we want them to use the word, the somebody with dysgraphia is going to write the dog Gran. And that is going to be fine where somebody without it might give us a big, long, great sentence, but they're going to give us the bare minimum because writing is so painful for them. They may have amazing ideas, right. They might be able to tell us sentences for days, but ask them to write it and we're going to get like nothing and it's going to be really hard to read.

Abbey: And that's what I was going to say. I mean, it's oftentimes just. Very very hard to read. It's beyond messy handwriting. It's almost illegible when you look at it

Laurie: And we are going to put in the show notes, we are going to include some samples of like, I think we talked about maybe like a second graders, dysgraphic handwriting, or first graders, and then maybe a little bit older, like a middle school student. So you can kind of get some ideas because the one thing dysgraphia

isn't is, if they take their time, they can write neat. These are not kids that are rushing that are just trying to get it done. These are kids that it really doesn't matter how slow they go. Right. It's not going to be legible.

Abbey: Exactly. So, so it's almost physically painful for them. And so you see a lot of tears during writing time. A lot of frustration, a lot of behavioral issues tend to come up during writing time during homework time, because writing isn't just language arts. If you're just writing sentences and paragraphs. It can impact you in science and social studies and math writing numbers is challenging and lining up those numbers correctly and making sure the numbers are formed correctly.

Laurie: And interestingly, a lot of the things we're talking about, we see with visual processing. So a lot of the kids that are dysgraphic, we look for some of those signs because of the spacing and the, you know, the word sit on the line. So a lot of our visual processing kids will end up with a dysgraphia diagnosis, oftentimes just to ensure that they get the right kinds of supports in school, because so many of those are handwriting related, copying related. They, they they're terrible at copying from the board, um, because it's just takes them forever.

Abbey: So, so tell me, Lori. So how do you assess for dysgraphia? How do you diagnose dysgraphia? I know we've talked a lot about the symptoms, but what type of evaluations do you do or what time, what do those evaluations look like? Or what can parents expect?

Laurie: I think the important thing to know is that for all the things that we're talking about, there's not just one test. That's like, Oh, look, you scored this. And now I can say that you have this. We're always looking for that preponderance of evidence, that's kind of our catch phrase, right? Like, do you have enough of the symptoms? You know, no one, well, every once in a while someone has them all, but rarely, but do you have most of them? Right. And can I probably understand why you don't have some of the ones you have? So we really just, you know, we want to look at writing, but we want to look at processing. We want to make sure this isn't a language processing issue or a visual processing issue. So we look at how they process all that other information. And if all that looks good, And they're able to tell us their thoughts verbally, right? But the handwriting is just illegible and we look at how they write single words in isolation, how they spell words in isolation, how they spell orally and then how they write content. Um, and we look at sentence writing and paragraph writing, and really try to compare all of those because obviously even I noticed I don't have dysgraphia, but as my hand gets more tired, My handwriting gets harder to read. So you got to take that into consideration. So we

try not to put all the writing in one piece, sometimes kids with dysgraphia. It's it's there because of a fine motor issue, right. They have a weakness in their fine motor skills. So sometimes we'll refer parents or refer families to an occupational therapist and say, we believe you have dysgraphia, but let's make sure that there's not an underlying fine motor issue that needs strengthening. And so, you know, I'll often ask. How are they buttoning their shirt and getting their pants buttoned and snapped and zippered and all that kind of stuff, coloring and cutting and fork and knife, shoe tying, to an extent, a lot of kids are terrible at tying down. That's a good indicator, but fine motor skills. Like do they hate to color? Do they, can they color inside the lines? And so sometimes it may, they may also need an OT evaluation to see, is there something going on with fine motor, but I mean, really it's just looking at how painful it is for these kids to write. And how's the moral aspect of hand-writing and how much is that impacting their ability to show what they can do what they really know.

Abbey: It is hard to assess their knowledge and skills when they struggle with writing. Cause that's the way we want them to show what they know. That's their output.

Laurie: That's their output. That's right. You know, those are the kids that need just a little bit of a tweak and really in the grand scheme of things, how much handwriting do we do anymore?

That's right. Technology has really taken away the need for beautiful handwriting.

Abbey: Um, and that's why I recommend you know, on a lot of individuals that we find with this graphic, even the young ones in first grade, where they're not expected to do a whole ton of written output at this time, I still think it's important to start building some of those keyboarding skills to get them comfortable with the keyboard and doing games and learning some typing skills because they're eventually going to be that person that is going to do best and demonstrate their knowledge best when they type.

Laurie: Well, and these kids are on iPads from birth, right? And so they're already developing the hunt and peck kind of stuff. And so the sooner we can enter, you know, get in there and intervene and start teaching them appropriate keyboarding skills, that's just going to make their lives so much easier moving forward. So I agree. I think the keyboarding is huge, but I think voice to text is a big one. If you can talk and let the computer type. Why not? Yeah, absolutely. I talk too fast. I can't, the computer can never keep up with me, I have to type.

Abbey: That's a great, you know, way for teachers to assess their knowledge as to listen to them, you know, an oral presentation instead of a written presentation or a project, you know, done on poster board, Audio recorded project, um, different, you know, thinking outside the box with the way they demonstrate their knowledge and skills and the typing. Even when they're working on typing in the beginning, they're slow and it's the hunt and Peck and it still is going to be, you know, they're not going to, their ideas are not going to flow as freely as, as they become better typers and keyboarding Comes more naturally, then the ideas can flow more easily. But like you said, if you, if they do that text or speech to text software on the computer, or even allowing them to record in one of those little voice recorders where they're just speaking about what they know, it's a great way to accommodate, um, dysgraphic kiddos.

Laurie: We have two apps that we often recommend for kids that are amazing. Um, they were both developed by occupational therapists who had kids with dysgraphia the first one's called snap type. And I know for sure, it's an Apple, it's an iOS family. I don't know if there's an Android version. Um, but basically what it does for kids is it's an iPad app. And so when they're in school and the teacher hands out a worksheet, um, in social studies or in science, or really in any class, they can take a picture of that worksheet. Type their answers in, on the iPad. And then they just print the worksheet right back out. Because if you remember, most of those worksheets that we get in school, there's no room to write for somebody who doesn't struggle with handwriting. So it really allows us. And then the other app is called ModMath and it helps them to keep their math lined up. And so they input. The math problems. It's not a calculation device, so it doesn't give any answers, but allows them to input the numbers in the columns, stay lined up. And that way, especially when you're getting into like three digit by two digit multiplication or three by three or long division where those columns are so important, right. Kids are getting counted off because.

Abbey: They're messing up their columns, they're writing their numbers so big that it's hard to line up their columns.

Laurie: What I find with my older students is that they're the ones that won't show. They do it all in their head.

Abbey: They want to do it all in their heads.

Laurie: Because, it is so painful for them to write that they have, they've learned, they've acquired the skill of. Working at it in their head, which is crazy to me, but

they, the avoidance, the writing avoidance is, um, is amazing. So dysgraphia sounds a lot like dyslexia, right? They sound very similar. Are they related?

Abbey: That's what I was going to say. Are they related? They both start with dis, but they are not related. They are not in the same family. They just start with that same root word of dis, which means poor. Or difficult. So, and then Graffigna, which is writing. And Lexia and Lexia, which is words. So poor with words, poor with writing. That's how they are, why they sound alike. They are not the same disability and one doesn't drive the other or correlate with the other. So if you have dysgraphia, it doesn't mean you're going to have dyslexia and vice versa.

Laurie: I think they share some common characteristics. One of those being, they both are usually pretty poor spellers. But with a dysgraphic kiddo, they're spelling on paper as poor, but verbally they could spell the words all day long, but the paper messes them up. Whereas a dyslexic kiddo can't spell the word. Doesn't matter. So that's where they struggle. Um, is it something that can be cured? Can you, can you ever grow out of dysgraphia?

Abbey: No. No, it doesn't ever go away.

Laurie: I do think you. Just like with so many of the things we talk about, you learn how to accommodate it. You learn strategies, you become really good at typing. Oh, one of the things we didn't talk about that I forgot cursive writing. Sometimes that can be easier for the disrupt dysgraphic kids because of the flow and the way the letters connect, you know, print is start, stop, start, stop. It's much harder on your hand, the flow of cursive. There's more steps to think about also. The flow of cursive keeps all your letters shaped correctly, starting at the right place, especially if you connect them all. Um, so I do recommend for some of our younger kids that they start working on cursive, because it might be that one thing that grooves. And I know schools for a while stopped teaching it. I think we're starting to teach it again, which is good. So I definitely think that can be a big help for them too, but I definitely think as kids get older, They just figure out how to type better. And I do think their handwriting can improve some just with maturity.

Abbey: Yeah, I think so with practice and with maturity

Laurie: But we've had high school and college kids in here that we've tested or had to do updated testing for dysgraphia, and it's still pretty bad. And we're saying you better type getting copies of class notes as a huge help for those college kids,

because trying to write those notes or being able to heck most kids are typing their notes in college now anyways.

Abey: Yeah. That's true. So yeah, definitely getting a copy of notes.

Laurie: What are some other kinds of accommodations or things that we can recommend to schools or to parents just to, to make writing less painful, or to make this process less painful for them.

Abbey: We talked about those, um, inadequate pencil grips and grasp that a lot of individuals with dysgraphia have. So they. Everyone has probably seen one of those pencil grippers, or if you haven't go on Amazon and search pencil grippers, and there are so many different ones to choose from some use the whole entire hand, some use fingertips, some are just a little nub that you rest your finger on some, some you actually put your fingertips in and pinch the pencil, but those are, those are writing aides that can make it easier for an individual with dysgraphia to write, make it less painful and help them with holding the pencil properly so that then it is easier to write the letters and it's easier for them when they're holding their hand on the paper for their hand to slide across the paper and create those letters in proper sequence and with proper spacing. And hopefully with practice, they're able to make them more, you know, more appropriately.

Laurie: There's also a paper that has the lines raised feel when you hit the top in the bottom. And that can sometimes really help just that, that tactile, that piece of it for us.

Abbey: Yeah. Any teacher store has the kind of paper.

Laurie: we talked a little bit I know before about like highlighting the margins, just to again, point those things out to the kids so that they're more in their visual field of vision. Like, Oh, I'm getting close to the margin. I need to, yeah. Make this word, you know, fit or break it in the right place, right.

Abbey: Or this is where I need to start my line to the far left up to against the margin, even practicing writing, for the little ones. It is important to continue to practice writing. And I think that there are fun ways of doing it that don't make it feel like homework or schoolwork. So even using your finger and practicing, writing on the wall where you feel that sensory input of the raised, the raised wall, you know, from the tip of the finger, it's connecting straight to the brain and it's

giving them more sensory input to help them remember how they practiced writing those letters, writing on sandpaper, writing in shaving cream.

Laurie: That was my favorite.

Abbey: That was fun. Um, using sidewalk chalk and practicing forming letters. You know, correctly on the sidewalk, really big and using large movements in the body and make it fun.

Laurie: I like that. You know, one thing we also want to think about too, is that what we've noticed with a lot of the kids that have dysgraphia as they get older, one of the things they tend to struggle with are those scan-tron forms bubbling in those little bitty things really are hard for them. So a lot of times we'll, we'll put into their, uh, recommendations that they should be exempt from having to use those. You get one. Bubble off right. Then it messes trouble. So if I just circled their answers on the tests, let one of the teaching assistants or a teacher just transcribed their responses into the, um, onto one of those scantron or bubble sheets.

Abbey: That's a great, accommodation.

Laurie: That would be huge for them. That's a good one for high school. Cause we don't really do that with the younger kids, but older kids use those a lot still.

Abbey: That is a good point in that you mentioned they struggle with copying. So even just copying over from their test, that they chose B and copying it over to the scantron and then the act of you know, filling in that tiny little bubble. So you're right. That is something that is important as an accommodation to allow them to just write on the test and have transcribed bubble documents.

Laurie: So we really don't have a, you know, this is again, not something that can be cured, but it definitely is something I think that improves over time. I think we have a lot of great accommodations that we've, we've even already talked about.

Abbey: Um, and there are, and writing clinics, you know, if you were into wanting to get your child or yourself into some practice handwriting, to practice with some handwriting skills. There are some OTs or occupational therapists that do clinics in the summertime mostly. And they'll do, they'll call it a handwriting clinic or a handwriting camp where there is more and more practice with the correct formation of the letters and practicing in all these different fun, varied ways. I also think a

great way to practice handwriting without it seeming like at schoolwork is to come up with a pen pal. I think it's fun to

Laurie: That's a lost art.

Abbey: It is a lost art, but if you're going to have your child practice handwriting and even use it with practicing typing, to write a letter to someone, a friend, a cousin, someone, and, and mail it away and get, have the excitement of waiting for it to come back in the mail and then being able to also have to read someone else's handwriting and see the flow of someone else's you can learn a lot from looking at a model.

Laurie: I wonder if there's, are there sites out there where you can go sign up for a pen pal? Now there probably are.

Abbey: I don't even know, but that would be fun to sign up for a pen pal or a buddy.

Laurie: That's really cool. Especially something like out of the country. That would be really, do you feel like that's been a lost art because of the, you know, the technology today, nobody's doing that.

Abbey: So, but even if you have to practice writing, just getting your ideas out in, in expressing yourself in writing, even with typing, you know, make it where you're writing a letter to a cousin or a family member, a friend, somebody. And practice with telling a story about what you did rather than writing about something school related. Just make it a little bit more fun.

Laurie: um, you know, something else to think about too, is that, you know, we talked about earlier about how the ideas are there, but they have a, it just kind of gets backed up, you know? So sometimes. Letting them record their ideas. Like I'm just gonna let you purge everything you know about this or whatever you want to say to this person. And I'm gonna record it for you. Then you can go back and write it one word at a time. You know, copying is an option. It's probably least desirable, but if you, they can put on their headphones and listen to it and stop it and rewind it and stop it, pause it, whatever that to me. But then all the information is out of their head frustrated. Waiting, you know, trying to get it out, but they, their hand won't go fast enough. And so I really like that. There's also a handwriting program. It's called handwriting without tears, and it is amazing. And I have had lots of parents say that they've had a lot of success with that too. So that is something to definitely, we can put some more of this information in the show notes that you guys

have links to it. And then we will include some examples of what I'm really describing.

Abbey: You know, it might be a good idea. I'm thinking we should include a sample of like a typical first grade handwriting. And, and, and a dysgraphic individuals handwriting. So you can see the difference of what we're talking about

Laurie: Because not too many first grade have really beautiful handwriting. We've had weave, those are rare, but they happen, but it's not great to look at, but there is kind of a standard, what you would expect. And then there's really not very strong, we can show an older age sample as well.

Abbey: That's a great idea.

Laurie: Well, if you guys have any questions or, or want to know more about dysgraphia, feel free to you can a, you can email us at letstalklearningdisabilities@gmail.com. You can visit our website at diagnostic-learning.com. Um, thank you so much for joining us today. This has been fun. We're really having a great time. I think this is episode 10 and I'm super excited. Um, I feel like. We've kind of set out. We've done. What we set out to do is share what we know about this, and we're going to keep it going. Oh, really quick. We did talk about 504 in special education. Um, last couple episodes. Describe your really falls under 504, right. Special ed, It doesn't really, there's not a need for different, a different curriculum or a change in curriculum. We just need to accommodate. Okay.

Abbey: And the last thing I was going to add when we mentioned occupational therapy and really the, their handwriting would have to be severely, severely illegible and their fine motor skills. Hugely weak or grossly weak for them to really qualify for occupational therapy services through the school system. So you can't for handwriting, you just, you just can't go to the school and say, I need occupational therapy for my child occupational therapy services fall under the special education umbrella and it is considered a related service. So you have to already be in special education with an individualized education plan and through an evaluation, they have to show that you can't be successful in the curriculum without that related service of occupational therapy. So I just wanted to clarify that. You can go into the private sector and ask for private occupational therapy, but you can't just go to your school just because your child has bad handwriting or we find their dysgraphic. You won't get occupational therapy.

Laurie: Sorry. That's a great point. You really do need it. If you're not already under that special ed umbrella, you need to go seek out a private occupational therapist. And I always encourage parents to, to go with our insurance company. Go look, see who's available on your insurance and go down that road. So thank you. That was a very good point. Sure. Um, you guys have, thank you so much for joining us today. Have a great day, please. Again, email us if you have questions or if there's a topic that you'd like to hear some more information about, we would be happy to cover that for you. Um, for now. Thanks for joining us.

Both: This is Laurie and Abbey. Uh, come back next time and we'll talk about learning disabilities. Bye 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.

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Dysgraphia Examples

1. and

1st Grade Dysgraphia Sample

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2. the

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FIRST GRADE-SPRING "TYPICAL"

Spelling

6. cat	21.
7. in	22.
8. be	23.
9. gem	24.
10. fix	25.
11. cap	26.
12. cid	27.
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