

Let's Talk Learning Disabilities

EPISODE 33

Welcome to Let's Talk Learning Disabilities with Laurie Peterson and Abbey Weinstein. Laurie & Abbey spend their days talking about dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, & 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 Intro: Hey everybody. And welcome to episode number 33. This is really our third episode of our second season, and we are very excited today. Kind of as a follow-up to our episode from last week where we talked to Kendra about dysgraphia and difficulties with writing. Today, Abbey and I are going to talk to Hunter Donahue. He is actually a student that we have worked with who is now in college, but who has struggled with dysgraphia all of his life. And he has a really great story. And we are super excited for you guys to hear about it. I think that dysgraphia is one of those things that a lot of people still are really unfamiliar with. And I feel like. The things that he shares with us today are gonna really help, um, parents and adults, you know, recognize the symptoms in themselves, but also, you know, know how to help somebody that they know and love that may have dysgraphia. So hope you guys enjoy the episode today. Thanks so much. And let's talk learning disabilities.

Laurie: Hey everybody, this is Laurie.

Abbey: And this is Abbey.

Laurie: Welcome to Let's Talk Learning Disabilities, today we are going to continue our discussion on dysgraphia. So our last episode, we met Kendra, who is a specialist who works with students that have writing difficulties, really handwriting and content writing. So today we are going to hear from a student who we have been working with, who, um, has been diagnosed with dysgraphia and has a really great story. So today we're going to talk with Hunter, Hunter, Donahue. Hunter, welcome.

Hunter: Happy to be here.

Abbey: Thank you so much. Thank you for being there.

Laurie: So I think if you could just give us a little bit of a snapshot of where you are right now, tell us how old you are, where you go to school, all that good stuff.

Hunter: So my name is Hunter Donahue, I am a freshman at Texas Christian university in Fort worth, Texas. I am 18 years old. I'm studying finance, um, with a concentration in real estate. I'm loving that so far. Um, starting my second semester, so we're off to a good start.

Laurie: How did first semester go for, you?

Hunter: It was pretty good. It, um, went by really fast. It was, it was an adjustment. I, but it was, uh, it was a good adjustment.

Laurie: And so we saw you, we were just realized I didn't even realize it was just a year ago. We saw you and you came to us for your initial diagnosis of dysgraphia. So you had never been tested before, never been diagnosed. So tell us a little bit about what life was like for you in school, growing up with handwriting issues.

Hunter: Yeah. The best way to put it is that all my teachers and I, and I knew I had been better at handwriting, but all my teachers always like said my handwriting was like the worst I've ever seen. And like, I'll be really honest. Like my handwriting is bad. Like it's pretty severe. I did. Um, I couldn't even read it. My teachers couldn't read it, which led to them just giving me zeros on stuff.

Laurie: Oh really.

Hunter: Um, but yeah, once I got through and got the process and like got diagnosed to kind of made a lot more sense as to kind of why my handwriting was so bad. Um, but yeah, it, um, it's definitely something, it just kind of got all put together finally.

Laurie: So when you were writing, so your handwriting was bad. Did you have trouble, um, did it take you a long time to like copy things from the board or complete work?

Hunter: Yeah, so, um, it did take me a lot longer, so I type faster than I can write because I, it takes me so long to write out words and sentences and all that it, um, like the teacher would be like, if we were doing like a notes on a presentation slide, I, um, I'd be still be writing and like, she'd go to the next slide. I have to ask her or him to go back because it was taking me so long to copy down my notes and get into my head and all that stuff. Um, but yeah, so I, it took me a little bit longer to take notes, um, and still make it sort of legible.

Laurie: Right.

Abbey: Was writing, would you ever say, I'm just curious, was it physically painful? Or your hand would really tire easily or you'd have to shake it out after writing?

Hunter: Sometimes not always. Um, they kind of, oh, I was writing like a couple of sentences. No, but if I was writing like paragraphs out and like long pages and notes and stuff, it would get tired and I'd just shake it out and kind of. Uh, squeeze my fingers a little bit, kind of get the blood moving to get a little bit.

Abbey: Okay.

Laurie: Did you ever learn cursive?

Hunter: I did. So that's actually a funny story. I, um, in kindergarten my school taught cursive. Oh, wow. You never learned to print. Um, and then, so once I switched schools, um, I, uh, Uh, the teachers wanted me to print. And so then they would not accept cursive and so I kind of just meshed them together. Like in the middle of words.

Abbey: Was cursive easier for you? Do you remember?

Hunter: Sometimes. So like, I don't know. I kind of go back and forth on which one I like, and it's especially hard now. Um, cause I do like both for different reasons, which is weird, but yeah, I, I like both.

Laurie: Do you feel like, do you feel like so, okay, so quick question though, did you, so you, you transferred schools. Did your second school ever go back and teach everybody cursive at, at like the typical age?

Hunter: No. So, yeah, so I do cursive in kindergarten all the way through third grade have to say. And then from fourth, all the way through 12th, it was print.

Laurie: Did you switch schools between third and fourth?

Hunter: Yeah, so I, I switched schools actually a lot during my, uh, Like lower school, elementary grades, but they all actually taught cursive still, so it ended up working out.

Laurie: So at what point did you actually, did you actually take a keyboarding class?

Hunter: Um, I did. So in, let's see, second grade, second grade at, um, Alito. I did a keyboarding class and I love that. Um, yeah, it was a good, it was a really good class. I actually already knew how to type. So it was kind of going through the motions, but, um, yeah.

Laurie: So now when you type, are you typing, like when, you know, the old people learned how, when you got your fingers on the home keys and you can look at the print and type, or do you have to look at your fingers?

Hunter: Um, I don't have to look at my fingers. I sometimes do though. It kind of varies. I go back and forth. We didn't have another go my fingers or like being able to just like keep staring.

Laurie: So we gave you your diagnosis last year. Were you able to get accommodations at your private school?

Hunter: Yes. Um, so, so I got the ability to type, um, regardless of whether, um, it was a teacher rule, which was kind of the problem. So the majority of my teachers and professors would let me type, however, there was probably three, there were like hardcore, like handwriting. And so like, I had a discussion with them and they still like fully understanding dysgraphia and all that. And so I got the typing accommodation that kind of forced their hand and allowed me to type.

Laurie: That's unfortunate though, but that is not uncommon. We hear that a lot. That there's always a holdout, a teacher that doesn't want to bend.

Hunter: Yeah, I think it's, I think it kind of makes sense. And I can see where some professors and teachers would want kids to hand write. Because studies have shown that like when your hand writes stuff, you do learn better. Um, I'm actually the opposite though. I learned better when I type, right. So, which is really weird and it defies all logic, but who knows.

Laurie: Well, no, it kind of makes sense though, with your dysgraphia, that that would be the case, right?

Abbey: If writing is difficult for you, then it kind of interferes with your thought processes and the ability to get your content and your ideas expressed in writing really well. So your ideas probably flow more easily when you're typing. Is that correct?

Hunter: Significantly easier. I, um, whenever I was handwriting. Cause it was really awful, but, um, I just, I wouldn't, I just skipped sentences and just like, say, forget it, like we're just going to keep going and I wouldn't write it down. And um, but now that I can type and stuff, it, I, I get all my thoughts out and can keep it on there and stay with the flow of the class.

Laurie: That's so interesting. Okay. So can we talk about how it might've impacted math?

Hunter: Um, yeah, actually that's a funny one. So I would put the specifically with the plus sign, uh, and the denominator sign, uh, they would like, look like teas all the time. And so it was a disaster if there's a disaster. Cause

like it would confuse myself, especially when like the variable was T and so, yeah. It's I think it's pretty common though. To, or I feel like it is to mix up T 's with $+$'s request.

Laurie: What about like, keeping your numbers lined up? Like if you're having to do like a long like division or long multiplication.

Hunter: Yeah, I, um, yeah, so my numbers typically curve up and they still do to this day, um, where like, w I won't keep it on a flat line, like they'll curve typically up, but sometimes they'll curve down. Um, and it's just, it's weird, but I've kinda like, learned to live with it.

Laurie: So you never really found a way to accommodate that?

Hunter: Yeah. Um, but I don't know. I've kind of worked through it, like where I try to like, just like box my stuff in, like for work on a math problem. Like we're all boxed in and, uh, that'll be good enough for the professor or the teacher to grind up.

Laurie: Do you get in trouble for not showing your work sometimes?

Hunter: Yes. Because, um, the way that my professors and teachers have, um, gone about that is that they just won't grade it. If they can't read it, they don't grade it. And so. Um, and even last semester, like that was still a thing. Cause I did have to turn in handwritten work in my calculus class. Um, and she did give me a 0 on 2 homework assignments because of that. But, um, yeah, but I don't even know that there's a way to accommodate that.

Laurie: It's hard. Um, so yeah, so I know Abby and I often tell, I mean, this is really basic and it may not even help you, but you know, taking a piece of lined paper and turning it sideways so that you have columns. Instead of rows and using those columns to kind of keep, if you're having to do work moving down the page. Right. But sometimes with algebra. And those longer problems that go in different directions. And some of those columns may not be helpful, but that's it.

Abbey: Have you ever tried graph paper where you have a box to put each number in symbol in?

Hunter: I have, and it sounds weird. It messes with my brain. I do like a, I put a formula out on the page. I won't read it as one cohesive formula. I'll see it as a whole bunch of different simpler numbers or the symbols and stuff.

Abbey: Okay. That makes sense.

Laurie: Let's see. No, there is, there is an app. I don't know. I, I don't know. We always, again, this is something we often recommend for like middle school, but high school kids too. It's called mod math, mod math, and it's like on an iPad and it does, and we'll put this in the show notes too, but it does help you keep your everything lined up and I think it can do pretty extensive, um, calculation. So we'll have to look into that and see, um, I don't know. Do you have a lot of math left still? I would think.

Hunter: I actually, I don't know is the thing. Um, I think I probably do just being in finance. It may not be labeled math classes, but they're going to be math classes. Um, I know that there is one, um, financial accounting. That's going to be a pretty heavy math class.

Laurie: Okay.

Hunter: But yeah, that's, that's definitely something to look into though.

Laurie: Do you feel like your dysgraphia impacts. Anything besides writing, like with fine motor, do you feel like you have fine motor issues with anything else that you do?

Hunter: Not really. I, um, yeah.

Laurie: I'm trying to think of an example, like cutting or something.

Hunter: Um, no, not really. I, um, I fidget with my fingers a lot, but that's probably not dysgraphia, that's probably ADHD, but, um, yeah, I don't, I typically don't have fine motor issues though.

Laurie: Okay. Good. So you've never like when you were little, did you have trouble, like learning how to tie your shoes, button, your shirts, those kinds of things. Do you remember?

Hunter: Yeah, so I actually did. I, I did have trouble learning to tie my shoes. Um, that's why I don't do it the normal way. Um, we never seen, you know, anyone else do it the way that I do it, but yeah. And even to this day, I did it this morning when I put on my shoes. Um, did you teach, figure it out? Yeah. No. Um, my mom and I went to Nordstrom rack and had a, uh, shoe tying class there.

Laurie: Oh, wow. Cool though. I didn't even know that existed.

Abbey: That is cool! So the, the salesperson taught you there, how to tie your shoes? And you still do it that way?

Hunter: Yup. They had like a group of 30 kids and, um, were teaching them all how to tie their shoes.

Laurie: Wow. How old were you when you did that? Do you remember?

Hunter: Hm. Probably four or five.

Laurie: Oh, that's young. Still. That's good, your mom was on it.

Abbey: Yeah.

Hunter: Yep. Uh, she tried and tried to teach me the normal way and it just, it wasn't gonna go in my brain.

Abbey: When you were really young, did you dislike drawing or was drawing okay for you? Coloring pictures or drawing.

Hunter: I never kept it done the lines and like a coloring book. Um, but yeah, I mean, I don't think drawing was too bad. I, I mean, I draw really bad. Like,

don't get me wrong. I'm not artistic, but, um, but yeah, like it was, it was possible to do it. I'm capable.

Laurie: At what point do you feel like you started becoming your own advocate? You know, I'm sure for a while your mom would kind of step in and talk to the teachers. At what point did you start speaking up about what you needed?

Hunter: Um, let's see. Probably eighth grade, eighth grade is when I started, um, cause that's when we kind of had the flexibility, um, to be able to type. Um, and so, like, I kind of had to explain to my teachers like, Hey, um, I would love for you to be able to grade this, um, and like all this, and I get that you're not going to be able to read my handwriting. Can I type like, is that, um, acceptable? And, um, some of my teachers reacted really well and some of them didn't, um, and that's totally fine. It's kind of how it is. Um, but yeah, so most of my teachers were pretty flexible though.

Laurie: Well, and I think for their own, you know, for them to be able to grade something, they would prefer to be able to read it like, and not have to work 10 times harder. Right. That makes sense. What's it been like in college? Like, so, so kind of walk us through. Did you go visit with the dis when did you start? When did you go visit disability support? When did you get all that stuff put in and I can't remember what it's called at TCU. Cause it's called somewhere, something different everywhere.

Hunter: Yeah. Um, it's called like disability awareness and something office. I don't know. I probably went in, in July before TCU.

Laurie: Okay, good for you.

Hunter: Because I want it to be proactive and get all my documents in and start the process and the ball rolling. Cause they, um, they can decline accommodations I learned. They didn't decline any of mine. Um, but I did have a friend to get her accommodations declined. And um, so I just, I went and met with my advisor. Um, she's a really nice woman, um, love meeting with her. She's definitely been a great advocate for me, especially, um, with some of my professors. A little more hesitant to allow technology in the classroom. Um, yeah, cause I did have a professor, um, who did not allow any electronics in the classroom at all. No phones, no apple watches, no laptops, no nothing at

all. And even, TCU also has like just standalone keyboards. Like you can type out essays on and even that he wasn't, he wasn't gonna go for.

Abbey: Really? Even with your accommodation plan?

Hunter: Yeah. Um, w the, I had to go back to the accommodations office and, uh, they had to sternly tell him, "You have to...", and I think it's like, I don't know this for a fact, like a Title 9 issue, maybe where it's like some, some...

Laurie: Well it's ADA. So it's the Americans with Disabilities Act. But because your school doesn't because you have a private school, it doesn't receive government funding. They're not tied to the law the same way. Like a public university would be tied to it, but it's still, you know, the difference between what's right. And what's wrong. Right? I mean, why would they not want to give you the support?

Hunter: Yes. Yeah. And I mean, he, he did, he, um, he finally did go for it. He kind of had to.

Abbey: Good. Once you talked to your advisor, so you had to go talk to your advisor about this specific professor that you were having difficulty getting your accommodations from and they helped you?

Hunter: Yeah, she was even surprised that, um, he wouldn't budge on it for the longest time. Cause most of the professors, if you talk to them, they'll go for it. Um, this guy, you wouldn't, he wasn't feeling it. He wasn't going to for. Um, yeah, and I'm, uh, I had this, uh, meeting yesterday, actually for my upcoming, uh, semester with my professors. I'm going to have another, that I'm going to have to not necessarily battle, but have a couple of conversations with.

Laurie: And you feel very comfortable doing that, like that doesn't bother you?

Hunter: I don't have any problem with it.

Laurie: That is awesome.

Hunter: If it's something that helps me, it's definitely something that's worth fighting for. And I learned it's worth fighting for.

Abbey: Good for you. Yeah. Way to advocate for your own needs. And that helps you be more successful and demonstrate your knowledge. And so, hopefully they appreciate that they can grade your work and see what you've learned from that class and give you the grade you deserve.

Laurie: And so we do a hundred. Would you be okay if we, if we included part of, we can't put the whole writing sample out there, even though it is pretty illegible, do you care if we share that with anyone?

Hunter: Yeah, it's all good.

Laurie: Okay. I think it's just good for people to see. Cause you know, oftentimes. Well a there's a lot of people that dysgraphia is still a mystery too. And I think that you may be running into that with some of your professors there. They've never heard of it. They're unfamiliar with it. It's not one of the, it's not dyslexia. It's not ADHD, you know, it's something very different, but then even still, once they hear about it, you know, not, I mean, a lot of people have bad handwriting, but it's still legible. There's a difference. And I think being able to see really the extreme. Of what, you know, somebody with dysgraphia and what it's like. And I think it really speaks to how much you've struggled because you really, it is very hard to read. And I think I would imagine for you even, even after you've written it after you've written it, you're not real sure what it says.

Hunter: Which yeah. It, um, it can be a struggle sometimes. Sometimes I can read it though. Um, mainly just so much, um, experience with it. Um, the average person there's...good luck. There's no, there's no way they're going to be able to read it.

Laurie: Um, okay. So big question. Yes. What advice would you give somebody who might be you know, in elementary school right now that there's a student that's struggling with handwriting, that's kind of going through some of the same struggles. What advice would you give them? If they didn't know what to do?

Hunter: Always advocate for yourself and, um, it's totally worth the fight. Um, don't just back down, take the fight so that you can Excel, um, in your academic studies. It's, it's definitely worth it. You will soar and thrive, um, academically. And really just advocating for the use of a computer can make all the difference in the world, right? This is not like a huge, we don't need to like put in a new program or reteach them. It's just...

Abbey: Right. It doesn't even require any extra work on the teacher's part, which some accommodations do. So just being allowed to type has allowed you success and enabled you. That's good advice.

Laurie: Have you ever used? Um, I guess because you've always been keyboarding though. You've always been pretty proficient. You've never needed like voice to text or anything like that?

Hunter: No, I don't, I don't really use voice to text. Um, I have on an essay once before. Only, just kind of wanted to try it out and see how it was. And I ended up kind of going on a tangent, like just kind of thinking it through and it ended up not being worth it. You talk fast, like me. So I wonder too, if that is, because when I try to do voice to text, I have to be very slow and have to be very and it's too much work to do that.

Hunter: Yeah.

Laurie: Yeah, no, I get that. I get that. Well, this has been awesome. I think that, um, Especially hearing your stories about, you know, your experience in college. Because I think that's where people I've had. I actually had a student who we diagnosed with dysgraphia. This was a long time ago, but I'll never forget talking to his mom. I ran into her somewhere, um, a couple of years later and he had failed out of school because he had put the accommodations in place, but wouldn't use him. He was embarrassed.

Hunter: Interesting. Okay.

Laurie: And he, he failed out now. I don't know if that's the only reason that he failed out. I'm sure there were other extenuating circumstances, but still imagine to have what, what that does your self esteem when you have that help

and you're able to be successful versus when you're just consistently struggling and feel like, you know, hopeless.

Hunter: Yeah. I don't, for me personally, I don't think it's something to be embarrassed about. It's, it's kinda, it's a part of you and you just kinda gotta live with it and own up to it.

Abbey: Yeah, good for you.

Hunter: Um, and if people can't relate to that and that's perfectly fine, you know, it's just something you gotta live with.

Laurie: Nobody is perfect.

Hunter: Yeah. Everyone.

Laurie: Yup. Exactly. Well, thank you so much for doing this. We're going to add into the show notes. We'll add some of the things we talked about. Um, some of the, like the mod math, a couple of the apps that we like to use. Um, and I may just put a little snippet of your handwriting for them to see. Um, if any of the listeners have questions about dysgraphia or would like to hear about a specific topic for an upcoming show, letstalklearningdisabilities@gmail.com is the best way to reach Abbey and I. We are very excited to continue our series, "Living With..." and we are looking forward to seeing you guys and actually talking to you guys in the next episode. You guys have a great day. Thank you.

Abbey: Thank you, Hunter! 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 24:59