

# The Parent's Problem Solver

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## Seeing Things Differently: The Dyslexic Child

by: Cheryl Brown

"Your daughter has something in common with Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Edison, and Walt Disney," we were told by the doctor. "They all had dyslexia too."

This diagnosis 4 years ago at the Cleveland Clinic confirmed our suspicions. Christy had been having lots of difficulty with second grade. Her handwriting was unusual, she mixed up letters, and her spelling was pretty bizarre. Most sentences resembled cryptic messages in dire need of a decoder: "A rcqtsihp blistd of" translated into "A rocket ship blasted off." (I cleverly deciphered this only by carefully scrutinizing the intricate drawing above it!) Her daily school performance became a roller coaster ride- one minute, "A"s, the next, not even close.

After having tried private tutoring, lessons at an accredited learning center, and summer school classes, my husband and I began to look into the possibility of dyslexia, which we already knew referred to the reversal of letters in words. But, as we learned more about it, we found that its manifestations could vary from severe learning disabilities to superior intellectual, creative, or athletic capabilities.

Christy's vivid imagination coupled with her intense curiosity were evidenced early on when every little walk together became an "expedition" into her own fascinating universe.

"Come this way so you can hear how the gravel crunches when I spin around!" "This buckeye got smooth like this when it fell into that magic leaf fort!" "There's sweet stuff in the middle of this honeysuckle!" These were typical remarks continually punctuating my own silent and ordinary observations.

Peering into her then favorite toy, a kaleidoscope, with its split-second flashes of color and mercurial designs, proved to be a glimpse into her future.

Change, of any kind, is today both exciting and expected. She has rearranged her bedroom furniture so often that it doesn't even leave marks in the carpet from where it was last placed. Balloons, posters, and streamers take short turns at decorating her room.

We can always count on her to select 1) brilliant paint, 2) zany wallpaper, 3) anything sparkling, 4) menu items no one else would imagine considering.

While she thrives on action-packed events like a double-over-time basketball game or a round of crack-the-whip on ice skates "best of all" to her is the walk down the middle school corridor "when it's

crowded with lots and lots of kids, and everyone's talking real loud."

All these characteristics of her personality, combined with her difficulties learning to read, were in keeping with the Clinic's final diagnosis of dyslexia. After having completed a battery of tests on Christy, including those which checked her hearing and vision, the doctors suggested we see a specialist.

Soon we were working with a dedicated dyslexia expert, who began by explaining to us that dyslexic people often perceive things in a unique way and think in many dimensions simultaneously, which is what accounts for their frequent superior creative abilities. They, therefore, learn best by using several of their senses at once, rather than simply relying on that of sight, a sense which is totally unreliable to them. Something in the brain causes distortions in their seeing, interpreting, and storing written words.

To illustrate this, we were told to visualize blurry, upside-down mirror reflections skipping around on a page, and to imagine the difficulty and frustration involved with our having to recall each jumble in precise detail.

Christy's hour-long daily sessions were begun immediately. She was intrigued by her specialist's creative "multi-dimensional" teaching absorbed in the process.

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For example, she was instructed to listen carefully to letter sounds, to write words on the desk top with her finger, to hold a mirror before her mouth to see the breath created with sounds such as “t” and “p,” and to feel her neck vibrate as the letters “m” and “n” were spoken. She learned, and relearned, concisely categorized spelling and phonics rules.

Bright colors of ink were splashed onto paper as she dissected words, letters on Scrabble tiles were selected that matched words she spelled aloud, and rhythms were tapped out with her foot as she stood and moved her arms in large, curvilinear motions.

The intense regimen was perfectly tailored to her unique learning style, and she looked forward to these lively, innovative sessions- even when it sometimes meant missing noon recess at school in order to squeeze them in. Our car became her “traveling lunchroom” which added another element of adventure to it all. (Presently, she requires only one weekly lesson which she says is for “selecting, dissecting, and especially, perfecting!”)

Christy began to be rewarded for all her effort by achieving good grades in school.

Her classroom teachers and tutor supported her, allowing her the use of a tape for dictating homework assignments and listening to previous classroom lessons. They gave her the option of taking either oral or written tests. They informed us of a program that provided pre-recorded textbooks. They asked for input and kept us informed of her progress.

Over the years she has learned to compensate for her dyslexia, like searching for clues to a word by examining its context in a story or by using a hand-held spelling checker. She has friends who read to her, encyclopedias which talk to her through CD-ROM, and a computer that teaches her to type.

I can honestly say that Christy has never really viewed dyslexia as a problem. To her, it's just something she's been afforded for making her walk through life into another great expedition. To me, it looks a great deal like a mountain-climbing expedition. But then, dyslexic people do see things differently.

My husband and I have found that, by setting realistic learning goals for our daughter, she is able to experience the kind of success which encourages and

motivates her.

Also, we try to provide opportunities for her to develop those skills for which we feel she has some special ability, such as athletics. We quickly discovered that making a “three-pointer” at the buzzer can do a lot to enhance a 12 year old's self-esteem! (And practicing for that perfect basket-ball shot might even do a lot to improve the very same eye-hand coordination that handwriting requires.)

We know that this learning “disability” will require her to work much harder than other students do in order to reach similar goals. It will cause her to depend upon other people sometimes. It will force her to search for alternative methods by which she can learn. It will be a lifetime struggle.

And, of course, she keeps right on seeing it as a gift.

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*Cheryl Brown, RICHARDS READ workshop participant, is an educational expert whose fascination with her daughter Christy's unique way of looking at life (and letters) inspired this article. This article is reprinted with her permission.*

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