

You only have to be good at one thing! - Ron James

I've been teaching for almost 40 years and now run a Sydney based centre specialising in supporting and improving the literacy skills of children with dyslexia. Over the years I've had numerous really desperate parents bringing their children to me for help. Their children are unhappy and struggling with the academic side of school which is really distressing, not only for the child, but also for the caring and conscientious parents. I can help the children improve their reading and spelling but I also reassure the parents that their children will usually succeed in the long run despite their present difficulties.

Most people do not realise that dyslexia is not an intelligence issue and that dyslexics are of average or above average intelligence. This innate intelligence, when combined with a good work ethic and parental support, will usually see them through.

When children are at school they are encouraged to be good at everything; reading, spelling, maths, physical education, music, etc. When they struggle with the academic side of school, it affects their self-esteem resulting in lack of confidence, shyness and poor behaviour. The child is often overwhelmed with academic pressure in school and homework. No wonder both the children and the parents despair!

There are many areas which aren't assessed or measured in school and yet are so important in adult life. A child can be outstanding in: emotional intelligence, social intelligence, persistence, curiosity, enthusiasm, courage, leadership, creativity, self-discipline, sense of humour, compassion, reliability, empathy, humility, resilience and just generally being a caring small person. Unfortunately, these areas are only briefly acknowledged in the final 'general comments' area of the school report.

It is upsetting to watch these wonderful children being worn down by school routines. I must stress that it is not the fault of the schools or the teachers but the system. It all boils down to curriculum and funding. Schools do not have the resources to give their children the individual attention that they need and deserve. In my opinion, children with dyslexia need 40 minutes individual attention every day. Schools just don't have the resources to do this and the child is often lost in the class of over 20. It is almost impossible for a teacher to give this attention to students with academic difficulties or perseverance problems. A class teacher would have to monitor this type of child for most of the day.

The parents can see their bright child gradually losing self-confidence as they progress through school and the biggest question they have is: "What can we do?"

The first thing they can do is meet with the child's teacher and tell them of your concerns. Are they being assisted by the Learning and Support teachers? If parents are seriously worried and your child is over the age of 6, ask for a referral and assessment by an Educational Psychologist.

Open the communication lines with the teacher and talk to them about the amount of homework he or she is getting. Is it too difficult? Are they spending hours and hours on it? I encourage parents to be more assertive with the school particularly about the amount of homework the child receives. Primary school age school should receive a maximum of 30 to 40 minutes per night, and depending on the ability of the child, 10 to 20 minutes of this time should be reading. It is really frustrating to see my students come to me with reproduced class spelling lists which bear no relation to the child's ability. Parents and children go through unjustifiable stress when doing this insensitively imposed homework. A dyslexic child will need constant repetition and overlearning of basic spellings (where,

were, who, how, they, there, their etc.) the fact that they get them correct in one week does not mean they will get them right the next week. Class word lists do not cater for this; individual lists are needed and problematic words repeated several times until learned.

In my centre, we can help with the nitty-gritty phonics, comprehension and all the other basics involved in learning to read but what about the child's self-esteem? This is a real challenge.

Unfortunately, for a lot of children it is a case of enduring school rather than enjoying it. I encourage students and parents to come to terms with their difficulties by telling them the truth. Explaining that they have a problem in a particular area but we can work on it and improve. They will probably continue have this challenge throughout life. However when the child leaves school, all the child needs to do is to be good at one thing. This one thing may be: acting, cooking, computing, science, music, maths, dance, cooking, gardening or simply being helpful to people. It may take you a while to find where your child's talent lies but with perseverance and hard work it will usually work out in the end.

So, parents and carers must give a child every opportunity to build up their skills to help them find that one thing that they may be good at. If they enjoy gardening, help your child build and grow a veggie patch in your garden. Do they enjoy cooking? Get them to help in the kitchen; find out the names of ingredients; Jamie Oliver is dyslexic. If they love sport take them to the local sports centres, Adam Scott (the golfer) is dyslexic. Many celebrities are dyslexic and have followed the path of acting and film, Tom Cruise, Jennifer Aniston and even Steven Spielberg. Encourage your child to go to different clubs, associations, camps, groups to find out where their talent lies.

It is also so important to encourage children to work hard; say "I liked the way you stuck at that and succeeded", rather than, "Well done, aren't you clever". A common characteristic of successful adults is that they are motivated and work hard at what they do. Encourage a good work ethic and reward their efforts; emphasis should be on effort rather than intellect. Praise and encourage success but also acknowledge that you also learn through mistakes.

Initially, set children tasks that they can easily achieve so they experience success. Then make the next task a little more challenging and modify the task if you see them getting frustrated. Give them help, let them experience the satisfaction of success and praise their efforts. This is a good, basic teaching technique.

I had a student who is now 14 years old and when he first came to me 4 years ago he was mildly dyslexic and falling behind the class with his English and getting really frustrated. He was struggling with everything and his mother had been up to the school but was still concerned about his progress. However, he has a gift for gardening. He grows lots of his family's vegetables and often brought in spinach, carrots and other delights for me at my centre. He was obviously proud of his achievements and worked hard in his garden. I improved his reading and spelling but also his confidence and pointed out that all he needed to do was persevere with his literacy and number skills; his gift and love for growing things would see him through. I asked his Mother if I could buy shares in him. His mother is great; she recognises the challenge but doesn't back away from it. She gives him 'tough love'; she brought him every week to my sessions and he has made fantastic progress. His confidence has improved and he is now thriving.

Richard Branson is a multi-millionaire but really struggled at school and has since been diagnosed with dyslexia. He is a phenomenal businessman; this quote reflects my thoughts well:

“Whatever personal challenge you have to overcome, you must be brave enough to accept that you are different. You must have the courage to trust your instincts and be ready to question what other people don't. If you do that, you can seize opportunities that others would miss. Believe in yourself, and use everything you can -- including the obstacles -- to propel you along the road to success. Who knows what you might achieve?” - Richard Branson, 'Turning a Disadvantage to Your Advantage.'

Parents should aim to give children the opportunity to find out what he or she is good at and then encourage them to work hard at it. You only have to be good at one thing when you leave school. What will your child be good at?

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