

Mitch Podcast mixdown

📅 Thu, 3/31 11:33AM ⌚ 29:54

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

child, dyslexia, lda, learning disabilities, anthony, parents, understand, people, research, ld, adhd, wife, dyslexic, school, test, work, differences, learn, sas, high school

SPEAKERS

Lauren, Mitchell Beres



Lauren 00:06

Welcome to the LDA podcast, a series by The Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our podcast is dedicated to exploring topics of interest to educators, individuals with learning disabilities, parents and professionals to work towards our goal of creating a more equitable world. Welcome, everyone to the LDA podcast. We're here today with Mitchell Beres, the President of LDA of Virginia and a parent of two children with learning disabilities. He's going to help us explain what parents can expect when their child is diagnosed with a learning disability. So Mitch, thank you so much for being here today.



Mitchell Beres 00:39

My pleasure. Thank you.



Lauren 00:41

So just to start off, could you give us some background about yourself and your story as a parent of an individual with LD?



Mitchell Beres 00:48

Yes, my wife and I adopted, these two children from Guatemala. Anthony came home at 11 months Analise came over five months and it's been a great experience. You know, as with any child, whether natural or adopted, you're going to run into things that weren't...I wasn't expecting this. And as both children sort of grow, getting into grammar school in say, third, fourth grade, we started noticing some differences. That's when we needed to start doing some research. More specifically, my wife started doing tons of research and trying to figure out what might be going on.

M

Mitchell Beres 01:30

Both our kids went to a Montessori school, and Montessori school, while they do teach the kids to be individuals and own their own work career, they're incredibly helpful. So especially with my son, this, at some point, wasn't as helpful as it could be, because my son has dyslexia, dysgraphia and ADHD, and his dyslexia is pretty strong. And so when he was struggling reading, you know, third, fourth grade is when we started knowing things, they actually read books, to him, which is great, because they'd make him follow along in the book. But we really weren't identifying what the issue was and what was going on. Because they only said 'he's six months, a year behind.' And as it continued to get worse, we worried about it. And we didn't get a official diagnosis that he was dyslexic until he got to high school high schools, it was a specialty high school in San Antonio, Texas, that was for kids with learning disabilities. My daughter, it was an anxiety kind of issue. And we were real lucky there. In terms of the teachers, they knew how to deal with anxiety kind of an issue and, you know, help her be confident and go through. Again, once she got the private method, private high school where Anthony was, that was a great place because the best phrase I heard from a parent out of that school was a talked about the Winston School of San Antonio, they don't teach.

M

Mitchell Beres 03:12

So somebody wants to sit on the floor rolling through papers or drawing while class is going on, let them, but the child knows what the requirements are. And they have to pass a test at some point in time, etc. My son used to want to sit at the math teacher's desk. Who knows why, you know, why the math teacher? But sit at the desk, do what you do.

M

Mitchell Beres 03:38

And when my daughter, giving her the ability to kind of work alone and not in public, made all the difference in the world and her ability to do things. She's very active in sports. But all the sports are team sports. Yeah, she could have gone to college on a golf scholarship. But that meant standing alone in front of a crowd. And if something went wrong, when she was shut down immediately, so it's the ability of these schools that we want to help us identify and then work out.

M

Mitchell Beres 04:15

So what do you do? How do you help your children succeed? And go this right now? My son graduated Hofstra University last May. He's taking a graduate program in DC right now in Virginia, and my daughter is a senior at Hofstra, she's going to graduate this May.

L

Lauren 04:34

That's awesome. So when was the first time you were aware that LD existed?

M

Mitchell Beres 04:41

M MITCHELL BERES 04:41

We started suspecting it or saying in fourth grade with Anthony because we knew something just wasn't clicking. Yes, they were reading to him. Yes, they said he was a year behind or whatever. We're not really making progress and maybe hold and so on. And we didn't know the definition of learning differences. And as my wife would be doing research, and we started, she started having me taking Anthony out for testing.

M Mitchell Beres 05:16

And I've heard all the names, I don't know all the tests, unfortunately I'm not an expert on the tests, we had so many tests done, and that we learned that there was a difference going on. So you start putting it together at that time, so it was in fourth, fifth, sixth grade in middle school, that things started to really become apparent. And it was in middle school even though he wasn't officially diagnosed as dyslexic. That's when teachers started saying, you know, he could be dyslexic. Again, back to my wife, who is the world's best researcher. 'Okay, let's get into what this all means. And go from there.'

L Lauren 05:56

Right. So once Anthony was diagnosed with LD, or once you were suspecting that he might have an LD, how did you explain that his LD to him?

M Mitchell Beres 06:08

That's a really great question. Because Anthony, as he progressively degrades, and this continued, he would start asking the question, 'Why me? What's wrong with me? Why do I have to be taken out of class and go to this other classroom to have somebody read to me?' And that's, again, when you asked the question about when did you learn about LD, we started talking about the differences. And we learned the telling him that 'Anthony you just learn differently. You really just learn differently, you don't do it the same way.' And over time that started to work, you know, he started feeling more comfortable in his own skin, who he was, who he is, and that carried through in such a way that he's become self confident, self assured, a self-advocate, that at Hofstra... Hofstra has a program called SAS, Student Access Services, which has all the programs with kids with any kind of disability. And the lady that runs that program liked him so much he became an advocate for the program, and then worked when they had incoming orientation for the new freshmen. He'd be out there selling SAS and telling him what a great place it is. You know, if you're struggling, make sure you call SAS, make sure you get in there. Totally, totally comfortable. And my daughter, as she started understanding herself, she fit the mold. I am who I am. You know, and she even jokes around she has, what is it working memory issues. You tell her something and ask her 20 minutes later, 'What's going on? Were you talking to me?' kind of thing.

M Mitchell Beres 07:56

And now she kind of jokes around with it. And if we tell her don't forget, she goes, 'You know me, send me a text. Because I will not remember this by the time I drive from Virginia, to New York.' And so they've gotten very comfortable. And I think you know, where we help that it's:

You just learn different. They're not different, you learn different. And we kept pushing that and pushing that all the time.

M

Mitchell Beres 08:23

They're both very, very comfortable with who they are. And it is what it is. And to the old phrase to self advocate, they are self advocates. In the course Anthony's taking right now it's condensed media, he wants to work in television production behind the camera and everything else. And when people start telling him things, let me show you or let me tell you how to do this. And you're gonna go, 'No, no, no, I need to touch. I need you to touch, show me, let me do it. And then I will learn. But if you stand in front of me and talk to me, not gonna stick.'

L

Lauren 09:03

So why should parents use specific terms like dyslexia or learning disabilities? As opposed to something more vague, say maybe differences or some other terms?

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Mitchell Beres 09:14

I think when you start work using vague words, you start to hide what is reality. And, you know, I believe, for the child to really become comfortable with who they are, they need to know who they are. And when you start playing with, 'Oh, you have some differences.' What does that mean? We all have differences, you know.

M

Mitchell Beres 09:41

And it's hard for them to say I'm disabled, not necessarily saying I have to say this, but I have dyslexia. I struggle with reading. And it's important that they understand that too, because one of the things I found over the years is the lack of knowledge of what dylexia is, people throw that word around like there's no tomorrow. They go, 'Oh, he jumbles letters No, it may look that way. But you can't describe dyslexia as he jumbles his letters. And the same with, you know, the anxiety kind of issues, if they don't understand what it is, that makes them different. If you cover it up, it's like, well, she's just a little shy. No, it's more than just a little shy. And so you can't hide behind that. You have to you have to be upfront.

M

Mitchell Beres 10:35

You know, it's like, I want to lose weight. And if I keep telling myself, yeah, you're okay for a little bit, I'm full of myself. I need to lose weight. And just say it, and you don't hide these kinds of things behind soft words and nice words. You don't abuse people. But at the same time, if you try to be too nice to them, they won't understand it, Forget the person that needs to understand it, it is the child that needs to understand this is who I am. And I have dyslexia.



L Lauren 11:09

Absolutely. So did anything change when your child was diagnosed with LD? Were there any routine changes or homework strategies that you sort of picked up along the way?

M Mitchell Beres 11:21

Yes. Again, it's especially with Anthony, because that's with dyslexia and dysgraphia, and tackling from, I'd say, from two sides of the coin. And so first, what I had to really, really learn is, dyslexia being that difficulty in translating the written word into something cognitive. And then dysgraphia, just reversing, they're taking the cognitive picture in your head, and translating into written word. So with him, my style of working with him had to be to sit with him when he was reading and read with him, and make him read and have him understand it. And when he started typing words, he was like 'How do you spell this?' Okay, look it up. You do it. I mean, I could spell that word for you. So I worked with him a lot on papers. And tying the two together with dyslexia and dysgraphia is 'Ok, do understand what this was about? This assignment. When you read it, you understand?' And we'd talk about it for a while.

M Mitchell Beres 12:23

And then when it came to writing it would be okay, Anthony, tell me what you want to say. Because he can create a story and tell you all day long, put that pen in his hand or the typewriter in front, I would say start typing. It's very, very slow. Look, and just tell me, and let's start writing down what you said. And by doing that, it became easy later to reformat and edit. What was down, even if it wasn't all logical in the way you wanted it, the storyline was there. And so it was being there with him, and helping him by making him do the things, and not doing it for him.

M Mitchell Beres 13:08

And that was different to think about, like, when I was your age, 'Go do your homework.' Where's mom and dad to come and help? 'You go do your homework, you're smart kid,' you know? And I couldn't do that with Anthony.

M Mitchell Beres 13:20

You know, 'just go do it' didn't work. I had to be around help. With Annalise, it was more of, you know, because the anxiety issues, doing homework and stuff like that wasn't the issue. Getting ready for a test, you know, we practice on the test and kind of go through things the night before, just to help build them that working memory kind of thing. And she did really well. It was more in the social occasions, the sports and everything, being there and providing that moral support and saying 'You're good at this. You're good at this.' She still plays soccer at Hofstra, it's called the traveling league or something like that.

M Mitchell Beres 14:02

But she's done so much. Now she's totally confident. If I just lay out there to try it, if she tried

but she's done so much. Now she's totally confident. If I put her out there to try it, if she tried another sport, you'd be a slow go. Because that idea of people watching me. So yeah, you have to change your style. And you have to understand not only what the child is wrestling with, but then how do you help them through it. And just doing it for them doesn't help anything because you've done all the work. They get good grades because you wrote a paper for them. But that doesn't help. But things that we might have grown up with ourselves or believe 'this is the way you do it?' You just got to sit there and say 'What's working?'

M

Mitchell Beres 14:44

And you've got to be willing to try different types of things. Again, helping them with homework. Do you do it in the bedroom? Do you do the kitchen? Where do you get their attention? Especially children like this, because both kids have ADHD, so you have to look for that period of time I have their attention. And it's going to last long enough to do something.

M

Mitchell Beres 15:08

But if you put them somewhere else where there's too many distractions, you know, they're going, 'Oh, well,' they'll be looking like that and going from that. Going through this is a multifaceted education process to the parent. You need to understand what their issue is, you know, why are they struggling? Is it dyslexia? Or dysgraphia? Is it ADHD? Is it something physical, that creates a problem on the learning abilities? You have to understand what you're dealing with so that you know how to react, then you have to educate yourself on how should I help, and then be willing to adjust many times during that process. Because as your child grows, what you did in third grade might not work in sixth grade, won't work in high school.

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Mitchell Beres 16:00

And so, again, multifaceted education is the best way, because as I've been saying, we have to educate ourselves on the whole picture, and then you can help. But if we go in thinking, 'Oh, I know what to do,' then you're gonna run into a brick wall and say, 'Why isn't this working?'

L

Lauren 16:19

That's true. So your children are both now great self advocates. How did you get them there?

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Mitchell Beres 16:26

It wasn't just me. You know, clearly, my wife had a lot to do with it. And the Montessori school, not the Montessori School, Montessori school is very good, but it was the Winston School in San Antonio, they went there in high school. So let's like start on this. But if there was one thing they taught, and pushed, is be your own self advocate. If you want it done, you got to be able to stand up for yourself. And you got to stand up proud of who you are. And understand yes, you learn differently, but you're not different. And don't worry about it. There's tons of people. And then you also educate them.

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Mitchell Beres 17:14

Branson, the Chairman of Virgin Atlantic is dyslexic. Einstein was dyslexic. The story goes, I don't know if it's true, the story goes that in seventh grade, a teacher sent a note home with him, telling his mother that he was too stupid to learn. And when they start finding out if there's these famous people that are just like them, in regards of how they learn and how they do things, it's 'Oh, okay. I'm not out here on an island. I'm not different, I learn different.' And as they get comfortable in their own skin, then it's easy to become a self advocate, because now they know who they are. And they're comfortable with who they are. So it's easier to stand up in front of somebody and say, 'Wait a minute, I have a right to have more time on my test, I have a right to go someplace else so I'm not distracted or nervous.' And do that.

M

Mitchell Beres 18:14

My daughter had to do that with the professor at Hofstra, he was adamant that she didn't need more time, or some going into a private thing. She went into SAS and the head of SAS, basically, I won't say what she said, but basically strained it out and said, 'He's wrong, you will have a special place to take the test, and then you'll have extra time.' And it was a done deal. She was totally comfortable in saying 'Wait a minute, I have this right.' And went in and got the support that she needs. So it's something that you know, we push as parents, if you have the right educational system around them, not only do they push it also, they succeed in it, and then they can see.

L

Lauren 19:03

Absolutely. Well, speaking of rights, what rights do individuals with LD have the parents should be aware of?

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Mitchell Beres 19:11

They need to be aware of everything that's out there. You know, what kind of programs are there? What can you have? Can you have extended time do you have rooms to go take tests in where you're not in the middle of everything.

M

Mitchell Beres 19:31

And then research. I mean, you have to do a little research because every state is different in terms of what's available, what's not. As you go from grammar schools, to high school, to college, everything changes and it takes a lot of research. You have to dig into it and say 'What are we allowed to do, what what are we expected to do?' I'm not an expert in IEPs but IEPs are not the teacher telling you 'Here's what we're going to do, take it or leave it.' You as a parent can go in there and say 'No, wait a minute. No, I took my child to a neurologist. And if we do it that way, it's not going to work. I took my child to the second neurologist that's not going to work.' these kinds of things.

M

Mitchell Beres 20:17

And it get takes research. And there's no one part answer that says, here's what you need to know. What you need to know is go research and find out what you're entitled to. I think I mentioned earlier, when I was on the board of this high school where the kids went to school, the parents that would come in from public schools and say, 'I want my child to go here,' a lot of the stories, behind the tears of the parents, because the child was struggling so much, they didn't know what to do. They went in and teacher said, 'Here's your IEP.' And they said, 'Okay,' and it wasn't working. And they didn't know why it wasn't working. And they didn't know what they could do to go back and appeal what was in the IEP, or where to go to get support to go in and fight what was in the IEP.

M

Mitchell Beres 21:10

I know, I said it before, my wife, researches everything. She is what made all this work, because she found everything out. 'You need to do this, you need to do this, you should go check this out, don't accept this is an answer' kind of a thing. I wish I could just say here's what you need to know.

M

Mitchell Beres 21:30

You need to know everything. You need to be able to go out and research it. And the more you research and you find out your rights, the better advocate you can be for your child, because you'll go in there and not accept something that's half hearted, or maybe technically follows the requirements, but isn't really doing what your child needs. And if you don't have any information as the parent, you really can't help your child, because then you're a victim of the system. And you know, the system is bureaucratic.

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Mitchell Beres 22:07

'It says do this, I did it. My child's not learning.' 'Well, we said that that's what we did.' Yeah. The parents really have to be in there. Absolutely have to be in there. And they have to be smart about what they're asking for.

L

Lauren 22:23

Absolutely. Well, Mitch, you may have a unique perspective on this, because you've served on the board. But what advice do you have for parents who are trying to connect with their school, their child's school?

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Mitchell Beres 22:36

To really reach out to the school, you know, find out who was the counselor who's the person in charge of ensuring that your child gets the accommodations they need, whatever has to

nappen, getting in front of them, talk to them, 'what do you think, my child should do? what are you the school proposing to do?' And you need to get your hands around that topic, that person, and understand what it is they're proposing. And then as I said previously, then you need to go out and do some research and say, 'Is this going to do it? Is there more that I can ask for or should ask for? And is there a specialist?'

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Mitchell Beres 23:19

And then people say, that costs money. And unfortunately, it does. But one of the things is research your insurance, because certain insurance policies and certain companies will pay for some of these tests. And so get as much information as you can for yourself, and then find who's the person that's going to sign off on that IEP or 504 and that information from school. Who's the person driving the program that my child will go through, because that's where you have to sit down.

M

Mitchell Beres 23:52

And some people say it's negotiation, maybe it's a little bit of a negotiation, but you as a parent, have a right to ensure, and in fact it's an obligation, to make sure your child is getting everything that they can and should get, and not get the minimum because the school says that's what we need.

L

Lauren 24:11

Right. And I have one more question here for you. I know this is gonna be a big one. I'm sure you have many thoughts on this, but what advice would you give to parents who are new to the world of special education and learning disabilities?

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Mitchell Beres 24:24

One of the first things I would do is join LDA. And we did that early on, because we newsletters the information that comes out is one of the greatest ways to find out what is happening in the world of learning differences and teaching learning differences, what's happening in the legal side of the coin. So join LDA and get that information. It is constant when it comes through. And there's a ton of it. You know, we belonged to LDA before we really knew the extent of our children's learning disabilities.

M

Mitchell Beres 25:03

One of my wife's things that she looked up, this company has information, and we need information. So absolutely, you need to kind of take, take that. Then also, you know, follow what's going on in your state, whenever you see anything, and there's a lot of things that go on to the state and the government perspective. But see if you can log into the education department. And what are they passing? What rules are they passing? What are they allowing people to do? We need to understand that. Otherwise, you go in and you find out, like going

through the pandemic, we have people wake up one morning, 'what do you mean, we don't have school now? We're doing it remotely?' Or up here in, Virginia, some people got up. 'Oh, they're supposed to be at school now.' Yeah, they said, we're not doing remote now.

M

Mitchell Beres 25:55

So it's doing...it really is just doing a lot of research. Get involved in the school, it doesn't mean necessarily joining the school board or becoming a volunteer but get involved. Talk to them. What's going on? What are your plans? How are you going to do this? What is your formal program? And even if you know your child has this learning disability, and it's one thing, what's their plans for children with learning disabilities in its entirety?

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Mitchell Beres 26:26

So the more you understand everything that's going on, it gives you more strength and knowledge. Plus, it takes you a long time to think you know everything. Now, we started out with my son, he had problems reading.

M

Mitchell Beres 26:42

And it took a while to go into dyslexia. ADHD came in during that. Dysgraphia wasn't found until the very end. And he really had to start writing papers. My daughter, we found the anxiety issue kind of early on. But the ADHD piece, which was written off as, 'oh she's just anxious,' wait, no, it's more than she's just anxious. So you don't always know the whole thing. You think sometimes, 'oh, I know, my child has this. And this is what I need to do.' Not necessarily. Keep looking, keep researching. And stay involved. If you sit back and just let the school do it, well then the school will do what they quote 'have to do,' but it may not be everything that your child needs. It's...get involved in every way you can. Clearly, LDA is a great resource of information, everything that's online, and everything that comes out on a regular basis with what's going on is phenomenal. When they have webinars, listen to one of those webinars, listen to what people are saying, here's what's going on, especially when they're coming up with the webinars on here's how we work with dyslexia, which could be different than here's how we did it 10 years ago.

M

Mitchell Beres 28:01

If you don't say involved, and understand everything you can, then you're going to do your best for your child. But there's more you could do if you had more knowledge.

L

Lauren 28:13

Absolutely. Well, is there anything else you wanted to add? Maybe something that I didn't ask, coming up?

M

Mitchell Beres 28:19

It's, you know, being a parent whose work no matter what. That's just what it is. One day you sit back and say, I hope they take care of me like I took care of them. But it's work, and when you have a child with learning differences, yes, there's more work. But you can make tremendous progress and help your child make tremendous progress by doing the work and helping.

M

Mitchell Beres 28:48

When we took my son to Winston School, and spoke to the administrator, the administrator, said 'So what did you want?' And my wife was almost in tears. I just wanted him to be able to get out of high school. And now both will graduate Hofstra. It's work. But the success is there. And you'll sit back and just be so happy at how well your children are doing.

M

Mitchell Beres 29:14

And if you want to do a little pat yourself on the back, I worked my tail off to get them there, but it's worth every step.

L

Lauren 29:25

Absolutely, Mitch, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today. You've been a wealth of information.

M

Mitchell Beres 29:31

Oh, thank you, my pleasure.

L

Lauren 29:39

Thank you for listening to the LDA podcast. To learn more about LDA and to get valuable resources and support, visit lda.america.org