

Episode 30: What to Expect When Your Child Has a Learning Disability, Part 2

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.

Lauren 00:23

Welcome everyone to the LDA Podcast. I'm here today with Kelly Haggerty. She's the president of LDA Montana and the founder of Dyslexia Screening and Tutoring Services. Thank you, Kelly, so much for being here today.

Kelly Haggerty 00:34

Thank you for having me.

Lauren 00:36

So Kelly, just to dive right in, could you give us a little bit of a background about yourself?

Kelly Haggerty 00:41

Yes, I am a dyslexia specialist. And I've been screening slash testing kids or children, or adults for dyslexia for over a decade. So 15 years, I've been doing this. And I got into this business of dyslexia, let's call it, because I have two out of three children and my husband are dyslexic. So once my children started, my son started struggling with something that was unidentified, and no one really knew why this smart child was not at the top of the class. And so I started doing some research and discovered that he is dyslexic. And then my youngest one was and my husband, because it's definitely hereditary.

Lauren 01:26

The first question here, what are the signs of a learning disability that teachers should be looking for in their students? I know you work mostly with dyslexia.

Kelly Haggerty 01:33

Absolutely. I think that teachers really need to be aware that children for the most part, they're there because they really want to learn. So if you're seeing someone that's acting out, a child that's acting out, and it's like, 'huh, what's going on there?' Sometimes they can be trying to get out of something that's very difficult. You also can be looking for a child that is trying to just kind of stay under the desk, you know, or 'don't call on me,' the extremely quiet child, sometimes they'll try to get out of class. So again, act out and that kind of thing. So I think you should be looking for that. Also, if they're not performing to the ability that you think. And then I think you should look at that and go, Alright, what's going on? In what areas are those difficulties occurring in?

Lauren 02:25

Definitely. So it sort of sounds like looking at the reasons behind the behavior, not necessarily just what the behavior itself is.

Kelly Haggerty 02:33

Exactly, exactly. And there are specifics as to things to be looking for, especially with dyslexia. If a child can verbally give you the answers to questions, and have a vocabulary for it and go, 'Oh, yeah, I know all about that.' But then when it comes to putting those answers down on paper, there's a disconnect. And that's a huge thing to be looking for.

Lauren 02:57

Absolutely. So if you're an educator who's noticing some of these signs, what should your first steps be?

Kelly Haggerty 03:03

You know, I think most teachers that are in the classroom, they have steps that they are supposed to follow, their principals have told them, and they go right through those steps. And the schools obviously have a way that they know that you're supposed to bring that to the principal's attention. And so they have their steps to go 'okay, yeah, there's a disconnect, I think we should have them tested for a learning disability.' But I think one of the most important things that teachers can do, also, is to keep the parents in the loop. A lot of times parents feel like they're kind of left out. And they're like, 'Well, gosh, I thought everything was going fine. And now you're telling me.' And so I hear this all the time, where parents are like, 'Gosh, I know they're smart and I didn't know anything about this.' And they feel like they've kind of been left out. So it is very important for those teachers to keep them on top of it.

Lauren 03:58

So what are some common accommodations and strategies that you can use to work with a student with LD?

Kelly Haggerty 04:03

There are a lot of things that teachers can do in the classroom. And I think it makes it a safe zone for children. They want to go to school and they want to perform well. And when they get there, that anxiety starts coming on and so they need it to be safe. Some of the things they can do is don't call on them to read. Now this again would be more for dyslexia because if it's a different learning disability, maybe reading isn't something that they really struggle with. But for dyslexia, it's very important that the child feels like they can read a passage in front of their peers, so don't call them unless they raise their hand. Another huge accommodation in the classroom would be to provide audiobooks or audio instruction. And there are some things like a C-Pen, which is kind of a really cool tool, they're about 200 bucks, but there's an air bud, and if the parents purchase it, they can have it and just have instructions read to them in the classroom through this earbud. So it's kind of a miracle tool. Because for the first time, it's like, 'oh, well, I know the answer to that,' and they're not having to put energy into reading those instructions and things. And then a lot of times, they're already burned out by the time they've decoded, like a story problem or something. And so if we're really trying to get the answer, they need it either read to them, or on audio in some form. So that's a great thing that they can do. Again, they can answer verbally. So if you know a child is struggling, and you're like, 'This does not make sense. I know they know the material, why can't they get it down on paper?' Take some time and see if you can do a verbal test, maybe after school, and find out if the material is really learned. It's also important that they

accept dictated work, like from their parents. If they have homework, just know that they've worked, a dyslexic child works three or four times harder, all day long, trying to keep up. And I'm sure that's how it is for other learning disabilities also. So our job as a parent is to make sure that they're not spending all of their time doing homework after school. So it's very important that the teachers accept dictated work and say, 'Okay, what do you know,' and then the parent can just write out that answer for them. I think it's also important to reduce assignments. More, especially in math, isn't necessarily better. If you have two problems that are the same, it's very important that it's just like, 'okay, just have them do one.' Because they will have a homework assignment that might take someone without a learning disability 10 minutes could take up to an hour, depending on what it is. So I think that's really important. One accommodation also that I love, and I think is for mainly for a little bit older, like third and fourth grade, is provide notes. Sometimes that disconnect between trying to get-kids that are dyslexic struggle with spelling. So if they're trying to copy off the board, it's like, 'I don't necessarily know how to spell that word.' And also, if they're struggling with reading, so they're taking that letter by letter off the chalkboard, or off, I guess it's just off the whiteboard. So it's important that if they can listen to the lecture, that auditory memory a lot of times is just a gift. But if they're trying to take notes, they've lost it. So it's important just push print, if you can do that, or have a student give them their notes. And that should be for anybody in the classroom, it doesn't necessarily have to be for those that have learning disabilities, it's a great thing. If you have an auditory memory for what the teacher is saying, and you can pass that test 90% already, heck, why not go for it that way? So I think those are some of the main ones. There are a lot of accommodations, like preferential seating, those kinds of things, don't keep them in for recess to do work, they need to go outside and play and be social and be around their friends.

Kelly Haggerty 08:11

We definitely need to have them reevaluate because some of that's in kindergarten or first grade, you know, they're obviously not taking notes yet. So when we evaluate a child for dyslexia, I give them all of the accommodations through high school. And so I tell parents, you're not going to need all of these, pick the top ones. And it's a living, breathing document, especially if they have a 504 plan through the school. So it's like go in, get evaluated, say, 'Yep, we need this one this year, we don't need this one.' And our goal is to get rid of those accommodations. And so that child is immersed in the classroom and doesn't really need them. But once they get into high school, it can be something like 'yeah, don't make them take foreign language.' It can be more time on the ACT only. So if they're down to just those type of accommodations at that point, that's great. Our screening tests that we run are good for college. Also, the colleges around here, they send those students to us for the disability services office. And they need to know, they need to identify what the learning disability is. And then they can provide those students to take their tests down at the learning disabilities office, so they get more time on tests. That's a great accommodation that I forgot to mention earlier is just give the students more time. If everyone's looking at them going, 'Okay, I'm done.' 'I'm done.' Well then there's that stress and that anxiety that starts to come. And so let them have that, do the testing in a private setting, let them have more time. Have them come after school or before school when everyone else maybe doesn't even know. But the college accommodations, they will provide audiobooks once a college student has purchased books then and they have proof with the receipt, then they have all the capability to go ahead and provide the audiobooks on any device that they want. And that's a huge, huge thing for a college students. The blue book book tests, if they still have to do big huge writing paragraphs or pages, they can talk that into a

recording device. So all of the kinds of technology, it's a great time to have a learning disability, because there are so many devices out there that can make it better, all of the word processing that wasn't around years ago. Everybody's using it.

Lauren 10:37

Well that sort of leads into my next question, which is how do you go about finding what works for a student with LD? What's your process for sort of measuring what's effective and what maybe they don't need?

Kelly Haggerty 10:48

Yeah, well, specifically, again, to dyslexia, when a parent or an adult, it can be them too, when they call, we spend time with them on the phone, we spend at least 20 minutes with them, looking through warning signs, making sure that this isn't something else. We don't move forward unless we're 95% sure that we're dealing with someone that is dyslexic. I send them to a neuropsychologist, or I will be really honest and say, 'Yeah, this doesn't look like what I'm used to dealing with.' So that's the main thing. And then we just give them suggestions. It's 'Do you want to go forward with the screening test?' And if we do, we're gonna run 10 to 12 different tests to prove dyslexia. And you can't prove it with just one test, you need them all to kind of go, 'Okay, this proves that this proves it, this proves it.' So there's no denying it. And then we will discover the severity level of dyslexia, we also look for something called dysgraphia, which is a handwriting issue that can go right along with dyslexia 70% of the time. So I'm looking for that, I'm checking to see if that is going on also. Many times, we've got an- I'm not a doctor, so ADD is not my specialty, ADHD. But we definitely see that 40% of the time too, and parents can be very concerned whether that's all that's going on, because a lot of times they're kind of led into that area, which is perfectly fine. But in my opinion, a lot of times the anxiety of having a learning disability is so great for these kids who are just like 'What's wrong, why, why am I not getting this?' And so there's a stress level, and I'm seeing more and more younger children like kindergarten first graders that are the parents are catching that there's something going on earlier. And that's fantastic. Because the child is already anxious, they're already thinking, 'Gosh, we need to medicate.' And it's like, let's get this under control. And let them know that a program is actually going to work, and that they don't need to be struggling with that and feeling so stressed out about it. And then let's see what else is going on, and whether you need to move forward with that.

Lauren 13:04

Right. So it sounds like a huge partnership between teachers and parents and just having that constant communication.

Kelly Haggerty 13:09

It really is. When they come in for an evaluation, then they have to decide whether or not, all right, so do you want to move forward with that test? It's about a 15 page report. We'll give them recommendations and accommodations, we'll find out if they're ready for it. The Orton Gillingham program, we use a program called the Barton System. That's the one that is going to be used around here the most. There are other great OG programs out there, we just don't have them around here. So we're going to lead them in the right direction, if they want to go with the testing, they can, but otherwise, we're going to have our tutors, they can go into tutoring without doing the testing. Also, we

would still do a free screening, we have to make sure that they're ready for the program that we have, and everybody starts at the same level. And I have had children where they go really fast through the first part, which is just connecting phonemes. And for those listeners, phoneme is different than phonics. And that was something when I first got into this I did not understand. And phoneme is just sounds, manipulating sounds with your eyes closed. So being able to take a sound out and put another sound in and then make a different word. And most dyslexic children don't understand the phoneme, there's a disconnect with the phoneme. So they think cat is one sound versus three sounds. And that's really important. So we have to make that connection. And it's kind of like math. If you don't understand, if there's that base layer, that there's a disconnect, you can't move on to the next. I think it's really important also, that teachers in the school classroom, if they can figure out what sounds and letter names those children are missing, and use like a sound page and have their own individual sound page at their desk. It will take some time on their own to check out all of the letters of the alphabet. And guarantee there's going to be—so now again, that's with dyslexia, there's going to be some G J confusion, they're going to be confused about the letter C, and the sounds of the C C K K. And there's reasons why C switches to a different sound. So it's not that the child-dyslexia is not an intelligence issue at all, average or highly intelligent. So we want the parents, we want the students to realize that this is not intelligence, it's just your brain processes language differently. It's very important that they understand that. Once a child comes in here, and they realize that, they settle down. It's like, wow. And I have children that will do the tests, and they're like, 'I like it here.' And they feel comfortable, because it's a place where we understand. And for dyslexia, we work with the best kids in the world. I tell parents that you don't need to be embarrassed that we're calling this learning disability dyslexia. It's time for the world to know that dyslexia exists. And that this is not something to be embarrassed about. We work with the best kids in the world. Their personality, they can wrap a teacher around their finger, they typically can make friends really easily. Not that there aren't some shy dyslexic kids, but they are the outside of the box thinkers. And they are the ones that are going to go out and change the world if we can just get some of this grade school stuff figured out.

Kelly Haggerty 16:46

And then it's get them up on technology. You know, once dyslexic, always dyslexic, we wouldn't even want that to go away. I wouldn't. I'm just like, no, that's the outside of the box thinker, thr I can see things, I can think three dimensional, well, I can't do that. So it's very important that we just make sure that our dyslexic individuals move forward and go and do all the great things that they need to do in this world. We'd be lost without them.

Lauren 17:13

Absolutely, yes. So you had mentioned all the new changing technology and things and it's so hard to keep up with it. How do you keep up with the latest practices, the latest research on learning disability instruction?

Kelly Haggerty 17:28

Yeah, a lot of times I get it through the Learning Disability Association, the Barton website, there are some or she sends out a newsletter, and LDA also, so there's so much with technology now, and all of the podcasts and things. Yeah, and I go to, you know, with COVID, there's been some, like the

International Dyslexia Association, some of those conferences, we've gone to some virtually or whatever, but it's definitely a lot better in person. And just just different little trainings and things.

Lauren 18:05

Well you touched on this a little bit, but are there different ways to boost the social and emotional well being of a student with LD?

Kelly Haggerty 18:13

Absolutely, I think it's really important. And I tell parents this all the time, that once they start getting into the correct tutoring program for dyslexia and Orton Gillingham program, I literally see them standing straight within a couple of weeks. Straighter, I should say. Which seems really...I think, okay, when is that not going to happen? But I've seen high schoolers where they come in, and they're walking straighter. The child comes in, and they're just all over the place and they're trying to distract to begin with, you know, because they could do all these great things, and then all of a sudden, within a couple of weeks, they kind of settle down. So it really does give them confidence, and makes them understand that for the first time, this program, or what we're doing is finally going to work and it's not just another program where 'Okay, memorize this word, memorize this word.' So a lot of the programs that are for non-dyslexic kids, they have a visual memory, so it's kind of a mixture between phonics and using visual memory. So read it, look at it, know it. And so when that's not dyslexic, they look at a word like 'does' and it goes in their memory bank. It's like, okay, that word is 'does' and then three lines later that word 'does' comes up it's like, oh, there it is. Oh, and then they're looking at there, oh, there it is, there it is. Someone that's dyslexic, the weaker that visual memory for words, the more severe they are. So it's like, the parents says 'Okay, that word says 'does.' All right. Okay. They see it again. And then the parents like, 'okay, there it is. That word is what? And it was 'does; remember it was 'does, okay?' Three lines later, they don't recognize it. That's a weak visual memory for black and white service words. And so they need to know how to decode. So once they come in once they start getting, even if they're they're just identified as this is what this is, this isn't an intelligence issue. There's such a relief to that. And I've seen it in this year alone, I've seen some middle schoolers, high school, that it's like, 'No, I'm so glad to know this.' And they'll come in my office, because I have them come in when we go over the testing results. And many of them tear up or cry, because it's such a relief. And they need to know now whether they go on to college. A lot of times, they're so beat up and they just really don't like school, they need to know and they need to know that to go do the great things.

Lauren 20:40

So what advice do you have for working with students with LD within the general education classroom? What would you say to those teachers?

Kelly Haggerty 20:47

I think it's really important that they realize that like with dyslexia, 17-20% of the population. So in a classroom, they've got five students that are dyslexic. So that's a huge percentage. And the severity level can be from mild to profound. We would never, with mild, you wouldn't come see me. And I've never seen a profoundly dyslexic child either. But they really need to know that there are kids in here that are struggling with-and again, I specialize in dyslexia-so they need to be aware of that. Now a lot of times where they're not a specialist, they are not allowed to say, 'we think it might be this,' but if a

parent does bring up, 'What's going on?' The teachers can send them to different websites, and it doesn't have to just be specifically for dyslexia, it can be like LDA. Get them in there so they're looking, they're aware. I know, teachers are in a very precarious situation. Because I've seen it, I've had parents tell me, you know, one minute, they want to know, but then if you say it, and they're not on the same page with you, then they're mad because you brought up something that that your child might be, and it's and so you have to kind of be careful. And I get that. And, you know, I was in denial when I first started out in this too, with my own kids. And so you have to be at that point where you're ready, ready to listen, but if they realize, and they could say, you know, this isn't, this is a huge percentage of people, I think there can be some warning sign sheets to definitely teachers need to check with their principals what they can and can't do. So with the state laws like they are, you know, some, some states totally recognize certain learning disabilities as in, it's okay for them to say, hey, you know, check this this than this. But I do think a lot of times, they need to make sure that the child is at least possibly of getting tested through the school and see what the discrepancies are in their learning ability between what their IQ is and how they're actually performing. And then I think it's important that it's identified what specific learning disability they're talking about.

Lauren 23:09

Definitely, specific terms are really helpful with that. Definitely. So I just have one last question for you. And again, you touched on this a little bit, but what are some good resources that educators can look for to get more knowledgeable about helping students with LD?

Kelly Haggerty 23:24

I think there are more and more websites to go to, like, for me, it's always been things like an International Dyslexia Association. I'm new to LDA and the podcasts and everything that's available there...that's huge. There are also many, many books. 'Overcoming Dyslexia' by Sally Shaywitz. That one's been around for a very long time. And I would recommend if a parent is looking at dyslexia, that is a good one to start.

Lauren 23:56

Well, thank you so much for talking with us today. We're so happy to have your expertise on this topic.

Kelly Haggerty 24:01

Thank you very much for inviting me and I hope that this is helpful for all the parents and educators that might be listening.

Lauren 24:14

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