

Lauren 00:12

Welcome to the LDA podcast, a series dedicated to improving the lives and education of all learners. In this episode, we talked to Chris Zeigler Dendy and Dr. Ruth Hughes, who provide both personal and professional advice on helping students with ADHD and learning disabilities transition into adulthood.

Kristina Scott 00:34

Hello, everyone, I'm here with Chris Zeigler Dendy and Dr. Ruth Hughes. Chris Dendy is a former educator, a school psychologist and mental health professional with over 40 years of experience. She has authored the book Teenagers with ADD and ADHD: A Guide for Parents and Teens with ADD, ADHD and Executive Functioning Deficits. And with her son Alex, she has also created a popular DVD titled Real Life ADD, ADHD, a DVD Survival Guide for Children and Teens. Dr. Ruth Hughes is a clinical psychologist and mother of an adult son with ADHD and LD. She is the former CEO of CHADD, her and Chris both co-authored a book that's set to be released this year, Ready or Not: the Transition to Adulthood with ADHD. Thank you for joining me.

Chris Dendy 01:23

We're glad to be here.

Dr. Ruth Hughes 01:24

Thank you.

Kristina Scott 01:25

Great. So what do you know about brain maturity during the high school years, and how the transition from high school to college or high school to the workforce is affected by brain maturity?

Dr. Ruth Hughes 01:37

The brain changes dramatically all through childhood and continues to mature into your mid 30s. So we often think of adulthood when that doesn't happen. But it's not true, there's still a lot of changes going on. And for most teenagers and young adults, that's a period of where the brain is becoming increasingly more efficient. It's a time of high learning, risk taking, trying new things. But if you have a disability like ADHD, there is a difference. And that there is really well documented research that shows that the brain matures more slowly. I want to be really clear that the brain matures, that our young people with ADHD get there, but it is a slower trajectory. So Chris and I like to think of our young men and a lot of people with ADHD as late bloomers because they definitely bloom.

Chris Dendy 02:36

And that was one of the things we didn't understand, because we had gifted sons who were very bright. And we expected them to perform as a 15 year old, not realizing that there was possibly a three to five delay in brain maturation, as Ruth explained, that's been documented by the National Institutes of Health. And so we had to readjust our expectations. But we were slow in doing that. It's like we were the slow learners, we learned the lessons the hard way. And that's why we wanted to talk to you guys to help you benefit from the mistakes we made and the lessons that we've learned.

Dr. Ruth Hughes 03:13

So the the brain maturity lag on average for young people with ADHD is about three years. But the part of the brain that takes the longest to catch up is the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for your planning, organization, common sense learning, anticipation of consequences, all those things that are so important when you reach that transition into adulthood.

Kristina Scott 03:43

Right. So, why, how would we see this and that transition to adulthood, this lagging of brain maturity?

Chris Dendy 03:53

Well, I guess what you'll see is that they don't seem as mature. They're not punctual about remembering and turning in homework. But you have some brain structural issues, not damage, and brain chemistry issues. And so we've done a lot more research on ADHD and the brain maturation than for example, LD as it relates to brain maturity. But you know, for example, we assume a 12 year old with ADHD can take the responsibilities of a 12 year old, but brain maturity-wise, he's more like an eight year old. So teachers and parents alike are guilty of expectations that are unrealistic. So that's one of the main things that we do is educate them and say, Look, these kids are going to need more supports than you think you should be giving them and that your teachers think you should be giving them. But you've got to do it because until their brain matures, they will need the extra supports. And of course with us being professionals, we wear two hats in this brain that was the point of Professor O'Brien is going, you're too involved, you need to let him fail, and he'll learn. And then the moms go, you're crazy. You know, that's just not the way it works, because they don't learn from punishment and rewards like other kids. So we have to, we will, for a good period of time have to provide them more supports longer than their same age classmates and not feel guilty about it and hope that teachers and and relatives won't make us feel guilty about it.

Dr. Ruth Hughes 05:29

And this becomes very crucial when we talk about 18 year olds graduating from high school, it's probably the biggest transition any young person makes. And we send them off into the world and expect them to be independent. At the same time, we take away all the structure and support. And that's just an awful combination if they're not ready. And so it's really important for parents and their young people, their teams, to really take a step back and assess whether they're ready. And for me, if I had listened better, my son was telling me, he never filled out a college application, no matter how much I nagged him about it. He said, I'm just going to the community college because I didn't give him any choice. I mean, I'm a PhD, I'm sort of academically minded. 'Of course, you're going to college,' and that day I made the appointment for him to go to Disability Services and register. And I drove him there with him screaming at me the whole time. Now, if I'd been more tuned in, I would have heard him saying loud and clear, 'I'm not ready for this yet mom.' And after spending five years at the community college, I got it, he knew that I got it. And we did a gap year then and he came back, ready to move on and eventually graduated magna cum laude. But getting there took time. So he was my late bloomer.

Chris Dendy 07:10

I think one of the things that we learn the lessons along the way is, we were rushing them before they were ready. And her message is right on target, you have to listen to what your child is telling you. And you know, there's this big, huge social push. We, our parents, our kids are guilty of 'you have to go to

college right after high school.' Well, that's not best for many of our kids. So don't rush them, give them an opportunity to grow. And of course, Ruth and I both, you know, there are options, the gap here that she mentioned. And do you want to start with a gap? Or do you want to start with community college? Probably gap.

Dr. Ruth Hughes 07:49

Well, one thing I want to say before then, the highest risk group of young people going to college, forget the disabilities, are people who go and drop out, they have a much poorer job trajectory moving forward as adults than people who never go to college in the first place. So it's very important that we think about how we can make this experience successful for our young people, which means waiting-Waiting is the wrong word, which means giving them the gift of time. So if you take a year or two before you go, that's much better than going crashing and burning, dropping out, and never wanting to go back again because it was such an awful experience. So one way of doing that is a gap year. And, really, there are many excellent gap year programs, but they cost money. But so does college. And so it's an investment in our young people's future. But this is something that you can plan with your young person. And what I would recommend, Chris and I talk about is that it's really important to us this year as a year of vocational exploration, you are much better off if you have some idea of what you want to do that interests you and excites you. And for many of our young people with ADHD and LD, if it's not interesting, it's so much harder. And so we really want to be sure that this is a time to really explore. And the sooner you start that the better. We think you should start in middle school, but very much in that gap year time to explore various opportunities, volunteer, do an internship, shadow somebody, do some vocational testing, there's so many different ways... a part time job...that you can explore what are the areas that you might like, My son did an internship in teaching because he really loves being with young people. And he came home one day and he said 'Mom, I don't care what kind of side of the desk I'm on. I still don't like school.' So he figured out that was not his path and then he ended up a park ranger, which was perfect for him.

Chris Dendy 10:04

One of the things that we discovered along the way is there's this wonderful federal program called pre employment transition services training. And if you have an IEP or 504, somewhere around age 14, they'll sign you up, like how to do job interviews, how to dress, how to write resumes, and it's a service that we had no clue existed. And so if you have a child in high school, and about that age, then you could check into this to see if your son or daughter was eligible, because that lays a great foundation. And of course, she's listed all these wonderful clubs and that sort of thing, exploring, you know, parents can kind of tune in to what their kids like, alright, you are really good with computers. So you sign him up for computer classes, or, you know, you're really good outdoors. So, let's sign you up for this outdoor camping or volunteering at a summer camp or whatever. So one of the things that I'll move on to here is, we have looked at the advantages of combining a gap year with, you know, the year of exploration and also signing up for maybe one course at a community college. And what we've encouraged people to look at is what I call specialized professional training. And we want to elevate the topic, elevate the status of, it's not vocational training, it's a vocational college, because things are so much more technical. Now they have to know computers, they have to know how to use equipment, they have to know how to think creatively. And what we found is that it takes less time, it's much less expensive. You don't graduate from there with this huge multimillion dollar, I think I know one kid or two who has an

\$80,000 debt from four years of college. And those professions like auto mechanics in refrigeration and air, you're gonna make \$50,000 a year. I mean, it's a wonderful profession. And a lot of these people are better hands-on folks.

Dr. Ruth Hughes 12:05

And a lot of apprenticeships today are moving into very new fields. Computer apprenticeships are beginning to grow by leaps and bounds across the country. And companies, large corporations, are unhappy with the college graduates they're getting as new employees. And so they're setting up apprenticeships specifically for what they're looking for. So they're doing the training for potential new employees. So apprenticeships are a wonderful place to explore.

Chris Dendy 12:34

There are a lot of places, schools, high schools around the country that are called Career Academies. And my sister teaches at one in Georgia, and they partner with Shaw Industries, he's one of the leading carpeting and flooring businesses in the world, and they have internships and they pay, they train the students at school, and then they pay them. And the other thing we're seeing is that there are, I mean, anticipated million job openings for nurses and for other highly specialized and trained professionals. And you don't have to have a college degree to sign up for those. I mean, we know there's going to be a nursing shortage, goodness, you know, that's well on the horizon.

Dr. Ruth Hughes 13:14

So we would encourage our young people, with their parents, to ask and answer a couple quick key questions. First, what is it you really love doing? Again, we don't want anybody thinking about a career just because they make money, but hating it for the next 40 years. So what is it you love doing? Number two, what is it you're good at doing? Because those two things aren't always quite the same. And you want a synergy where you've got both. Three, what are you not so good at? So if you're not good at math, you're not going to be an accounting or a financial manager somewhere. But what are the things that you're going to avoid doing because that's not your cup of tea? But we would suggest two other questions with that, which is, the fourth one is, can you make a living doing this? Because a lot of our young people would like to be basketball stars, like Kobe Bryant or, you know, a rock musician or an artist, well, it's just a realist-and it's not that we should discourage that-but a realistic look at what the chances are they'll be able to support themselves. And the fifth one is, what will the job market be five or six years down the road when I'm ready to go there? Because our world is changing so rapidly. So for instance, right now we have a huge need for truck drivers. Well, 10 years from now with autonomous vehicles, that's going to change dramatically. So really just looking down the road at that, and there are excellent resources to help answer those questions. That and the program Chris was talking about earlier, anyone who goes to their state department of rehabilitation asking about transition services for their high school students, that is the entry to those services that Chris was talking about.

Chris Dendy 15:05

One of the things I'd like to throw in is, you know, there are skills that some people call soft skills, but they're really critical skills. And these are sometimes skills our kids lack, not being on time to work, not being organized, not planning ahead, not finishing assignments on time. So continued treatment into young adulthood is critically important. And, in fact, I saw a survey of Georgia business leaders, and the

critical soft skills were the reasons people were fired, not the quality of the job. But now I tell you who's the real expert, if they're going on to college, is Ruth, because she has the perfect job to know how to guide our kids through that process.

Dr. Ruth Hughes 15:50

Well, I came out of retirement, I started to get a little bit bored. And I'm now working with students with disabilities at our community college part time and just loving it. They teach me new things every single day. But one of the things I think, choosing a college is really important. And typically, we do it for the wrong reasons, we do it because family members went there and there's sort of a legacy in the family, or it's got a gorgeous campus, or it's got a great reputation for being a really prestigious school. Those are not things that will help our students be successful. So we really want to caution parents to think about what your young person needs to have a successful college career. And that includes things like the size of the school and the size of the classes. For my young man, it really meant smaller classes, not going to school with 300 other students in one class, but really having that one-on-one involvement with professors and instructors, and being able to be part of that. It can, making sure, of course, that a major that they have some interest in because they've done their vocational exploration. But also really paying attention, is this a school or university that is more invested in research and prestige, or more invested in actual teaching? And we want to send our young people to schools that the teachers are invested in teaching, it isn't just one more chore they have to do while they do their research. And we really want, I recommend small classes, looking at other services like the Disability Support Services. I'm very lucky that I work at a college, Howard Community College. I have to do a shout out there where our staff will go to the wall to help a student. But there are a lot of places that disability services is sort of a paperwork process, 'You need accommodations, okay, here they are now. Next!' We really want students to come back to consult with us, we are there for them their entire time, I probably spend more time with students coming back in because they've hit a rough spot than with that initial accommodation. So making sure it's a good Disability Support Services, good tutoring. That there is an investment in people graduating. Do you know the graduation rate in our country is below 50%? That is incredible. We want to make sure that there is a real concern about people moving forward and getting their degrees. At my school, we have all sorts of support programs. We have free counseling, we have programs for people who are moms going back to school, who are African American, and going back to school, who are Hispanic, Latino, and going back to school, who are first generation students, when we just have reached out many, many different ways. So really pay attention to what's there. And that first semester, it's so easy to say, 'Oh, I'm so proud of you. I know you're going to do great, babe.' And then walk away. And things go down the tubes and your young person is afraid to tell you. So we recommend putting all the supports in place the first semester, get tutoring, use the Disability Services, make sure that you have everything you need. Take fewer classes at the beginning, to three classes, three tops that first semester, then if you don't need things, you drop them away because you're doing fine. But you want to prevent the failure and that's really important as you move forward.

Chris Dendy 19:48

I think one of the things that I wanted to kind of share is Ruth and I are perceived and have perceived ourselves and been by others as experts in this field. And then we had our children who humbled and taught us the real lessons in life. And so what we have wanted to do is share with the parents coming after us what we've learned. I mean, we would do by the book advice, and sometimes it would work,

and sometimes it wouldn't. I'm a mental health professional, former director of children's mental health services, school psychologist, and we were baffled why our kids couldn't meet our expectations. And so our joy now comes and sharing the lessons we've learned. My son is in his 40s and I jokingly say he's happily married, has a job that he loves, and I can finally sleep well at night without worrying. Because in the high school years, you're like, oh, my gosh, is he ever going to graduate from high school? Is he going to live with us the rest of his life? Will he ever get a job? And what most people don't realize is two thirds of our kids with ADHD have something else. My son had ADHD, a learning disability in written expression, executive function deficits, anxiety, slow processing speed. So when you have parents that are as passionate as we are, it's typically because it's more complicated. And I think at least, I think this data is something like over half of our kids do have learning disabilities. So we share, alright, this is by the book advice. But if this doesn't work, then get real. And the other brilliant thing that Ruth did was developed this lovely survey for parents, because we went to our friends of 30 years from CHADD and LDA, and said to them, tell us what lessons you've learned, what would you do differently? So this is a joyful book, our ending chapter is going to be something like the book of hope, you know, that this is Chris, her son, and now he's a park ranger. And this is the first Black triathlete to compete as a professional triathlete. This guy's a musician in New Orleans. And this is some 20 years later, kids that we worried about that weren't going to make it. And so we're sharing the successes, and it's a book of hope. And we've done some training, we'll do training tomorrow here. And then we've done one in CHADD and had really good reception, our parents are saying thank you for not making us feel guilty, that we are doing the right things that even though people might call us names like helicopter parent, or you're too involved, or you're too overprotective, you know, trust your guts. I mean, this parenting thing is not easy. Nobody gave us a guide book. It's like walking a tightrope without a bar. So we love what we're doing. You know, when you write a book, you go through this love-hate, so about a year and a half into it, we were both hating the book. And now I think we're falling back in love with it, if we can just get it finished. So we hope within the next six months that it will be out because it's our joy and our gift to share this with other parents so that their parenting experiences and the successes of their children will be more positive.

Dr. Ruth Hughes 23:06

The one thing that came out of the survey that Chris mentioned, that was so important, is parent after parent after parent, and these are parents of adult children, looking back asking them what they would have done differently, or what they did that they thought was most important. And the resounding message was how important it is to keep a positive relationship with your young person. We are human, all of us parents are, we have days that we're ready to pull our hair out that we're ready to say I give up. I don't know what to do, do we need to kick him out? Do we need to...and limit setting is important. I don't want either one of us...We know limit setting is important. But having said that, the most important thing was keeping that relationship with your young person positive. And being that the place they could always come when life threw them a foul ball that they could come home, recover. But not just stay in the basement feeling depressed and anxious, like a failure, but rather, we're helping them develop the new plan right away to move forward. We're helping them get whatever treatment they need to address anxiety, depression, any of the things that happen when the world falls apart, and take those next steps and be there to support them. Communication and that feeling of being loved and accepted no matter what is absolutely key.

Chris Dendy 24:35

...Barkley, the leading international researcher in our area talks about providing a safety net and that's what you want to do and Ruth and I agree wholeheartedly on this. The unconditional love you give your child and acceptance for who he is, may one day save his life. And I don't say that I can speak to my own personal experience because I've had my son sit and cry and say, you know, I wish our dad just could go to sleep and never wake up. But if I didn't know how much he loved me, I would never do that.

Dr. Ruth Hughes 25:15

And that is true. So many of our young people, particularly at these very vulnerable period from 18, to 25, it's a really tough period. And we both had those experiences where it just felt like the world was crashing down on our sons. And today, my son, Christopher, as opposed to Chris, my co author, he feels like he won the lottery, he's got the best job in the world, he's doing really well. They talk about his supervisors say you know, he'll be a supervisor soon at the rate he's going. But so that's, I think, the last message we'd like to give all parents is that where you are in the moment with your young person is not where they're going to end up, that they really, they continue to mature, they continue to grow, their executive function deficits get better. It may not disappear, but they get better, that brain maturity continues to go on, they get life experience, they get some wisdom along the way, they learn coping skills, and as long as we're continuing to be there for them when we need them, excuse me, when they need us, or when we need...I think that's an older person's faux pas there, Chris...that they do bloom. And it just is not going to be on anybody else's time schedule but their own.

Kristina Scott 26:54

So thank you for sharing your successes in parenting, it sounds like you've raised two exceptional young men who are contributing very much to the world now. And I thank you for sharing personally, your own struggles, because I think many of our listeners, parents, feel these struggles. And there are moments in parenthood where you feel like you're at the bottom, and why was I chosen to be this person's mom, like I know that from my own experience. So I thank you, because I think it resonates with many of our listeners. So I appreciate you being here today and giving us your time to really disclose a lot of your personal life with us and give us a sense of hope, which you said your last chapter of the book also will talk about, so we eagerly anticipate that coming out as well.

Dr. Ruth Hughes 27:48

And the book coming out is Ready or Not: Transition to Adulthood with ADHD. We hope it'll be out summer 2020 or maybe fall. We're getting close.

Kristina Scott 27:59

That love-hate relationship with writing, right?

28:01

Just look for our name on the book, because it's gonna say "launching into young adulthood." But it's, you know, the thing is, we finally have hope, our kids are doing well. And we want to share that joy and love and the lessons we've learned with other parents so that their jobs don't have to be as difficult as ours was. And thank you for inviting us.

Kristina Scott 28:21

I appreciate it. Thank you

Lauren 28:29

Thank you for listening to the LDA podcast. Our theme music is little idea by Scott Holmes. The series is made possible by The Learning Disabilities Foundation of America. In our next episode, we'll talk to Sharona Somers, a certified professional coach and director of learning for the college internship program national about strategies that help with executive function. For more resources from LDA visit ldaamerica.org