

Lauren Clouser:

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. Hi, everyone. Welcome to the LDA podcast. I'm here today with Lois Letchford, who is a reading specialist, dyslexia advocate, and parent. Lois, thank you so much for being here. We're so excited to have you.

Lois Letchford:

Lauren, I'm delighted to be here. I love sharing my story.

Lauren Clouser:

Yeah, we would love to hear more about that story. Could you start off by telling us a little bit about yourself and your awesome story?

Lois Letchford:

As you can hear, I'm Australian. So my story began in Australia in Brisbane, Australia in 1994, a bit before that, really. I'll take you back even further. I went to high school and struggled in school, and I still became a physical education teacher. But it was an enormous struggle for me. So today I would say I'm undiagnosed dyslexic. And what that does is you grow up with, you know, am I good enough or am I not good enough? So I taught for a while, I traveled, I met my husband, we married, and then we had children. Then my second son comes along.

What I didn't realize when he was a small boy was that he had ear infections from the age of 8 to 18 months, and I didn't know the impact that has on a child's brain and on a child's learning, and particularly the language component. So he's always a bit slow, he's a bit of a dreamer, and we send him to kindergarten and he seems to be okay. And the kindergarten teacher said, well, you know, he'll be alright. He's a bit slow, but he'll be alright. Send him to grade 1, and at the end of week 1, I speak to the teacher and she says, well, I don't know what I'm gonna do with him. He's so far behind. I just don't know how I'm gonna teach him this year.

Devastating. What I knew as a parent was that he wet his pants, he bit his fingernails, and the teacher told me he stared into space all day. What she didn't tell me was that she shouted at him every day of the year. Then what do you do? You get them tested. Testing reveals he can read 10 words. He has no strengths, and above all, he has a low IQ. Devastating. It impacts the way we think about the child, and it impacts their whole lives.

That one test on a 6 and a half year old child, no chance of doing anything. As I said, I married a man who became a professor, and when I told him this, he said to me, Nicholas can look like that on any given day. It's a lower bound. It's not the whole story. And it was really good for me to hear that. Okay. So the following year, my husband has study leave in Oxford, England for 6 months, and the whole family goes with him. And I take a series of books with me called Success for All.

Should work, shouldn't it? Isolated words on the page, 3 columns, no pictures, no sentences, no nothing except these words. Nicholas starts at the beginning, gets to the end, gets back to the beginning, no clue what the word is. And my mother-in-law was with me, and she said, Lois, put away what's not working and make learning fun. I needed input at that time. I didn't know what to do. And her words were just the enormous balm that I needed. And it gave me an opportunity to, well, it doesn't work, Lois, doesn't worry about it. Don't do it.

Do something differently. And that what it got me to do was start to think about what he can do. Because Nicholas did have strengths. He was brilliant at doing puzzles. Brilliant. So I thought, what can he do? He can read, he can rhyme words, and he's good at seeing patterns. So that's where I started. What can I do? I wrote one little poem about a mug on a bug.

And because I read it to him, he then joined in. We found the rhyming words, we had a lot of fun with it, he illustrated it in a multilayered illustration, just loved it. And because one poem worked, I did another and another and another. And we're in a city called Oxford, which, if you've ever been there, every time you turn around there's some plaque to another famous person, and the shops were full of maps, and just everything. And then I wrote this poem which was about Captain Cook, because you've got double o's. Cook Cook and book rhyme, don't they? So I wrote about Captain Cook, Captain James Cook, the last of the great explorers. And he was the one that completed the mapping of Australia in 1770. And I wrote, Captain Cook had a notion, there's a gap in the map in a great big ocean.

He took a look without the help of any book, hoping to find a quiet little nook. The beauty of poetry, four simple lines like that explain this enormous journey. And we could walk with Cook, and we could discuss what happened. And while I'm doing this with my young boy, he says to me, can I see Captain Cook's original maps? It's the first time I'd heard a question that made me go, this child doesn't have a low IQ. That question doesn't come from there. And then he said to me, who came before Captain Cook? And smartypants, he says, well, that was Christopher Columbus. He was the first one that we know of. And he shoots back.

And who came before Columbus? Now I'm in unknown territory. I haven't got a clue who came before. But because we are in Oxford, England, I find out. And not only do I find out that they have a map of the world's first mapmaker, who was Ptolemy, who came from Alexandria in Egypt. And he drew a map of the world in 250 AD. That became Columbus's latest map. Columbus's map was over a 1000 years old. We had so much fun with this.

And no matter what I did, any reading I did, if I read it to Nicholas, I lost him. So I had to read it to put it in poem format. Now I can feed it to Nicholas. You know, it's like feeding a little bird and giving him the right amount of information that he can take away and then think about, and we can come back and discuss. I also had you know, so that's all the language and the knowledge component. Then one lady I spoke to at Oxford gave me a book called Hear It, See It, Say It, Do It on Teaching Decoding. And that blew my mind, and it was perfect for Nicholas because it

dealt with only short vowels and all the consonant blends. And those consonant blends, the difference between a word like pay and play is one letter.

And we could do that explicitly, and we put the consonant blends at the beginning at the end of the word. He learnt them. We're so you know, we're making these tiny little steps, but his mind in the way of learning has gone boom. Okay. We return to Australia, and I meet the lady, the diagnostician who'd done the testing 12 months prior. And I say to her, I'm so excited by all that Nicholas has learned. You know, it's so much fun. He's asked these amazing questions.

She stood in front of me. She put her hands on her hips and said, well, I've spoken with the reading teacher, and he's gone backwards. And in fact, he's the worst child I've seen in 20 years of teaching. This is a true story. You don't make this up. I left her, and eventually, hours later, I went back to her and said, you can call him whatever you like. But if he is the worst child you've seen in 20 years of teaching, don't expect him to learn like everybody else. And that was a really good start.

Now, the next bit's fascinating. He comes home with sight words. He's now doing 10 sight words, not 20, which was perfect. He knew 8 of the 10 words. He didn't know the word saw or the word now. And for the word saw, the reading teacher had given him 2 sentences. The first sentence was, I saw a cat climb up a tree. And the second was I saw a man rob a bank.

Nicholas read, you know, he's holding this little paper in front of him, you know, and getting anxious about it. Big breath. I saw a cat. He went, I was a cat. No. No. No. No.

No. He says, I said, add a cat, and he just had to be in the paper. He just stopped. He gave up. It took me a while to work out what was going on, but I did. The word saw has three meanings. The concrete meaning, the first meaning, means to cut. The teacher has only provided one meaning of this word with multiple meanings, and she has given the abstract meaning of the word.

Why has the child failed to learn, to understand this word? Because there's a gap between what the teacher did and what the child understood. I went back and I said to Nicholas, you know, we cut the tree down, we saw it. We give him that one. But what about what did we see in England? Did we see Windsor Castle? And then you get the concrete meaning. Did we take a saw with us when we went there? No. Did we take a saw with us when we saw Cook's original maps? What he says, what does it mean? It means we looked at it. So when he's left me, my son knows that that word has three meanings, and we as the reader have to do the work. That scenario of how we combine the worst child I've seen in 20 years of teaching with really poor teaching is where the problem of learning disabilities lies.

I went on to become a reading specialist, And the paper that sticks with me today was written by Professor Brian Campbell, an Australian educator, and published in 1990. And it says, beyond the deficit theory. And in that paper, he says, when children fail to learn to read, what do we do?

The first thing we do is say, look at their IQ. Look at their home background. Look at this. Look at that. Look at the other. And what do we fail to do? We fail to look at the teaching that we are providing, and that we fail to give complete examples of how the written language works.

What happened to me and what happened to myself? Does that say everything?

Lauren Clouser:

I think that was a really great overview. And, again, it's just an amazing story of how far you were able to go to provide for Nicholas and to find a way that he did learn. So I wanted to ask, how did your experience with Nicholas' dyslexia diagnosis and your own dyslexia, how did it impact your teaching when you became a reading specialist?

Lois Letchford:

Brilliant question. The diagnosis is irrelevant. Whether the child is dyslexic, learning ect, what is critical is, a, how we see them, and, b, are we prepared to teach them? Or are we going to let a diagnosis get in the way and say that child isn't learning because they are dyslexic? And that's what they did. They gave him a label of the worst child I've seen in 20 years of teaching. It's irrelevant. What do you call him? What's critical is how are we going to teach that child? And when I work with teachers and parents, I say, when you've got a child you're struggling to teach, tell that child they are a future rocket scientist. I want to see, as the teacher wants to see that child as being brilliant. They need to know that they are brilliant, and the label of what you are should not be the first thing that we see.

But unfortunately, that's the way funding occurs, we need to label before we do anything, as opposed to just teach. And I see that as a significant problem. Now as I said, you know, I grew up undiagnosed dyslexic. You're just lazy. You just don't work hard enough. And what people don't see is the amount of effort that you are putting in to come out with, I don't get it. My son has an auditory processing disorder. I would say I have the same.

And it, you know, impacts the way you take in information. It's a problem. It's a serious problem that we label first and think second.

Right. Right. And a lot of the issue too is with that label, there's a lot of stigma attached as well. There you sort of think that there's a limit to what somebody's able to achieve, and that can lead you to teach them differently.

You know, I've just given the start of my story. Nicholas learned to read in Australia. We lived in Australia. We lived in the UK. And to take Nicholas from the bottom to the top, we lived in Lubbock, Texas. And without that third component, Nicholas would never be where he is today. And that fragility of a journey is really scary to me. And fragility and privilege.

You know? And we didn't do a thing for Nicholas. We did it because of my husband and his work. Nicholas just followed along. And that is frightening that you have to have this level of

support. Yet, what was provided for Nicholas in Lubbock can be provided anywhere, at any school. And that's the frightening part, why don't we do it? Because we see a child as learning disabled. He can't do it.

Lauren Clouser:

Yeah. Well, and could you tell us where Nicholas is now?

Lois Letchford:

Nicholas completed a PhD in applied mathematics from Oxford University in 2018. He then worked in various industries. He's now back in Australia and working. I don't even really know what he does. He's working as a consultant doing mathematical modeling for medical support. And so he did the modeling for COVID. What happens, you know, if you don't give a vaccine? What happens when you do x, y, and z. And he said, I can't tell you anything because we're dealing with death rates. So all of my work is confidential.

But mathematical modeling is what he's now specialized in and really loves doing.

Lauren Clouser:

It's really impressive. So I wanted to ask a little bit more about how you and your son work through your dyslexia? I know you had mentioned, you know, a lot of teaching in a different way. What are some day to day things that you found that have been useful in both of your journeys?

Lois Letchford:

For me, teaching, I grew up reading words, not comprehending. So that's critical. Why do children not succeed and abstract words cause problems? And what it did for me was made me look at language and look at the words. Which word will they struggle with? And so anything abstract, a lot of the verbs to be are abstract. Now also words that are very close, words with multiple meanings, like wear, where and where, where and were, they're actually not the same words. Then and than. Two different words, and the children always muddling up, were often muddling up. It gave me insights into language and language problems that many teachers don't have.

And we look at decoding, all they see is decoding. I see decoding and language. And I question all the time, is this word in the child's oral language, or is it something that they're just repeating and don't have a clue they're repeating about? It has made me question more than most people do. And the thing that where I work from is I tried it with some students who don't have TV. I have this book called the Hassett Stalk. Simple little book. It's out of print by Gerald Rose, and it's called Hassett Stalk. I will eat this egg.

He pecked at it, but it would not break. And the next page is double page spread, elephant stamped on it, and the lion bit it. Double page spread. Four words. Lion bit it. Chimp hit it. And so on and so on and so on. And I get to the end of the book, and I had 3 little students in front of me, age 8.

So they're in 3rd grade. And I said to them, what's the it? Simple word to decode, isn't it? Simple as ever. What's the it? All three students sat in front of me and said, it. It is nothing. If you've got 3 words and 4 words on a page and a child hasn't worked out that you as the reader have to do something with that word it, They're not only not comprehending, they won't decode either. And that got me to thinking about pronouns and how pronouns work, and I wrote a paper with professor Tim Rasinski that's published in The Reading Teacher. And I talk a lot about pronouns because once a child reads a word, we expect them to comprehend it. And I go back to my childhood, why couldn't I comprehend? And one of the reasons is because you've got no idea what the words are doing.

You're just reading words. And we accept if they can read a word, they can comprehend it. They don't. And the other thing I do is turn a book into a play. It stops it from being abstract. We make it real, and it turns around the reading journey. And it's fun. It's exciting.

Yeah. Yeah. So there's a lot of things that I do because I am dyslexic. You know, we both live with dyslexia forever, and it's not fun. If, you know, I write or I try to write and I wrote my book. I should have written another and another and the cost of it because I want to write a good thing with editing. I needed someone to help me edit it. You know, it's really too much.

So I've stopped at 1 at the moment, and I'm getting older.

Lauren Clouser:

Well, I'd love to build off of that as well, talking about focusing on strengths and knowing what your strengths are and even with Nicholas with the explorers and building learning off of a child's interests. Could you talk a little bit about the importance of that?

Lois Letchford:

I think it's a critical component to build on their strengths, build on what they can do. You know, you're told so many times you can't, and you're working so hard to get it right. And you don't. You don't. And it's another, I can't do it. And the problem with it is the child blames themselves. That's why it's critical. You build on the strengths.

You find out what those strengths are, and go from there. And work out what they can't do. So how am I going to teach it? If they're struggling doing this, how am I gonna teach it in a way that builds to their strengths? And that's the answer. You know, we are the ones that have to change. And here's where I feel sorry for teachers. We don't give teachers enough time to think about this. When I was working with Nicholas, and in England it was fine, you know, I was working at 100, my brain was going 100 miles an hour all the time. When we went back to Australia, I was a stay at home mum.

I worked, or my brain worked, just as hard, 24 hours a day, to come up with activities to build for Nicholas. It took that amount of time. It's not something you, this is what I have to do. It's not a 2 minute thing. You know? It was hours of thinking how is this gonna work? Well, particularly the

first time I did it. You know? Now I've laid the foundation for other students, but those first times it was many, many hours. And that's what we don't allow teachers to do.

Think what do I have to do? How am I going to implement this in a way that is going to engage my class and have them learn what they need to learn. Does that answer the question?

Lauren Clouser:

I think it does. Yeah. Again, it's just a lot of teachers, like you said, are really strapped for time.

Lois Letchford:

Yes. Yes. It's a critical component. You know, there's a book I love on this. I, you know, I've gone on from Nicholas. And the person who blows me away is Professor Stanislas Dehany. Have you heard of him?

Lauren Clouser:

I haven't.

Lois Letchford:

He's a reading specialist. He's a neuroscientist. He does a lot of TED Talks, and there's a lot of his stuff is on YouTube. And his book is on how we learn. And he puts 4 components forward. And the first is active engagement. No, it's not. That's the second.

The first is attention. We moved to Lubbock, Texas, and I met a mother whose 13 year old son was non reading. This boy had spent 4 years in a phonics only reading program and came out non reading, Literally struggled to read a sentence. He could read some words, couldn't read a sentence, couldn't write, didn't understand the difference between l-i-c-k and l-i-k-e. 13 years old. And he said no one can teach me to read. I just can't do it. So I taught him to read.

But I knew the first component, whatever I did, it didn't matter what I did, the first component, I had to get his attention. The second component was that I had to make him an active reader. And they are the 2 critical components of reading. We hear about decoding. If you don't have those first two components, forget the rest. And that's what I did with Nicholas. That's what I do with all of my students.

Lauren Clouser:

Well and based on your experience too, what advice would you give to parents who have a child who's struggling to read?

Lois Letchford:

First, you must believe in the child. You believe that they are capable of doing things. That's the critical step. And tell them that. You're a smart kid. We can get through this. You have a lang... you know, I don't even know if I'd say you have a language problem. I don't put the deficits on them.

You are capable of doing this. You're capable. You're going to be doing anything in the future. We'll get through this. So really and truly, the answer is support them. And the second can I tell it through a story? After Nicholas graduated with his PhD, I spoke to him and I said, Nicholas, I don't know anything that happened in 1st grade. Would you tell me? My son, articulate and confident and highly knowledgeable, cried.

And he couldn't speak. His tongue went round and round in his mouth. And then for the first time, I recognized that he would have been traumatized in 1st grade. And I really should have withdrawn him from school, but don't go down that route. I didn't. We had to live with the trauma that occurred in that 1st year of school. And I thought, I can't deal with that now. And I said to him, Nicholas, can you tell me what happened when you and I learned? And now instead of crying, he's laughing.

And he said, you wrote poems for me. You wrote a mug on a bug and windmill on a hill. This is 30 years later, 25 years later, he identified the poems that I wrote. And then he said to me, learning about Captain Cook and the explorers taught me to love learning, and I never want to stop learning. So there's an emotional component to learning that I hadn't even acknowledged. So that's what I want to tell parents. When you're dealing with children like this, make it fun.

Have them laugh because that's what goes not only into short term memory, but into long term memory. And then the story goes on, but I think it's enough to stop there. But I hadn't connected the emotions and learning, and they do. And the lady is, Mary Helen Immordino Yang. She does the research on that, and she's in California. And it's phenomenal research about the power of these emotions connecting. So when you get told you've got to do decoding, and it's gotta be done in this way, if your child is in tears, you say, oh, don't do that. Know that tears are disastrous, unless they're tears of happiness.

You know, we have to engage our children in a way that makes them feel good.

Lauren Clouser:

Well, then, Lois, I just wanted to wrap up. You had mentioned before your book, could you tell us a little bit more about *Reversed: A Memoir*?

Lois Letchford:

My book tells a lot of the story that I've told today only in much more detail. And with the journey of going, the emotions, you know, of going up and down, and then you think we're through it, and then you got another high, and then you get slapped down again. All the way through the book is a bit like that. So I wrote it. I had a young girl who helped me write it, and so much of it has been written in a way that you want to read it, and you wanna keep turning the page, and that's what I want from a book. And I am delighted that I've been able to do that.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. Well, I'm so glad too that you mentioned that, you know, it's not just a straight

upwards, learning curve, you know, there are still ups and downs, a lot of people would just expect, you know, things to get better and better but I think that's a really important point for educators and parents to know that, you know, this growth comes gradually. It can have starts and stops, and that's just part of the process.

Lois Letchford:

I agree. And Nicholas would say exactly the same because it's been a struggle for him to get to the point where he is. You know? The highs and the lows, and the highs and the lows, all the way through. Yes. It's just been wonderful talking to you and sharing my story with you, and grab a copy of the book. But above all, you know, believe in your children. Believe and find them heroes like Nicholas who have struggled and who have overcome. I think that's an important point too.

Lauren Clouser:

I think so. But, Lois, this was an amazing story. We really appreciate you, and we appreciate having you on the show.

Lois Letchford:

Thank you very much. It's great to be here.

Lauren Clouser:

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