

MANAGING YOUR CHILD'S EDUCATION: CREATIVE AND SMART IDEAS

The International Dyslexia Association®

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Parenting a child with learning difficulties is probably one of life's greatest challenges. As a private tutor for 14 years, I have seen numerous parents each struggling with different issues when it comes to managing their child's learning difficulties. And that's just it – parents need to think of themselves as managers whose job it is to coordinate and oversee their child's social and emotional well-being. Many parents have found creative ways to deal with the vicissitudes in rearing a child with learning disabilities. Listed below are strategies that have either been advised or observed in families over the years. Collectively, they are a compilation of words you may have heard before. Individually, they are "management strategies" that have made a difference for many families. The goal in providing this list is a common one – to help your child succeed and be happy.

1. FOREMOST, EDUCATE YOURSELF

Attend conferences, read suggested books, and network with parents who "have been there." Listen attentively and read carefully. Learn all you can about the nature of your child's learning difficulties.

Take notes of particular parenting or academic strategies that have been successful, ones that you think might work for your child. A good place to start may be in reading *Educational Care* by Mel Levine.¹ I have found that parents who educate themselves bolster their own self-confidence. Oftentimes, learning more about your child's difficulties simply reinforces those "gut" feelings you've had all along. Don't shy away from those feelings. You may not always have the "right" words or express yourself as you'd like, but remember – you know your child best. By educating yourself, you not only maintain your self-confidence to help you deal with professionals in the field, but also, you are in a stronger position for making informed decisions about your child's educational career and emotional life.

2. CREATE A NOTEBOOK OF YOUR CHILD'S WORK

Invest in a 3-ring hole punch and buy a 3-ring binder. Compile your child's work – everything from crinkled homework sheets, to returned tests, to workbook

pages. Organize the papers chronologically and by subject matter. Include anecdotal information as well; these snippets of everyday life may provide you with insights into their language competencies, social relations, and emotional status. As a parent, this "scrapbook" may be handier than you think. Bring it to meetings as written documentation of your child's progress (or lack of progress). As a chronicle of your child's day-to-day work, you are in a good position to do your own analysis. For example, one parent discovered that her son's poor grades on math tests were not a reflection of his misunderstanding of the concept, but a simple mechanical error – he forgot to reduce fractions to the lowest common denominator. In this case, it was a parent who uncovered the problem. Another parent spotted a yearly trend. She noted January and February were her daughter's toughest months to keep motivated, hence her grades slipped considerably during this "off" season. From an academic standpoint, these

are the months when the volume of work substantially increases and the material taught in the first semester begins to culminate at this time. For these parents, seeing this trend was a sign for them to maintain greater involvement and provide more encouragement during these winter months.

3. KEEP YOUR EXPECTATIONS HIGH

Too often teachers and parents lower their expectations *because* of their child's learning difficulties, when, in fact, these children need high standards and reasonable goals. When expectations are high, students are forced to face their difficulties. Within a supportive and encouraging environment, they will learn how to cope. Yes, there will be times of setbacks, and moments of frustration, but that doesn't mean to lower your standards, it means to help your child persevere in the face of adversity. A home schooling parent asked me if she should drop writing expository paragraphs altogether because her son's reluctance to follow through. My answer was a resounding "NO!" Guide him through the process, do lots of modeling, but don't ever give up. The internal sense of accomplishment outweighs any external struggle of reaching that goal. The unspoken message you are giving your child

when maintaining high standards is: *I believe in you.*

4. VISIT YOUR CHILD'S CLASSROOM...OFTEN

Volunteer your time in your child's classroom in any capacity. First, it allows you to see how your child functions in comparison to their peers. Second, it increases your quantity time with the teacher. Think about it: the law of averages is on your side. To insure a moment of quality time with the teacher (especially during formal conferences) requires an investment of *quantity* time. Your goal is to foster a close working relationship between you and the teacher. Your child will benefit from these frequent interactions because you will be "in the know," specifically in terms of assignment expectations. Further, you will have an "insider's view" of the teacher's teaching style. With this perspective, you will certainly feel more empowered when managing your child's education, in general, and more able to help with individual homework assignments, in specific. One mother told me the best thing she ever did for her son was to "get involved and stay involved."

5. KEEP A FILE OF POTENTIAL REFERENCES

Who might be included in this file? For starters, names of reputable tutors who are trained in multisensory

structured language should be in this "Master File." The name of a pediatrician who understands learning difficulties is a must. If you have medication issues that need careful attention, you will want to choose a doctor who is not only sympathetic, but knowledgeable about your child's special needs. A counselor who deals specifically with college placement for children with learning difficulties may be a useful resource. Although your child may currently be in 6th grade, you want to prepare for their future by securing such a person in case their services are needed. A reliable advocate is another resource to include in your file. This person may be an objective partner who can accompany you to those sometimes arduous and emotionally-charged school meetings. A psychologist who treats children and adolescents with learning disabilities may be a name to store in your file. Adolescence is a trying time for most students, but it may present unique problems for children with learning disabilities. If a crisis should occur, you have the name of a person already in place to help you deal explicitly with your problem. Think of this "Master File" as an insurance policy of sorts. Do your shopping. Jot down names of potential references. Strike up conversations with other parents in your area. Find

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out who they work with. Keep your networking strategies alive and update your "Master File" from time to time.

6. BE PATIENT ON "OFF" DAYS

An "off" day is when things just aren't in sync for your child. Their oral reading, which may typically be slow, but accurate, is inexplicably slower and beset with multiple inaccuracies and retrieval difficulties. You'll know it is an "off" day not only by the increase in subtle distress signals such as yawning and heavy sighs, but also by a change in their general tolerance level. It is as if their "brain energy" is working overtime, trying to synchronize its gears while simultaneously attempting to read fluently, accurately, and expressively. A nearly impossible task! What resolves is extreme frustration. As a parent, keep in mind that inconsistency is part-and-parcel of having learning disabilities. It is important to help your child recognize these days and acknowledge their feelings of frustration and discouragement. It is equally important to help your child develop strategies to manage these days. On a particularly heavy homework night, you may need to do a greater share of reading, be a scribe for the upcoming book report, or put off practicing math facts for a better day. Again, reassure your child

that "off" days will occur, knowing that tomorrow their gears will be in sync to complete the work with less assistance.

7. READ ALOUD TO YOUR CHILD EVERY DAY

You've heard these words before. But when they come from a clinician they may take on a new relevance. Reading to your child makes a difference, not only in improving their general comprehension and vocabulary, but in improving their decoding skills as well. While your child is being remediated for underlying decoding difficulties, they are most likely reading controlled texts (ones which include sound concepts that have been taught). Once they "graduate" to less controlled texts, they will encounter words containing a greater variety of sound concepts, perhaps some that have not yet been formally introduced. At this point, they must rely on their decoding skills to figure out the intended pronunciation of a seemingly unfamiliar word. **If** that word is in their oral vocabulary (learned from listening to language), **then** their chances of reaching the intended pronunciation when they are reading independently is much greater than if the word was not in their oral vocabulary. From clinical observations, I have found this to be true, again and again. Those students, who

have been widely read to, have a distinct advantage over those students who have not had the same exposure to language.

8. LET YOUR CHILD BE AN "EXPERT"

Whether it be a non-academic skill such as sewing, tree house building, or drawing – or whether it be a storehouse of knowledge about a specific subject, such as monkeys, medieval warfare, or sailing – help your child develop this area of expertise! Why? For several reasons. It can become a topic for open-ended writing assignments or oral reports. This area of expertise may develop into a life-long hobby, providing hours of fun and personal satisfaction. As children grow up they're asked to be less of a "general" learner – (one who is expected to be good in many subject areas) to one that is more of a "specialized" learner – (one who is really good in a particular area). Giving them an early start in becoming a specialist has other advantages as well. It may provide opportunities for your child to shine in front of their peers. Further, it may provide opportunities for your child to meet a small group of people who share a common interest. This is one way long-lasting friendships begin.

9. START A DIALOGUE WITH YOUR CHILD

Talk to them about their learning difficulties. Be honest. Be matter-of-fact. Your goal is to demystify the notion that something is “wrong.” They already sense that. Help them acknowledge their feelings and put their learning difficulties into perspective. A starting point may be to have a specific conversation about strengths and weaknesses, or talk in general terms about how people with learning difficulties have special minds that just happen to learn differently. What you’ve done is establish the groundwork for a

conversation that is going to continually mold itself over the years. One parent started a dialogue by reading the biography of Nolan Ryan (a famous pitcher for the Texas Ranger who has dyslexia). When the chapter about Nolan Ryan’s learning problem was revealed, it provided the perfect springboard to start a long-term dialogue. As this dialogue develops, by the middle and high-school years, you may want to steer this conversation toward helping your child become their own advocate. Role-playing should be an integral part of the dialogue by this time.

10. KEEP A SENSE OF HUMOR

Learning is a challenging, often a painful experience for children with learning difficulties. They need laughter in their lives, and lots of it!

About the Author:

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