



## **Dyslexia Four-Part Professional Development**

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### **Module Four**

#### **Dyslexia: Its Social and Emotional Impacts**

In our three previous modules we have discussed the terminology of dyslexia, its evaluation and diagnosis, and accommodations and strategies to see the most positive outcome for students. Beyond the educational challenges, this last module will address its social and emotional challenges and what educators and parents can do to provide support.

Dyslexia can affect a person's self-image – at any age. Students with dyslexia often end up feeling “dumb” and less capable than they actually are. When students experience a great deal of stress due to academic problems, a student may become discouraged about continuing in school. Some experts even caution the use – and overuse – of the term disability.

*“When a child is labeled ‘learning disabled,’ and what’s implied in that is this child will always going to be defective in some ‘global’ way...I think that to me is tragic.”*

*– Dr. Paul Yellin, Pediatrician*

Tragic, he says, because a learning disability has nothing to do with intelligence. Kids with learning disabilities can be brilliant. It's just that their brains are wired differently when it comes to letters or numbers or writing.

*“It’s hard for me to read, so I also take this pill to helps me pay attention in class.”*

*– Meara Tao, Age 11*

*“I just go blank. Have nothing to write. Can’t think of anything.”*

*– Brandon Nick, Age 13*

*“If we had to read to ourselves, I would just look at the words, not reading them, pretend I was reading them.”*

*– Jack Rohan, Age 13*

In first grade, Anna could not read at all; she couldn't even recite the alphabet. Other kids made fun of her.

*“Other kids would call me ‘mental’ when I really wasn’t. And I would come home and me and mom would sit down, and then like I would get frustrated and start crying and say, ‘Mom, am I*

*retarded? What's wrong with me?' I could be a very smart person. And it's just hard for me to let people know that I actually can be actually a really smart person."*

– Anna

*"Unfortunately, students with specific learning disabilities too often begin to adopt that as their identity: 'I have LD. I am learning disabled.'"*

– Karen Walsh, School Psychologist

*"Because what happens in kids' minds is, they say 'I'm dumb.' They see it as sort of a global problem. It spills over and doesn't have boundaries around it."*

– Dr. Paul Yellin, Pediatrician

So how can we help students overcome the social and emotional problems related to dyslexia? According to experts at Boston Children's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, consistent support and praise for intellectual curiosity and participation in family and classroom discussions is vital. They encourage parents – and educators – to remind students with dyslexia of two important things: that having a reading problem doesn't mean lower intelligence and that, with practice, the brain can be trained to help make reading easier.

The key is identifying and treating dyslexia because we know that when dyslexia is untreated,

Children are likely to struggle in school, become **easily frustrated**, develop **low self-esteem**, and **fail to reach their academic and personal potential**. Research has shown that kids with untreated dyslexia are at **greater risk of dropping out of school**, or ending up in **the juvenile justice system**, like Matthew Lavine's story.

Sometimes learning disabilities can lead to problems more serious than reading or writing... and problems can develop quickly. For Matthew Lavine, the first day of the sixth grade marked the start of a decline that would eventually land him in jail.

*"I didn't think I had what it takes to graduate or to learn...I thought my brain wasn't, like, developing."*

– Matthew

*"It was just horrible both for him and for my wife and myself."*

– Eric Lavine, Matthew's Father

Matthew has a learning disability. He has trouble remembering what he reads... and he has trouble writing.

*"If I'm trying to write something down it just doesn't make sense. I have to go over and over and fix it and fix it. I have to work two times as hard as everyone else. It sucks."*

– Matthew

Matthew felt like he was working hard just to keep up, but some of his teachers didn't see it that way. One called him lazy. His grades began to slip. Other kids made fun of him. He got into trouble.

*“Seventh grade I got into a fight and they suspended me for three weeks, 8<sup>th</sup> grade I got into a fight and they suspended me for 100 days. It just got worse from 6<sup>th</sup> grade on. I didn’t understand why I was different, why it wasn’t working, why I wasn’t being taught, why teachers didn’t like me. I thought it was just because they just didn’t want me being there.”*

– Matthew

Frustration. Anger. Hopelessness. Experts say these are reasons why so many kids with learning disabilities fail in school...and in life. For Matthew Lavine, the worst came his sophomore year when he was expelled for defacing school property, and went to jail on drug and vandalism charges.

*“It was a horrible experience for him, and I think he learned a great lesson there.”*

– Eric Lavine, Matthew’s Father

*“I accept why God gave this and I can’t change it. I can just fix it. I can just work on it.”*

– Matthew

Matthew Lavine has been off drugs for more than a year. His grades are better. In fact, he is seen as a role model at his new school.

*“The teachers notice I’m a different person. They think from sophomore year, they say I am a ‘changed Matthew.’”*

– Matthew

And Matthew has a new attitude about his learning disability.

*“When I see someone doing drugs or fighting, or I’m gonna see that could have been me, that still could be me, unless I push myself harder and harder... and don’t give up.”*

– Matthew

Clearly, there is a lot at risk. School staff and guidance counselors should be even more aggressive in drop-out prevention outreach efforts for students diagnosed with dyslexia, It is critical to engage them and to encourage them to reach their potential... and graduation date.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if, as educators and as parents, we could have a “crystal ball moment” to glance at the future... to see that, yes, learning challenges can be overcome. But we know that crystal ball visions are fictional. Next, let’s learn about Jodie Finney’s real past, present – and very bright future. This story foreshadows what we can expect when dyslexia is identified and addressed.

At age 26, Jodie Finney is about to reach the top of her field. She has a degree from Northwestern University, a master’s from Washington University, and is now working on a Ph.D. in physical therapy. Jodie also has a serious learning disability. Even now, at the age of 26, she still struggles to read.

Using a pen to concentrate, she sometimes has to break words down into parts. Even individual letters can be confusing for her.

*“Instead of saying ‘employment,’ I might say ‘employee.’ I’ll just look at the e and the m and the p and know that I’ve got a multitude of different things that I could say: employment, employee, employer, and I’ll just throw whatever I want in there...”*  
– Jodie Finney

Jodie was diagnosed with a learning disability almost 20 years ago, in the first grade.

*“I felt frustrated. Really frustrated that I couldn’t get it. You know, I was just like why...why...‘Why can’t I get it???’”* – Jodie Finney

*“I mean, she just couldn’t read!”*  
– Sandra K. Gilligan, Director, Churchill Center and School for Learning Disabilities

*“And I felt stupid. Definitely. 100%, I mean I just felt like I was—dumb!”*  
– Jodie Finney

At Churchill School in St. Louis, Jodie learned two lessons that will stay with her forever. First—that she was *not* stupid...that her mind was simply wired differently. Second, that *if she wanted to read* ...she would have to work harder than ever before. That meant summer school...plus endless hours studying letters and words...over and over .... For years.

*“And I think getting educated with what was wrong with my brain and how it worked, and I how my brain worked differently really helped.”*  
– Jodie Finney

Jodie went to Northwestern University on a field hockey scholarship. She was a solid B student there. But still, she had doubts about getting a Ph.D.

*“You know, I thought, I couldn’t be a doctor. Are you kidding? There’s no way. Because of my learning disability, not because I wasn’t interested in it.” (:08)*  
– Jodie Finney

Paul Yellin, M.D., Director, The Yellin Center for Mind, Brain and Education in NYC  
*“Some of the most famous people that are out there struggled with academics.”*  
– Dr. Paul Yellin, Pediatrician

Albert Einstein...Walt Disney...John Lennon...each had a learning disability. In helping his learning disability patients, Dr. Paul Yellin reminds them that success in *school* and success in *life* can be two very different things.

*“It’s a lot easier for a lot of us to be grownups than it was for us to be kids, that when you are a kid you are somehow told that your supposed to be good at everything, and that the secret I tell kids is that, as grownups we just have to be good at something.”*  
– Dr. Paul Yellin, Pediatrician

He says when teachers don’t give up on a student – when parents don’t give up on a child, the child is less likely to give up on himself.

*“It can’t go away. I’ll always have it, but I can find ways to fight it.”*  
– Anna Gaffney, Age 10

*“It’s possible to do anything when you put your mind to it.”*

– Matthew

*“Don’t give up on them ever. To this day, my parents have never given up on me (chokes). It helps.”*

– Jodie Finney, Age 26

Experts say it also takes hard work and discipline... long hours and patience. To learn ways to overcome learning disabilities and to overcome dyslexia.

*“So definitely, takes me longer to get to my goals, but I just have to remind myself to work hard.”*

– Anna Gaffney, Age 10

*“I know I’m just going to have to work twice as hard as everyone else, but I have what it takes. I know I can do it.”*

– Matthew

Working together as advocates, not adversaries, a bright future is ahead for all those challenged with dyslexia.