

MINDSET

tackling

By Kayla McLean.

My name is Kayla McLean and I am a third year Communications student. As part of one of my papers I was asked to write my first ever news feature. I was given a voice. I was touched by the people I met along this journey. Dyslexia affects people that I too, love dearly. So, I hope that I have inspired at least one person who has read this story, bringing awareness and some sort of understanding towards Dyslexia.

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DYSLEXIA



Her home is comfortable, the kind of comfortable where there are books spread out on the kitchen table, and large bay windows looking onto a back yard that evokes a childhood of adventure and discovery. Her home expresses a welcoming, tidy clutter. Yes, that kind of comfortable. I feel at home, sitting by the fire and sipping sweet tea with someone I have known for a long time. I listen intently. I feel as though I am unravelling this shield of strength that she wears as a mother. Yes, she's a mum. That explains it all really. She may be soft and gentle, but she would tackle the hell out of anything that affects her children. I guess that's what Annabelle* is doing with dyslexia. Dyslexia has affected her two children. So now, she is tackling the hell out of dyslexia.

Annabelle and Dan Young have two children, Luke, age 17 and Emily, age 12. On the surface, they seem like any other happy, competent people. They ski, they love sports, they are involved in the community, and they are all very sociable people. What is their hidden difference? They all have dyslexia. This does not define them as a family or as individuals. However, there is no denying that dyslexia has become a major part of their lives, as they learn to adapt to particular lifestyle changes that will help their children in academic and social arenas.

The Dyslexia Foundation says that 1 in 10 New Zealanders and 70,000 of our school children have dyslexia. Dyslexia can affect the individual with different levels of severity and in different ways, socially as well as academically. The Foundation defines dyslexia as a specific learning difference which is constitutional in its origin and which, for a given level of ability, may cause unexpected difficulties in the acquisition of certain literacy or numeracy skills. The definition of "constitutional in its origin" means that dyslexia has a substantive neurological basis. Thus, extensive brain research has proven that although it is common to use the left side of the brain to understand words, dyslexic people use the pictorial right side, meaning that they are slower in processing and understanding language.

Dyslexia's complexity is shown through Annabelle's daughter's own personal dyslexia package. Annabelle began to realise Emily may have a learning difference when she was only three. "I used to try and do jigsaws with her, and she refused, she just wouldn't do it. It wasn't until later that I did manage to get her to try. She tried to put a piece in. It was just so obvious that it didn't fit, but her eyes, brain, didn't see it". As Emily struggled to do board games and jig saw puzzles, Annabelle was told that Emily had a defect with visual discrimination, a skill that refers to the ability to differentiate one object from another and discriminate from such things like colour, form and size all in a visual sense.

When Emily started kindergarten she began work with a speech therapist. Annabelle noticed Emily's behaviour reflected her struggles with vocabulary recall and verbal expression, "her behaviour reflected those issues because of not being able to express herself".

LEARNING DYSLEXIA

This was the beginning of what was to be a long journey in discovering Emily's learning capabilities as a diagnosed dyslexic. At primary school, Emily continued to work with a speech therapist, and Annabelle discovered that Emily didn't know basic concepts like "behind", "in front" and "below". "It just absolutely floored me. I was like oh my gosh, what bad mother I am... I thought children naturally acquired this". Most children are able to easily grasp these concepts at an early age however as Annabelle said, children who have these gaps as part of their dyslexia may not. "It is not an easy fix. It might take three or four times to learn a word. So they are already on the back foot when they start school."

It wasn't until April 2007, that the New Zealand Government recognised dyslexia as a learning disability. The Ministry of Education released a statement acknowledging their efforts to change the school system in ways that will support the dyslexic student.

"Internationally, education agencies now feel confident using the term 'dyslexia' to describe this specific range of difficulties... we're now at the beginning of the journey toward understanding how to act on this knowledge. The ministry is working with the Dyslexia Foundation and literacy experts in its work to better address dyslexia in schools... we are determined to ensure that the different needs of these learners are identified and met as effectively and as early as possible so that specialised instruction can ensure maximum progress" – **Mary Chamberlain of The Ministry of Education.**

On their website, The Dyslexia Foundation acknowledges that the Government recognition was a critical and positive step in the journey for change, that is, the possibility that the label of dyslexia will be understood more in educational, working and social environments. Leanne Hill*, Deputy Principal at a primary school in Dunedin, confirmed the positive value of having access to strategies and programmes that can aid their dyslexic students, "it's good for any teacher because our theory is, is that if you can teach a dyslexic student, then you are being a good teacher to any student". Despite this, Leanne still agrees that there is a great deal of work that needs to be done in focusing on making teachers aware of more programmes and teaching strategies available. "I do think there's a lot of work that needs to be done out there about making teachers aware. Teachers are really keen to hear about how they can get better at it".

Annabelle openly speaks of her struggle with teachers who don't understand Emily's dyslexic package, particularly when something they have learned is not retained she says. Dyslexia is different for every student. One student may not have the same dyslexic characteristics as another, and therefore a teacher may need to alter their teaching strategies for each student's individual dyslexic package. In a recent One News article, University of Canterbury Professor John Everatt has admitted to the education system's struggle to diagnose and address dyslexia, "a lot of teachers understandably find it confusing about what they should do. I think that is one of the reasons why provision varies greatly across different schools."

ADDITIONAL TACKLING

Glynis Hannell, author of *Dyslexia: Action Plans for Successful Learning*, notes that “what a dyslexic student learns one day is often forgotten the next, so that forward progress is constantly undermined by the loss of earlier learning, which has to be repeated over and over again”. Annabelle struggles to get teachers to understand that Emily is trying, but she just can’t retain her information. “Her teacher was very confused because she would know something really well one week and then forget it. This was the issue, she couldn’t retain it”.

4Dyslexia, or 4D, is a website that offers a different outlook with strategies for addressing dyslexia. For the majority of students with dyslexia, the 4D website argues that simple adjustments in the classroom are immensely valuable in inspiring them to draw on their strengths as a student. However some students may benefit from extra support, says the 4D organisation, with an estimated 4% (compared with the estimated 10% of the population who are dyslexic), in need of additional specialist help, screening tests and small group, or one-on-one interventions, to help them make significant progress.

Annabelle has thrown herself into any sort of research and programmes that she can get her hands on. “People come to me and say what do you do for Emily? We have done a lot of courses. We did the DORE programme and then we’ve done another, Fast ForWord, that’s for central auditory processing”.

Leanne Hill has been working with other teachers in her school to find resources that they feel are best for the individual child. “Together we have been looking at all the different resources and one that we have found particularly helpful perhaps is the Toe by Toe research”. The Toe by Toe programme is designed to improve a child’s reading skills.

“The name Toe by Toe was chosen to signify that a student makes progress by the tiniest steps - one toe at a time. However, even though the steps taken are small, the student can clearly measure his or her progress right from the first page. The student’s confidence and self-esteem are boosted as a result.” – toebytoe.co.uk

First, the school initially worked on the programme with two boys who they thought shared dyslexic tendencies. Although the programme determined that in fact they were not dyslexic, Leanne acknowledges that the boys really appreciated having one on one help, “I’ve seen their ability to go through this programme has really helped them”. One on one attention could be useful for a child with dyslexia and other learning differences in the academic arena. Smaller classes with a strong sense of structure are also crucial adjustments a teacher can make in the classroom says Annabelle, “what helps them is smaller classrooms, they need structure... so they know what to expect and when it is happening”. Bit by bit teachers seem to be adjusting their strategies however, Leanne recognises that they want to know more.

ADDITIONAL TACKLING

Emily also has CAPD and Irlen syndrome which are both part of Emily's learning difference. CAPD is known as auditory processing disorder (CAPD). If the child is listening in the classroom they can hear the information being said but they cannot process it. By the time they have heard a particular piece of information the teacher has continued to move on. Emily also suffers from bad headaches, which Annabelle has now learnt is caused by Irlen Syndrome. Irlen syndrome is a condition that causes someone to have a great sensitivity to light and glare, often resulting in headaches and fatigue says Annabelle. Ironically, the three most dominant elements of a classroom, the whiteboard, white paper and florescent lights, do not help Emily in the classroom because the glare from these objects give her headaches, again affecting her concentration. To help with the glare and the brightness in the classroom, Emily wears glasses with a pink tint, which provokes the anxiety of having to wear them in front of other kids, other kids who may not understand the full extent of Emily's learning difficulties that stretch further than common characteristics of dyslexia.

Annabelle is aware that Emily's dyslexia is starting to affect her on a more emotional level as she grows older. "What happens to Emily is she holds herself together at school, I guess she tries hard and has to work harder than anyone else and so when she comes home she loses it because there's nothing left, there's nothing left because she's all used up". In the next breath however, Annabelle also mentions the importance of not focusing too much on the problems that dyslexia can cause, "because otherwise it's like oh my gosh all this is wrong with me".

Maria Mody's book *Brain, Behaviour, and Learning in Language and Reading Disorders*, analyses a lot of research that has gone into understanding the brain of a dyslexic child. Through this study comes the question: can the brain be changed? Because dyslexia causes some differences in brain function and structure, there have been studies that have attempted to discover whether the brain is malleable enough for the plasticity of the brain to be changed.

Annabelle has great faith in this concept of brain change. "We're right into the brain change aspect, because the positive thing about it and why we did the DORE programme is that recent research has shown that the brain can change. The brain has a lot of plasticity'. Annabelle describes The DORE programme as a personalised exercise programme designed to stimulate the cerebellum, thus improving the child's automaticity skills. As Glynis Hannell writes in her book *Dyslexia: Action Plans for Successful Learning*, a child without dyslexia may recognise words quickly and sound out unfamiliar words, however dyslexic children have a great difficulty with automaticity, often handling words that have been seen or written many times, as if they are new. These words have to be processed over and over for they are not being automatically retained. As Annabelle says, school work isn't the only way to tackle dyslexia. "You do need that for strategy and for ways of doing your work but I am looking for brain change. Tuition is one way, with lots of repetition, exercise can help to". In discovering this whole concept

of brain change, Annabelle has encouraged her children to do what they love, sport. When asked what people should try with their dyslexic child, Annabelle without fail says to try sport, “however you do need intense focus for the brain to make those changes. Emily got some changes in her reading last year when she did the aerobics”. With aerobics, Emily was doing three separate hours of high intensity training a week. “She was having to really concentrate hard on the routine, she would finish red in the face and that’s what helps create new pathways.”

Now Emily is 12 years old, Annabelle is seeing positive improvements in her academic and social abilities. Despite the common stereotype often associated with someone with dyslexia, Emily is a good speller and her handwriting and verbal skills have also improved, which Annabelle tentatively attributes to the DORE programme. Another change that Annabelle has seen in Emily is her ability to swim. Once someone that got into the water and sank, Emily is now an enthusiastic swimmer, something that can only benefit her social skills and confidence as a young teen. Annabelle is full of praise for swimming and dance, activities that she believes will contribute to brain change. Through swimming and dance Emily has had to remember sequences, so although she struggles with sequences (as a part of her dyslexia), Annabelle believes it is still good for her brain to actually do it, “because the more she gets her brain working in that way the more she will be able to do”.

Despite Emily’s improvements, there is no denying the emotional impact that dyslexia can have on a family, and for those who are trying to understand what dyslexia means for that particular individual. Annabelle is open about her experiences with having a family of four dyslexics, and in particular her concerns for Emily as she and Dan begin thinking about what High School they should enrol their daughter in. “My thoughts are the social aspects because when you have so many difficulties how do you then fit in with big groups of people and other cool kids?”. With these concerns, Annabelle acknowledges that sometimes she feels very overwhelmed by what she needs to be doing to help her children. “You forget to say the nice things that you are supposed to say because you are so focused... it’s kind of a bit of a blur sometimes because it’s quite overwhelming”. Despite this pressure, Annabelle attempts to remain positive, often focusing on the strengths that both her children have, not only in sport but also with other creative tendencies that a dyslexic child is often known to have. “One of the big things that we have tried to do with both of them is... focus on what they can do”.

I myself am feeling a bit overwhelmed. I am now about to leave this home with a new-found respect for Annabelle and her family. Feeling overcome with a strange sense of passion towards this whole discussion with Annabelle, I can’t help but wonder what the key is to getting anyone through all of this. I guess it’s simple really, hope. Hope that the brain can change, hope that your child will embrace their strengths, hope that people will finally understand. Annabelle agrees. “Take my hope away and I can’t do this. I can’t do it”.



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