

A Family Deals with Dyslexia

Getting a label was a complex issue in our house. In one way labels are compartments for filling and storing fixed boxes, while they can also be a positive affirmation of one's unique abilities. It's worth remembering a child will be feeling pretty confused and frustrated long before we are able, as parents and teachers, to recognise that they are dyslexic and feel the world differently. Jasper was certainly showing some signs all was not content towards the end of year two and early year three. I had mentioned this to his then teacher but was assured that Jasper was doing well.

As parents we could feel there was a change in Jasper at the start of year three. Luckily for Jasper his teacher had had Jasper in year one, so the step change in classroom expectations of school work became a curious question mark.

Jasper's year one report noted a willingness to learn. Similarly NAPLAN testing in term two (year 3) provided an opportunity for the school to address what was happening to Jasper. The teacher was open and approachable and did not seek any social or school pathology to his NAPLAN results, but poor data can have big impacts on school structure.

We were called in for a chat and a learning plan was put hastily under construction. We spoke about our instincts and that we thought Jasper was dyslexic, as I have now realised I am a self-corrected dyslexic. There was yet more luck: Jasper's teacher's partner was a dyslexic so the teacher was very "on it" and supportive. Together we worked on ideas of how we might help Jasper.

I had read "The Gift of Dyslexia" 15 to 20 years ago so I was convinced that may well be the track we wanted to cut! However my partner was an academic extension child all through school and wanted a more "robust" approach. So we began exploring our options with Jasper.

As a child growing up I hated school, it was a place of torture and ridicule. The only real good things were sport or anything outside the classroom. Years of remedial classes, bouncing in and out year after year until people just give up on me (or I just gave up). How could I spare my son the facsimile experience?

As parents we knew from our collective experiences that Jasper would need a balance of activities in his life. Sport would have to play a key part, but so would art, music and the more we thought about it, just about anything that helped build his resilience. Jasper was encouraged to try out new sports and a bunch of cheap musical instruments were left in and around the house to play undirected. Lego is a major love for Jasper and his iPad is currently his portal into a world of ideas that keeps him excited and happy.

Rather than see the iPad as a thing to be afraid of (too much screen time blah blah) the screen helped Jasper use his visual skills better. Not that he was allowed to just "veg" with a screen either. But for Jasper, visual learning is the key. For example using Lego to help visualise his times table as a Lego pyramid worked like a magic trick.

So, when in year three he was struggling in the classroom but going well at Nippers, loving his soccer, starting piano lessons (his request), enjoying gymnastics and had a couple of strong friendships, we started to monitor him really closely. We noticed that his friends at

school were those, who like Jasper, appeared somewhere in the dyslexic gift box. And watching these friends interact in the school grounds and play dates was obvious while they were so tight with each other. They often created alternative worlds to play in through their imaginations. The non-dyslexic kid trying to keep up was strangely puzzled with their burgeoning imaginations. Of course we are in an age of data collection and in some ways being a little less likely to provide rigid data metrics can put some of us at risk of being left as the “other”. And that’s where Jasper landed for a while, thinking he was the other, struggling with name calling and ridicule. Jasper had loved school, leaving early every day, and spending hours playing on the oval at the end of the school day. But he was now becoming sullen when school was mentioned.

After a few months of pretty intense research my partner and I decided, with Jasper’s agreement, to undertake the Gift of Dyslexia course due to its ethos of empowering the child (or adult) and not trying to fix a non-standard problem.

The problem is not the child’s (or adult) but overt rigid pedagogy. We used Dyslexia WA as a label (framed positively) that helped Jasper realise this was a word, a collection of ideas, a resource of prior experience to help put meat on his struggling word bones. We showed him famous people who have experienced dyslexia and hunted the internet for further examples of the positives (TED talks, International Dyslexic Associations). As a family we agreed to what we would do and then we all decided to have Jasper assessed by Annette at Dyslexia WA

At the start of year four Jasper started The Gift of Dyslexia course and started a new chapter in his life. It was like Harry Potter using his magic to cast out the Dementors. The metaphor is not a lazy one either. Jasper’s imagination was, and is, thankfully, a world from which he can escape too. We introduced the Box Set of Harry Potter books to Jasper at the start of the new year. So while Annette was carefully mining diamonds in Jasper’s strengths, he was also starting a vast story of a boy and his many varied friends undertaking a difficult journey.

The Dyslexic course brought clear thinking strategies for coping and working on breaking codes in languages. Jasper quickly got 3D clay words. The need to “set himself”, the need for “balancing” skills (his pre-primary report was excellent, but the one thing he could not do was balance on one leg... at the time we thought, what is that about??). As we spent time together driving to and from his course I could feel Jasper’s resolve returning. His confidence was coming back, he now knew more about himself. He had explored “Jasper” - how he thinks, how he acts. Giving Jasper information on the iceberg of human experience helped raise him out of the chilly shadows.

Jasper was treated as an equal; he was shown new ways of seeing and thinking, helping to find his own solutions. I think this method is important to underline, he was encouraged, and shown how to take control of his learning. Moreover, once Jasper realised how he could read complex text aimed at, for example, year 7, although some words were strange, overall he got the paragraph. He knew what it was about; he could feel the pattern of the words. Jasper took pictures both actual photos and pictures of words in his head of his clay words, the pictures made by him, his pictures, his interpretations. As parents we are still moved how such a simple method seemed to work so well with Jasper.

Once Jasper completed his week with Annette the next anxious moments as parents was how could we keep him on track to complete his trigger words? Jasper looked at the list and

mentioned that it looked long! As parents we had to allow a little flexibility built in at the start. One word a day, he would balance before school, get himself ready for school, get his head ready for conscious learning.

He made an agreement to complete his dyslexia course each day, and he suggested his rewards, the currency he would earn. For the main, the currency would shift from iPad time to spending money on little gifts, etc. But we tried to get Jasper to make sure he was clear about agreeing to each new reward.

After about 6 months Jasper swapped the balancing the Koosh balls for playing the piano as this was getting him set for school. He had time away from trigger words during school breaks and sometimes we let things slip a few days if we felt Jasper needed it. He might be psychically tired, emotionally spent or just needed a small window of down time. Every now and then we would be guided through some of his word models and check the spelling. In nearly all cases he was getting it right.

Jasper's teacher in year four was a very experience male teacher. Mr E 'got' Jasper and more importantly Jasper 'got' Mr E. Mr E understood the need for the movement side of Jasper; every morning before class doing sport for twenty minutes had a huge impact. Mr E had also done some learning on what works with dyslexia and was able to help with "pre-learning" topics and using visual aids. The school have touch screen TVs and more and more content appears to be taught this way. Moreover, we quickly realised using U-Tube channels was a great help if we needed a visual learning aid. For example using the Khan academy to help Jasper explore fractions was really useful.

Jasper finished his trigger words during October and we tested him on them. He did get a few words wrong but we never set out to gain perfection, we set out to help Jasper be in charge and find solutions that he can use and that he is ok with. He has made a remarkable effort in his own education. But, it takes an attentive family unit to get children over the line.

Planting seeds is one thing, but watering and tending to plants is much more a hands on thing. Jasper has found ways of dealing with school and his learning goals, but doing this aged 9 needs a holistic family, school and other interests to make it truly purposeful and worthy. Annette did not relieve us as parents with Jasper's learning goals but helped us find the time to support our son's learning needs.

Jasper had ongoing challenges through the year with a group of boys who bullied him. However, reinforced with a clear strategy and a solution focused approach, Jasper stayed the course. He had two merit awards and a Citizenship award by the end of the year and started playing cello on a school programme. Jasper knows the "struggle" is where he learns about himself. He knows his family will back him, he trusts us! And Jasper knows some of his teachers get it.

But more importantly Jasper can back himself and hold his head up as an equal to all. We are excited by what Jasper will do with his life, whether fame, fortune or infamy... it will be one of the imagination for sure.

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