



# read me differently

*A Film by* **Sarah Entine**



V I E W E R ' S G U I D E

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## INTRODUCTION

Amid islands of papers dotting the landscape of her grandmother's living room, Sarah Entine begins the complex story of one woman's journey to understand how learning disabilities have affected three generations in her family.

*Read Me Differently* invites viewers to travel with Sarah as she explores learning and attention issues in the context of her family's history, examining the relationships between her grandmother, mother, sister and father. Sarah's central question concerns her own dyslexia, especially its role in her childhood and family dynamics. Following a key revelation about her dyslexia while studying for a Masters degree in social work, Sarah reaches out to her family with a camera in hand and questions in her heart.

Sarah's story offers a personal exploration of the world of learning disabilities. By investigating the silence around her dyslexia, Sarah opens the delicate realm of family communication and the subtle dynamics between mothers and daughters, sisters and grandmothers.

*Read Me Differently* is inspiring families, teachers, therapists and students to deepen their understanding of learning and attention issues, to look at how learning differences can become accepted as part of the fabric of a family system, and to find opportunities for growth and understanding.

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**NOTE ON LANGUAGE:** In this guide, the terms "learning disability" and "learning difference" are used interchangeably. We believe that learning challenges are better understood by their specific impacts on learning rather than by seeing them as part of an umbrella concept of "disability." For example: people with dyslexia will explain that they have a reading disability, not a problem with learning. Therefore, the term "learning disability" can feel offensive and demeaning. Still, it is important to stay within the current framework of common language needed to access educational, legal and support services. As a result, both terms, as well as the abbreviation "LD" are used in this guide. We know that the evolution of language will continue as more adults growing up with labels like "LD" and "ADHD" find ways to more accurately describe their experience.

# READ ME DIFFERENTLY INITIATIVE

## OVERVIEW

The **Read Me Differently Initiative** was created by award-winning filmmaker Sarah Entine as she began to share her story with others through her film screenings and appearances. This initiative is designed to reveal the impact that learning disabilities (LD) can have on the entire family system. Through our partnerships with organizations working in education, parenting support, mental health, and social service fields, the **Read Me Differently Initiative** is championing an approach to help support adults and children to better understand how their learning differences affect life experiences outside of the classroom. By opening up dialogue at home and in the community, we can empower family members to better understand each other, increase acceptance, and build resilience.

## CORE BELIEFS

- Since learning disabilities are often invisible and life-long, most people aren't aware of the psychological and social challenges people with LD may face. We need to share LD experiences to cultivate more understanding. As Maya Angelou said, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."
- Learning disabilities affect more than a student's academic experience; addressing LD effectively requires attention on a child's family and social experiences as well.
- Learning disabilities often affect many members of one family. If one family member is identified with LD, it could be a pathway to identifying other family members as well. Complex family dynamics may be interwoven with learning differences in several generations. Investigating and understanding how these patterns impact the family system can lead to more clarity and compassion.
- All family members need education, training, and support to understand how learning disabilities affect the family system.
- As educators work to create safe and welcoming school communities, they need training on how to better embrace and communicate about the spectrum of learning differences many students face.
- While individuals with learning disabilities should be supported to develop strong self-esteem, it's equally important to help cultivate self-compassion; learning strategies for greater acceptance and reducing stress, such as meditation, are also very valuable.

## VISION

When a child or adult is identified as having learning disabilities, there is a widespread understanding that this challenge affects that individual's immediate family system and their school community.

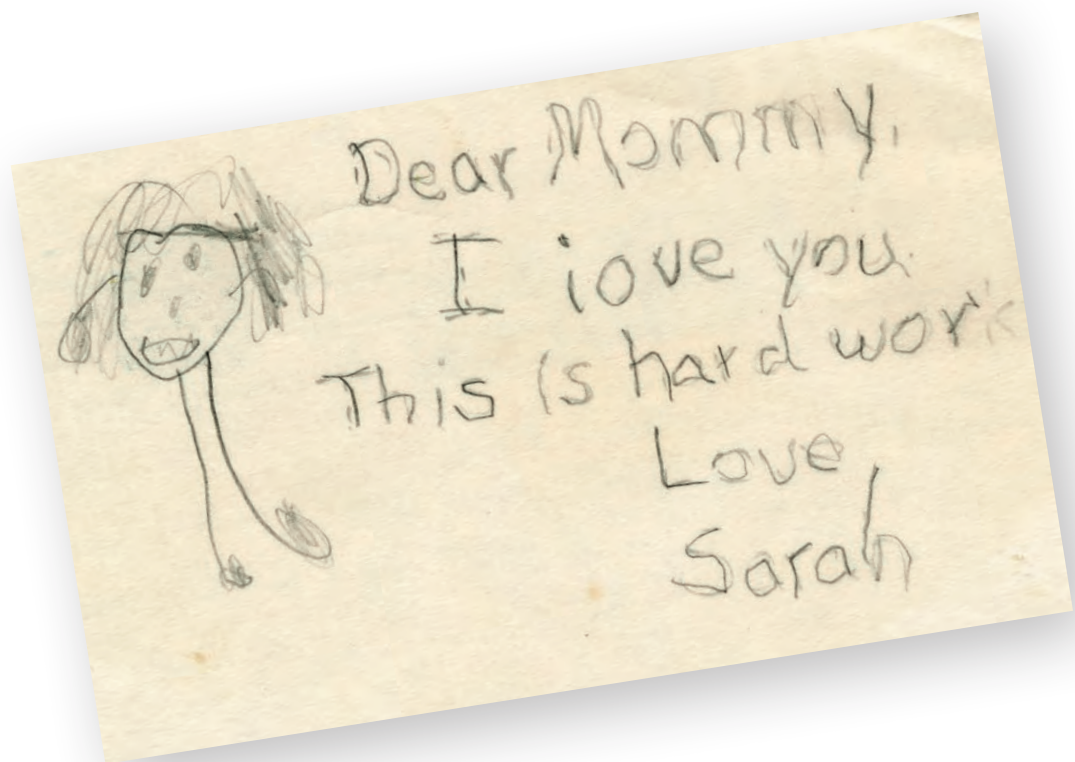
- The evaluation for LD serves as a catalyst for assessing all members of a family to see how they, too, may have LD. Social service and mental health providers support the family to understand the different ways that this challenge impacts relationships with siblings, parents, and guardians.
- School staff members are trained to understand that learning differences affect more than a student's academic learning process, and ideally they should take steps to build awareness and understanding throughout the school community.



- Finally, children or adults who are grappling with LD are encouraged to cultivate self-compassion in addition to building self-esteem. Since LD lasts a lifetime, everyone affected in a family understands and accepts how learning differences continue to manifest throughout their lives.

## ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERS

The **Read Me Differently Initiative** is calling on organizations in diverse fields—education, mental health, social services, youth empowerment—to join with filmmaker Sarah Entine, the director of *Read Me Differently*, to spread this message, these values, and this vision. For more information about our partners or to inquire about becoming an organizational partner, go to our website: [www.readmedifferently.com](http://www.readmedifferently.com).



“Having been a reading teacher for 25 years in a private day school in Connecticut, I strongly recommend this touching and informative film to both educators and parents. Cinema verite at its best!”

**LINDA S. LINDQUIST**  
FORMER TEACHER AT PINE POINT SCHOOL

## USING THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed to enhance the experience of watching *Read Me Differently* by offering background information, activities, perspectives and discussion questions to help you explore the varied influence learning and attention issues can have on children and families.

If you are facilitating a film screening with a family or group, we suggest viewing *Read Me Differently* ahead of time and considering how best to follow the screening to help your group address the issues most compelling to them. Explore below a list of general questions that can be used with any group, and specific questions following each of the perspectives sections. The activities section offers interactive and creative ways for families or groups to explore together some of the major themes raised in *Read Me Differently*. Additional support materials include myths and misconceptions, strategies for what works to address learning differences, and lists for identifying LD and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in children and adults. Please use this guide the first time you watch the film, and then return to it to support your continued exploration of these issues in your professional, family, community or school setting.



## AUDIENCE

*Read Me Differently* can be used with a wide range of audiences to discuss the complexity of living with learning and attention issues.

These audiences include:

- **Families** dealing with learning differences
- **Adults and Seniors with LD** and their friends and family
- **College and university departments** including psychology, social work, education, special education, counseling and guidance
- **Counselors, therapists, social workers and clergy**
- **Teachers, youth workers, coaches** and other educators
- **Mindfulness educators** and advocates
- **Mentoring and tutoring organizations**
- **Support, advocacy and activist groups** for people with learning disabilities and attention issues
- **Learning disability conferences**
- **Libraries and community organizations**

## KEY THEMES

Watching *Read Me Differently* opens the door to explore a range of issues. These themes include:

- Learning and attention issues
- Family communication patterns
- Parent/child relationships
- Parenting
- Special education
- Early intervention
- Genetics
- Social emotional learning
- Family engagement
- Building resilience
- Mindfulness and self-compassion

## PLANNING A SCREENING

Wherever you screen *Read Me Differently*, consider your goals before you begin. Are you planning for small, intimate discussions or general information sharing? Will the film be used to open a dialogue in a family or to spark action in your community? Large groups work better for general conversation and raising awareness while smaller groups allow more room for intimate discussion and personal reflection. Whatever the size of your group, consider what your audience may need in order to feel welcome and to engage in a meaningful discussion. If you have panelists or partners for the event, involve them in the planning process ahead of time and decide on goals and format together.

## NOTE TO FACILITATORS

Viewing *Read Me Differently* with a group opens the possibility for valuable interactions between family members, classmates, colleagues or any audience. We encourage you to leave ample time for viewers to discuss their reactions to the film.

If you are interested in inviting the filmmaker, Sarah Entine, to represent the film and participate in a panel or discussion, please contact her via the film's website, [www.readmedifferently.com](http://www.readmedifferently.com).

### General Facilitation Tips

- Preview the film and the guide ahead of time, taking time to reflect on your own response. Know how much you are willing to share about your personal involvement with the issues.
- Know your role. A facilitator guides discussion and sets parameters that allow for everyone's voices to be heard. Decide in advance what strategies you will use to help keep the discussion moving forward. Remember to be neutral, and to allow for open conversation without judgment or assumptions.
- Know where to connect people with resources. Have books and websites available.

Consider inviting a specialist (psychologist, teacher, tutor, counselor, etc.) to offer an informed perspective.

### Tips for Family and Friends Screenings

- Even with friends or family, discussions about difficult topics can sometimes raise intense feelings and the conversation may, at times, feel uncomfortable. Remind your group to be open, receptive listeners. Suggest that everyone assume best intentions, and focus on gaining a deeper understanding of each person's experience.
- Use the list of discussion prompts in this guide to get a conversation started. Be patient! Sometimes these discussions take time to get going. Be ready for topics that are touched on in the film to appear in family conversations a few days or even weeks later.
- Use the activities in this guide to keep the conversation flowing with your friend or family group.



“ I just finished watching your documentary.... and I am writing with my eyes glistening with tears. *Read Me Differently*...makes my heart ache...however, I relish its cadence and honesty... ”

**FRAN THOMPSON**  
MOTHER OF A DYSLEXIC CHILD,  
FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL DYSLEXIA ASSOCIATION, B.C. BRANCH

## DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Select from the following to begin a discussion after viewing *Read Me Differently*. Further questions are included at the end of each perspective area below.

For a general discussion with any group:

1. What is one moment that stuck with you most about the film? Why does this moment stand out?
2. What do you like most about the film?
3. Why was it so difficult for Sarah's family to be open with her about her dyslexia? What were the consequences of their decision not to talk openly about it?
4. After viewing *Read Me Differently*, think about the different people in the film. Who reminded you most of someone in your own family? Or a family you work with?
5. How is your experience similar or different to Sarah's? Do factors like socioeconomic status, race and culture play a role in understanding dyslexia and learning disabilities? How?
6. Sarah was raised in an environment where academic and professional success was a high priority. Where did you see evidence of that in the film? How might Sarah's life today be different if her family's expectations were different?
7. Consider the process of discovery Sarah's family went through in the making of the documentary. What is the most important thing Sarah or her family realized through this process?
8. Think of someone you could tell about the messages in this film. Who would it be and why?
9. If you were to take a camera home to your own family, what questions would you ask? What might you discover?



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The landscape of learning differences and attention issues has evolved at a rapid pace since Sarah's childhood experience in the late 1970s. Today, nearly 2.4 million school age children are identified with learning disabilities, and 11% of children are diagnosed with ADHD, a number that continues to increase every year.<sup>i ii</sup> Refinements in federal legislation and educational strategies have continued, along with further research in the area of neurobiology that contributes to a deeper understanding of the variety of physiological conditions that lead to persistent challenges with learning<sup>iii</sup>.

If a school or family has questions about a child's learning, the first step is usually an evaluation. Once a child is evaluated, the family will need to decide where and how to access resources. This can be a daunting process, and varies greatly by state and by school district. Most questions related to the public education system fall under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This legislation requires appropriate support for children in school. However, families are generally left on their own to navigate their experiences at home. There is a growing body of support and information available online to help families, and advocacy networks are increasingly common around the country. The more you understand about the terrain of learning and attention issues, the more you can advocate effectively for yourself or your family, your clients or students.

## DYSLEXIA AND ADHD

**Dyslexia** affects how the brain processes written language—how it decodes letters and words. Dyslexia causes difficulties in the areas of reading, writing, speaking or spelling, and affects people throughout their lives. Children with dyslexia may have particular trouble reading with fluency, finding the right word when speaking, pronouncing long or unfamiliar words, confusing words that sound alike, and reading aloud. Strengths include being big picture thinkers, as well as problem solvers and troubleshooters. People with dyslexia also tend to be visually and spatially talented, intuitive, verbally articulate and creative. Dyslexia is the most common learning difference, with research suggesting it affects 17 percent of the population. Because dyslexia describes an aspect of brain functioning, it lasts throughout the life cycle, and tends to run in families<sup>iv</sup>. Similar learning disabilities include dyscalculia (difficulty with math), dysgraphia (writing difficulty), and dyspraxia (challenges with coordinating physical movement).

**Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)** interrupts a person's ability to focus and pay attention. ADHD affects children and adults, and is considered life-long. ADHD affects between 9 and 10 percent of school age children in the U.S.<sup>v</sup> ADHD and other learning disabilities like dyslexia are often present together. There are three types of ADHD:

- **Predominantly Hyperactive-Impulsive:** People with this type of ADHD tend to be hyperactive and impulsive, and feel the need to move constantly.
- **Predominantly Inattentive:** People with predominantly inattentive ADHD have difficulty paying attention. This type is easily distracted, and they do not have issues with impulsivity or hyperactivity.
- **Combined:** The Combined Presentation is the most common. Children with this type show all of the above characteristics.<sup>vi</sup>

ADHD often impacts school performance and friendships, and can create challenges at home, particularly with handling executive functions like planning, organizing and remembering directions. Strategies to manage ADHD include clear and routine expectations, a reminder system for tasks, labels for storing things, checklists, praise, and patience. Kids and adults with ADHD report positives too, including strong problem-solving skills, creativity, and a sense of humor.



## RELATED ISSUES

Learning and attention challenges like ADHD and dyslexia fall on a continuum and can be combined or associated with other complications like working memory, word retrieval and sensory processing issues. **Working memory** is our conscious ability to use and manipulate information.<sup>vii</sup> It's the short-term focus on specific information that we need in order to solve or understand something—like being told directions then forgetting them, or being unable to describe a movie you just watched. Children and adults challenged by **sensory processing issues** can overreact or underreact to information coming into the brain through the senses. Things like loud sounds, the touch of clothing, or bright lights, can cause extreme reactions in some people.

When ADHD and dyslexia are combined with other kinds of processing issues, finding the right strategies to improve learning can take time. These kinds of challenges can affect a child differently at home and at school. The sooner a child and her family can understand what her challenges are, the sooner they can be on a path to getting the right kind of support. Be persistent, and be patient.





“ Sarah Entine has produced a remarkable and memorable film about the unique pressures that generational learning disabilities have on a family. This is a film to be viewed... and viewed again. ”

**RICHARD D. LAVOIE**

PRODUCER, *HOW DIFFICULT CAN THIS BE?* THE F.A.T. CITY WORKSHOP,  
AUTHOR, *IT'S SO MUCH WORK TO BE YOUR FRIEND* AND *THE MOTIVATION BREAKTHROUGH*

## MYTHS & MISCONCEPTIONS

The following are common myths and their explanations about dyslexia, learning disabilities and ADHD. Use these to help open up or keep conversation going in your family or group. Debunking myths matters a great deal when confronting issues like dyslexia and ADHD that are so prone to secrecy and misunderstanding. The descriptions below are focused on children, but these issues affect people of all ages and persist into adulthood.

**Myth: Dyslexia means reading backwards.** Dyslexia is a language-based learning disability that includes a range of issues related to reading, writing and even speaking. Letter reversal, or reading backwards, is a common misconception. In fact, dyslexia affects a child's ability to *decode* letters and words, and to connect letters to the sounds they make.

**Myth: Just try harder.** Children with learning or attention issues describe trying as hard as they can but still not getting it. Learning disabilities and ADHD are neurological differences that improve with specific interventions not just more effort. If someone has poor vision, for example, we don't tell her to try harder to see well. Overall, it is better to assume that your child *IS* trying. Most kids want to succeed in school and to socially fit in with their peers and siblings.

**Myth: Having a learning disability means you are not as smart.** In fact, learning disabilities affect children of all backgrounds and intelligence levels and many children with LD have above average IQs. The designation of a learning disability highlights the reality that there is a gap between how children perform academically and their actual potential; it is not a limit to what they can accomplish.

**Myth: Reading is the only way to learn.** We know that the brain learns in many different ways—auditory, visual, and kinesthetic being the major pathways to knowledge. When it comes to reading, we can easily forget that audio recordings and braille are two alternatives to visual text. People who are sight-impaired are not shamed for reading via braille or audio recordings. Likewise, those with dyslexia can become skilled in gaining knowledge through all learning modalities. Reading visual text is important, and effective strategies exist to help people with dyslexia read text more easily. At the same time, auditory and kinesthetic approaches are excellent ways to acquire knowledge and are useful for all learners.

**Myth: People with dyslexia can never improve or become good readers.** In fact, dyslexic and non-dyslexic brains are actually wired differently. Understanding this has led to the development of very effective strategies to make reading more automatic for those with dyslexia, allowing them to become skilled readers, writers and speakers.

**Myth: Dyslexia is just for boys.** In schools, boys are more likely to be identified with dyslexia, most likely because of their more active and visible response to their frustrations with reading. In fact, dyslexia affects girls and boys equally. Some girls respond more quietly to their reading challenges so teachers and parents should be on the look out for a full range of responses.

**Myth: There is no early detection for dyslexia.** Dyslexia becomes more obvious as children learn to read, but there are signs to look for as young children begin to communicate. Slight delays in learning to speak, not recognizing rhyming words and a history of reading difficulties in the family can all be early indications. Testing can be done before a child enters school, and therefore strategies can be identified early as well.

**Myth: Dyslexia only affects a small percentage of the population.** In fact, dyslexia is the most common learning disability and is estimated to affect 20% of the population. One in five children have dyslexia, representing a clear need for more understanding and effective interventions.<sup>1</sup>

**Myth: Be patient, kids outgrow their learning disabilities.** Learning disabilities are neurologically based and life-long. Therefore, early treatment and strategies to understand how to live with learning disabilities and/or ADHD throughout the life cycle are very important. Ignoring or denying the existence of a learning disability will not make it go away.

**Myth: ADHD is not real.** The American Psychiatric Association, the National Institutes of Health, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention all identify ADHD as a medical condition. There is also evidence that ADHD runs in families, and may have a genetic component.<sup>viii</sup>

**Myth: All kids with ADHD are hyperactive.** In fact, there are three types of ADHD, Predominantly Hyperactive-Impulsive, Predominantly Inattentive, and Combined. The inattentive type, the child who is quiet but not paying attention to what is going on around her, or is very easily distracted, is often overlooked and explains why girls with ADHD are frequently unnoticed.

**Myth: It's better not to tell.** Sometimes parents or teachers think that children are better off not knowing about their dyslexia or ADHD. But this secrecy can lead to feelings of shame and confusion, once the child finds out. Instead, be honest when dealing with your child's learning or attention issues. Explain the social and scientific aspects of your child's situation, and give him the power of knowledge to manage his reality with your support.

“ My call of action is to own your label, there is power in that... that’s how you begin to change the narrative and change other peoples perspectives. ”

**DAVID FLINK**

COFOUNDER & CHIEF EMPOWERMENT OFFICER OF EYE TO EYE,  
AUTHOR, *THINKING DIFFERENTLY: AN INSPIRING GUIDE FOR PARENTS  
OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES*

## PERSPECTIVES

In this section, common themes from *Read Me Differently* are highlighted and discussed in more depth. Discussion questions are included at the end of each section.

### NAMING AND LABELING

“The label does something for people who want to be informed about who they are. It doesn’t do something if society then defines you by your label.” Quote from *Read Me Differently*

The use of labels to identify particular learning difficulties can be complex and sometimes raise intense emotions. For many families there is a sense of clarity and relief that comes along with being able to name a child’s persistent problems with attention or with reading, writing, spelling or math. This naming allows the individual and the family to get more information, understand their experience and access available resources. The label—i.e. “dyslexia,” or “dysgraphia” or “ADHD”—is the standard language of institutions and professionals who will be supporting the child and family through school and life. For this reason, knowing, and even “owning” the label can be critical for distinguishing and accessing the right services. The label also has the effect of reducing isolation, of bringing the child and the family into a community of others who are managing the same issues.

At the same time, labels can be too rigid, and can have the effect of marking someone, making them feel limited, or presumed to be less capable. Some advocates challenge the use of terms like “learning disabilities” and look forward to a time when the range of learning abilities can be appropriately addressed in our education system without the debilitating use of labels. In the film, Sarah’s parents tried to protect her from the perceived stigma of

dyslexia, so the family avoided naming it, pushing it below the surface. To her parents, Sarah's dyslexia label would hold her back and make her and everyone around her lower their expectations. But Sarah's experience needed recognition. By naming a child's invisible struggles, the family can begin to address them.

The family, too, can be affected in other ways. Since dyslexia and ADHD tend to run in families, the revelation of a child's identification with these issues can sometimes lead to the same identification for other family members. This can be an emotional time for families. Parents may experience fear, anger, or resentment about how they or their children will now be treated, and these feelings may be coupled with memories from a parent's own childhood. A parent may realize his/her own learning or attention issue for the first time. Denial is a natural and common response. Families may need to engage extra help from counselors, therapists, support groups and extended family members.

Children will watch closely how their parents adjust to the recognition of learning or attention issues in the family. This is a tremendous opportunity for parents to model their response for their children, and ultimately for everyone to find acceptance.

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#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ABOUT LABELING:

- Consider Sarah and her family in *Read Me Differently*. Using examples from the film, explain why Sarah's father and mother chose not to label her learning disability. What about her elementary school tutor? What was her perspective?
- In your experience, how do labels get in the way of someone finding the support they need? How do they help?
- If we no longer used terms like "learning disabilities" what would we need to do differently to make sure all children would be able to learn?
- Have some fun brainstorming labels that feel more empowering and can more accurately depict your experience.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVE

Akin to labeling is the use of narrative to describe and understand a child's experience. When a child has a learning disability, a story starts to form about what the child can and cannot do, and what his value and potential might be. This story and its many versions are repeated and reflected by the family, the school, community programs, and anyone else in regular contact with the child. In Sarah's case in *Read Me Differently*, the story was mostly silent. Sarah says, "Without any information, I was left to make up my own explanation, and I started telling myself the wrong story."

Children make sense of their lives and experiences through the stories they tell and hear, internalizing the messages they receive. Parents, teachers and counselors can have enormous influence over how a child perceives herself and the influence of her learning or attention issues. When they work together, the adults in a child's ecosystem can tell a story that supports the child's growth and helps her face her challenges.

For example, if a child is having trouble reading, and initial efforts to teach her fall short, the family or the school might start saying, “She’s not trying. She’s not smart. She can’t read.” Older siblings, and other family members or peers might compensate for her. Everyone around the child might begin to believe that she will not be able to learn to read well, and apathy and hopelessness can sink in.

However, if the family, the school and the community can work together, they might discover that this child loves reading graphic novels, listening to audio books, or acting out characters she knows. The depiction of the child’s abilities can focus on her strengths, while still acknowledging areas for progress. Parents and teachers can describe a student who “has difficulty spelling but loves reading graphic novels and acting out the characters.” A fuller picture of the child can begin to emerge and support her growth.

In Sarah’s case, since no one spoke openly about her dyslexia, the story she created about her difficulties with reading and expressing herself, both orally and in writing, was based on confusion and a lack of information. She didn’t know why she had a reading teacher, why it was so difficult to succeed in college, or why home life was so disconnected.

Instead, families and professionals can involve children in the conversation. Talk with children honestly about what you know about their learning disability, discuss the kinds of interventions to try, and how to measure progress. Then, the child can take more ownership over what is happening and will be more invested in it.

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#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ABOUT NARRATIVE:

- What was the story Sarah told herself about her dyslexia, and what was “wrong” about it? What story do you think her other family members told themselves about her learning issues? Try telling Sarah’s story in a different way.
- In creating *Read Me Differently*, Sarah opened up questions about how her family communicated during her childhood. She also explored the roots of her own learning difficulties and followed them up the tree of her maternal family line, finding speech and attention difficulties with her mother and grandmother. Do you think Sarah’s family members would tell their own stories about learning challenges differently now? In what way?
- Consider how factors like race and culture affect the narrative about a child’s learning. In communities of color, there may be particular resistance to a story that appears to mark a child as less capable or learning deficient, because of a history of perceived inferiority or superiority of that group. What measures need to be in place to assure that all families have expectations and support that reflect our cultural context?
- Split into pairs or threes. Think of one person—yourself, a family member, a client, etc.—with a learning difference. Role play this person’s story to your partner the way it’s being told now. Then, consider how it could be told differently, emphasizing strengths while still acknowledging challenges. Replay the story in a different way. Does the new version feel more accurate? How can the story describe areas of strength and challenge in a balanced way?

## CHILDREN AND TEENS WITH DYSLEXIA OR ADHD

For a child with learning or attention issues, life at school and at home may be very different, and very confusing. At school, he may have endless meetings about academic progress, or constant tests and questions about reading, writing, math or social situations. A child may be visiting school administrators or counselors repeatedly after disruptions in class. Friendships can be hard to establish and to keep. Relationships with siblings might be strained and taxing for parents. As the school and the family are figuring out the full picture, some children may feel that they are under a microscope. Others may be suffering below the radar, feeling ignored and left out of the learning process and the progress of their peers. At home, kids with learning disabilities might find it impossible to meet expectations of the family and to complete daily tasks without conflict.

With more awareness, early intervention and effective services, stigma is being reduced and children with learning and attention issues are becoming less isolated and better understood. Similar to managing physical ailments like asthma or allergies, families can discuss with children and their teachers the optimum kinds of environments that promote learning, how to recognize potential triggers, and what strategies work best when things become difficult.

Kids are still kids, interested mostly in growing and playing along with their peers. They are resistant to being defined by one aspect of their personalities. As a supportive family, pay attention to all the other intellectual, physical and emotional needs of childhood beyond learning or attention challenges. Making friends, playing, and finding things to love and to do both alone and with others are necessary tasks of childhood and should be pursued with equal vigor.

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR YOUTH:

- What was your favorite part of the film?
- Was there a moment that reminded you of your own life? Talk about that.
- What do you think about your own learning difference? Is it a challenge? Does it help you in any way to have a learning difference?
- In the film, Sarah had a reading tutor she worked with. How does your school help you learn better? How does your family help? What strategies make learning easier? Would you like anything to be different?
- What about at home? Does your family understand what it's like for you? How do you learn new things at home?



## ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES OR ADHD

We know that learning and attention issues are present throughout the life cycle, affecting people of all ages. For some, age brings wisdom, understanding and acceptance. Other adults, like Sarah's grandmother, may not become aware of their learning or attention issues until mid-life or later. As with children, there can be a sense of relief at finally understanding persistent difficulties with learning or attention. Everyone's experience will be unique, yet we do know that sharing your story and finding support will make things easier.

Related challenges, like executive function, can also affect adults. Executive function is the brain's ability to connect past experience with present action, to plan ahead and complete tasks. It is useful when organizing, solving problems, strategizing and remembering details. Along with learning differences, executive function problems can also run in families, and can often coincide with learning and attention issues.<sup>ix</sup>

If you suspect that you or someone you know may have a learning difference or ADHD, it is never too late to understand more and to find support.

### HOTSPOTS

Common challenges for adults with learning and attention issues. :

- Reading books to children
- Helping with homework
- Telling accurate stories to teachers about their children
- Remembering information, especially directions and instructions
- Spelling, writing clearly
- Picking up on social cues, reading other people's moods

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR ADULTS:

- If you discovered your learning or attention issue as an adult, as Sarah did, what was the experience like? Do you remember any extra supports you had as a child? Would things have been different for you if you knew more about your learning or attention issue earlier?
- How has your life been impacted by your learning disability? Has your learning disability affected others in your family?
- How do you talk about your experience? What are the benefits of telling your story about learning and attention issues?

## FAMILIES

In the nucleus of the family, parents and caregivers are the tether from which the child experiences the world. Where learning challenges can be clearly defined in the context of school, things at home can be much more complicated. In the family context, children are learning how to be social and to be independent, to share and contribute to the family environment while also developing their own identity. The rules are often much less defined, and can change with shifting family circumstances. As in Sarah's case in the film, other family members may also share challenges like ADHD or learning differences, known or unknown, making communication difficult.

When first finding out about a child's learning or attention issues, parents and family members may go through a myriad of emotional responses to the news. Some of the most common responses include: confusion, grief, blame, fear, curiosity, shame, denial and relief. Parents may feel a sense of loss as they reconsider their child's future in the context of a learning difference. There may be confusion or stress regarding how to access support and services. There could be cultural, language or other barriers that divide families from teachers and administrators at school. A parent's childhood memories of difficult educational experiences may be triggered by awareness of a child's learning or attention issue. Families need extra support as these challenges are being addressed.

An evaluation, done either privately or through your school district, can give you concrete information. Once you know more about the specifics of your child's learning struggles, you can help guide them toward success in school and at home. Evaluations can be relevant even if your child doesn't meet the criteria for extra help, because they can identify with more precision where your child is having trouble. Evaluation reports can be daunting, so be patient and ask for guidance from your child's school or counselor.

Since learning and attention issues are often inherited, getting clear information about a child's challenges can also shed light on similar struggles a parent or grandparent may have. This process can raise intense feelings, even for adults. Be compassionate with yourself as your family moves through this time. Strategies and support are available for anyone who is dealing with these issues, at any age.

Other kinds of habits or patterns with family communication can emerge as more is becoming known about the child's situation. Mother-daughter relationships and father-son relationships can carry their own characteristics. Sibling relationships, like that of Sarah and Jennifer in *Read Me Differently*, can be both a challenge and an opportunity.

Often, a sibling will feel envious of the time and attention dedicated to a sister or brother with a learning disability. Other times, siblings will compensate for a family member who has difficulty with reading, writing or communicating, covering their challenges by answering for them, or doing their homework or chores. In some families, like Sarah's, more attention will be given to the children without learning disabilities, because they may be easier to communicate with, leaving the child with learning or attention issues to feel like an outsider. However, with solid communication strategies, learning differences can become part of the normal fabric of the family. Having a brother or sister with a learning difference can present an opportunity for everyone to develop empathy and understanding of each person's unique gifts and challenges.

For many families, working with a therapist experienced in learning and attention issues can help your family members support and understand each other better.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR FAMILIES:

- Ask each person in the family (as a group or in pairs) to talk about how they learn. What is hard about learning? What comes easily?
- Parents—can you define your child’s learning difference in everyday terms, i.e. how it manifests at home and in life? What about your child, can he/she describe what it means to have a learning challenge? If not, what else do you need to know to understand better?
- How does each member of your family build resilience given the lifelong nature of learning disabilities?
  - As a parent, do you reflect on your own responses to your child’s learning disability? Are you keeping a journal, talking with a therapist or counselor, meditating or otherwise taking care of your own needs?
  - Are you conscious of doing things together as a family that everyone enjoys and can participate in equally?
  - When there are particularly challenging, disappointing or frustrating moments, how does everyone manage? Think about what your family’s response is to challenging moments. Are you able to model the behavior you want from your kids? What supports might you need?

## PROFESSIONALS

**Counselors, Psychologists, Psychiatrists, Teachers and Educators** who work with children with learning and attention issues can play a critical role in supporting them and helping families to effectively identify needs and access services. *Read Me Differently* can be used to engage a group of professionals in discussions about the history of learning disabilities in families, and how to support families to discuss these issues at home.

In Sarah’s case, the professionals supporting her family did not discuss learning differences or dyslexia directly with everyone involved. This was a missed opportunity. Understanding the role that learning differences play in a family’s dynamics can be critical in supporting progress in a therapeutic setting.

Current research is also finding that some professionals are even noticing positive effects in families where learning disabilities are understood as one aspect of a child’s character and development. These effects include increased empathy, appreciating a change in perspective, finding value in other people, and increased tolerance and patience.<sup>x</sup>

In a school or community setting, strategies designed to help children with learning and attention issues can be beneficial to all. Visual and oral cues for behavior, clear expectations and directions, reminders of schedules and support with planning and organizing are examples of strategies that can support learning for all children.

In your own professional context, identify ways to incorporate the presence of learning and attention issues into your work with children and families.

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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS/PRACTITIONERS:**

- After watching the film, what are some themes that stand out to you in your professional context?
- From your experience, what is one of the most challenging things about working with families with learning differences?
- What is something you appreciate most about working with children and families with learning and attention issues?
- If you are a therapist, do you screen clients for learning disabilities? If not, why not? If so, how has the process been helpful in their treatment?
- If Sarah's family had come to you for support when she was a child, how would you have advised them? What would you want to know more about? What strategies would you suggest to help the family communicate better?
- How would you counsel Sarah and her family now as adults?
- In the film, Sarah's mother reflects that in her own family, "You never could get really close to each other because the subject changed. And that is profound, and that did happen a lot." Knowing that a trait like ADHD may be behind this kind of communication, how would you approach a family where ADHD is present?
- Sarah's father discusses a common theme of parenting—when parents try to "fix" their children. Consider an approach that prioritizes compassion over problem solving. What could Sarah's father have done differently?



## ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

*The activities below are designed to help deepen understanding and bridge the gaps in communication within families. Children who are struggling with reading, math or social situations in school may have difficulty at home in different areas. At home, challenges may include completing tasks, following directions or connecting with siblings. Use these activities to engage children in conversations about understanding and accepting life's daily challenges within the context of learning and attention issues.*

*The “I am a Superhero” and “My Robot” activities can be particularly helpful for children to understand their own experiences better. If done in a therapeutic setting, the child can work together with a professional to uncover underlying feelings she is experiencing at home.*

*The activities can be done after watching Read Me Differently together, or at a separate time. If the children in a family are young, parents may watch the film separately, then do the activities together. All of these activities can be modified for any setting and any age group, including classrooms, community settings or therapy groups.*

### I KNOW YOU COLLAGE

In *Read Me Differently*, Sarah talks about feeling isolated and misunderstood and how her family tried to fix her without really understanding her experience. In this activity, siblings or other family members take time to reflect on the positive traits they see in each other, and to bring these to life in a portrait collage. In the process of creating and sharing these collages, the entire family builds a sense of understanding and appreciation for each other. Modify any of the directions to fit the interests of your family group.

**Goals:** To notice how individuals in a family perceive each other, to develop empathy and understanding.

**Materials:**

- Scrap paper, small found objects, felt, photographs, magazines, ribbons, buttons, beads, blocks, jewels, and any other material that can be glued
- Stiff paper or wood board for backing material
- All purpose glue or adhesive
- Scissors or craft knife

**Procedure:**

1. Begin by talking about individuality, personality and character. Talk about how every person has traits and qualities that make him/her unique. Some special traits are obvious to others, and some are more hidden. Note examples of *unique characteristics* of people in the room. These can be as simple as how a person moves, how they laugh, or what they look like in the morning. They can be about actions and behavior, like how generous one person is with friends or neighbors, how another builds amazing giant block creations or how another dreams about magical places.
2. Next, describe the project and the materials. You can say: *We are each going to make a collage about someone else in the family, about that person's unique self.*
3. Then, ask each person to pick someone in the family to be their subject. Once everyone has chosen, ask the group to think silently for a few minutes, and then make a list of characteristics about their subject. Questions to consider: *What are the person's strengths? What makes him/her unique? What do you like most about the person? What matters to her, what interests her?* Family members can even interview each other for more information. Focus on positive and distinct characteristics. Try to have everyone in the family chosen as a subject.

4. Now, everyone begins their collage using collected materials. Mention that expressing simple ideas may be more effective than complicated stories. Final versions can range from realistic portraits to abstract images, the intention is more important than how the project looks. Collage examples:



- a. Using a photograph as a model, make a portrait with torn paper
- b. Handprint with character traits inside
- c. Person's name with images or words around it
- d. Collage of a tool, toy, animal or symbol that represents the subject

5. Once the projects are finished, take time for each person to share their collage with the group. Notice how each person perceives the other, how compliments are received, how stories are told.

**Other collage options:**

- Use uniform paper for each collage (5X5, 10x10 or 12x12), then hang completed projects for a family portrait.
- Each family member also does a self-portrait, then pair the two together.
- Every year, look back on the collages and reflect on what has changed. Or continue to make a new collage each year.



## I AM A SUPERHERO

Dinner time in Sarah's childhood home could be an awkward moment in the day. Conversation between her mother and sister flowed easily, and Sarah often just disappeared, unable to express herself clearly and effectively. People with learning differences and ADHD sometimes describe a habit of hiding at home or in the classroom because they feel different, do not understand what is happening or cannot express themselves fully. Rather than risk being criticized or punished, children may hold back or hide themselves. Children may even hide behind disruptive behavior for fear that their real selves will not be appreciated.

Creative activities can encourage the development and expression of self. The superhero activity below invites kids to weave fantasy into their regular lives, to see themselves and their power from a new angle.

Fantasy play can be an excellent way to encourage engagement. In addition to building cognitive skills and creativity, make-believe play offers an opportunity for improved social interactions with both peers and adults, and encourages the development of empathy. Fantasy play allows children to modulate their feelings and express a range of emotions safely.<sup>xi xii</sup>

The superhero activity can be done in a school, community, family or therapeutic setting. When working with a therapist or other adult, children can use this activity to help understand and regulate their own feelings. Adults can look for underlying feelings—frustration, anger, a desire to feel valued—to be revealed in superhero play. Acting out scenarios can also support patience, divergent thinking (consideration of many possibilities), and delayed gratification. Try to present scenarios that can help develop skills your child needs to understand herself better.

**Goal:** Use fantasy play to improve language skills, social interactions, development of empathy and self-regulation.

**Materials:** Paper and pens, cardboard, construction paper, tape, glue, scissors, other scrap materials and fabrics. [Use printable Superhero identity cards included below.]

### Procedure:

1. Begin with a conversation about power, heroes and being a force for good. Discuss what a superhero is, including known superheroes like Superman or Wonder Woman, or a modern animated character like WordGirl. Then, ask about the kinds of special powers different superheroes have, and talk about what it means to have hidden strengths or characteristics.

“I don’t think I really felt like: I am seen. I am loveable. I am worth knowing.”

—Sarah, in *Read Me Differently*

2. Next, you can say, *If you were a superhero, what kind of superhero would you be? What kind of superpowers would you have? What would be your weakness?* Each person can complete a Superhero Identity Card. On the card, the child can:
  - a. Give the character a name and a special power
  - b. Describe clothing and physical characteristics
  - c. Describe the character's strengths and weaknesses
  - d. Describe the character's mission (i.e. fixing problems, saving people who are in trouble, solving math problems, etc.)
3. Once the child has created her/his superhero, it's time to bring their superhero to life. Choose one of the following, or come up with your own:
  - a. Create a costume for the superhero. Costumes can include capes, wrist cuffs, headwear, belts and accessories.
  - b. Draw a comic strip of the superhero completing a mission. Use standard paper folded into four or six sections.
  - c. Combine the costume and the comic strip and act out the mission! Capture the mission with video or photographs.

## ***SUPERHERO Identity Card***

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

SPECIAL POWER \_\_\_\_\_

CLOTHING, PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS \_\_\_\_\_

STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES \_\_\_\_\_

MISSION \_\_\_\_\_

## MY ROBOT

Completing daily tasks without stress and anxiety can often feel impossible in any family, and can be a particular strain in families where there are learning and attention issues. Below is a creative approach to understanding how children experience expectations at home. As with the Superhero activity, My Robot can also help children better understand their own underlying feelings. Take time to ask questions about the robot and the robot's tasks. Present common scenarios and ask, "If you had your robot with you, what would she do to help?" Help the child name feelings of confusion, frustration or anxiety about expectations at home.

This activity is designed for families or professionals whose children or clients have learning or attention issues. Modify for your age group.

**Goals:** For parents to understand things that are most challenging at home for their child with LD or ADHD. For children to think about the most important things that could be made easier at home. Builds skills in imagination, creativity and critical thinking.

**Materials:** Paper, pencil, marker, paint. Optional: cardboard, tin foil, and tape to build with.

**Procedure:** You can read the following aloud: *Imagine that you have been given a robot who will follow you around at home and will help you do everyday things. Your robot will be able to help you, but it can't do things for you. Also, your robot is programmed to do only THREE helping tasks at a time. You can decide which three are the most important for you, and you can design and name your robot. Think of things you would like to do better at home, things that are still hard for you even when you try your best. Robot tasks could be things like organizing your room, helping with math homework, reminding you to brush your teeth, or helping you to stay calm when your little brother is talking incessantly. They could also be things like explaining to your parents what it's like for you at school, making you laugh, or helping you find a best friend. If you get stuck, ask a grown up for help.*

### Steps:

1. Think of a name for your robot
2. Sketch a design for your robot (or you can describe it to someone else who can draw for you)
3. Think of 3 ways your robot can help you at home.
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
4. Make a poster of your robot. Or, use cardboard to build your robot, and decorate with paint, marker, feathers, aluminum foil and anything else available. Include labels on your robot that explain what tasks it can do.
5. Describe and share your robot with others in your family.

### Options:

Other family members can discuss or do the same activity, to show how each has tasks at home that are hard.

## READ MY FACE

Children with learning and attention issues are full of emotions that can be very difficult for them to describe. Schools and community programs are increasingly recognizing the importance of social emotional development in children's lives. You can help your child develop emotional awareness by naming and understanding how she or he is feeling in different situations, and how best to respond to those feelings. In Sarah's case, she began to understand the feelings associated with her dyslexia only as an adult.

In this activity, focus on understanding your child's emotional landscape. What does your child do when angry? When excited? How does he think about those feelings? If naming emotions is something difficult for your child, one way you can help is by naming your own and describing how you respond. You can say, "I'm feeling very frustrated right now because my train was late, so I am going to take five deep breaths to calm down." Or, "I feel so happy about the project you finished, let's celebrate by going for a walk together."

Here is a list of emotions to consider:

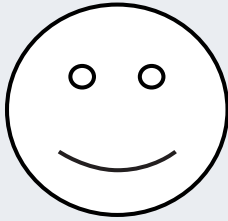
- *Confused*
- *Afraid*
- *Annoyed*
- *Distracted*
- *Uncomfortable*
- *Embarrassed*
- *Lonely*
- *Restless*
- *Helpless*
- *Friendly*
- *Interested*
- *Hopeful*
- *Confident*
- *Compassionate*
- *Surprised*
- *Thankful*
- *Joyful*
- *Calm*
- *Refreshed*

**Goal:** To help families identify a range of emotions and understand how children can express what they are feeling in different situations.

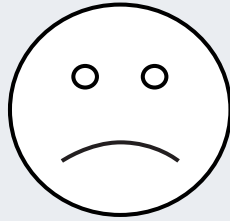
**Materials:** Use printable cards included below and writing materials

**Procedure:** Below is a sample faces chart. Begin by covering the words underneath the faces and asking your child to name the feeling each face suggests before revealing the words. For "Loved" think of how to describe together what it looks like when someone feels cared for by the important people around them. Use this example to be curious about your child's understanding of more complex emotions. Contact your school counselor or search the web for more comprehensive feelings and faces charts.

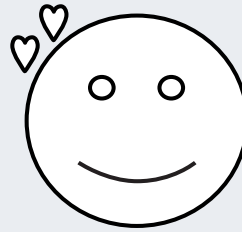
**SAMPLE FACES:**



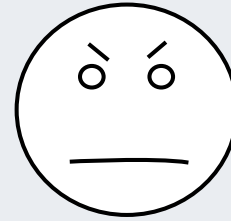
**Happy**



**Sad**

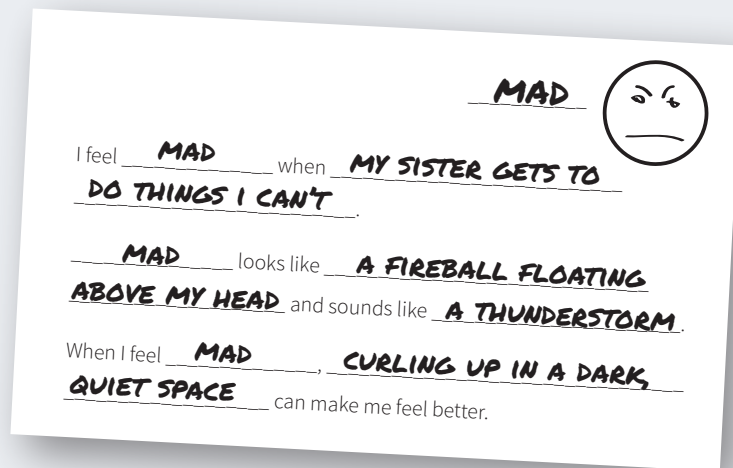


**Loved**



**Mad**

Next, tell your child that together you will be making cards for these and other emotions we often feel. Using the example below, label the card with an emotion and ask your child to draw in the face and complete the sentences for each one. You can collect the cards in a box, and take them out at any time to review, revise and remember. Here is a completed example:



\_\_\_\_\_  
(EMOTION)

I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when \_\_\_\_\_  
(EMOTION) (WHAT HAPPENS)

---

\_\_\_\_\_ looks like \_\_\_\_\_  
(EMOTION)

\_\_\_\_\_ and sounds like \_\_\_\_\_

When I feel \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_  
(EMOTION) (ACTION)

\_\_\_\_\_ can make me feel better.

“...brave, honest, illuminating... Almost any family will see a bit of itself in this film.”

**MYLA AND JON KABAT-ZINN**

CO-AUTHORS OF *EVERYDAY BLESSINGS: THE INNER WORK OF MINDFUL PARENTING*

## WHAT WORKS

For every child, and every family, there is a unique story and a particular way of successfully managing learning and attention issues. Be patient as you work to find the most effective strategies and interventions for your family. Use the list of approaches below as a guide, and adjust your approach to best fit your own situation.

### 1. FACING FEELINGS

From the first time you suspect your child may have a learning difference to getting the results from a professional evaluation, you are likely to experience an array of feelings. Going through this process can be tough. It is a challenge to the mind, it brings on an explosion of emotions and it is hard on the spirit. No one chooses these scenarios. Rather than always looking for solutions and ways to mollify your responses, we suggest you begin by acknowledging the feelings of discomfort, confusion, frustration, fear, dismay and even anger that dealing with these issues can bring up.

Maybe your child with dyslexia struggles in school or is left out of social gatherings. Perhaps at home, one child experiences much more difficulty with the same tasks than a younger sibling, or you find yourself avoiding situations that may be particularly challenging for your child with ADHD. Your hopes for a bright future for your family may seem dashed, and you may even feel sorry for yourself for having a child with these challenges.

In response, maybe you yell too much, cry too often, eat or drink to excess, hide, flee, or seek other ways to avoid the difficult feelings.



Instead, give yourself permission to feel all the messiness that's associated with dyslexia and ADHD. Be honest and forgiving. Things can change from one day to the next, and one year to the next. When dealing with children, there will be periods of calm and periods where things seem to fall apart again as your child crosses another developmental barrier, changes schools, moves, or experiences a major disappointment. The dyslexia or ADHD will be with you through all of life's other challenges as well, and can complicate things in unexpected ways.

For most people, denying these feelings or compounding them with feelings of guilt for having them at all can be destructive. Emotions have a way of finding a release somewhere, and you might begin to see yourself losing patience, making poor decisions or otherwise taking out your frustrations on yourself or those around you. Sometimes extra support is needed. Talking with a trusted friend or therapist may be helpful. Practicing yoga and meditation regularly can offer a way to directly feel your present moment experience with caring and acceptance.

As you begin to acknowledge and accept your own feelings, you will become more grounded, and start to develop your own toolkit of responses. Through this process you will also be modeling for your children, and helping them find ways to face their own challenges.

There is no simple solution or magic approach to make the difficulties go away. However, the strategies listed in this section do work. We encourage you to focus your response on a starting point of acknowledgement, acceptance and self-compassion. It will really pay off in the long run!

## 2. EARLY IDENTIFICATION AND INTERVENTION

Dyslexia and other learning disabilities are neurological differences that are generally lifelong and cannot be “cured.” However, intervening early can have an enormous impact for children and families. In the early grades, as children are learning to read, write and perform basic mathematical skills, children with learning differences can be supported with specific strategies geared towards aiding their learning. Using these strategies can help children stay on track with their peers and prevent a downward spiral ending in school failure. For a checklist of characteristics that may indicate a learning or attention difference, see page 36.

Clear communication between parents, caregivers and teachers can help identify issues and support pathways to progress. We know that children who are not reading at grade level by third grade face big obstacles: 74 percent of children who are poor readers in third grade will continue to be so into adulthood,<sup>xiii</sup> and have higher chances of dropping out of high school or becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. Early intervention works to help children progress successfully through school. Contact your local school or education department to find out more about services available in your area. If the services offered are not adequate, keep trying until you find what you need for your family.

### 3. BECOME INFORMED

It is important to be as well-informed as possible regarding the latest developments and understandings about dyslexia and other learning differences. We highly recommend becoming familiar with the book *The Dyslexic Advantage* by Brock and Fernet Eide. Current research, like that of the Eides, suggests that with dyslexia, the brain is actually organized differently, and needs to be understood from a strength-based perspective. In their words, “Dyslexia, or the dyslexic processing style, isn’t just a barrier to learning how to read and spell; it’s also a reflection of an entirely different pattern of brain organization and information processing—one that **predisposes a person to important abilities** along with the well-known challenges. This dual nature is what’s so amazing—and confusing—about dyslexia. It’s also why individuals with dyslexia can look so different depending upon the perspective from which we view them.”<sup>xiv</sup> Their paradigm-shifting examination of dyslexia is critically important to enhance our understanding and shape our response. Other resources like Understood.org, Decoding Dyslexia and the Parents Education Network are also excellent places to go for current information about the dyslexic experience. After broadening your own knowledge, share what you deem appropriate with your child to foster a positive-self image and deepen your understanding of dyslexia together.

### 4. INCLUSION

For many parents, the desire to protect children can sometimes supersede the need to develop independence. This can be particularly true when the child has an extra challenge. However, we know that including children in the discussions about their learning and attention issues helps them in positive ways.

Children who are more aware of the scientific and social aspects of their dyslexia or ADHD feel less shame, and are more empowered to advocate for themselves at an early age. Age-appropriate conversations can start early on, and as children grow, they can become more prominent actors in the decisions about services and interventions to support their learning. Include children in family discussions and school meetings about their learning and processing profile, and about accommodations and strategies. Being included gives children more language to understand themselves and to articulate and advocate for their needs.

### 5. DEVELOP AREAS OF STRENGTH

While it is critical for children to get appropriate help early, it is equally important that they are able to continue to develop and grow in all areas of interest, especially those where they may already excel. If your child has trouble reading, but shows interest in the piano, or painting, or soccer or basketball, make sure they continue to learn and play in these areas while they get extra help where it’s needed. In fact, regular exercise can actually improve brain function and general well-being, particularly with children who have attention issues.<sup>xv</sup> Developing areas of strength also builds a healthy sense of self-worth for children, and contributes to the resilience needed to struggle successfully through school.

Afterschool, summer and community programs can be excellent environments for developing and enriching interests. Community centers, art centers and sports programs can offer smaller settings with adults trained to focus

on building strong relationships and promoting social and emotional development. Partner with the staff running your child's out-of-school activities to support your child's growth and to understand their strengths and challenges in social and emotional contexts. You can meet with your child's afterschool teacher, coach, or scout leader at the beginning of a session to discuss goals and expectations. Sharing strategies that work well in school or at home will help set your child up for success. At the same time, asking for feedback from other adults can also help you gain valuable insight about your child.

Contact your local community center, recreation department or school district to find enrichment and out-of-school time options in your area.

## 6. NURTURE OPEN COMMUNICATION

All families face challenges in their communication with each other. For families with the added hurdle of managing learning or attention issues, clear communication can sometimes be elusive. Raising a child with a learning disability, coupled with the possibility that parents may also be handling their own, can be a cause for misunderstanding and stress.

At the core of healthy family communication is a feeling of connection, which can be built or repaired with time and attention. Use the tips below to get started:

- Identify communication patterns in the family. Each family member can talk about what works well and what makes understanding each other hard. Strive to know each other's different styles and needs for communicating in the family context. Each family member can then try new ways of responding to any negative patterns that have become habits. Start with small changes, and then build on those.
- Build a network of support for everyone in the family. If someone needs extra help, find a good therapist, extended family member, teacher, counselor or friend who can also devote special energy or attention where it's needed.
- Develop personal coping skills for managing stress. Coping skills are strategies for feeding the mind, body and spirit in ways that help us face challenges.
- Nourish a loving environment. Take time to remind each other of what you appreciate, seek ways to make even simple moments matter. Surprise each other with small gifts and notes. Imagine and talk with family members about dreams and aspirations. Make short gratitude lists and share them with each other.
- Bring the family together to discuss how everyone manages stress and weathers the storms of life. One person may need exercise, another social time, another peace and quiet. Children can often de-stress by listening to music, making art or being outdoors. Prioritize the coping needs of everyone in the family.
- Establish regular family play time. To keep your connection to each other strong and your lines of communication open, be sure to build in time to play and do things together that everyone enjoys. A Friday game night, a Saturday walk in the woods or at a park, or a Sunday basketball game or picnic are all examples of activities families can do together.

## 7. CULTIVATE COMPASSION

Families dealing with learning disabilities can often feel criticized, evaluated and judged for the choices they continually have to make about the best way to support their children and family. It can be a lot to hold together. Juggling special tutors, IEP meetings, evaluation reports, and constantly monitoring social and academic progress can build up and take a toll on a family dealing with learning and attention issues. One way to address these kinds of challenges is through an approach of self-compassion, a concept that has become increasingly recommended by experts in recent years.

Self-compassion is like a gentle mirror used to remind yourself of your inherent value in the world. Author Kristin Neff offers three pillars for self-compassion— 1) Self-kindness; 2) Common humanity; and 3) Mindfulness. *Self-kindness* says that we accept and understand our shortcomings, faults and failures. *Common humanity* asks us to recognize that our personal failings are human mistakes, common to all of us. This pillar reminds us to resist any sense of isolation in our suffering, and instead reach out to others in a spirit of humility. *Mindfulness* is the practice of being fully open and connected to the present moment. Mindfulness is present moment awareness of both mind and body, a practice of noticing your felt experience and allowing each moment to unfold without resistance or judgment.

Mindfulness is gaining more visibility and can be very effective for families dealing with learning disabilities. In the family context, applying mindfulness can be as simple as considering a new way to approach different moments of the day. For example, if you are arriving home from work and greeting your child, being mindful means that you are fully present with your child in that moment. You notice your own physical and emotional presence, and you also see your child, notice her tone, body language, words and intentions without judgment. For at least a few moments, your thoughts are not consumed with what happened to you earlier in the day, or what should be happening next at home. You are focused solely on engaging with your child in a fully present, caring and compassionate way.

“Understanding is love.”

—Thich Nhat Hanh

### TAKING ACTION

Develop your own mindfulness practice.

1. Pay attention to what’s happening in this present moment, including sensations in the body, sounds and breathing. Take 5-10 minutes every day to focus on your breath, gently observing each in breath and out breath. Let go of any extraneous thoughts or judgments.
2. Try a local mindfulness meditation or yoga class, or borrow an audio book or video from the library. Guided meditations can be helpful, such as those offered by Jon Kabat-Zinn or Sharon Salzberg. Remember to be self-compassionate as you try out these new practices!
3. Practice using your new awareness of the present to recognize something different about a person in your life with learning or attention issues.
4. Research books, websites, courses and retreats that build your own mindfulness practice. If you need extra support to interpret the teachings, because of your own dyslexia or LD, ask for it from workshop leaders or website authors.
5. Share what you are learning with others.

Children and teens can also practice self-compassion and mindfulness. The strategies that work with adults are equally affective for children to become more calm, focused, empathic and self-aware. Help your child learn how to pause during a moment of frustration or emotional intensity, to take deep breaths and become physically grounded before responding or reacting. Suggest that your child try using “positive self-talk,” repeating silent phrases like “May I feel safe and protected” or “May I accept myself just as I am” when faced with a difficult situation.

The mindful connections you make with your child, even if they are brief, are crucial elements in building strong relationships between family members, and are particularly useful when bridging gaps with children who face learning or attention challenges.

## 8. GET INVOLVED

Whether you are in the early stages of understanding the person in your life with learning or attention issues, or you are a seasoned parent with years of experience, getting involved with LD or ADHD groups and organizations can support you and your family while also building an important community network. There are online organizations offering resources and support, national and regional advocacy groups, and school communities. If nothing exists in your area to meet your needs, you can start something. Telling your story minimizes isolation and begins to knit a web of understanding and support with others who share a similar experience.

Joining together with others in the learning disability or ADHD communities can also encourage your children to find connections with other youth dealing with similar issues.

These organizations can help get you started finding connections in your area:

- Eye to Eye. <http://www.eyetoeyenational.org/>
- Parent Education Network. <http://parentseducationnetwork.org/>
- Understood.org. <http://understood.org>
- Decoding Dyslexia. <http://www.decodingdyslexia.net/>



## SIGNS OF A LEARNING DISABILITY

This is a sample list. Seek a professional for a full evaluation.

Source: <http://ldonline.org>

### **PRESCHOOL**

- Speaks later than most children
- Pronunciation problems
- Slow vocabulary growth, often unable to find the right word
- Difficulty rhyming words
- Trouble learning numbers, alphabet, days of the week, colors, shapes
- Extremely restless and easily distracted
- Trouble interacting with peers
- Difficulty following directions or routines
- Fine motor skills slow to develop

## GRADES K-4

- Slow to learn the connection between letters and sounds
- Confuses basic words (*run, eat, want*)
- Makes consistent reading and spelling errors including letter reversals (*b/d*), inversions (*m/w*), transpositions (*felt/left*), and substitutions (*house/home*)
- Transposes number sequences and confuses arithmetic signs (+, -, x, /, =)
- Slow to remember facts
- Slow to learn new skills, relies heavily on memorization
- Impulsive, difficulty planning
- Unstable pencil grip
- Trouble learning about time
- Poor coordination, unaware of physical surroundings, prone to accidents

## GRADES 5-8

- Reverses letter sequences (*soiled/solid, left/felt*)
- Slow to learn prefixes, suffixes, root words, and other spelling strategies
- Avoids reading aloud
- Trouble with word problems
- Difficulty with handwriting
- Awkward, fist-like, or tight pencil grip
- Avoids writing assignments
- Slow or poor recall of facts
- Difficulty making friends
- Trouble understanding body language and facial expressions

## HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND ADULTS

- Reads slowly, needs to read a few times to understand
- Spells incorrectly, frequently spells the same word differently in a single piece of writing
- Avoids reading and writing tasks
- Trouble summarizing
- Trouble with open-ended questions on tests
- Weak memory skills
- Difficulty adjusting to new settings
- Works slowly
- Poor grasp of abstract concepts
- Either pays too little attention to details or focuses on them too much
- Misreads information



## SCREENING CLIENTS FOR LEARNING DISABILITIES IN A THERAPEUTIC SETTING

This section of the viewers guide is focused on increasing the awareness and capacity of therapists who work with clients with learning differences. While often relegated to the realm of school, learning differences can permeate all aspects of life and wreak havoc when not understood. Therapists can play a crucial role in helping clients reach a place of understanding and acceptance. If possible, connect with colleagues in a small or large group setting to discuss the questions below. Over time, you can develop your own approach for integrating questions and strategies related to learning differences that will fit best with your practice and your clients.

### ***General questions for therapists to consider:***

1. When first meeting with a client, do you have a screening/intake process for identifying dyslexia, executive functioning, learning disabilities, ADHD, etc.? If not, how do you notice/identify if learning disabilities are present?
2. Do you feel competent in working with clients with learning differences? Why or why not? What would help you gain greater competency?
3. Do you feel comfortable talking about topics like: dyslexia, executive functioning, working memory, ADHD, etc.? Are these topics off-limits? If so, why? How do you gain competency in these areas?
4. Do you understand the link between a commonly identified school-based learning difference like dyslexia, and how it could manifest in relationships and in work environments?
5. Have you ever attended a learning disability conference or event? If so, how was that helpful?
6. As most therapists already know, behavior is communication. How can you help your clients better understand how their behavior and/or communication patterns are linked to their underlying LD/ADHD experience? Essentially, how do you help to make the invisible visible?
7. Many times issues like anxiety, depression and substance abuse mask an underlying learning disability. Are you familiar with identifying the roots of these conditions?
8. In addition to talk therapy, what other resources can you offer your LD/ADHD population? Have you explored meditation, self-compassion, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), etc.?
9. Do you have peer support for working with LD/ADHD clients? If not, how can you create the support you need?

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