PEER-REVIEWED

Parenting with Dyslexia

One Father's Creative Approach to Storytime

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Parents and caregivers of young children naturally want to set their kids up to succeed academically as best they can. However, how do caregivers who they themselves struggle with a learning disability approach supporting their children's early literacy development?

Despite the fact that 15 to 20% of the population has a language-based learning disability, there is little research on how this condition impacts caregivers while their children develop their language skills.[1] This case study begins to address this lack of research, by focusing on how a father with dyslexia supports his almost three-year-old as she grows up, how his dyslexia affects storytime, and his strategies for overcoming his reading challenges.

Family Introduction

David, Grace, Emilia, and Arthur are a white, English-speaking family living on the West Coast of Canada. They rent a house in a middle-class suburb, with David's sister living in their basement. David works as a coordinator in the school-age care program at a childcare center. Grace is a nurse, working at a senior's home. Three-year-old Emilia and nine-month-old Arthur attend daycare five days a week, usually in the afternoons. They often spend the mornings with their mom, whose shifts tend to start later in the day, and spend the evenings with their dad. They visit their grandparents most weekends, and regularly get babysat by their aunt who lives downstairs.

Emilia enjoys collecting and painting rocks, drumming and singing at daycare, and climbing on the playground. She enjoys books and visits the public library about once a week. Her local library does not have much for children beyond the books (no toys or kids' games), but Emilia still throws a tantrum when it is time to leave the library. She knows where to find her favorite library books and is allowed to borrow five books at a time.

While not yet able to write letters on her own, she can copy simple shapes onto paper and has a game on her tablet where she traces letters. She can sometimes correctly identify what letter a word starts with based on how it sounds, and occasionally sings parts of the alphabet out of order. She has memorized a few books, and knows when to turn the pages of those books. Books with songs, repetition, and rhymes are especially popular with Emilia.

David or Grace reads to Emilia at least every night before bed. Usually, Emilia wants to read sometime during the day too. David explains, "She actually will bring us books more than we offer them, which is kind of cool. She'll go to her room and come out with a stack of books and ask us to read them. She usually does that once or twice a day." Emilia enjoys storytime with her parents, demonstrating a positive impression of reading and books.

Emilia's father, David, has more than a decade of experience working in childcare and is designing a program for supporting

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young fathers as part of his work. David is a loving and enthusiastic father, but because of his dyslexia, reading aloud to Emilia did not immediately come naturally to him. Over the years, David has developed strategies for dealing with his dyslexia and supporting his daughter's early literacy development in spite of his own challenges.

Methods

David gave signed consent to be recorded and interviewed for this case study. Emilia agreed verbally to my request to watch her play and listen to her storytime. David chose pseudonyms for the four family members.

I spent three hours with the family at their home. Initially, I watched Emilia play, and watched how David and Grace interacted with her and her little brother. I then interviewed David while the whole family spent time together in their living room. At the end of the session, I observed while David read to Emilia, and then Emilia got out more books for her to "read" to David. I took notes and photos while observing the family play, and audio-recorded the interview and reading. The parents shared videos to help enhance my understanding of Emilia's early literacy development. By spending time in the family home, I got a sense of the environment in which they spent most of their time together. While my presence was out of the norm, this method of observation aimed to capture a sense of a typical weekend in the life of this family.

Findings

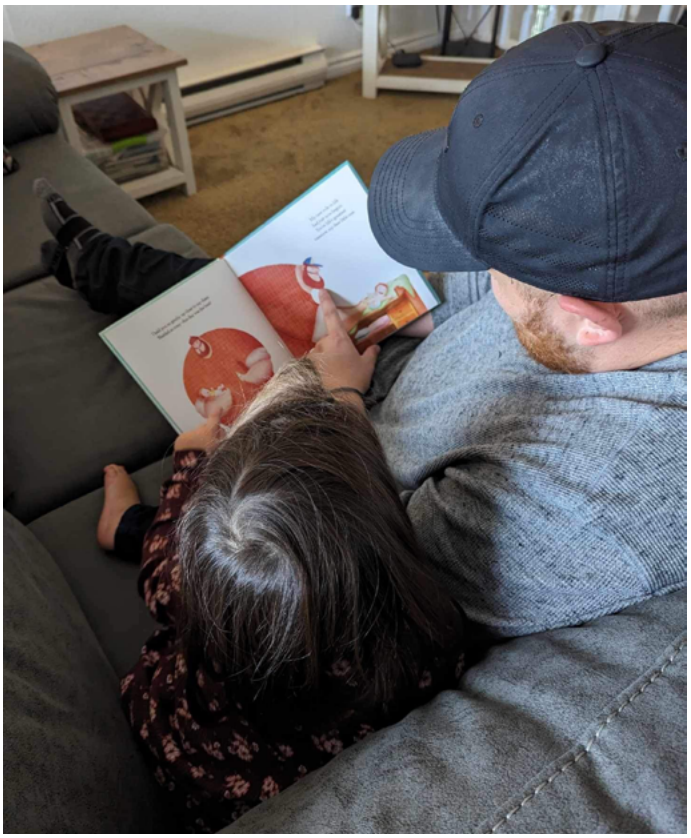
Dyslexia has complicated David's relationship with reading. He remembers struggling in school, both with reading and math, but had no idea he had a learning disability.

"I actually didn't graduate high school on time," he said. "I found it too overwhelming and I started failing classes… Finally, I was telling someone involved with [my work] and they suggested I should get tested for dyslexia, just telling based on my story." He was later diagnosed with dyslexia, and sought out a program that supported him; he completed high school at 22.

Since his diagnosis, David has felt relieved and empowered. "It was hard when I was younger," he says, "but it's kind of cool now that I know about it and I can figure out ways to overcome it."

Understanding his learning disability helps David take steps to accommodate his learning style. However, he confesses that being a father proved to be a new obstacle for him when it came to reading aloud to his daughter.

He admits, "I was self-conscious to [read with Emilia] at first. Especially if Grace and I read together, just because Grace is a reading master. And I was nervous to read around people…when I was in high school. Once I realized that we could have fun with it, I think it got easier."



David felt the stigma of not being a strong reader, feeling inferior to his wife's reading skills. However, understanding why he struggles to read in ways that others do not, David has learned strategies to combat his learning disability. One such tactic involves adding some creativity to storytime.

He explains, "If I'm reading Emilia a book…sometimes I will change the story if I get lost. [Laughs]. Which is kind of fun. I'll just tell her a different story. I can be pretty imaginative."

David's flexibility and creativity keep Emilia engaged, encouraging her to pay attention to the reading, catching him when he deviates from the story. Another strategy he employs involves him asking Emilia to tell *him* the story instead. David tells me she is good at this, which demonstrates her understanding of how books and stories work. She turns pages periodically and uses the pictures as the basis for her narratives.

Emilia and David's relationship to reading underscores that books are vessels for emotional expression and development, not simply tools for learning to read. Despite the hurdles David faces in reading aloud and Emilia's inability to read altogether, storytime is a way the two can connect.

Emilia's favorite books tend to mirror her life. This attraction to books that reflect a child's own experience is common: "Young children use concepts and experiences from their daily lives to help them make meaning out of story events and settings which would otherwise be quite alien to them. Simultaneously, the children draw on stories to better understand their own existence: it is a two-way process."[2]

Books help children make sense of the world, and they are therefore most interested in books that relate to their own lives. One of Emilia's favorite books speaks to her desire to see herself and her surroundings in books. She calls the book *Made for Me* by Zach Bush her "Daddy Book" because the illustrations look like her father.[3] Most tellingly, she seems to only want her dad to read this book to her, not anyone else. Emilia obviously associates the content of the book with her father, and the act of reading it to her is reserved for him alone. She expresses her love for her father through her storytime requests. This book is David's favorite to read to Emilia.

Discussion

Dyslexia is a neurological condition, affecting people at an even rate of about 15 to 20% across cultures and genders.[4] It has no effect on intelligence, though ignorance and stigma may negatively affect people with dyslexia.[5] Many people with dyslexia feel embarrassment or inadequacy because of the lack of cultural understanding surrounding dyslexia.

The International Dyslexia Association reports, "It can be painful and frustrating to struggle with basic reading and writing skills and to be unable to achieve in the eyes of their teachers, classmates, and parents… A sense of failure and inferiority may generalize beyond the classroom and may last into adulthood."[6]

David recalled feeling this sense of inferiority when he first began reading to Emilia. He, fortunately, overcame this nervousness and does not let some stumbling over his words stop him from reading with his kids every day. Other parents and caregivers, especially those with undiagnosed dyslexia, may not feel so confident. Further research should be done to get a better sense of how other dyslexic caregivers approach reading to their children.

While dyslexia is hereditary and therefore a condition that one will have their entire life, proper support and coping skills early on can help those with dyslexia lead a normal, successful life.[7] Because of the genetic component to dyslexia, the children of people with dyslexia have a 33 to 66% chance of developing the condition compared to 6 to 16% for those without a dyslexic parent.[8] This highlights the need for more resources for dyslexic caregivers to best help their children thrive in their early literacy development.

In researching this topic, it became clear that there are few easily accessible resources for caregivers with dyslexia. Most searches yielded results about parenting *children* with dyslexia, rather than giving advice for caregivers wanting to support their children's literacy development when they themselves struggle with a learning disability.

Academic literature and scientific studies on parents with dyslexia focused on the genetic component of dyslexia; few examined the tactics caregivers take in coping with their learning disability when reading with their children or teaching their children how to read and write. Many articles address the challenges children face in school when they have a learning disability, but what happens when those children grow up and want to support their own children to learn to read and write? If dyslexic caregivers struggle to read, they may inadvertently pass along an aversion to reading to their children.

Emilia shows no signs of being behind in her literacy development. In fact, at not-yet three years old, she has already displayed an understanding how letters and words work, she memorizes songs and books, she can make up stories based on the illustrations in a book, and she can sometimes identify which letter a word starts with. There is no evidence that David's dyslexia has hindered Emilia's literacy development. However, because of the genetic component of dyslexia, information and support should be readily available for dyslexic parents who want to ensure their child's successful early childhood development.

While reading aloud to children is valuable for enhancing a child's early literacy development, it is only one of many possible ways for caregivers to prepare their child for reading. Celano and Neuman pinpoint five activities as key practices for early literacy development: singing, talking, reading, writing, and playing.[9] These five practices work equally well for developing an understanding of language and it is not necessary to force a child to do one they do not like, if there are others that they particularly enjoy.

For caregivers who do not enjoy reading, guided play with their child is equally beneficial. Neuman and Roskos write, "Considerable evidence, in fact, supports the critical role of play, and in particular pretend play, on children's language and emergent literacy in the preschool years."[10] Playing with a child enhances their early literacy in three ways:

- providing settings that promote literacy activity, skills, and strategies
- serving as a language experience that can build connections between oral and written modes of expression
- providing opportunities to teach and learn literacy.[11]

Giving children many opportunities to practice their early literacy with guidance from adults is what matters most.

David's strategy of asking Emilia to tell him the story as a way of coping with his dyslexia is a clever way to help promote Emilia's early literacy learning, since it encourages an in-depth connection with the book.

Teale writes that giving children a chance to respond to books in various ways helps them better engage with reading and develop a positive association with books: "The greater richness children attach to books, the more likely they are to enhance their love of them and learn from them."[12]

David combines reading and play when he invites Emilia to be the storyteller. In doing so, Emilia practices her language skills, and

demonstrates an understanding of narrative and how books function. This tactic is a fun way of preparing kids for reading and does not require the parent to have strong reading skills.

Reading to children fosters a connection between parent and child; a child's learning depends upon their surroundings and their close relationships with the adults around them, as Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory asserts.[13] One of the most important factors for a child's success both academically and emotionally is that they "are surrounded by responsive caregivers, family members, teachers, and peers."[14]

Storytime with her father teaches Emilia that she has a support system and a parent who cares for her. In fact, Bus argues, "the main incentive for book reading is not the child's reading interest, but the fact that parents are able to create an intimate situation in which parent and child share a book."[15] A child's development depends far more on having strong, intimate relationships with adults than on the speed with which they learn to read. As demonstrated through David and Emilia's shared love of reading *Made for Me* together, stories can be a way for caregivers and children to bond and form strong relationships. By sharing this book about a father and daughter, David communicates to Emilia that he loves her, by far the most important lesson Emilia could learn.

Recommendations for Libraries

Libraries should consider steps to make their programming more conscious of caregivers with diverse learning needs and literacy competencies. While there may not be enough demand for workshops or support groups for caregivers with dyslexia, librarians should note that reading does not necessarily come easily to everyone. Libraries can include resources on their website giving tips and guidance for caregivers with dyslexia.

Although librarians may be keen to share information with these caregivers, they must first have solid research to share. More research on parenting with dyslexia is necessary to further the dialogue and increase understanding of the challenges these caregivers face. However, even without this research, librarians can reassure caregivers that reading aloud is only one of many possible ways to enhance their child's development.

They should communicate to caregivers that singing, playing, and talking are equally as important for a child's early literacy development as reading and writing. This messaging should be at the forefront of libraries' guidance for all caregivers of young children, since many caregivers likely associate the library exclusively with books. Most of all, librarians should be assuring caregivers that demonstrating to their child that they are loved and valued is the most important thing a caregiver can do. &

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