

Good morning, my name is Beth Reusser and my most important job on this earth is to be a wife and mother. My husband and I have two children, the oldest is severely dyslexic, dysgraphic, and has ADHD. His sister, two years younger, is a very intuitive learner.

Even before our son was 2 years old, I knew in my heart there was a problem. His speech was delayed and he battled frequent ear infections. Today, I know that these two signs, along with a family history, are huge red flags for dyslexia in pre-readers.

In 2006, he went to preschool. He was already behind in learning all the basics, the alphabet, colors, and numbers. These were more textbook warning signs of dyslexia that were present and no one figured it out. After the second year, teachers advised us to hold him back. We sent him to Kindergarten against their recommendations. We knew he was totally unprepared and already behind his peers academically, but there was a problem and we hoped the public school would help us figure it out.

My husband and I are both college educated and knew we were doing everything right, we read to him, played games, worked on flash cards, and at the end of the day we prayed that he would just magically catch up to his peers. By the end of Kindergarten, I was already meeting with the team at our small rural public school. Everyone knew he was not learning like his peers.

We spent many excruciating months just waiting for an appointment at the local children's hospital because our school system couldn't help us. Frustration was mounting for everyone. One teacher told me that her regular interventions were just not working and she didn't know why. Mid way through first grade, we finally heard "your son has dyslexia". Why could our school not do these same tests and give us this diagnosis? After all, dyslexia surrounds learning to read and spell, don't schools teach those skills? Again, no one had the proper training.

Dyslexia is a diagnosis that changes everything for the whole family. All four of us struggled with this diagnosis in our own way. For me, I was dealing with immense guilt, anger, and frustration. Then my panic set in, the fear of the unknown. Will he ever be able to read his birthday cards? Do homework independently? Read a menu? Drive? Go to college? Get a job? Get married? Will his children have these same challenges? My head was spinning!

I quickly learned that no one in our little town really knew what dyslexia was and how to teach him properly. So, I dug in and did more research than the FBI, after all, I was his mom and I had to get to the bottom of it! I found the best method for teaching someone with dyslexia was called Structured Literacy or Orton Gillingham. Unfortunately, no one in our public school or even our county, had any training or certification to teach reading and spelling in this method. After school, we would drive our second grader to a tutoring center 35 minutes away, twice weekly for one hour sessions. On those days, he gave up after school activities, and often his little sister did as well.

Purely out of necessity, in 2011, I signed up for a masters program to learn exactly how to teach using Structured Literacy. I was never a teacher - I was just a mom, but after two long years of intensive study, I added a third job description to become a Dyslexia Therapist. I ended

up taking on my own child as a student because there was still no one in our county that knew how to teach in this way.

Eventually, I was no longer a safe place for my son. He told I had my “therapist voice” on and it created anxiety. One time at the grocery store he said, “Hey look, apple juice is on sale!” He put a big jug in the cart. Imagine how it made him feel when I said, “Oh, honey, that is not apple juice, it is floor cleaner”. I’m sure the look of pity on his sister’s face said it all, after she read the label easily.

For 5th grade, we made the tough decision to move two hours away from our families and friends so he could attend a private school specializing in dyslexia. We hoped that he could begin to close the enormous gap that had already formed due to late identification. After 4 years at that school, our son self-advocated for his 1:1 Structured Literacy tutoring, and this specialized school did not offer it in their high school setting. For 9th grade, we made a third transition to one of the few public schools that utilizes Structured Literacy.

I often wonder, “Where would our family be if he would have been identified in preschool?” Now, as an 11th grader, he relies heavily on assistive technology, has to self-advocate regularly, and still hates reading menus. However, he is driving, visiting colleges, lettered in swimming and is a member of National Honor Society. Please, don’t look at me and say he will be fine because he has “parents like us”. Think about the kids that don’t have overly involved parents or the financial means to move their family and pay for an appropriate education at a private school?

Now, when I do professional development, I often read evaluations that state “I had no idea!” and “Every teacher should be required to do this PD!”. I truly believe many teachers just don’t know, what they don’t know. It is absolutely critical that we train teachers how to identify children with dyslexia before they fail and how to properly teach them these essential life skills. If you are still questioning what this family diagnosis is like, I’ll invite you over for dinner so you can hear it first hand. Thank you.