

Your Shortcut to... Learning Disabilities

Up to one in ten Aussie kids has one... so did Albert Einstein... and they can make school really hard. This is your Squiz Kids Shortcut to learning disabilities—the podcast where we dive into the who, what, when, where, why and how of the big news stories. I'm Amanda Bower.

And I'm Bryce Corbett.

Bryce, the Disability Royal Commission is delivering its final report later this year into the experience of Australians with disabilities. A Royal Commission is an investigation into a matter of great importance to the country. The commissioners do research, hold hearings, and at the end, they make recommendations to the government about what should change. This Royal Commission has heard from THOUSANDS of people since 2019, including a special session on what it's like at school for kids with disabilities ... including learning disabilities.

Today, we'll take you through WHY learning disabilities are different from other disabilities... WHAT types of learning disabilities are common... and HOW kids with learning disabilities get help at school.

Listen carefully - there's a S'quiz at the end!

WHY

Okay, Bryce, so the biggest difference between a learning disability and another kind of disability is right there in the name... it affects the person when they're learning things in a specific area. Because of the disability, they aren't as good at that skill as you'd expect them to be, based on how smart they are. For example, you can be a super smart person, but really struggle to read. Learning disabilities usually affect how you learn to read, write, or do maths. But it doesn't affect your ability to, say, play sport... or sing... or paint. That makes it different from an intellectual disability, which affects every aspect of how your brain learns and understands. And it's different from a physical disability - like being in a wheelchair, for example - because that's with you in everything you do.

So a learning disability only affects you when you're learning?

Or when you're needing to use the skills in that area of learning. Here's an example. Let's say you have a learning disability around numbers. Obviously, that will affect you at school when you're trying to learn maths. But if you don't get help, then it will continue to affect you when you're a grownup. Difficulty with numbers could mean that you have a hard time when you need to pay bills; add simple things in your head; or remember important dates, like birthdays. And no one wants to forget a birthday.

So if you have a learning disability, you have it for life?

You do. In that way, it's similar to other disabilities. Learning disabilities aren't diseases, and they can't be cured.

And WHAT kinds of learning disabilities are the most common?

WHAT

Our government estimates that up to one in 10 Australians have a learning disability... and the most common by far is dyslexia.

The prefix "dys" comes from the Greek, and means difficult. And "lexia" means words.

Very impressive! Dyslexia means difficulty with words. Everyone experiences their disability differently, but usually people with dyslexia find it really challenging to read and to spell.

I knew kids who hated spelling when I was at school! Does that mean they had dyslexia, and just never got diagnosed?

Definitely not. The symptoms of learning disabilities are common for lots of kids—I mean, spelling in the English language can be ridiculous. Why on earth would E-I-G-H-T spell "eight" and not "E-IG--H--T"? But if time goes on and a kid is still having difficulty reading common words, then it's possible dyslexia is involved.

So what does it feel like when you have dyslexia?

Well, my students with dyslexia said that it was really frustrating trying to read. For some of them, words and letters blended together, and the spaces between words were lost. Sometimes they mixed up letters—so instead of reading "felt" F-E-L-T, they saw "left" L-E-F-T. They had to work extra hard to read - and because of that, they sometimes didn't get the meaning of what they'd read. BUT - if they listened to a book being read aloud, they were fantastic at comprehension!

Now I've heard that some pretty famous people had, or have, dyslexia. Is that true?

Sure is! Albert Einstein was believed to have had dyslexia. The scientist Charles Darwin is famous for his theory of evolution, or how living things adapt to their environment. But he's also famous for his terrible spelling and punctuation! Now, no one was testing kids for dyslexia back in the 1800s, so we can't know for sure. Same goes for the first American president, George Washington, who famously hired Alexander Hamilton to write his letters for him! Apparently when Washington did put pen to paper, he had dreadful grammar and difficulty expressing himself. That didn't affect his ability to win a war and lead a nation, though! But my favourite is probably the children's book author and illustrator Patricia Polacco. She didn't learn to read until she was 14, when a teacher finally realised that she had dyslexia and worked with her. Now, she's written dozens and dozens of award-winning books! I've put a link in your episode notes to the book *Thank You, Mr Falker* - which is all about that teacher and her struggles at school.

Teachers really can change kids' lives, can't they? So Amanda, you said dyslexia was the most common learning disability - what are some others?

You know Daniel Radcliffe, who played Harry Potter in the movies? He has dysgraphia, which means difficulty with writing. Again, every person is different, but dysgraphia often means that your handwriting is hard to read; that you may get a sore hand from writing, or sit in an unusual position; that even though you might have amazing ideas for a story, you struggle to get it on paper. You know who else is believed to have had dysgraphia? Agatha Christie!

But she wrote 90 novels that have sold more than 2 billion copies!

She sure did. She jotted down ideas in a notebook, but her family says that she then dictated most of her novels - meaning she spoke them out loud and recorded them. Then someone else would type them up. She was a fabulous reader, so she could easily make changes to the books once they were typed up for her.

And you mentioned earlier that people can also have learning disabilities around maths?

That's right—it's called dyscalculia. The history of the word is pretty cool in itself. In Latin, "calc" means stone... and "calculus" means counting, because little stone pebbles were used to count. So dyscalculia is when people have difficulty with numbers, and working with numbers.

Let me guess - plenty of famous people have that, too.

Well, some people believe that the famous inventors Thomas Edison and Benjamin Franklin had dyscalculia—but of course they were never formally tested. But the pop singer Robbie Williams and Microsoft founder Bill Gates have it, and in America, the National Institute of Child Health and Development is spending millions of dollars studying dyscalculia, to try to figure out just how big a problem it is, and how they can help kids who struggle with maths.

Which leads us to our final question... HOW do kids with learning disabilities get help at school?

HOW

Australian law says that kids with learning disabilities have the same rights to education as any other child—but they often need some extra support. The earlier the child gets help, the greater their chances of success. This is called early intervention.

So some kids might spend extra time with a special teacher who can give them strategies to help with their dyslexia, or dysgraphia, or dyscalculia.

Exactly. And then there might be things that you do in the classroom, too. For example, I had a student with dysgraphia who basically did an Agatha Christie - he jotted down his plan—which was pretty messy and hard to read—and then he dictated his story or essay straight into the computer. And let me tell you, it was amazing to see what an incredible writer he was, once he didn't actually have to hold a pencil.

That must have felt so good for him, to be able to express his ideas.

And that's one of the most important things for all kids to remember. Having a learning disability does NOT mean that you're not smart. Your brain just works a little differently. You may need extra help, and you have to persevere - which means keep going and not giving up. You might also need some strategies to help you stay calm when things get frustrating.

And don't forget that even if one part of school is tricky, there can be others that aren't. And outside of school, you might be an incredible musician, or sportsperson, or artist, or chef.

And like everyone, you can always be kind, and you can always be a great friend.

The S'Quiz

"This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening...

1. What does the prefix ""dys"" mean? (Difficulty)"
2. How common are learning disabilities in Australia? (About one in ten kids have one)
3. What's the name for the learning disability when you have difficulty with words? (Dyslexia... dysgraphia is with writing)

That's all we have time for today. Thanks for joining us as we explored the who, what, how, where, when, and why of learning disabilities.

Now get out there, and have a most excellent day!

Over and out.