Creating Dyslexic-Friendly Children's Libraries

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Introduction

The library is a place where children, regardless of their race, gender and income, have access to materials, programs and learning in a fun, supportive, and dynamic environment. Libraries offer parents free, and at times, crucial resources, while building a community for them to come to for support, guidance, and learning. In today's day and age, parents are aware of learning disabilities such as dyslexia and the effect it can and will have on their child, but might not have the monetary means or an understanding of where they can find resources, and unfortunately, many libraries seem to be lacking in support of dyslexic students- a situation that must be remedied. Libraries and library professionals have the unique opportunity to offer parents resources and support they might not have had access to, and give children an inclusive environment that helps foster lifelong learning, despite their learning disability. Hazel Rutledge comments, "Since libraries have considerable experience in catering for users with a wide range of disabilities, it is only natural to expect that they can find ways of coping with users suffering from dyslexia. This would fit well with the public libraries' mission: to facilitate access to information and resources in a variety of media and should therefore place them at the forefront of assisting people with the disability of dyslexia." (Rutledge, 2002). By building dyslexic- friendly children's departments in public libraries, we are offering children and parents a community and an inclusive environment in which they can find not only ways to cope, but a place they fit in and are welcome. This paper will explore the role public libraries can play to support dyslexic children and their families through programming, targeted collections, and re-orienting the children's department to make it more inclusive and "dyslexic friendly," facilitating better access to information and a safe community for dyslexic children.

Understanding Dyslexia

First and foremost, to better understand the need for dyslexic-friendly spaces, one must have a basic understanding of what dyslexia is. Dyslexia is "a complex neurological condition which is constitutional in origin. The symptoms may affect many areas of learning and function, and may be described as a specific difficulty in reading, spelling and written language. One or more of these areas may be affected." (British Dyslexia Association). According to APM Reports, scientists estimate that "between 5 and 12% of children in the United States have dyslexia." (ampreports.org) The interesting thing is that recent studies have shown that a dyslexic person's brain are distinctly different from those without dyslexia. According to Great Schools Staff, "While no two brains are alike, the brains of people with dyslexia are distinctly different compared to those without dyslexia. Dyslexic brains function differently because they are organized differently. They even look different, though not to the naked eye. Scientists discovered yet another difference in autopsied dyslexic brains — smaller neurons in certain cell clusters (nuclei) of the thalamus. The two affected nuclei are dedicated to vision and hearing. Although scientists do not know exactly how size relates to function, smaller neurons in these two areas may disrupt the exact timing required to efficiently transmit information across brain networks." (greatschools.org,2016). With a basic of understanding of what dyslexia is, it is important to note some of the symptoms, which include:

- Complications with reading
- Difficulty spelling words in writing products
- Low confidence or behavioral problems
- Letter/and or number reversals (transposing)
- Problems with pronunciation
- Difficulty reading aloud
- Trouble with sequenced instructions
- Guessing, skipping or replacing words instead of sounding out
  (lexercise.com,2015)

Because of the challenges a dyslexic child faces due to the condition, they might have behavioral and emotional problems. Michael Ryan, M.D. comments, "The frustration of children with dyslexia often centers on their inability to meet expectations. Their parents and teachers see a bright, enthusiastic child who is not learning to read and write. Time and again, dyslexics and their parents hear, "He's such a bright child; if only he would try harder". Ironically, no one knows exactly how hard the dyslexic is trying. The pain of failing to meet other people's expectations is surpassed only by dyslexics' inability to achieve their goals. This is particularly true of those who develop perfectionistic expectations in order to deal with their anxiety. They grow up believing that it is "terrible" to make a mistake." (Ryan, 2004). By giving children a space in the library tailored for their needs, we are giving them the tools to learn to adapt to their dyslexia and succeed in school, and give parents the tools to better understand the way their child learns, how to adapt their learning styles, while advocating for their rights and services to better help their child as they progress through the education system, while also giving parents and children a safe environment in which they can build communities and relationships, thus fostering a community of inclusiveness. This might alleviate some of the stress children feel in regards to their learning disability, while giving parents a support network and a place to find information. By offering dyslexic- friendly programs and spaces, we are not only breaking stigmas associated with learning disabilities such as dyslexia, we are showing dyslexic children that they

are not "less than" non-dyslexic children, that they are just as welcome in the library, and more importantly, they are not alone. Because learning disabilities are not "visible", like a physical disability or ailment, many children with learning disabilities still face stigmas and negative attitudes. According to Kelsey A. Lisle, "Unlike physical disabilities, LDs are often characterized as being invisible disabilities. Invisible disabilities have no signs or cues to make them easily perceived by others. They are not noticeable in an individual's everyday actions. The effects caused by an individual's LD may only show up in certain environments (e.g. educational environments). Unfortunately, the invisible nature of these disabilities often perpetuates ignorance and differential treatment." (Lisle, 2011) It is important to break the stigmas associated with dyslexia and make it more "visible" so children receive the help and support they need.

Supporting Dyslexic Children through Library Services

One of the ways children with dyslexia can receive support is through their local public library. In order to begin the process of making the existing library space more dyslexic friendly, there are several things the Children's Department can do. Librarians can amend collections to better suit the learning style of dyslexic children by using pictographs and easy to read labels, clearer signs and iconography, specialized technology, and even updating the furniture. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) recommends:

- A building with clear signs and pictograms (icons) is more accessible and user friendly for every visitor. Ensure that the signage does not use continuous capitals, italics or underlining.
- Create an inspiring easy-to-read area where users are invited to sit down and relax while browsing the collection, exploring and using IT tools.
- Choose furniture that will encourage browsing and reading: present materials with the front facing outwards. Partners and users with dyslexia can be involved in the process. Use clear recognizable shelf signs.
  (ifla.org, pg. 27, ,2014)

Once more dyslexic-friendly spaces are incorporated, it is critical that the library ensures their book and materials collection are just as accessible for dyslexic children as it is to non-dyslexic children. For print books, Tea Tree Gully recommends:

- A font style and size that is clear to read.
- Off-white paper that is kinder to the eyes as it reduces glare from the high contrast of black against white.
- Spacing between letters, lines and paragraphs
- Age appropriate content and story lines but with less text to a page and more pictures
- Shorter chapters to give the eyes natural 'rest' break

The IFLA recommends:

- Many pictures
- Straight left margin / no right margin (justify left and ragged right) promotes readability
- Avoid text written in blocks
- Additional aides including: a personal computer equipped with a spell checker/ dictionary, reading pens, magnifying rulers and special glasses, and dyslexia software.

Rather than separating dyslexic-friendly materials from the general collections, librarians should label the materials so they are highlighted, but do not make children feel like they are not part of the library community. The IFLA comments, "Indicate genres clearly, with pictograms and labels on books and other materials," while Iansyst recommends, "Try using color coding to differentiate different book collections, say periodicals and text books or fiction and non-fiction." (iansyst.co.uk) Libraries can use pictograms, or pictorial symbols for words and phrases. In this case, the label can be a simple spine label to indicate that the book is dyslexic friendly, and might look something like this:

(courtesy ttg.library.com)

This label is an excellent use of a pictogram to make finding dyslexic-friendly materials more accessible, but allows them to be part of the general collection. This makes children feel like they are included and not different from the non-dyslexic children. Librarians must also have accurate, up-to-date parenting collections with materials on dyslexia. According to Barbara Bliss, the library needs to ask themselves two key questions:

1. How much information does the library have on dyslexia?
2. What materials are available for teachers, tutors or parents to use in helping dyslexics learn to spell or read? Are these materials primarily visually oriented?
   (Bliss, 1986)

Once librarians have an understanding of the information they have and need, they can begin to update their materials for parents and ensure that they are current, accurate and easy to use. Libraries should offer resources on dyslexia in their parenting collections as well, to assist parent's with their child's education. Parenting collections are important, as parents are their child's first teacher.

Staffing Needs and Training

Collection development, parenting collections and proper labeling are just two small facets of having a dyslexic-friendly library. Another key to providing dyslexic-friendly library spaces is properly trained staff who understand the unique challenges of dyslexia. In order to give dyslexic children reading confidence, Youth Services Librarians should be trained in ways to understand how dyslexic children read and approach reading, and know what they can offer to ensure they are represented in the library collections. The IFLA comments, "Dyslexic people frequently have low self-esteem. During their school years they often experienced a sense of failure which makes them very vulnerable. We have to make an extra effort to make this large group of people who are unaccustomed to the library feel welcome when they visit. This may mean changing the attitude of library staff and teaching them the appropriate way to interact with and assist dyslexic library patrons." (ifla.org, pg. 6, 2014). Having a more positive attitude might give children more confidence if they feel like they are included and welcome in the library, boosting their desire to read and learn how to read with their learning disability. Some libraries, if resources are available, might consider hiring a Learning Differences Librarian. San Francisco Public Library in California was the first library to hire a librarian solely for teens and children with processing disorders, dyslexia, autism spectrum disorders, and developmental disabilities. Their website states, "The position provides services and support to adults with dyslexia and other learning differences in the Project Read adult literacy program, to youth with learning differences, and works to create system-wide inclusion in service and programming." (sfpl.org). If a budget allows for this type of hire, it would be an excellent way to make the library not only more dyslexic-friendly, but also inclusive of other disabilities as well. Libraries can also train staff to better serve these communities, by having them attend seminars, workshops and webinars. Anna Shelton comments, "Each staff member needs the tools to provide inclusive customer service throughout all library interactions." (Shelton, 2014). Whether it's through training or a designated librarian, it is critical to have a staff member trained in recognizing and serving learning and physically disabled patrons to make the library feel welcoming and inclusive each and every time they visit.

Dyslexic-Friendly Library Collections and Programming for Parents

Once proper collections, spaces and properly trained staff are enacted, it is important to support both parents and children through library services and programming. First, let us focus on the role the library can play in supporting the parents. According to Nessy.com, "The better a parent can learn to support their child, the better the family understands dyslexia's strengths and weaknesses." (nessy.com) The library is an essential resource for parents to come to receive information, and libraries should he more inclusive to ensure parents are able to find what they need. Libraries also afford parents an opportunity to build communities with other parents who might be in similar situations, and give them a chance to get out of the house. By fostering a welcoming environment, we are demonstrating to parents that they have nothing to be ashamed of and will not be judged inside of our walls. Parents can also come to the library and find accurate resources and even seminars to ensure they are supported, informed, and have a place to continue learning how they can support their child. Libraries are oriented towards meeting the needs of parents and caregivers, connecting them to resources and services in a non-judgmental environment, and might even help them reach a diagnosis for their child. A key program to offer parents is called Early Intervention. According to the Early Intervention Foundation, "Early intervention involves identifying children and families that may be at risk of running into difficulties and providing timely and effective support. Early intervention is about enhancing the capabilities of every parent to provide a supportive and enriching environment for their children to grow up in." (eif.org.uk) Early intervention is key to easing the effects and ramifications of dyslexia and ensuring children have proper help as early as possible. According to Homeschooling with Dyslexia, "Kindergarten and first grade are deemed to be the "window of opportunity" to prevent long- term reading problems. Without early intervention, the "reading gap" between struggling readers and their peers continues to widen over time." (homeschoolingwithdyslexia.com) Libraries can help close this gap by providing resources for parents such as the early intervention services, seminars and programs such as Dyslexic 101, which aims to help parents "reframe their understanding of the dyslexic mind." (sherwoodlibrary.gov), and dyslexia awareness seminars. Libraries might also want to partner with the International Dyslexia Association (state chapter) to offer parents resources to better help their child. There are also programs that stimulate dyslexia, to help parents and caregivers better understand what their child is going through, such as a program held by the Longmont Public Library (LPL) in Longmont, Colorado. The program hosted by the LPL is an "Experience Dyslexia Simulator" which will help parents and caregivers "learn more about dyslexia and how they can support them through a hands-on simulation workshop." (longmonthcolorado.gov). These workshops can demonstrate to parents the struggles their child faces, and how they can not only help, but better understand the daily challenges of living with dyslexia.

Dyslexic-Friendly Children's Programming and the Importance of Inclusion

Another way to create a dyslexic-friendly children's department in the library is to consider hosting dyslexic-friendly children's programming, but include non-dyslexic children as well to foster an inclusive environment and ensure that no one is excluded. Segregating programs is never okay- instead, libraries should adopt an attitude of inclusivity and community building. Fostering this inclusivity is key for several reasons:

- Children develop a positive understanding of themselves and others. When children attend classes that reflect the similarities and differences of people in the real world, they learn to appreciate diversity. Respect and understanding grow when children of differing abilities and cultures play and learn together.
- Friendships develop-schools are important places for children to develop friendships and learn social skills. Children with and without disabilities learn with and from each other in inclusive classes.
- Children learn important academic skills-in inclusive classrooms, children with and without disabilities are expected to learn to read, write and do math. With higher expectations and good instruction children with disabilities learn academic skills.
- All children learn by being together, because the philosophy of inclusive education is aimed at helping all children learn, everyone in the class benefits. Children learn at their own pace and style within a nurturing learning environment. (pbs.org)

By offering inclusive programming, we are giving dyslexic children a chance to feel included and welcome, but we are also allowing non-dyslexic children a positive understanding of someone who is different than them. One program that truly fosters a feeling of inclusivity a buddy reading program, which could give dyslexic children a chance to practice their phonics and language skills in a relaxed environment. Many children hate reading because of the daily struggle dyslexia places on their cognitive and letter recognition abilities, so making reading fun and positive is key. In a School Library Journal article, Rebecca Shargel and B.P. Laster commented, "Students deepen their interpretation of texts when they "read" each other's responses, and their comprehension is strengthened by another student's reaction." (Hinds, 2016). Helping children develop their phonics and reading skills through peer reading might boost their confidence and comprehension, making reading less intimidating and more fun. In the same vein, libraries might also hold a "Read to a Therapy Pet" program. For dyslexic children, reading to a non-verbal, non-judgmental creature might make them feel more comfortable as they work through their reading difficulties. According to Cesar Milan, "For children who are beginning to read, or are a little behind developmentally, or suffer from dyslexia, autism, or learning disabilities, an environment with a friendly companion like a professional therapy dog (or even a well-trained family pet) can create a safe atmosphere where they can work out their difficulties but not feel trivialized by classroom peers or fear disapproval of adult authority figures." (Milan, 2011). Already popular in libraries, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) programming is essential for dyslexic children. According to Lyndsey Alyssa Wright, "Many dyslexic students are also gifted, and some researchers believe that some dyslexic students have a unique capacity to visualize in three dimensions, which ironically contributes to the challenge of mastering reading in two dimensions. The ability to reason in three dimensions is an advantage when learning STEM. This advantage should be recognized, developed and encouraged because many of these students may have the potential to be future scientists and engineers." (Wright, 2014). Having non-judgmental, accessible programming that boosts a dyslexic child's confidence and skills is critical, and many of the programming doesn't need to only target dyslexic children, so they won't feel like they are being singled out or cannot participate due to their learning disability. This will give them a sense of belonging and provides better opportunities for learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, creating a dyslexic-friendly library space is critical as libraries continue to grow and evolve. Children with dyslexia need support to ensure they can tackle the emotional, social and developmental challenges that come alongside a learning disorder, and parents need resources to help their child. Libraries have the unique opportunity to provide these services because they are the center of the community and can offer free resources. By enacting properly trained or special staff, dyslexic friendly programs and collections, we are offering learning-disabled children a safe, inclusive and welcoming environment that aims to help them learn, grow, and thrive despite their learning differences.

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