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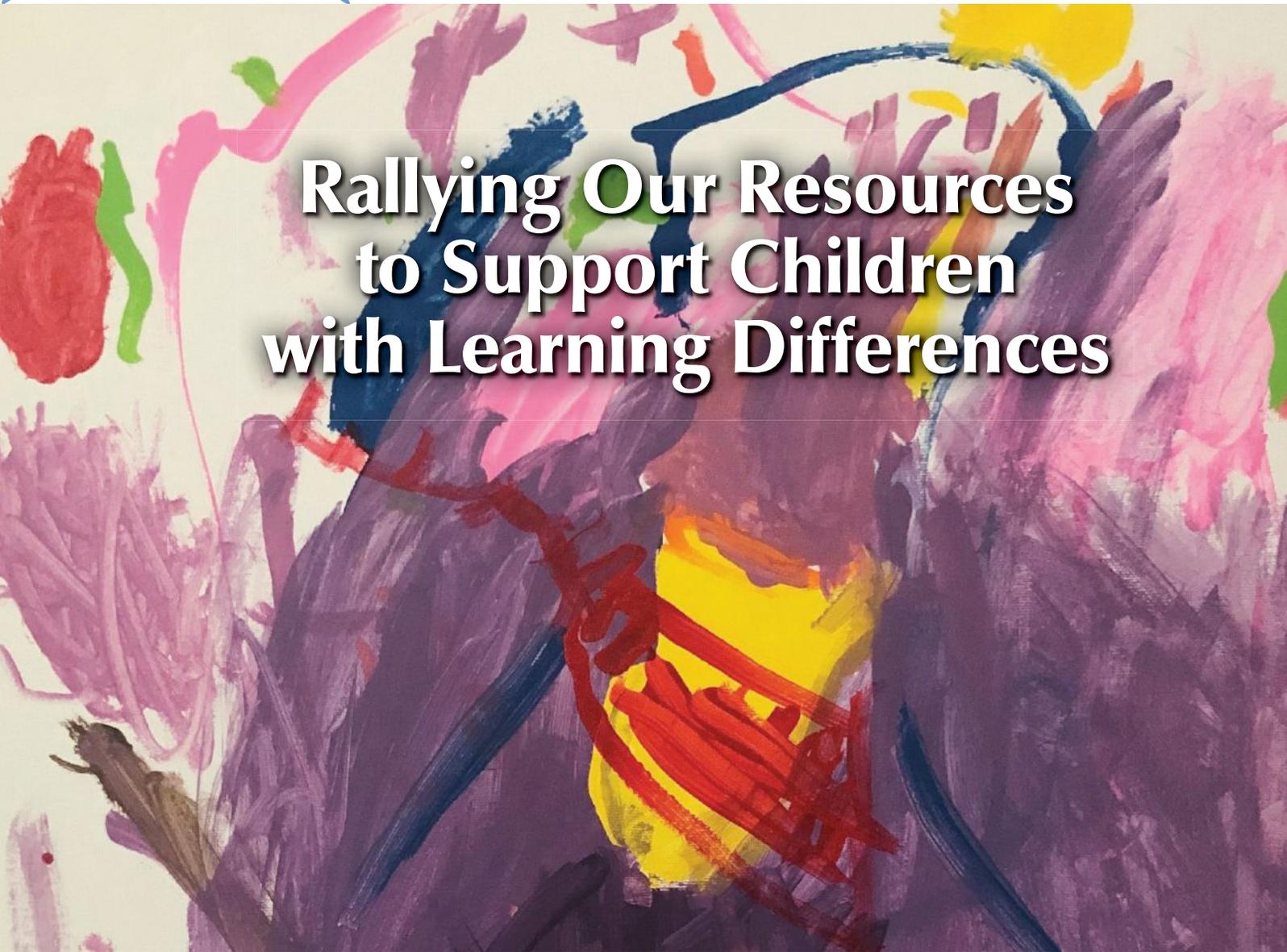
Mark Bertin, Theme Editor

PERSPECTIVES

ON LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

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Rallying Our Resources to Support Children with Learning Differences

11 **How Clinical Psychologists Can Help
Dyslexic Children and Teens**

Roberto Olivardia

17 **Getting Help for Your Child When
School Alone Is Not Enough**

Margie B. Gillis

21 **Parent Training and Coaching: Treatment
Strategy for Complex Children**

Elaine Taylor-Klaus

27 **Dyslexia and Our Public Libraries**

Jill Lauren

31 **The Role of the Special Education Attorney
in Developing a Plan for a Child with
Special Educational Needs**

Marion Katzive

35 **The Primary Care Provider's Role with
Specific Learning Disorder in Children**

Barbara J. Howard

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Dyslexia and Our Public Libraries

by Jill Lauren

Public libraries are a community treasure, a place where everyone has free access to information resources and multi-disciplinary programs. According to sociologist Roy Oldenburg, libraries can be defined as a “third place,” a location where people spend time between their “first” place, home, and “second” place, work. In this third place, people may learn, exchange ideas, enjoy each other, and also build a sense of community (Butler & Diaz, 2016). As Andrew Carnegie boldly stated, “A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people. It is a never failing spring in the desert” (Stamberg, 2013).

Though dyslexia was not a commonly known condition when Carnegie made his assertion, many public libraries are indeed benefiting patrons with dyslexia. When librarians have been trained to care for the dyslexic population, there are a number of ways that public libraries may serve as a lifeline for these patrons. Other libraries, like many of our schools, would benefit from additional support so that librarians might better understand dyslexia and its impact on readers. This article will review the creative approaches public libraries currently use to provide for their dyslexic patrons and it will offer suggestions for additional ways in which libraries may bolster their programs. Included, too, are numerous observations from librarians gained through personal communications.

In a 2017-2019 survey of about 100 librarians working in public libraries throughout the 50 states, results showed that although librarians were eager to attend to “reluctant readers,” many did not feel qualified to help those who might be dyslexic. As a result, librarians worried that their support might harm rather than help (Copeland, 2021). This is unfortunate, as librarians are generally a remarkably dedicated group who believed that there is a “book for every child,” and that it is their job to help find it. Librarians’ lack of knowledge about dyslexia can be traced back to their Library Sciences training programs. In ways that are similar to disparities in teacher training, many librarians receive little to no education about dyslexia. Public library-based researcher Hazel Rutledge recognized the need for training when she commented, “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).

Support Services for Patrons with Dyslexia: Reader’s Advisory

Regardless of training, librarians cite Reader’s Advisory as their most popular tool to support struggling readers. This interactive approach uses interview techniques to decipher what motivates each child, whether the child is dyslexic, reluctant, or otherwise challenged by reading. Betsy Kluck-Keil, a child development specialist at the Seattle Public Library, believes we need to carefully listen to what a child both likes and does not like. Some children love data and lists, for example, and she notes the increase in new nonfiction titles across reading levels. In addition to determining a child’s interest, Kluck-Keil also attempts to lead a child to a “just right book that is not too hard and not too easy.” Specifically, she asks children, “Are there too many words on this page, not enough words, or just right?” This nonjudgmental line of questioning may have particular appeal to the dyslexic reader, as it allows the child to weigh in as to an appropriate reading level.

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The Importance of Early Literacy Programs

An early literacy program developed by the American Library Association, Every Child Ready to Read®, provides an excellent first start along the process of learning to read. The program was designed with the understanding that “early childhood literacy is regarded as the single best investment for enabling children to develop skills that will likely benefit them for a lifetime” (Neuman & Dickinson, 2001). As such, the Every Child Ready to Read® program contains important goals that are scientifically determined to be related to reading development, such as the emphasis on phonemic awareness activities that include rhyming, counting syllables, and isolating sounds, which some librarians recognize for their potential impact. Jodi De la Pena of the Alpine Library in California

Continued on page 28

Abbreviations

NLS: National Library Service

UDL: Universal Design for Learning

noted, “Early literacy classes are not just fun and games anymore. We create programs with reading, movement, and singing, while addressing early literacy criteria, including phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, and executive functioning.”

Some librarians were surprised, however, to learn that the Every Child Ready to Read® program might also serve to help with the early identification of dyslexia. As indicated in the International Dyslexia Association’s definition of dyslexia, difficulty with the phonological components of language is a hallmark of the condition. Children who struggle with the phonological awareness aspects of the Every Child Ready to Read® program may require attention. Other important indicators found on Understood.org’s “Signs of Dyslexia in Preschool” checklist developed by Margie Gillis may be observed in this preschool program, too (Understood Team, 2020). The following are behaviors that could be considered “red flags” if exhibited over time in an Every Child Ready to Read® class:

- Difficulty remembering the words, or parts of words, to a song
- Struggling to find words to talk about a book
- Problems with writing, especially writing one’s name
- Difficulty playing sound games that are part of phonemic awareness exercises

When a child’s responses fall outside of behavioral norms, the librarian is in a unique position to act. But before doing so, the following steps are suggested:

- Each library should have a uniform policy in place as to how to share information about behaviors that might be considered red flags. Working with local chapters of the International Dyslexia Association or Decoding Dyslexia would be helpful in establishing this policy.
- Steps might include handing out checklists, similar to that mentioned above, regarding signs that a child might struggle to learn to read and/or be dyslexic.
- A list of local support providers, as well as the national websites, can be provided.

Librarians who observe behaviors indicating that a child is not meeting the goals of the Every Child Ready to Read® program, and who have also established a trusted relationship with a parent or caregiver over the course of this preschool program, might be comfortable disclosing that the child’s participation differs from others. Sharing this information by using concrete examples is a critical first step in the process of aiding a child who may need support. It is important to note that early intervention for possible reading issues is *one of the most powerful aspects of preventing a lifetime of potential reading failure*. Each of our community caregivers of preschool children can play a significant role in potentially influencing the success of a child’s relationship with reading.

Assistive Technology and Print

Librarians may also identify and offer technological options for dyslexic readers who struggle with print; for example, audiobooks are highly recommended. This technology is an excellent tool to help individuals who struggle with reading to either listen to a great story or attain useful information. An opportunity to listen to text is a well-supported component of a literacy plan, particularly for emerging readers. Today there are a multitude of options for finding an audiobook; libraries are a wonderful place to start. Many popular book titles are available in audio format for individuals of all ages at school and public libraries. Fortunately, even titles that may not be readily available in libraries can be obtained with a little effort, through the help of a librarian. For free audiobooks with human-voiced recordings, librarians can introduce patrons to the National Library Service (NLS) for the Blind and Physically Handicapped’s Braille and Talking Book Library. NLS ships over 70,000 audiobooks or magazines for free directly to a patron’s home, as well as the equipment needed to listen to them. NLS also provides free downloads, once an applicant has applied for membership.

Audiobooks are highly recommended. Additionally, two specific book formats receive much praise from librarians for their appeal to dyslexic and reluctant readers: hi-lo readers and graphic novels.

Additionally, two specific book formats receive much praise from librarians for their appeal to dyslexic and reluctant readers: hi-lo readers and graphic novels. Hi-lo readers are known for their high interest but low reading level, which is suitable for older readers who cannot manage grade-level material. Jamie Schlenk, youth service librarian at the Hussey-Mayfield Memorial Library in Zionsville, Indiana, says of their hi-lo collection, “We are carefully working on collection development. A lot of reluctant readers show up in third and fourth grades. They don’t want to be caught dead reading a second-grade book. We steer kids towards the hi-lo readers. These kids come back and say, ‘I like this, do you have more?’” Schlenk affirms that many mainstream publishers now have hi-lo books in their catalogs about intriguing topics such as World War II, extreme adventure, and time travel to historic events such as the sinking of the Titanic. Publishers with appealing titles include, but are not limited to, Saddleback Educational Publishing, Orca Book Publishers, Capstone Publishing, and High Noon Books.

As to graphic novels, public librarians often suggest them as a way to engage dyslexic and reluctant readers. Graphic novels have achieved great popularity over the past decade, even receiving Newbery honors. Yet, some educators and parents question their place in literature. Librarians express concern

that many parents or teachers do not recognize the value of graphic novels, believing that reading “comic books” does not count. The American Library Association cites research that offers many reasons to consider graphic novels as vital resources, including that they “boosted reading interests among students with disabilities” (Irwin & Young, 2005). Olivia Wilson, head librarian at the Dunedin Library in Dunedin, Florida states, “We have decided to separate out our graphic novels and comics and highlight the section as ‘Comics.’ Many old-school librarians might scoff at us making comics a real shelving section.” Wilson observes that children improve their reading skills with graphic novels and then move on to books that are more “meaty.” The sensitivity displayed by many librarians interviewed reveals that they also thoughtfully organize material with a deep appreciation for the needs of a multitude of readers.

Support for Librarians

Whether through books, technology, or programming, librarians with proper training find a way to reach their patrons. But what about those librarians who want to help, yet feel insecure in their knowledge? Fortunately, many librarians, educators, and parents who understand dyslexia are committed to working with these librarians. Carrie Banks, Supervising Librarian of Inclusive Services at the Brooklyn Public Library, trains librarians in best practices that focus on a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for patrons who require multiple means by which to engage with information. Another library specialist, Clayton Copeland, Faculty and Director, Laboratory for Leadership in Equity & Diversity at the University of South Carolina, invites guest lecturers to teach her students about dyslexia and ways in which they might better understand their patrons’ needs. One student recently reported, “I had no idea that dyslexic patrons needed this kind of assistance, and I promise to create a display in my library to bring about dyslexia awareness.” With each new display, individuals who struggle to read will recognize their library as a place where they might find support.

Further, parents who lead the Decoding Dyslexia movement (which actually began in a public library conference room) recognize the importance of displays that help patrons understand that a library is “dyslexia-friendly.” Steps may include:

- Contact your local librarian to discuss organizing a visual display or event for Dyslexia Awareness Month in October.
- Create a poster for display on the wall. Print out reliable information on dyslexia, including warning signs, methods of remediation, and sources for information.

Marion Waldman, Executive Director and founder of Teach My Kid to Read (<https://teachmykidtoread.org/>) provides training for public librarians. The nonprofit instructs librarians, primarily working through library systems, about the process of learning to read, where decodable texts fit in, and ways in which librarians can be a better resource for early and struggling readers. Teach My Kid to Read reported, for example, that some libraries are now adding a “Decodable Book Section.” The nonprofit also demonstrates how librarians can create

events to educate parents and caregivers about supporting their struggling readers. Due to initial successes in New York state, Teach My Kid to Read has expanded their work to educate librarians around the country.

Common Questions for Librarians about Dyslexia

Public librarians report being asked these common questions about dyslexia:

- What is dyslexia?
- How can I find out if my child is dyslexic?
- How do I obtain needed services?
- What if I can’t get help?
- How can my library help patrons with dyslexia?

Librarians can be prepared to answer these questions by knowing about educational information and services offered in their communities or online. A good start is to direct parents to the Decoding Dyslexia website (<https://dyslexiaida.org/decoding-dyslexia/>), where they will find chapters in all 50 states. Similarly, the International Dyslexia Association (<https://dyslexiaida.org/>) has state chapters, as well as a wealth of valuable resources about dyslexia. Websites by the Learning Disabilities Association (<https://ldaamerica.org/>), Understood.org (<https://www.understood.org/>), The Reading League (<https://www.thereadingleague.org/>), and LD Online (<http://www.ldonline.org/>) also provide ways for parents to obtain needed information. Parents who believe that their public librarians would be open to further education about dyslexia are welcome to copy and share this article.

An Important Part of a Community

As a “third place” of great importance, libraries bring books and resources to all kinds of readers in a multitude of ways. Indeed, according to a 2016 study by the Pew Research Center,

Americans view public libraries as important parts of their communities, with a majority reporting that libraries have the resources they need and play at least some role in helping them decide what information they can trust. When asked to think about the things that libraries could do in the future, notable numbers of Americans respond in a way that can be boiled down to one phrase: ‘Yes, please.’ (Horrigan, 2016).

With “yes, please” in mind, our librarians can be sure that their efforts on behalf of readers with dyslexia are well-supported and respected.

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Continued on page 30

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Jill Lauren, MA, is a learning specialist and author with over three decades of experience as an educator and teacher trainer. She is the founder of *Whole Phonics™*, a Structured Literacy program for beginning readers.

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