

Tilt Parenting Podcast: Heidi Nord on the Challenges and Gifts of Dyslexia [Transcript]

Debbie: Could you tell us a little bit about what it was that led you down this path of creating [The Brilliant Dyslexic](#) and doing what you do?

Heidi: Sure! When I was a kid, I had an uncle who had Down syndrome and I remember being really young and sitting at my parents' kitchen counter teaching him how to read. It's one of those memories that just sticks with me. I was really young—maybe seven years old—and I just kept trying to do different things to help him. So I guess pretty much since I was a kid, I knew being a teacher was my path.

When I got my teaching credentials and I had my first class, it was in North Hollywood, California in a really low-income neighborhood. Among my sixth graders, the reading levels varied from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade. And I realized that, even though it was a low-income neighborhood, a lot of these kids had been going to the same area schools, so largely they had received the same instruction. And it didn't make sense to me. Why were some kids learning how to read and other kids who had attended the same schools weren't?

So, I went back to school while I was teaching and got my reading specialist credential and a master's degree in reading. And ironically at the time I graduated in 1994, nothing about dyslexia was said in that program.

Debbie: Wow!

Heidi: I know, I know. So, the challenge we have today is that a lot of teachers have not been trained about dyslexia. So, imagine me—I have a master's degree in reading but still haven't learned everything I needed to learn about how to instruct dyslexic students. I had an ah-ha moment when I went to the 2002 California Reading Conference and I sat in on a lecture by [dyslexia expert Susan Barton](#) and everything just came clear all of a sudden. Ohhhh, this is what I've been searching for!

But I think what we're still seeing in schools is some of the old teaching patterns, which is why there is such a big homeschooling and alternative school movement. Because parents want something different for their children.

Debbie: I have to say that I'm shocked you went so far in your education as a reading specialist and the subject of dyslexia didn't even come up. That is just dumbfounding to me. It makes total sense then that there are so many of us choosing alternative educational paths for our kids. I am what I would call an unexpected, and initially reluctant, homeschooling parent. I am homeschooling because my son's needs weren't being met in school. And I know that there are many, many parents who have children with dyslexia who are really struggling to find that school fit as well.

I want to talk about that but before we do, could you take a few minutes to explain to us exactly what dyslexia is?

Heidi: Sure, I'd be happy to. Let's look at the word itself: DYS meaning difficulty with and LEXIA referring to language. That's the basic definition—difficulty with language. And this

difficulty with language has nothing to do with IQ—it's just that it's really hard for people with dyslexia to break language down. There are some essential pre-reading skills that people need in order to start building their reading levels, and what happens is, because dyslexia is language-based, typically what we're missing in schools is we're trying to diagnose it too late. We're waiting until a person starts having trouble reading, sometimes until the third or fourth grade, when in reality it could be assessed for in kindergarten because it actually has to do with language.

So, there are a lot of speech patterns you'll see with dyslexia such as changing the sounds and syllables in words. So, saying pasgetti instead of spaghetti or hotspital for hospital. Somebody with dyslexia believes they are saying those words correctly, but they aren't. So, they actually need help at the sound level with processing sounds, but because we wait until students in school start to fail, there winds up being a whole mess of mindset issues of people thinking that they aren't successful or they aren't smart enough. So, for me that's a huge area of dyslexia that we need to do some work with.

Debbie: Absolutely. I know of parents with dyslexic children, and when they made the discovery it connected so many dots for them. But it was also heart-breaking to realize how much their children have been overcompensating and working so much harder and wondering to themselves, Why this is so hard for me? It's surprising to me that it continues to be diagnosed so late . . . that it takes so long for the connections to be made.

Heidi: It's been challenging to get the teacher mindsets to change. A lot of teachers do know about dyslexia, but we still need even more filtering of dyslexia instruction and what to spot in the classroom. It's so important because it can take a world of pain away from the student who's having difficulty.

Typically, when a student I'm working with learns they're dyslexic, it's a major relief because it finally makes sense. They finally know it doesn't mean anything about their intelligence when all this time they've been thinking: I'm just not smart enough to do this or Why can't this come easily to me? Whereas, when they have a name for it and figure it out, their thinking can become, Oh, this means I'm extra bright. It's just that the language piece will be a little bit more challenging. It's really life changing when students come to that conclusion.

Debbie: We saw that with our son who has ADHD and Asperger's. He was almost happy to find out what was going on with him—he kind of embraces his diagnoses. They explain a lot about who he is and they empower him in that way.

But going back to something you said: Do you feel like there is some resistance to acknowledging or supporting dyslexia in school systems?

Heidi: It really is school site dependent. In the Napa Valley here in California, I know which schools understand what it is and I recommend those schools first to families with dyslexic kids because the schools know what they're dealing with. At other schools, yes I do find resistance, and that's something I'm super passionate about, so it's a lifelong path for me to address that. It is so important to help people with dyslexia because they have such high intellectual capabilities.

It is challenging because sometimes teachers spread myths that aren't true, like the idea that you can't test for dyslexia until a child is nine. That's just not true. Or some prefer to just keep waiting with an assumption the student will outgrow it. That's not true, either. These kids just need different instruction and the earlier they receive that instruction, the better off the student is.

Debbie: I often hear dysgraphia being mentioned in tandem with dyslexia. What is dysgraphia and how does it differ from dyslexia?

Heidi: I'll go back to that simple definition. Literally the DYS means difficulty with and GRAPHIA means writing. Some students have dysgraphia paired with dyslexia and some students don't. When students have dysgraphia, it's challenging them to have the fine motor skills to make letters. Not just correctly, but readable.

What we're going after is something called "dual coding." So, for example, if I'm listening to a recording of somebody reading, I'll learn even more if I'm reading along while the person is reading out loud. Or I will learn more if I use a speech recognition program to type for me. And the same thing happens with handwriting. When you're thinking about what you're going to write and you're also actually writing it, you get that dual coding. So part of the challenge in somebody who has both dyslexia and dysgraphia is they're not getting that dual coding.

One of the things I like to do with students who have dysgraphia is have them make more gross motor movements with the letters than fine motor movements. For example, if you take a look at your hand and you wiggle your thumb, your thumb is actually a gross motor movement. Yet your fingers are fine motor movement-directed. Often times people with dysgraphia will have a fist grip on their pencil because they're trying to involve the thumb since those gross motor movements are easier for them to make than the fine motor movements are.

What I like to have these students do is sky-write in the air so they can take their whole arm and write words that way, because then they get the dual coding.

Debbie: I know that a lot of the parents in the TiLT community have children who are twice exceptional. Is it common to see dyslexia and giftedness go hand-in-hand?

Heidi: Definitely. I had this one student I worked with...let's call him Max. He wasn't really getting correct instruction at school, and environmentally he was having a tough time. Eventually, the parent decided to have him go to independent studies and I suggested he get tested as gifted. And almost as soon as they did that, a different child emerged. Because, whereas the environment he had been in wasn't helping him thrive, now he was able to leave that and get the tools he needed and self-confidence came along with that. So, yes, I do find that a lot of these students are gifted.

Debbie: I think with a lot of twice exceptionalities, it does tend to come as a surprise, especially for the child themselves. A lot of times ADHD and Asperger's is paired with giftedness, but the disorder or difference can sometimes mask that giftedness. That makes it tricky and it takes a lot of work on the parents' part to advocate for their kids. Or they need someone like you in their life to say: Hey, I think we should test for this as well. I love hearing that story about Max and knowing he had such a powerful shift in his experience with school.

Heidi: It was really neat to see and it was great that it happened so quickly. We already know that the thoughts that we're thinking about ourselves make a difference in the world, right? So, if one day I'm thinking that I'm lousy, then I might not be productive that day. But if I think that I have something to give the world, then I wind up being more productive because it's a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The same thing can happen with a teacher. If a teacher thinks his or her students aren't very bright, the students pick up on that. They know... they can sense it. And as a result, they start not doing as well because they believe the teacher might be right and maybe they aren't very bright. That teacher interaction is pivotal. If a teacher has an openness about what they're seeing in the classroom or how intelligence is displayed, they're going to have a very positive effect on the student. It's almost like dominoes—they just line up and fall into place, because then the student believes really good things about themselves too. That whole mindset piece is very important in the classroom.

Debbie: Yes, and unfortunately, that's a lot of power for a teacher to have. And sometimes it is the luck of the draw about what kind of a teacher a child has and whether or not they're going to be able to support the differently-wired kids in their class.

Is that part of what you do when you're training teachers is helping them work through that and approach students with a growth mindset?

Heidi: Yes. There's a study called the Pygmalion Effect where researchers told a group of teachers at a school that they each had five students in their classroom who were exceptionally bright. And what happened over the course of the year is those five students made more progress than others. But the truth is, those children were chosen randomly and weren't necessarily exceptionally bright at all. I tell teachers about that study so they can connect the dots and realize what they believe about and their interaction with a student makes a big difference. And I try to empower students so they have the self-confidence to know their gifts and talents and not let a teacher sway it too much.

Debbie: That's challenging, especially for younger kids. In our family we experienced what it was like having both a very supportive teacher and an unsupportive teacher of Asher's neurological differences. And that was really tricky territory when he was such a young kid and we were trying to figure out who he is and what he's capable of. So I love that you're doing that work with teachers. It's so important.

Heidi: I agree. If there was one thing I could shift in education it would be mindset. Because sometimes we start thinking: Oh well, if there was more funding and more money in schools or if we had different materials. I've seen classroom materials change every seven years, and that's challenging for teachers because they continually have to learn a new curriculum. Whereas with something that's as simple as mindset, if a teacher changed his or her mindset about their students, that could be possibly even more powerful than changing the materials. As teachers and parents, we can be constantly asking ourselves, Where is my child bright? Where is he or she talented? And we can be observing to see those peaks. Because when we focus on the lows and the challenges somebody has, that sometimes gets magnified, whereas if we're focusing on the peaks, those can be magnified.

So, it's important that teachers change instruction and level up for the areas of challenge, but it's equally important, if not more so, to find out what that student is really good at and loves to do. Because that will be their work in their world that winds up being so wonderful.

Debbie: I love what you just said. I think you're absolutely right that in the world of education, especially in traditional schools, there is so much of a focus on the deficits. Oh, you're struggling with this? Great! Let's do more of that then! As opposed to, and often at the expense of, really supporting and developing those incredible gifts that the child has. Have you heard of the book *Strengths Finders 2.0*?

Heidi: I love that book.

Debbie: Me too. I love that it helps you identify your six core strengths and how you best move through the world. And that's a core tenant of that book—focusing on our strengths. And you are absolutely right...that is where our work is in the world. That is where you're going to be spending most of your life.

On your website [The Brilliant Dyslexic](#), you say you believe dyslexia is an asset. What do you mean by that?

Heidi: I do believe dyslexia is an asset because people with dyslexia have brains that are structured a little bit differently. And that structuring is really amazing. Something that people often know about dyslexia is this idea of reversals. So, let's say a student is writing a three in reverse. That is one of the warning signs of dyslexia, but what that really means is that the student is capable of being able to flip and rotate shapes in their mind. Now, that's amazing! That's a really important skill for engineering, for architecture, for design, for art. And it's something that many see as a negative, but really it's a positive when you look at that capability.

And because of this different brain structuring, I think people with dyslexia are the inventors and the creatives of the world. Einstein was dyslexic. Edison was dyslexic. There are so many examples of people who have made such amazing things with the capabilities that they have. And I think that's why I'm so focused on that part of it. Because as you said with the *Strengths Finders* book, we need to highlight all of those positive things.

Google, who has developed a great speech recognition program, as well as a reading program where teachers can track how many words a student is reading, is a good example of a company that probably has a lot of dyslexic employees, because people who are good with technology can think differently and that's what a technologically advanced company needs. Even NASA recruits people with dyslexia and it's because of that unique thinking capability. I think in the next five to ten years, people will be wishing they were dyslexic or that their children were dyslexic. It's a really exciting time to have some of these capabilities. It really is.

Debbie: I love that companies are recognizing the gifts that come along with differently-wired people in the way that they experience the world. I just read an article about some companies specifically looking for employees with Asperger's because of the unique way they're able to deal with technological data. I definitely believe that being differently wired is part of our evolution as a species.

Heidi: It definitely is. We're making a collective leap not only in consciousness, but also in intelligence. You can't leave one without the other, at least I don't think so. So, the differently wired brain is really important for what's happening on an evolutionary process. It's time for schools to get up to speed with all of these new pieces of research.

Debbie: What advice do you have for parents with a dyslexic child who want to support them as best as they can?

Heidi: For me, knowledge is power. So, looking more into what dyslexia is and how to teach toward that is a really good idea for parents. And to also know that some teachers will be aware of dyslexia and some won't. It's important for parents to do their own research.

Dyslexia is not challenging to diagnose. If you look at some of the warning signs and your kids display them, they probably do have it because it affects fifteen to twenty percent of the population. Like anything else, it goes on a continuum from mild to moderate to severe, but you want to figure out where the child is on that continuum so they can be helped by the school. My biggest message is to not look at it as though your child isn't learning, but rather see it as a language processing issue. Make sure the student knows they're really intelligent. And sometimes that means calmly going to bat for your kid. And study after study shows homework doesn't help, so I think making sure your child is not slaving over homework at night is really important. It takes a lot of courage to tell the teacher, you know, We are not going to be doing as much homework. But that is one of things I suggest. More is not better.

Debbie: Definitely not. Thank you so much for sharing so much useful information. You clearly know your stuff and it's been fascinating to learn from you. So, thank you again!

Heidi: Thank you so much, Debbie. I love the work you're doing in the world and this was a lot of fun.