



Episode #143:

Victoria Biggs Shares Her Story of Being Dyspraxic

September 10, 2019

Debbie: Welcome to the podcast, Vicki.

Victoria: Thank you.

Debbie: So we have a lot to talk about. And actually today we're talking about something we haven't covered on the show as a solo episode yet. So I'm really looking forward to getting into this. But before we get into the heart of our conversation, can you take a few minutes to introduce yourself to us?

Victoria: I'm Victoria Biggs. I'm a teacher in a special school for young people with trauma related mental health problems. You've often got additional learning differences, layered underneath. And I have learning differences myself. I'm autistic and I also grew up with severe dyspraxia, which very much inform the way I teach. And in addition to that, I'm an academic and researcher with the University of Sheffield in the UK.

Debbie: Excellent. So, and just curious, and we're gonna talk about your teaching in a little bit, but I'm curious, is there a specific age range that you teach?

Victoria: Yes, 12 through 17 year olds, what we call secondary school here in the UK.

Debbie: Great. Okay. Well, I do want to hear more about your work in education, but before we do that, we are going to be talking about dyspraxia today. And because this is a new conversation for this show, would you mind just taking some time to explain what exactly dyspraxia is?

Victoria: Okay. Dyspraxia is a neurological disorder or difference and there are three main domains in which it affects people. The most obvious is physical: coordination, balance, spatial perception. Dyspraxic people are impaired in their movement. For example, fine motor skills like handwriting or doing up buttons or the big gross motor skills like running, walking, riding a bike. One of the ways in which I am affected by balance coordination, spatial perception issues, for example, is crossing the road. I struggle to tell how far away the traffic is, how fast it's coming. And so yeah, you notice these kinds of physical issues among people with dyspraxia. And then there's cognitive difficulties as well, difficulty with processing speed, short term memory, that kind of thing. So you may see dyspraxic individuals as coming across as very scatty, disorganized. When I disclosed to my university I had dyspraxia, the occupational health nurse just laughed and said, you'll be another academic then, because of this stereotype of the nutty professor. And finally it can affect you socially too. Like some dyspraxic people will have difficulty interpreting nonverbal cues, body language, that kind of thing. Dyspraxic children who may not have had the same opportunities to join in with their peers, because so many of children's games are based around coordination sport, they can have social problems in consequence of that.

- Debbie: So as you're describing that, it also to me sounds like sensory processing disorder. Is there a relationship between them?
- Victoria: There's a relationship in that people with dyspraxia often do have sensory processing difficulties but not all dyspraxic people do. In my case, I very much do. I have hyper acute hearing, hyper acute sense of smell. So I really struggle with certain physical environments like a busy bus or something like that. But it isn't true for everyone with dyspraxia, although it is common.
- Debbie: Okay. And can you talk about, and you're in the UK and I know there are some similarities, and probably some differences, in the way that neuro differences are identified and labeled in the EU and in the UK and in the United States, but where does dyspraxia fall in terms of the diagnostic process? Is it a diagnosis in and of itself? Does it usually go hand in hand with something like autism or ADHD or other things?
- Victoria: In the UK it's a diagnosis in itself. It can be diagnosed by a range of professionals. In my case, as a teenager I saw a clinical psychologist, she assessed me and then she referred me to a neurologist at the hospital just because my difficulties were quite severe and she wanted to rule out that it wasn't anything degenerative. So I had a brain scan and so on just to check there were no other issues, and between them, the neurologist and the psychologist diagnosed dyspraxia. But you're right, the labels vary depending on the place. I know for example that people in the US who have my kind of pattern of difficulty often tend to get diagnosed with nonverbal learning difficulties, whereas in the UK we don't really have that label at all. Clinicians would just say dyspraxia. There are links with other conditions. There's quite a high rate of overlap with dyslexia, with ADHD and also with autism. There's some interesting research showing that dyspraxic adults who don't meet criteria for an autism diagnosis still have a higher rate of autistic traits than the general population. So, so yeah, there's some link there.
- Debbie: So interesting. So the way that I found you is I was doing research and stumbled upon a book that you wrote when you were a teenager. Can you tell us about that and why you embarked on that project?
- Victoria: Oh yes. Well, being diagnosed with dyspraxia was a major watershed moment in my life. I'd had a lot of trouble in school, which people are often surprised to hear about now because I have a PhD, I went to the University of Cambridge, got one of the highest marks in the country for my A level exams, my graduating exams. And yet in spite of this, when I was 13, I had nine months out of school because I had a breakdown, I just wasn't coping. Teachers believed I was either lazy or not trying or just not very capable. I'd been badly bullied on the basis of my differences. And it all got to the point where I just wasn't coping anymore. And at 15, I finally had that neuropsychological assessment and was diagnosed with dyspraxia, and it was like a light bulb going on in my head as I realized all the different things I struggled with were actually part of a pattern and I needed some help.

But when I, my reaction when I need help is to read. I've always been a voracious reader ever since the age of two. But when I turned to the bookshelves, everything I could find was written for parents or teachers of much younger children. There was almost nothing on teenagers and nothing was spoke directly to teenagers. So I sat down to write the missing book. I was part of a support group for teenagers with learning differences by this time. And so I got everybody together and we crowdsourced our best tips and strategies for getting through adolescence. I wrote them down and weaved them in with my own story and they became *Caged in Chaos*. And I'd always knew I intended to publish it, but it never actually hit me what that would mean until I got to Cambridge first day at university and there was a note in my pigeonhole from one of my new professors saying his two little nieces have got dyspraxia and he'd really enjoyed reading my book over the summer. And then it hit me; I'm going to be taught about 18th century literature by someone who has read all about my embarrassing first crush and the problem with inserting tampons. And so it was life changing in that way as well, like all this information about teenaged me is out there now and I'm never going to be able to take any of it back.

Debbie: That is super interesting. Yeah, I was wondering about that. I mean, I think 15 is a really rough age for any teenager, I think for young women in particular. And it sounds like when you wrote the book you were really taking ownership, you know. Was it part of your putting your stake in the ground, this is who I am, this is, there's nothing wrong with me? I mean I'm just curious to know a little bit more about your emotional process at that time.

Victoria: It felt wonderful. It was a way to say there's nothing wrong with me. Like right from the moment I got my diagnosis, I accepted that it was just a different way of thinking. I'd spent most of my life starting to think I was bad or broken or just not trying. I absorbed all the things that were said to me and the moment of diagnosis with a wonderful empathetic psychologist showed me that actually things were different. And although I believed that, it took me some time to start implementing the belief. And so writing the book was actually part of that process, part of that struggle for self acceptance. And I think you can see that when you read the book, but there were some pages where I'm very hopeful and upbeat and other pages where you can tell I'm really frustrated with myself. When the publishers released a new edition a years ago, they asked would I write an afterward as an adult just to give an adult's perspective. In the afterward, for this reason, I included some advice to my 16 year old self that I would say now if I was talking to her as she was then, just recognizing what an anxious person I used to be and how much better things became.

Debbie: I love that. I used to write books for teenagers, in many ways because I consider myself a recovering teenager, but I think that it can be so healing as well to reflect on and talk to that teenage part of ourselves and let them know that you're okay. So tell me a little bit more about what some of the challenges were that you were experiencing when you were younger. You talked about the bullying, you talked about struggling in school. What are some other things and I, and I'm asking in part because I'm hoping that parents might identify with some

of these things going on with their child if dyspraxia hasn't been on their radar so far, what kind of things they might keep an eye out for?

Victoria: The single hardest thing for me was the inability on the part of so many of my teachers to realize that just because someone is excellent at one thing, that doesn't mean that all their skills are going to be in the same league. When I was assessed and diagnosed with dyspraxia, I found that some of my cognitive skills, particularly around language, put me in the top 0.1% of the 16 year old population, whereas others put me in the bottom 0.3%. So, extreme gap. Because of these extreme gaps, which showed themselves in that I could read Jane Austin, at the age of 10 I'd read her complete works, and yet I couldn't finish a simple assignment in class, my handwriting was so slow.

Because of those extreme gaps, some teachers decided that I was being lazy, that someone as capable as me couldn't be incapable of finishing work. I just wasn't trying. I was just being insolent. I thought it was beneath me. And they used to say this to me and I'd been busting a gut. I'd been trying my best. And I remember sitting there trying to hold back the tears as these things were said to me. Other teachers conversely had the belief that I wasn't very bright. It depended which side they saw of me on whether my difficulties or my strengths were more in evidence in that lesson. And I have a particular humiliating memory of one French lesson where I'd worked really hard to produce an essay, I'd written about Marie Antoinette. The teacher called me to her at lunch and said, well, it's obvious you didn't write this by yourself, where did you copy it from? And every word was mine. And I was actually so indignant in that moment that I snapped back at her and I said, I did.

And something in my voice carried conviction and she, she looked at it again. And then she recognized that it really was mine, she talked to me about it. But experiences like that, that was a big challenge. Being constantly doubted, facing this belief that you can't have difficulties and academic gifts simultaneously, when you absolutely can. Other challenges came from peers, fitting in socially. Things got better as I got older. But high school can be quite a cruel place for a teenage girl who doesn't have the motor skills for makeup, for applying nail varnish, who isn't any good at hockey or the other games that sporty girls play, whose main interest is curled up reading books. And I've learned a great many of my social skills from books as well. I did have friends. I wasn't gregarious growing up. I was excluded from a lots of things in the playground. And so I used to copy the patterns of speech of characters I'd read in books, thinking that this would help me to make more friends or cope better at school. And of course, quoting from an early 19th century book when you are an early 21st century teenager doesn't exactly help matters. So yeah, I stuck out, I struggled in that way for a while.

Debbie: Well in your book you offer some practical tips that helped you get through adolescence. So can you share some of those? Perhaps listeners who have teenagers with dyspraxia will share this conversation with them, will want to get them your book *Caged in Chaos*. But what are a couple of strategies or tips for teenagers?

Victoria: That's a really big question because the book's subdivided into all domains of life. I've got tips for coping with school, tips for making friends, tips for dealing with bullies. So if I just pull a couple of major strategies, I'd say tips for self confidence. I'll give two tips for that because self confidence is the crux of everything. One thing I would say to parents of dyspraxic teenagers is don't be afraid, to show them that it's okay not to be perfect. Show them that you're not good at things. One of the most encouraging things a friend ever did for me was take me along to the choir where she sang. She was a terrible singer and she couldn't carry a tune in a bucket, but she loved it. She used to go there and she used to sing and nothing was stopping her.

And just seeing someone be confident like that and enjoying themselves like that helped me to start to understand that you don't have to be good at something to be able to do it. And I wish I'd understood that so much earlier on. It would've given me more confidence in sports and games and all the things I do now, but struggle with. For example, I love to swim, but I'm never going to be a great swimmer because of my coordination problems. But I would have had much more confidence in trying different sorts of swimming if I'd known this earlier on, that it's okay not to be perfect. And parents can be vital in sending that message to their teenagers, I think just by being open about their own weaknesses.

The second thing I would say is help teenagers to understand that being differently wired isn't something to be ashamed of. There are all kinds of minds. And sometimes I hear parents saying things like, oh, I don't want to call my child dyspraxic because I don't want to label him or I don't want her to get saddled with a label that might have negative effects for her future and so on. And I know they're speaking with good intentions, but it makes me so uncomfortable because you wouldn't say, oh, I don't want to label my child French or Japanese. You only say that if you think the thing is bad and it's not bad. And by avoiding the label you're suggesting that it is and there are alternative labels that teenagers will put in place for themselves. I used to get called retarded a lot. Very cruel word. So I internalized all those unkind labels for myself until I had a nicer one and an accurate one. So yeah, I would encourage parents to make sure their children don't grow up being ashamed of who they are and how their brain works.

Debbie: Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. So I'm just wondering, and I want to just switch gears into your work in schools in a moment, but you know, you mentioned some of the things that when you were first discussing some of the different areas that dyspraxia can affect people, you talked about your own challenges, even just crossing the street and those kinds of things. I'm just wondering what is, again, I'm sure there's no typical protocol for supporting and working on developing some of these skills, but what kind of support is available for kids with dyspraxia in terms of working on those kinds of awareness issues and other types of challenges that may arise?

Victoria: Well, when I was a teenager, I had access to occupational therapy. There was an occupational therapist who came to my school and she worked with me on

developing motor skills. So different exercises that she would do with me. And also we had practical skills groups for independent living. Like I used to go to the neuro rehab unit at a local hospital where they did cooking skills. And this was for people with any type of neurological disorder that might affect their ability to make food. And as I was 15, 16, and would be living independently hopefully in the near future, I wanted to learn these skills. So I had access to that. She provided me with some adaptive equipment. So when I went off to university, I took a bunch of kitchen supplies that are designed for people with coordination problems. Knives with handles that are perpendicular to the blade, jar openers, gadget that holds things still on the counter so you can chop it, all that kind of thing. So it was a cross between finding ways to mitigate my difficulties as they were then and helping me to develop new skills. Younger dyspraxic children can sometimes be referred for physiotherapy as well. I was told by my occupational therapist that the younger you are, the more impact physio and that kind of thing is going to have. For me, because I'd come along quite late, there was a limit to how much they could realistically change about how my body works.

Debbie: That makes sense. All right. Let's talk about the work that you do now. I know that you, you are in academia and I know that you work in a school. So I'm curious to know how, you know, your own learning differences have influenced the teacher that you are in working in special education.

Victoria: The main influence that it's had on me is it teaches me never to assume anything about any child and this is especially useful to me when I'm getting frustrated. Like if I have a child in front of me and I think, oh he could probably do this if he could, if he tried, he's just not bothering today, there is eight year old Vicky in the back of my brain going, stop. Remember when this was said about you? You can be wrong. And I think all teachers can learn to second guess themselves in that way and it's very important that we do. But I have that visceral reminder, it never lets me do it. Plus, in consequence of the social and communication difficulties I have, I've spent all my life knowing that humans are quite mysterious creatures and I'm not always going to understand them.

And I think this gives me a certain humility when I approach my students and it enables me to ask questions that might seem too obvious even to be asked but actually aren't obvious at all. And I think this helps me to build up a better rapport, a better relationship with my students. And they know my diagnosis too, and this helps. I don't share a great deal about my personal story with them. They've never read the book. They don't know that I've written a book for example. But sometimes very casually, I'll mention it. Like I had one 14 year old boy who's phobic of writing and he gets very disruptive when he has to sit down and write. He'll often refuse to do it. He'll often break things in the classroom. And in my first lesson with him, I showed him my own writing.

I did a writing task together and I also did some cutting out and tried to make something with a glue stick. And he watched me bumbling and fumbling being so slow with the pen and scissors and glue. And at the end he made some comment, and I just said, oh, I've got dyspraxia, so I'm afraid I'm a bit slow at these things. And then he just said, I've got that too. And I said, I know. And that was it. That was all we said. But he picked up a pen and he started writing something. And so

I think, again, it goes back to what I was saying before about not being afraid to show your own imperfections affects my teaching.

Debbie: So, because of your unique vantage point of being an educator and being the person you are, you know, the thing that comes up for me anytime I talk to parents is how do we support our kids in schools? And so many parents in my community, their kids are in mainstream schools or you know, they're really kind of butting up against a system that wasn't designed to support who their children are. I'm just wondering, can you solve the educational crisis? No, I'm just wondering if you have any, any ideas about what schools or teachers could do better? You know, you talked about never to assume. I think that's beautiful and I think that is such an important thing that all teachers could do better. Are there any other thoughts you have about some shifts that could help kids with dyspraxia and other learning differences?

Victoria: Yeah, it's a difficult one because to be honest, I think mainstream schools are actually designed for very few children, not just those with dyspraxia. You get the increasingly big class sizes and very competitive culture that's focused almost exclusively on the grades you get as opposed to what you're managing to learn. And it's getting more and more like that, which, which saddens me. The best way teachers can swim against that tide I think is partly to try and neutralize the competitiveness and try and focus, as far as possible, on what interests the students as opposed to what they need to do to get a particular score or pass a particular test. And this is really difficult for mainstream teachers because the curriculum is built so much around tests. And there are practical ways to do it, for example, like building a lesson into the weekly schedule in which students get a chance to present on something that interests them. And we do lots of presentations at my school.

Can be written, can be oral, can involve getting someone else to read out what you've prepared, any way of sharing that's comfortable. And it's all about the learning and the knowledge, and not necessarily about what it looks like or how perfect it is. Other things I would think of is really try hard to diffuse any competitiveness in the classroom, like comparing grades, that kind of thing. When I went to university for the first year, even, um, my professors didn't give me numerical feedback on my essays and it drove me absolutely mad just to get qualitative written feedback. You could do this better, this is quite good, but not to be able to match it to a grade. Obviously it's not practical for mainstream teachers to do that. But if they can try to shift the emphasis onto that qualitative feedback as opposed to on the number, I think it really helps, especially kids with any kind of special need.

And the final thing I would say is just accept that some children, well, all children, have things that they can't do. I think some teachers find it inspiring to foster this kind of, 'there's no such word as can't' mentality in their classes. And I remember really being really angry once, cause I read one of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books and there's this supposedly inspiring story about a teacher who gets students to write down all the things they can't do. Then she has a funeral for the 'I can'ts', makes a tombstone for 'I can't' and hangs the 'I can't' tombstone on the classroom wall. And then whenever a child says, I can't do this, she points to the

tombstone and says I can't is dead. That's the polar opposite of encouraging and inspiring. And I'd say to any teacher who thinks this is a good idea, I expect you to be dancing with the Royal Ballet Company in two weeks and I don't expect to hear, no, I can't because there's no such word as I can't. Put like that it seems ludicrous. Everyone's got things they can't do. And I think the liberating power of education is to help you accept your limitations as well as your strength. I think to feel really safe in finding their strengths dyspraxic kids need to also feel safe going up to the teacher's desk and say, I can't sharpen this pencil, I can't do this. Whatever it is. And teachers can play a big role in helping them to to say that.

Debbie: Thank you so much, I really appreciate you sharing that and really great things to think about. So before we say goodbye, I know that you're working on a new project, you're working on a new book. So can you tell us a little bit about that?

Victoria: Yes. It's a book about mental health needs in teenagers with learning differences such as dyspraxia. I started working on it because statistically these young people are far more likely than their peers to develop psychological problems. And it's not inevitable, it's a result of being square pegs in round holes. So it's going to be a practical manual on building up resilience and becoming more confident in yourself. Written primarily for teenagers just as *Caged in Chaos* was, but there'll be advice for teachers and parents in there too.

Debbie: That's so exciting. Do you have a timeline for that or where are you in the process?

Victoria: My editor was expecting it in January but time management can be a bit tricky for dyspraxic people, as I mentioned. So it wasn't January. I just remind myself that time isn't linear, so somewhere in the universe I'm on schedule. I hope to have the manuscript with them by September.

Debbie: Fantastic. Well, please keep us posted on that. It sounds like something that many of my listeners, including myself, will be very interested in. And listeners, the other book that Vicki talked about is her book *Caged in Chaos: A Dyspraxic Guide to Breaking Free*, and I will include links to that and Vicki's website on the show notes page for this episode. Vickie, is there anything else you want to share before we say goodbye? Any last thoughts?

Victoria: I think that's everything. Thank you, Debbie.

Debbie: Thank you so much. This has been really interesting and I appreciate your, again sharing your story, your perspective, and I also just love the work that you're doing in the world. It's, it's so inspiring for me to hear people doing this kind of work that supports our kids. So thank you so much.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- Victoria Biggs author website
- Victoria Biggs professional / academic website
- *Caged in Chaos: A Dyspraxic Guide to Breaking Free* by Victoria Biggs