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Spinning in My Head

What's good and smart about me? I have a good memory and can remember songs and what people say in movies. Animals love me because I'm not afraid, and they sense this. I'm good at playing the clarinet and the saxophone. And I can make anyone laugh with my voices and faces.

But I have trouble with other things. My mother and teachers call it a learning disability. This means I can't learn things as fast as other kids, and languages are harder.

When It Started

At the end of second grade, I could still only read the words "Henry," "pizza," and "the." My mom took the summer off from work to help me learn to read.

She made flash cards like the baseball cards I collected. The cards had sounds, funny sounds like "ing." We made silly words with them and real words, too. When I got frustrated, she would do the silly words until we both were laughing. We read three or four times a day...and ate a lot of ice cream!

In third grade I went to a tutor and began to read even faster. But things were still hard for me. The hardest thing was that people saw I had problems.

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It's tough when I see others succeeding, and I just can't do it as easily. It feels like there are too many things going on in my head — spinning around. Sometimes I can't calm them down to get the information I need.

Why I Get Frustrated

If I don't understand things right away, or if I feel I'm not on the same level as other kids, then I get frustrated. The frustration makes me feel I don't want to do it because it's stupid. I don't want people to talk to me or to help me. I just fall apart.

I like getting help from my classmates because they think more like I do. They don't try to make me special. They explain it and let it go. With teachers, if you don't understand it one way, they show it to you another way. That really makes it worse because I get more confused. I see too many things coming at me. Kids explain things in a regular way — over and over. That works for me.

I can play tennis really well, but team sports aren't good for me. I get angry at the ball hogs — the kids who think it's all about them. When I get frustrated and angry, I don't play well.

With tennis, it's just me. I can see what I'm doing wrong and find a way to change it because I'm on my own. When I'm playing tennis and I get frustrated, I can go some place in my head to overcome the frustration. But when I'm on a team, it's impossible for me to find that place.

I see that tennis helps in school because the more I play tennis and the harder it gets, the more I see I can work harder and do better the next time. If I make mistakes, I can still keep going.

How to Find the "Good Zone"

On a good day when I finish homework that's hard for me, I feel I can do everything. That's the "Good Zone" — when things fall into place and click one after another. Here are some things that help me get there:

- **Do homework soon after coming home.** If I wait and hold off, then I never do it.

- **Set a timer.** I set a timer when I practice clarinet because sometimes I lose track of time and don't know how long I've been playing. If I set a time limit, it helps me stay on track and know when I'm done.
- **Start with something I like and am good at.** When I feel successful, I can go on to homework that's harder. If I start to get frustrated with the hard stuff, I just keep pushing through. If I finish it, I give myself a reward. If I can't finish it, I try to not get down but say I'll do better next time.
- **I always have a friend I can call to ask for help or just to get the assignment straight.** Hopefully he'll call me for the same thing, to be more equal.
- **When I'm called on in class, I don't answer right away. I count to ten or breathe deeply before answering.** Otherwise I might just blurt out, "I DON'T KNOW!" But really if I took a moment, I'd have the answer.
- **If I need more time, I ask the person to explain again more slowly, but the same way as the first time.** I ask the person not to repeat a question but give me time to regroup and come up with an answer.
- **I find a place or subject I'm strong in and help others.** I know how it feels to need help. My Humanities teacher told my mom she didn't know what she'd do without me in class. She said I'm good at being patient with kids who have behavior problems. When my teacher told me this, it was the first time I ever had such a big compliment in school. I felt very useful and smart. People thought I was nice! People other than my family!

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What I Learned

I'm starting to get good grades in school now, but I want to get better ones. My older sister gets good grades, so sometimes I feel less bright. (I really wanted to say "dumb," but I know I'm not supposed to.)

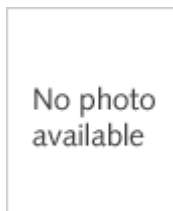
I see that my sister can't do some of the things I can do. She quit music and is sad she can't play tennis the way I do.

We help each other, too. We tease each other about things, like how she is so afraid of dogs. My sister takes my arm when we walk by a dog because we know it won't hurt her if I'm there. Then we laugh.

Now I read all the time. My mom and I read together, too. I learned to believe with her that I could do something I thought I couldn't do — like reading. She knew how to turn reading into a game. She also knows how to make me laugh when I'm ready to turn off.

In the future I hope to go to UCLA and play tennis. Sometimes I have dreams that I'm winning the U.S. Open. I tell my mom I need just one more minute in bed in the morning, so I can win the final point. We laugh.

About the Contributor(s)



Henry Sherwin is in the seventh grade at a public school in New York City. He has a Maine Coon cat named Zuzu whom he has trained to do jumping tricks. His goal is to make a lot of money at tennis so he can train Seeing Eye dogs and give them away.