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Kersten: Defeating dyslexia at home

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For years I dreaded this time of year: back-to-school time. For my elementary-school-aged daughter, it meant another year of teasing, frustration and a constant sense of defeat.

I first realized that something was wrong during her kindergarten year. Try as we might, with songs, games and repetition, she couldn't learn the alphabet. After first grade, my husband and I had her tested. She scored between the fifth and tenth percentiles in reading -- as if she'd never been to school.

In the classroom and on the playground, my daughter endured misery. She was always an outsider, feeling stupid. Often, her teachers didn't comprehend the nature of her difficulties, or thought she wasn't trying.

"Learning to read at school was like trying to run through mud," she says now. "You struggle so hard, but you never seem to get anywhere."

Learning disability

My daughter, now 20, has a learning disability. The umbrella term is dyslexia --- unusual difficulty with reading. But she also has difficulties with math and sequential memory. We had her in four schools over five years. Though we encountered several dedicated special-education teachers, we never found a school with a clear, coordinated plan for poor readers. Progress seemed to depend on the luck of the draw -- would she get an effective teacher or not? But a half-hour a week with a specialist made little difference anyway.

I used to wake up at 3:00 a.m. and gaze sadly out the window thinking, "She'll never read a novel; she'll never go to college."

At the end of fourth grade, I got a note from my daughter's teacher, who said she was "regressing." We were at a crossroads. With more failure, we could see an attitude of defeatism becoming a permanent mark on her character. Public and private schools seemed to offer only bits and pieces of what she needed. With time and options running out, we made the decision to teach her at home.

Sitting in my kitchen that July, I searched catalogues and the Internet, poring over sample curricula and rejecting faddish programs. I knew my daughter needed a systematic, step-by-step approach to reading instruction that would spell out the rules that most people just intuit.

A discovery

I found it in "Megawords," an eight-volume series from Educators Publishing

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Service. (I combined that program with other aids, such as the Dolch "sight word" list -- 220 high-frequency words, many of which can't be phonetically sounded out.) Each day, my daughter had contests with herself, trying to beat her time reading the Megawords word lists. Slowly she began to master the "decoding" skills she hadn't been able to learn piecemeal in school.

As time went on, I discovered that my initial instructional strategy -- just explaining things again in a louder voice -- didn't work. We needed to identify learning techniques that would act as keys to unlock her memory and unleash her abilities.

I discovered that my daughter had an excellent memory for pictures and spoken words. By sketching pictures that she could associate with facts or names, she could remember history and science lessons that would otherwise slip her mind. Rhyming and acting-out concepts also helped. She learned all the states and capitals perfectly after we composed rhyming sentences for each one.

Slowly I began to see how much my daughter was capable of. Teachers had often assumed that because she struggled with reading, she needed dumbed-down history, literature and science. We got challenging books such as "Little Women" on tape from the library, and studied King Arthur and Homer's "Iliad." She memorized Shakespeare poems and recited them to the rest of the family.

As defeatism faded, my daughter developed a new love of learning. Our mother-daughter bond deepened as we went over her accomplishments at the end of each day.

After three years at home, she had vaulted ahead and was ready to go back to school. We found a unique academic program that offered both special help and high standards. Tested again, she read at over the 90th percentile.

Though she still needs accommodations, she's now a college sophomore with a scholarship and a top grade-point average.

Home-schooling isn't for everyone. But all parents can make their home a powerful educational resource. Often, that means more than supervising homework or calling a teacher when difficulties arise. It can mean searching for books that fire a child's imagination, probing for techniques that make learning easier and crafting ways to make "math facts" fun rather than tedious.

Sometimes it takes the patience, persistence and love that only a parent can give to make a daughter bloom.

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