

Close X



Dynamic Duo: A Father and Daughter Who Share LD

Schwab Learning recently spoke with David Sharpe about his teenage daughter, Hayley, and the role he plays in her life. Both David and Hayley have learning disabilities (LD). David first contacted Schwab Learning to make us aware of the support group Hayley set up at her high school to help incoming freshman with LD learn effective self-advocacy skills. We soon realized that David is actively involved in Hayley's life and wanted to know more about his parenting philosophy and experiences. Like many parents, David is quick to discuss his daughter's achievements but is modest about his contribution to her success. We convinced him that his insights would benefit other parents — particularly fathers — who are also raising kids with LD. This is his story.

Words of Wisdom

We asked David what advice he'd like to share with other men whose kids have LD. Here is what he frequently tells other fathers:

"We men tend to want to 'fix' problems, but we can't fix or cure LD. What we can do is learn about LD and get our kids the help they need to succeed."

"If you watch your child stumble and fall at the playground, you'd naturally run over to help. If you watch your child struggling in school, you should intervene in the same caring manner. Don't ignore it and hope it will just go away."

Demystifying Learning Disabilities

Hayley has been identified with dyslexia, dyscalculia, and short-term memory issues. David has always believed strongly in demystifying LD for her. "We never hid Hayley's disabilities from her. From the time her LD was first identified in first grade, we told her she simply learned in a different way. We encouraged her to be aware of her LD but not ashamed of it."

David is a pro at delving into books and the Internet in search of research-based information that sheds light on his and his daughter's learning disabilities. He and Hayley are both intrigued by brain research that helps explain the physiology and dynamics of LD. He's grateful that scientific evidence is making learning disabilities, often called "invisible disabilities," more tangible in the eyes of the general public.

A Positive Perspective

David speaks passionately about his philosophy on living with learning disabilities. "Learning differences are something to be embraced and celebrated," he says. He and his wife have always emphasized this perspective with Hayley and her teachers and school administrators. As parents, they've always taught Hayley that the world needs and values people who learn and think differently, and they point to many successful people in history who probably had LD. While in elementary school, when Hayley was assigned to play the role of an historical figure she could relate to, she chose Thomas Edison, who is believed to have had LD.



Supporting Self-Advocacy

Understanding one's learning disability doesn't always insulate a child from the stigma and misconceptions held by others. Even when her LD had been explained to her, Hayley was self-conscious about it, especially when other kids teased her or asked why she had to go to a special classroom. How did David and his wife address her insecurities? David says, "Since the time Hayley was in first grade, we've taught her how to advocate for herself. She learned how to explain her disability, her needs, and her strengths to teachers and peers."

Self-advocacy doesn't mean making excuses; it means asking for what one needs to work around a disability and function well. As David points out, "The last thing most disabled people want is sympathy; what they want is information and support. An amputee is only disabled if he doesn't have the proper prosthetics."

Hayley's teachers and school administrators have been supportive of her special needs. Many other adults, however, subscribe to some harmful misconceptions about LD. "I get really angry about people's ignorance when it comes to learning disabilities," David admits, "especially those who think LD stands for 'lazy and dumb.'" As Hayley becomes a young adult, she'll be equipped to deal with such views because she has a clear understanding of what her disabilities are and can articulate that to others.

“ The last thing most disabled people want is sympathy; what they want is information and support. ”

In addition, David has always engaged Hayley in healthy debates to help her learn to "think outside the box," develop her ability to reason, and form her own convictions. He recalls taking five-year-old Hayley to a city hall hearing on the closure of several community recreation programs. "She stood on a chair and listed all the reasons why those programs should continue," he chuckles, "She brought down the house."

Harmony at Home

David admits that his wife, who doesn't have LD, is a tougher disciplinarian than he is — and that he sometimes has to act as a buffer between mother and daughter. While David holds Hayley accountable for her homework and coaches her on day-to-day responsibilities, he empathizes with her challenges, having struggled with learning all his life.

When asked if having different parenting styles causes marital conflict, Dave is quick to explain that he and his wife see their roles as complementary, providing Hayley with a balance of structure and support. While David and his wife don't always see eye to eye, they stand united on the most important values and decisions.

David also encourages other fathers to spend time now to nurture their marriages. "After all," he points out, "when your kids are grown and gone, you don't want to be a stranger to your spouse."

Involvement and Influence

From the time Hayley was in preschool, David has been actively involved in her education and extra-curricular activities. Whether it's an IEP (Individualized Education Program) meeting or a disabled students rally, David is usually on the scene. Many fathers complain they don't have time to be involved. David's reply to them is clear: "Put your child first. Get involved. Just do it!"

David's work schedule is somewhat flexible; he has every other Friday off, and he usually devotes that time to his family and the school. He's a familiar face at Hayley's school because he's an active volunteer. He helps repair the facilities and does set construction for high school drama productions. It's his way of giving back to the school community that has supported his daughter.

We asked Dave to name a high point — a seminal event — in his support of Hayley. With a broad smile, he told us how he took Hayley and several other teens with LD to the governor's office in Sacramento where the group staged a peaceful protest against state legislation that penalizes kids with LD taking state-mandated tests. Hayley took a stand and led the protest, but it was David behind the wheel who quietly maneuvered the group to the steps of the governor's office.

About the Contributor(s)

David Sharpe and his teenage daughter both have LD. David is artistic and learns best in a creative, hands-on environment. He has a college degree in art and enjoys pottery and glass blowing. He works as a municipal building inspector in the San Francisco Bay Area.



In her role as Writer/Editor for Schwab Learning, **Kristin Stanberry** provides information, insight, strategies, and support for parents whose children have LD and AD/HD. She combines a professional background developing consumer health and wellness publications with her personal experience of coaching family members with learning and behavior problems.

© 2004 Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation Created: 06/10/2004