

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #197: Dyslexia at School: How to Access Reading Support for your child with ADHD

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Katie: Hi there. We are The Childhood Collective, and we have helped thousands of overwhelmed parents find joy and confidence in raising their child with ADHD. I'm Katie, a speech language pathologist.

Lori: And I'm Lori.

Mallory: And I'm Mallory. And we're both child psychologists.

Lori: As busy mamas ourselves, we are on a mission to support ADHD parents on this beautiful and chaotic parenting journey.

Mallory: If you are looking for honest ADHD parenting stories, a dose of empathy with a side of humor and practical tools, you are in the right place.

Katie: Let's help your family shine with ADHD.

Mallory: Today we are diving into an important topic that so many parents have questions about, which is the identification of reading difficulties and how to ensure children get the support they need in school.

Lori: And our guest today is Michelle Henderson, a structured literacy dyslexia specialist. She's a parent coach and she's an advocate who helps parents navigate the complex world of reading challenges. Michelle, welcome to the podcast.

Michelle: I am so delighted to be here. I feel so grateful for all of your work and just the support as we all need to support these children in our lives.

Mallory: Yeah, well, we really appreciate you taking the time today to talk about this important topic. What led you kind of to the field of dyslexia? How did you end up here as, a specialist helping parents?

Michelle: Yeah, that's a great question. And actually, it's kind of my big, you know, life story because I had been an early, kind of early educator for 20 years and I did a lot of preparing kids before they went to school, my own kids and other kids that I worked with. And I had the assumption that I was, you know, sending kids off, my kids off to, and the kids that I worked with, to reading specialists at school. And then I, my youngest son went to kindergarten and I knew that he was struggling, but I guess I don't think I understood how much he was struggling. And it was really his experience and everything that we went through with him, he was ultimately diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD inattentive that kind of motivated me to go back to grad school and become a reading specialist and a dyslexia practitioner and studied reading science to really understand how to advocate for my son and now how to advocate and help other families who are going through similar, challenges and trying to jump those hurdles to help their children.

Mallory: I love that. I love speaking with professionals whose kind of career journey was sparked by a personal need. Like that Fire is lit in your own home and you want this information to help your own kid. Now you're helping more families. I love that.

Michelle: Yeah. You know, I think when it becomes personal, that passion becomes really deep and you can also relate to the families that you work with on a different level. And I really, I know on a personal level how hard it is to see your child struggling to learn how to read and not be able to access really school and how it affects them socially and really in every aspect of their lives. And that's heartbreaking. And so, I come to my, you know, work with other families with that feeling and kind of hope for other families to succeed and find that path, you know, that path to success on their journey.

Lori: Yeah. And it's such a challenging journey. And I know we'll talk more about that, for many families and I'm sure it was for yourself. So, the personal input that you have about

your specific journey and your professional experience, it's very unique and extremely helpful for families.

Michelle: It was incredibly challenging for us. And that's actually the exact reason why I do what I do now. Because the thing I want more than anything is for parents to feel hope. Because there is so much reason to have hope. When I first started this journey, I felt very alone and I didn't know where to go for help. I didn't know what to ask. I didn't know how to advocate for my son. And that is a really hopeless, overwhelming, heartbreaking feeling when you're seeing your child struggle so much. But if there's one thing that your listeners remember from this episode, it's that there is hope. And we actually really have so many decades of research showing how kids learn to read and how to help struggling readers. It's just a matter of learning it and finding, you know, those who can support you. But there's just so much hope.

Mallory: Well, I love that and yeah, I really want our listeners to hear that. So, let's get them that information, let's dive into it like what else they need to hear, what they need to know to find that hope and feel that success. So, I know that there's lots of parents who feel stuck between having their child assessed for reading difficulties, reading struggles, and then actually that translating to support at school. So, what are some of the biggest challenges that you see parents facing in this process between having their child assessed and then actually getting help at school?

Michelle: Well, some of the challenges are this sometimes, unfortunately, teachers haven't been trained in how to support dyslexic learners. And I will say, as I'm a dyslexia specialist, but I'm a structured literacy specialist as well. And the way that we teach reading to a dyslexic child is beneficial for all children. It's not like we have to teach reading in a different way and then we have to teach, you know, typically developing kids in a different way. In fact, you know, when I say structured literacy, that's kind of the gold standard for the type of literacy instruction. But it's necessary, it's crucial for a dyslexic learner, but it's beneficial for all. Unfortunately, a lot of our nation's kind of pre-service teacher training programs haven't been training teachers in those methods. Now that's starting to change slowly but surely. But that's definitely a challenge. And I will say this, when I say, you know, some teachers aren't trained in dyslexia or structured literacy, that's not a dig on our hardworking teachers at all because teachers are working tirelessly to do everything they can. I know that they want our

children to succeed and sometimes I feel like we've given them an impossible mission because they might not have the training that they need. They are understaffed, they're under resourced, they're under supported. I guess right there, that's kind of a list of challenges that we're, we're facing, right?

Lori: It's a systemic issue; it's not a teacher issue. And we do have so many teachers that listen to our podcast, which I, we get emails all the time from teachers wanting support. And I think it's amazing because they're reaching out saying I'm, I'm really having a hard time and I want to better be a better teacher to this child with ADHD or whatever. Like they really want to do well for these kids and are like finding the information on their own, which I think is just absolutely amazing. But it is a systemic issue. And it's frustrating, we see the same thing with ADHD. All the things that we teach are beneficial for neurotypical kids. You know, it's, it again, it's essential for a child with ADHD to like do a lot of the things that we teach, but it's beneficial for all kids. And it is frustrating because it is the reading interventions that you provide for dyslexia, why can't we just do that for all children? It would make so much sense.

Michelle: Well, honestly that's my goal is to advocate for really effective reading instruction in schools that is going to help everybody.

Lori: When you say structured literacy can you give us a little bit of a definition so that, our listeners like, have an idea of what you're talking about?

Michelle: You bet. So structured literacy is really characterized by a systematic approach that's sequential, that's cumulative, and that's explicitly taught using multi-sensory methods. So multi-sensory means that the instruction is using visual, auditory and tactile pathways simultaneously. And really what that's doing, and it's developing more opportunities or kind of connections in the brain to help retrieval of that information that they're learning. So, when I work with students, and you know, we're trying to learn a new sound or something, we are tracing the letter and saying the sound, seeing us trace it, feeling it and hearing it all the same time. And so often I will, you know, ask a student to recall what we learned last time or something, and they can't remember right off and we'll try and trace it or something and all of a sudden it clicks because they're using a different, you know, way to retrieve that information. So, using that multi-sensory approach is really helpful as well.

Lori: Okay, perfect. Thank you so much for that. And let's kind of go to the beginning of the process. So, what should a parent do if maybe the teacher is bringing up concern or the parent has concerns about their child's reading, and the teacher kind of responses let's just do more of it at home. But you're seeing like, really significant struggle in that area. What would you tell a parent to do at that point?

Michelle: Yeah, and I think that is very common to hear, for parents to hear, you know, your child is struggling, or for a parent to go to the teacher and say, my child is struggling. And the teacher to say something like, well, you should, you really need to read more to your child at home. Now, reading to our kids is so important, and it builds so many necessary components that do impact, you know, reading skill like vocabulary and background knowledge. But reading to our children does not teach them how to read. Let me give you a little analogy so that you can kind of think about this in a different way. Imagine if you wanted your child to learn how to play the piano and you sent them to a piano teacher, and the piano teacher played Mozart for them, and they listened to Mozart, and then they came home and went back and listened to some more Mozart. Now, it's almost silly. And when I share that analogy, people usually giggle because it seems so obvious, right. Is listening to Mozart a bad thing? Absolutely not. And you can learn so much about rhythm and you know, voicings on the piano and so many musical skills. But it's not going to teach them how to play the piano. They need to actually be taught explicitly and then practice. And that's the exact same thing with reading and learning how to read and spell and write. Yes, read to our kids, that's building kind of half of the equation that listening comprehension, which is crucial. We need that understanding of language kind of acting as velcro so that when we do learn word recognition and we can decode those words, we have something to stick it to, right. If you don't know what a table is, when you learn how to decode the word table, you still don't have that understanding or that comprehension, which is the ultimate goal. So yes, read to your kids. But if you get told by the teacher to just read more to your child as if that's going to solve their challenges in word recognition and be able to like actually decode, that's a red flag in my book. And I would say that you would need to approach that with a conversation to in a respectful way talk to the teacher about your concerns with doing more than just reading. Maybe express, you know, we do read, we read every day and now my concern is teaching my child about word recognition. My child can't sound out the, you know, letters, doesn't understand what the sounds are, it doesn't, isn't able to blend those sounds together or whatever it might be. And if the teacher, you know, says anything further like, well, let's just

wait and see, that's really a red flag too because the last thing you want to do is wait and see. That's actually one of the reasons why I developed my parent teacher conference guide and outlined questions to, for parents to ask themselves and for like before they meet with the teacher so they feel like they have an understanding. And then you know, a few pages of questions to ask the teacher so that you can get on the same page and so you know what is actually important.

Lori: Yeah. And we'll link that guide in the show notes just for everyone who's listening, so you can check that out. And we always talk about, and we've had other podcasts talking about initiating the process of an evaluation. And that's sort of the, the first place, you know, putting it in writing, asking for an evaluation. Sometimes the school will want to do interventions beforehand, right. So sometimes they might say, yeah, we're gonna do some like small group reading instruction that's a little bit more targeted to see how they progress with that. So sometimes that's kind of the first step, but again if you have concerns, you can always put it in writing and request the evaluation which then helps them better understand where your child's reading is at and what their needs are.

Michelle: Absolutely. And I would add to that, one of the things to make sure you have. Like, and that was the experience I had when I was like, oh, you know, my child's really struggling and they're like, okay, let's see how he responds to this intervention, right. You might, parents might hear them talking about RTI or MTSS and that's that let's see what we can do before we go into the evaluation and/or special education process. But what I didn't understand back then was what, how are they determining if he's making progress or where he's at and how do we know if this intervention is actually helping? Right., so that's another thing that I kind of outline in my guide, but I'll just mention it quickly here is this term oral reading fluency or ORF for short, which helps because it's standardized and it's a quick measure. And what that does is it tells you where is your child performing right now in words correctly read per minute and accuracy of those words that were attempted. And then also there's a retell or comprehension component where you can say, did they actually understand what they did read? And those measures take, you know, two minutes or less to administer. And if you do that at the beginning of the intervention or the beginning of RTI, then you can also look at that at the end so that you can know did my child actually respond well to this intervention or not? And not feel like you're just kind of going by what this school says and you don't really know.

Lori: Yeah. And I think a lot of schools like in Arizona, a lot of them now give something like Dibbles, which looks at fluency, accuracy. And I would say in my experience like testing kids, that's a pretty good indicator of how they're doing. The issue I see is that many parents will have kids who have low Dibble scores for years and years and nothing happens. And that's where I think a parent has to kind of say at some point like okay, like these are still low, what are we doing? Like we need, we need to move on to the next step. Because a lot of times that just doesn't get initiated by the teacher.

Mallory: In that case, sometimes those kids are getting pull out instruction, small group reading instruction, but perhaps it's not evidence-based structured literacy.

Lori: Exactly.

Mallory: And so, parents feel good, okay, great, my kids getting pulled out for a small group. But then when you look at those Dibbles scores, those probes and there's not progress being made, we need to ask questions. Why isn't progress being made?

Lori: Yep.

Michelle: So often the teachers that I've worked with and the families that I work with have communicated with more often than not, the teachers are very receptive and appreciative of when parents reach out to them and say, hey, these are my concerns, let's work on this together, let's be a team. Because teachers need our help. Teachers need that support from home. And on the flip side, parents need to understand what's going on because in my opinion, literacy is just too important to leave to chance. And we just can't, I don't think we can assume that everything that our child needs is happening at school.

Mallory: So, you've explained what structured literacy is and we've established that kids with dyslexia or kids struggling with reading, maybe they haven't even been identified with dyslexia, might be getting pull out reading support, but that doesn't necessarily mean it is structured literacy. Is this something that some schools do provide or is this so specific that parents have to go get the help of a tutor? Or this is something that's going to happen outside of school. Like what do parents do to get their child structured literacy?

Michelle: Yeah, that's a great question and it's not an easy answer. The easy answer is, well, it depends, but that's not really going to be very helpful, right. So, some schools are using a structured literacy curriculum and many are not. So let me also tell you this kind of the opposite of structured literacy is called balanced literacy or whole language. Balanced literacy sounds pretty good, doesn't it?

Mallory: I love the word balance. Sounds great.

Michelle: I love balance.

Mallory: I strive for balance in life.

Michelle: And sadly, it's not. It's not. And it kind of functions in the myth or the misunderstanding that reading comes naturally and that if you just kind of, you know, read enough to kids and give them a really print rich environment that they're going to eventually learn how to read and if you just expose them to good literature, etc. And then the whole language approach and balance literacy kind of go hand in hand. Balanced literacy kind of was born out of whole language. There were people like, oh, this isn't work and the research is saying it's not. They're like, okay, well we'll add a little sprinkling of phonics in there and make it more balanced, right. Phonics is very important, but it's not the only component that's important or necessary in a structured literacy approach. But a sprinkling of phonics is not systematic, cumulative, sequential, and that's really what is necessary. You just, you don't take anything by chance and you make sure you are teaching exactly what you want them to know.

Lori: So are there certain programs or approaches that are structured literacy programs that a parent can like ask their school, do you do these? Like, is this something we can try? Like, what would you recommend to a parent? Let's say they really need to get it done through the school. Like, how do they do that?

Michelle: Right. Something that maybe people have heard of is the Orton Gillingham approach. That is kind of the gold standard when it comes to, you know, reading intervention. And it was originally intended for use with individuals who have difficulty with reading and writing associated with dyslexia. But really what they've discovered over time is that it is beneficial for all kids. And again, Orton Gillingham, the approach is not a specific program

or curriculum, but it's an approach that really, is tailored to student's needs. It's again going to be that systematic, cumulative, multi-sensory and then the instruction is also diagnostic and it's personalized. It includes phonemic awareness, which is sound awareness. So, is it possible to find that at school, in schools? Yes. Is it always likely? No. But another thing that can happen is when a parent is really empowered and knows what to ask for, they can get their kids help in school. So, one of the things I do is work as a parent coach to teach that very thing. Parents can ask for certain interventions and they can request. Maybe ask their school is there anybody at the school that is trained in Orton Gillingham? Or is there anybody who is trained in a structured literacy approach? Or they might even say, do you employ, you know, the principles of reading science? And all those things would make a teacher and/or an administrator sit up and say, oh, well, this person kind of knows what they're talking about.

Lori: Yeah, no, that is so helpful. And I think what I have seen in the schools, collecting data when you start, because you know, the schools don't have to provide a specific intervention, right. But if your child is not progressing in their IEP goals adequately and you're showing data and you have data that's being collected that's showing that, that's when you can start to say, okay, what, what we are offering them here is not adequate. And so, I have seen schools at that point, when there's enough data, you can get private tutoring and things like that paid for that is focused on dyslexia that the school district is paying for if your child is not making progress. But that's why it's really essential to be collecting that data, to kind of show if they are making progress, they need something more and something more tailored to their specific needs.

Michelle: Absolutely. And again, why it's so important for parents to be part of that team where they feel really empowered and know what type of monitoring is happening and how frequently it's happening. You know, the IDEA law, the special education law specifies that we are, the purpose of special education and these IEP goals is to prepare students for future education and independent living. Now if they're not making progress in their IEP goals, they're not being prepared for future education because they're not even able to access what they're receiving right now. And you really have to look long term at their trajectory because we're typically talking about kids that are in elementary school and they've got so much ahead of them. And then ultimately, you're just looking at can my child function in society when they grow up and graduate from high school, there's so much more. If they can't read well, we live in the information age, we can't really access information if we can't read well.

Mallory: So, this is kind of thinking about even kids that already have an IEP and maybe aren't making progress towards their goals. What about those families that are just at the very beginning of the process? So, let's say parents, they're beginning this process of advocating for their child, they're concerned about their child's reading, but they're just not even sure where to start. What would you recommend?

Michelle: Yeah, I would start with a conversation with their teacher. And sit down with the teacher and say, these are my concerns, this is what I'm seeing at home, what are you seeing at school? And then like we've discussed in the past, and I think you guys talk about this a lot, it's really important if you have those in person conversations to then go home and sit down and write an email and that way you're putting it in writing. Say, you know, I really appreciate you taking the time to sit down and have this discussion about my child's progress and reading. These were my concerns, these are the concerns that you shared, and this was our plan. X, Y and Z. We're gonna see over the next three to four weeks how things go, do we see any improvement? And then decide what next steps to take from there. You need to have those in writing so that we can create a timeline. So, you know, when did we start talking about these concerns and how have things progressed? Because it's so important when you are then later trying to get additional services or special education to say, hey, we started talking on this date, these were my concerns, these were the teachers to concerns and this and we're still struggling with those concerns this many months later or heaven forbid, this many years later.

Mallory: And then you can look back and say like, these are all the different things we've tried along the way as well and how those went and data that was gathered. So yeah, document, document, document. And like you've highlighted, work with your child's teacher. Give them the benefit of the doubt that they want your child to succeed and they want to do right by your child, right. So, work with them, bring up your concerns and they can help you kind of move forward.

Michelle: Absolutely. Because teachers don't go into teaching to make millions. We all know this. You know, they go into teaching because they care and because they're passionate about it and they really want our kids to succeed. But they also need our help. They need our help. There are, you know, our advocacy and our information about what's going on with our child

at home because it creates a bigger picture, a fuller understanding of really how a child is performing and excelling or not excelling.

Lori: Okay. So, I do want to circle back on talking a little bit more about that structured literacy. And let's say you suspect your child that has dyslexia or maybe somebody listening already has a child with dyslexia, but they're not making adequate progress. You know, we understand kind of what that curriculum will look like now, but what is the intensity of that? Like, does that need to be done one-on-one? Should that be done in a small group? Like if parents are looking at doing that privately, like, are they having to do intervention every day? How long should it be for our kids to really make progress?

Michelle: That's a great question. So, when a kid is really struggling, the intensity will depend on how far behind they are and really what grade level. If they're older and they're behind many years, then it's going to be more frequent and more intense. If a child can receive intervention at school every day in their reading block and then, but let's say they have been receiving that and they're still struggling, then they might also in addition to that need some private tutoring. And private tutoring, when I work with students privately, I work with students at least two times a week. And some if they're really behind, I will work with them three times a week. So, you want to kind of have a day break in between usually, but any less than two times a week, it's just too long in between the intervention sessions for them to really progress. So, I know for my own son personally he started receiving special education and his we were really blessed because his SPED teacher was trained in the Orton Gillingham approach. And so, he was doing that, you know, five days a week during their literacy block. But he was, and he started to make progress but it was very slow. And because I was very concerned because he was getting older, I realized, okay, he needs even more additional support. And that's when we started private tutoring with him, you know, a few times a week after school. And when we hit it really hard like that, once we incorporated that as well, he started making leaps and bounds. I will say as a slight aside, but also involved with this question specifically is that my son had dyslexia and ADHD inattentive. And I, it really wasn't until we figured out his ADHD inattentive that we were able to then help him make progress with his reading. It was a bit of a perfect storm for him to have these struggles with reading and writing and spelling, but then also not be able to focus and have those executive functioning skills. And so, I know that medicating children with ADHD is a very personal choice and it really just depends on the situation and the child and the family. But

for us personally it was really necessary for my son to get his medication and be able to then focus on the evidence-based instruction and then be able to make progress. And until we did that, he didn't start making leaps and bounds. Once we did it was incredible because now he could finally focus. I will say, I was nervous. I was a little bit nervous about that. I think a lot of parents are, but for us it made all the difference.

Lori: Yeah, and I think that that was one of our other questions was how does the ADHD impact the dyslexia? And I think even from the research it's going to be harder and it makes sense for them to progress if the ADHD piece isn't treated. And again, there's ways to address that through behavioral interventions, there's ways to address that with medication. But again, sometimes that progress can be slower, if the ADHD piece is not, is not being addressed with the tutoring, right. And I think sometimes too for parents when they're making that decision about medication, that's definitely something we consider is like when you're doing a pros and cons list, if academics are really low and they really do need to be able to focus during that intervention to make progress, that's something that parents can kind of consider.

Mallory: So, Michelle, you offer some amazing free resources for parents. One of those you've already mentioned, your free parent teacher conference guide, we'll link that in the show notes. You also offer, a free 20-minute parent consultation. Do you want to just put a couple more words to that so families know what that is and if they're interested?

Michelle: Yeah, absolutely. I love being able to chat with families and talk about maybe their top three concerns and where I can help them. And so, I offer free consultations. You can contact me, through my website, which is michellehendersonliteracy.com or you can always find me on Instagram, which is, @all.kids.can. And then also on my website you can find my free parent teacher conference guide. Everything I do is about advocating for parents to help their child on their child's literacy journey, because literacy is just too important to leave to chance.

Lori: I love that. Thank you so, so much for coming on. This is really helpful.

Michelle: Thank you so much. It's been a delight to talk with both of you and thanks again for your awesome content and I just love women supporting women and getting out there and helping these kids really be the best they can be.

Mallory: Thank you so much, Michelle.

Katie: Thanks for listening to Shining with ADHD by your hosts, Lori, Katie, and Mallory of The Childhood Collective.

Mallory: If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review and hit subscribe so you can be the first to know when a new episode airs.

Lori: If you are looking for links and resources mentioned in this episode, you can always find those in the show notes. See you next time!