

# "We're Not Dumb"

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(Published in the December 2005 Canadian Edition of Readers Digest pp 93-96)



IMAGINE that when you read the word *imagine*, instead of seeing *imagine*, you saw "imgne." And think what would happen if when you were asked to add  $3 + 3 + 3$ , you saw  $33 + 3$ . How do you think you would learn to read or perform simple tasks of arithmetic?

I lived with this reality for at least 12 years, from the time I entered kindergarten until just before I graduated from high school. As a result, until I was 18, I could hardly read. When I looked at sentences such as the one you are reading now, this is what I saw:

*Untl I ws eiten I culd hard read. When I look at sentcs like the on you are readin now thi is wha I saw.*



**Things only began to change** when I was 16, after our family doctor's wife, a speech therapist in High River, Alta., heard about a test for people with learning disabilities. Since the description of the problems the test identified sounded like what I was facing, she suggested I visit a psychologist in Calgary who had recently begun using the test.

I went without any real hope. After extensive testing, the psychologist identified a slight problem with my vision that had not shown up on normal eye tests. Instead of moving in a steady manner, my eyes moved in small, almost undetectable, jumps. This meant that while I could read the letters on a static eye test without any difficulty, I could not read even simple sentences-let alone a book-because my eyes jumped over letters and words as they moved across a page.

No wonder I always got the wrong answer when doing mathematics! Yet when I did mental arithmetic, in response to spoken instructions, I could give the right answer. I knew  $2 + 2 = 4$  and  $12 \times 12 = 144$  and could easily memorize the multiplication table. However, as soon as I had to write out something on paper or read it in a book, everything was different.

What made matters worse was that, when teachers or my parents tried to help, they did not believe I failed to see letters and numbers correctly. Rather, they thought I was being lazy or allowing myself to get distracted. So what did I do in response to this situation? I did what every sensible person tries to do: As much as possible, I avoided situations that exposed my weaknesses and tried to bluff whenever confronted with the need to read.

One way to do this was to be well informed. So when my teachers discussed things in social studies, or any class involving a verbal discussion, I always knew more than anyone else because I'd become a radio freak. Radio provided me with endless information in a form I could understand.

Like most learning disabled kids, I also busied myself with all sorts of practical tasks. I joined Junior Achievement, which I loved. In my first year, I won third prize for my age group in the annual essay competition. This triumph quickly turned to disappointment as, although my school was informed I had won the prize, and the principal and vice-principal were invited to the ceremony, neither turned up. Nor did they congratulate me publicly. What's more, most people did not believe me. How could a dumb kid win an essay prize?

The answer was easy: I had a good idea and I worked and reworked the essay with the help of a home computer. This was possible because my parents were academics and we had one of the first home computers in our neighbourhood. Then my father helped me correct any remaining mistakes in my grammar and spelling. Therefore, it all turned out very well. But nobody in the school, apart from one kind teacher who worked with learning disabled kids, took any notice.

**The following year** I was determined to win first prize, so I worked hard on an essay about Les Hewitt, a neighbour who ran an organization called Achievers Canada. I admired Hewitt, and he encouraged me by allowing me to attend the meetings of his organization once a month as part of my school activities. These meetings brought in speakers from all over North America to talk about sales, the economy and other topics of interest to business people. The subject of the competition that year was, "The business person I admire the most and why."

Once again my dad let me use his computer. This time, to avoid questions about my work, I added a note explaining that the essay was written on a home computer because I had a learning disability.

When the competition results came out, I was told my essay was prize-worthy. But the judges slammed it-not because it was a bad essay but because of the note. One judge wrote in her comments that she did "a great deal of work with disabled children and I doubt many of them would add a note like Jeremy's." She added, "Lots of kids have problems, but I don't think they should be used as an excuse."

This assessment really shocked me. Instead of winning first prize, I came in fourth and did not get a prize at all. My attempt to prove to the school and everyone around that I really could write an essay, given the right conditions, backfired. I could have cried. In fact, I did.

**I did eye exercises** to stop their skipping movement, and my reading and academic skills continue to improve. Nevertheless, I am still struggling to complete my Bachelor of Arts even though I am now 30. As one might expect, in terms of writing

and reading, I am about ten years behind my biological age and I lack confidence whenever I read a difficult passage.

And I am not alone. The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) estimates that ten percent of Canadians, that's three million people, suffer from a learning disorder, which it defines as "a disorder that affects a person's ability to either interpret what they see and hear or to link information from different parts of the brain. Although the individual with a learning disability has an average or above-average IQ, the disability becomes evident in both academic and social situations."

A 2001 Statistics Canada report involving schools across the country found that an average of eight percent of children in schools have learning disabilities. What is worse, an American summit on learning disabilities concluded that 35 percent of students identified with learning disabilities drop out of high school-twice as many as those who drop out because of other kinds of disability.

In 1992 the Conference Board of Canada estimated that people who had dropped out of high school in 1989 cost the government over \$1.7 billion dollars in lost taxes. The economic costs of people dropping out of high school because of learning disabilities are enormous and a constant drag on the Canadian taxpayer.

The situation is far different in Britain, For example, when the daughter of a friend was nine years old she was diagnosed as severely dyslexic. Once her parents paid for the necessary tests to make the diagnosis, and the school was notified she had a disability, her teachers took it seriously. They made accommodations such as giving her oral exams and allowing her to use voice-dictation software.

If you check almost any university calendar in North America, you will find that provisions for the learning disabled exist. But while extra time for writing exams is common, professors are not as willing to accommodate oral exams, crucial for those with disabilities that hamper reading and written comprehension.

At issue is society's lack of knowledge about learning disabilities. While LDAC has spent four years airing radio ads to inform the public and help the affected, the campaign reaches only an estimated one million listeners. Many learning disabled people remain years behind their peers on their career path: It often takes longer for us to complete tasks, but with a supportive working environment and the right - not necessarily expensive - technological tools, we catch up fast.

The greatest need is for society to wake up to the reality of learning disabilities and the fact that some learning disabilities, like mine, are rooted in small but significant physical problems. Others, of a neurological nature, can be compensated for with the proper diagnosis and aids. By raising awareness, we will be able to utilize the full potential of learning disabled people, saving many from years of ongoing agony and self-doubt because they are labelled "dumb" in school.