

ON THE WATERBED



The Journey from Denial to Acceptance

Parenting a child with learning disabilities is laden with fluctuating highs and lows that contribute to numerous joys and challenges. According to Rick Lavoie, well known LD author and lecturer, the image of a waterbed is the perfect metaphor for the impact and instability that LD has on the family. "If one person on the bed shifts, everyone feels it. If one member of the family has a learning disability, it affects everyone". No one escapes the ripple effects that are created.

Once parents are informed that their child has a learning disability, the journey from denial to acceptance begins and that water bed remains in constant motion.

Research by Eleanor West, out of the University of Virginia, found that parental reaction to the diagnosis of a learning disability in their child is more severe and profound than any other disability. The reason is that a learning disability is invisible and permanent, and one can only learn to cope. Learning disabilities become more obvious in grade 2 or 3, and most parents don't see it coming.

A mourning process follows the diagnosis with stages that are distinct, yet unpredictable. It begins with denial, ends with acceptance and has no set order in-between, as parents bounce back and forth for various reasons. There is also no way to predict the order in which parents will go through this process that is described as follows:

DENIAL

Initially, the only way to deal with the problem, is to deny there is one. Parents say, "That can't be true." "There's nothing wrong with my child." "He only needs more time, more understanding, a better teacher and a better school." "That's the way I was."

Then parents bounce around the following stages:

BARGAINING

This is part of denial - making a deal. "We'll move, change schools, hire a tutor."

BLAME

Parents begin to blame others. "It's your fault", the teacher's fault, she can't teach", "They should have caught it earlier", "You baby him, spoil her, don't make him take responsibility." "We never had anything like this on my side of the family."

MOURNING

Adjustment of expectations and reflecting on what might have been.

FEAR

Parental feelings of powerlessness- "Maybe it's worse than they say. " "What are they not telling us?" "Is it a progressive disease?" "Will she ever be able to go to university, marry, have children, hold down a job, live on her own?" Fathers especially are fixers by nature, and feel powerless to fix this.

ANGER

LD families are families in crisis, as their lives have just been changed. They are going to be angry and anger is aimed at the professional, not the child. "Doctors, psychologists, teachers don't know anything!" "They are only out to make money with more tests and examinations." "They are wrong."

GUILT

This is the mirror image of the blame stage- Mothers, as nurturers, are more susceptible. "What did I do to him/her?", "Why is God punishing me?" "How can I have made life better for her?" "I should have watched him more carefully."

ENVY

Envy of other parent's children. "It's not fair." "Look at those other kids, they don't know how lucky they are, everything comes easy to them."

ISOLATION

This is a dangerous stage where the family shuts themselves in and everyone else out. Siblings don't have friends over because the child with LD has no friends and needs company.

DEPRESSION

Feeling there is no hope. It is situational, not clinical. "I feel inadequate, where have I failed my child?"

FLIGHT

Parents search for the promise of a miracle- "Let's try a new therapy, go to a new clinic."

ACCEPTANCE - The Stage Where Greatness Happens!

Once here, parents acknowledge their child's learning differences and are ready to address them constructively. "OK, so what can we do to help?", "How can we make him feel better about himself?", "What are her strengths?" "We'll make it with time and cooperative effort.", "Let's work together with the school."

I must forewarn you, the unexpected element about acceptance is that once reached, it is not permanent. With everyday life challenges / situations impacting family members, at any given time, each may revert to a previous stage of mourning.

Frequently, it is complicated for parents to achieve consensus in the struggle to deal with LD. The reason for this is that parents will go through the stages of mourning and acceptance at different times and various degrees. Each may find it daunting to deal with their own feelings, let alone their partner's, simultaneously.

Often, Dads tend to stay in denial longer. Why? One reason is that dad is the "fixer" in the family, and may feel helpless to do so in this situation. Another reason is mom is so good at being mom. She settles the frustrated child she's dealt with all day and when dad comes home, the child is happily watching TV. So dad does not see the behaviour mom experiences, until dad is home sick one day and witnesses it firsthand.

When parents fully understand the journey from denial to acceptance, they are prepared for the stages they, their spouse and child will experience. Remaining alert, sensitive and accepting of the process is paramount, as reaching acceptance is the stage of "empowerment."

The good news is that today, we are blessed with an abundant variety of tools, strategies, technology software, plus The Nurtured Heart Parenting Approach and Theraplay Social & Thinking Skills Groups, which promote children's academic, emotional and social success. Passing through those turbulent stages, provides powerful teachable moments for us all. Yes, there is a vibrant light at the end of the tunnel which illuminates resilience, commitment and connection for the whole family.

