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February 1, 2013

I would like to share a story with you about my daughter, Ashley. When Ashley was 4 years old she was outgoing, friendly, very bright and loved learning. It came as a complete surprise to us when Ashley had immense trouble learning the alphabet; the sounds, the letters and even the sequence of letters while singing the alphabet song. She had a hard time spelling her name and using a pencil writing letters and numbers. We had many consultations with friends, family members, teachers and doctors. The consensus was to wait. We heard over and over, "Wait, she will outgrow it!" Guess what? She didn't outgrow it!

Fast forward to elementary school, we tried everything from private tutors to Hooked on Phonics to Vision Therapy. We still did not see any learning changes and Ashley's love of learning began to crumble. The elementary school Ashley attended tested her. To our surprise, and the school's principal, she did not make the cutoff for Special Education. With the teacher's and psychologist's urging, she received an Individual Education Plan (IEP) which included daily help with the reading specialist. No improvements were made. Ashley was regressing and the school had no ideas on how to help her. Specialist after specialist evaluated Ashley and the school ran out of specialists' to consult with. The conclusion was Ashley did not want to learn and if she only tried a little harder she would succeed in school. As Ashley's mom, knowing how hard she was trying, I knew their conclusion was incorrect. Going through this rollercoaster ride frustrated Ashley and her self-esteem plummeted. I was left feeling helpless as a parent.

I knew as Ashley's mother it was up to me to get her the right kind of interventions. I researched for many long hours in the evenings, gathering huge amounts of information on learning disabilities. At this time Ashley was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, reading and writing at about Kindergarten level. The teachers at her school and the reading specialist's said that they had tried everything to help Ashley and did not know what else to do. Through my research I came across Dyslexia and its characteristic warning signs. I realized that Ashley had many of them.

We had Ashley tested and she was diagnosed with severe to profound Dyslexia and Dysgraphia. Ashley's whole world changed for the better with that diagnosis. Most importantly we knew how to help her. Continue reading to learn how Ashley is currently doing and how the right intervention can make a world of difference in the life of a child.

You are probably asking yourself what exactly is this letter about? I wrote this letter to provide information on Dyslexia, empower parents and emphasize that early intervention is critical and the key to help struggling learners as young as preschool. By educating the public on Dyslexia, parents and teachers can help students they suspect may have Dyslexia and what should be done to prevent a child from going through what Ashley did. If I had this information when she was in preschool it would have saved the school system money, our family heartache and most importantly years of lost learning, major self-esteem issues and confusion for Ashley.

Research shows that “Giving It Time” and “Waiting a Little Longer” for a struggling student results in the child falling further and further behind. Waiting drastically damages self-esteem as well. Early diagnosis and targeted science-driven intervention is critical to the learning success of a child.

What is Dyslexia you ask? Dyslexia is a language-processing disorder that also impacts directionality and the ability to memorize random facts. Dyslexia is inherited. Warning signs of Dyslexia start to appear as early as age 1. A child can be accurately tested for dyslexia as early as age 5.

Dyslexia is **not** rare. It affects 20% of our population, which is 1 out of 5. Some have it mildly. Others have it severely. It is the most common reason a child will struggle with spelling, writing and eventually with reading.

The National Institutes of Health has been studying Dyslexia for more than 30 years. Here is the research-based definition.

- Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin.
- It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities.
- These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction.
- Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.

The reading, spelling and writing failure caused by Dyslexia is preventable and fixable by teaching students using an Orton-Gillingham-based system.

The first step a school or parent can do is have their child screened before Kindergarten using a phonological awareness screening to help identify if they are below their peers in important phonological abilities. Screening is appropriate for use in children starting at the age 5 years 0 months. If a child is younger and they have Dyslexia or even the possibility of Dyslexia in the family tree the parents or a tutor can start activities to promote phonemic and phonological awareness.

The next step after screening and learning that the child has a deficit or is lagging behind their peers is to review the warning signs of Dyslexia. If the child has 3 or more of the warning signs, parents need to learn more about Dyslexia so they can start helping their child immediately. Remember children do not “outgrow” learning difficulties and prevention is always easier than remediation.

So what happened to Ashley you ask? After receiving the correct interventions in 4<sup>th</sup> grade Ashley went from reading at a Kindergarten level to reading at a beginning 5<sup>th</sup> grade level. Wow!! In just one year she made tremendous gains and absolutely loves to read and write now. Ashley is currently in High School and looking forward to going to college. Oh, one more thing to brag about, Ashley has made the Honor Roll for the past several years!

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. It is my hope and desire to help parents and educators to better understand Dyslexia and the need for early intervention.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lynn Hillman". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned at the bottom of the page.