



Transcript of episode 59, The Stealth Nature of Dyslexia

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:00:31] Hi and welcome to episode 59, this is Emily Kircher-Morris, and we've touched on the subject of dyslexia in past episodes, but today we're going to dig deeper into the diagnosis, the indications and difficulties associated with dyslexia and some ways that we can help kids deal. Hang on for Dr Dan Peters, he's a solid resource on the subject of dyslexia in gifted kids, and he will join us in just a minute. During the Coronavirus pandemic, most American kids and many kids around the world are getting their first taste of online learning. I hope you got a chance to catch our first video roundtable, Online Learning for Gifted and 2e Kids.

We assembled a panel of experts who offered a ton of great advice that parents can use. You can watch it on our YouTube channel. It's at youtube.com/mindmatterspodcast. Anyone trying to adapt to online learning from home should catch this round table. Also, if you're looking for other Covid-19 support information, you can find a link to NAGC's resource page at www.Mindmatterspodcast.com. Just scroll down to the blog section and you'll find the link. Coming up next...

Dan Peters: [00:01:43] My name is Dr Dan Peters. I'm a licensed psychologist, co-founder and executive director of the Summit Center, and host of the Parent Footprint Podcast with Dr Dan.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:01:55] When Mind Matters continues. (break)

Today we'll be talking about dyslexia with Dr Dan Peters. He's the co-founder of the summit center in California and the host of the parent footprint podcast with Dr Dan. (sample) Dan Peters, it's a pleasure to finally have you here.

Dan Peters: [00:02:17] Oh, happy, I've been looking forward to it.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:02:20] Can you start by telling us more about yourself and what it was that got you interested in this population of kids?

Dan Peters: [00:02:26] Well, I would say it was about probably 10 years into being a psychologist and I had hit sort of a rut. I was sort of in this, you know, what am I doing? Which direction am I going, I was doing... I had left a lot of agency work, which I really liked, and went towards more private practice, which we all know can be a little more isolating. And I was just in this place of, um huh, what's next? And I got a call from a mother who happened to be a social worker who had these two gifted kids and said, um, "Hey, do you

know anything about gifted? Because we need a local, a specialist and we're flying this guy in from, uh, Kentucky now named Ed Amend."

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:03:04] We know him.

Dan Peters: [00:03:07] "And it's crazy that we should need to do that. And then, and so she also said, "and we had heard about you through the district, that, um, you were able to get parts of the district to understand that kid's behavior is not just behavior and it could be due to anxiety." So we had coffee and she told me about gifted and nothing about twice exceptionality but about gifted. And she said, you know, do you know anything about it? And I said, yeah, all my friends were in those classes, that's what I know about it. And so I was interested. So I started getting books. I started going to conferences and at the first California Association for Gifted conference, Ed, who I got to know quite well, and we became friends, said, "Hey, you gotta meet this guy, Jim Webb. Tell him I introduced you."

And sure enough, I go to, uh, the booth and I meet Jim Webb at Great Potential Press. And he says to me, "Oh, you need to meet Susan Daniels." And Susan Daniels... I just saw her over excitability talk, it was like 7:30 in the morning. And she and I then talked for about two hours, and the whole idea of Summit Center was born.

And um, I have to say I just became obsessive really about this whole population that I was not trained in. But where the deep dive came is when realizing that all of these kids that I had worked with at ADHD summer camps and all my clients and all these people I tested who had all these strengths and didn't fit in the box, the idea that they could be gifted and ... just blew me away and I realized, oh gosh, you know, we are we just pathologizing and missing so many of these kids and focusing on their weaknesses instead of their strengths. And, uh, I continue today.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:04:48] Yeah. So specifically, we want to really talk about kids who struggle with reading today. And so we've talked a lot about twice exceptional kids on our podcast in the past in different episodes, and we've kind of glossed over dyslexia a little bit here and there, but never really looked at it really deeply. So that's what we want to do. So why don't you start by explaining to us what does dyslexia look like specifically in gifted learners?

Dan Peters: [00:05:11] You know, we call this it, it was coined by Drs Brock and Fernet Eide, who wrote The Dyslexic Advantage and are founders of the Dyslexic Advantage website and nonprofit. Wonderful people. And it presents in gifted people, it can present in similar ways, which we'll talk about, but it's also hidden. And so what I mean by this is, you know, we see in school that people, everyone expects, you know, as long as you're reading at grade level, then you're fine. And we know when kids have advanced intellectual ability potential, let's say top 2% and then they're reading at the 50th percentile, which is normal, everyone just glosses over that. But in reality, what we see is, stealth dyslexics or gifted dyslexics, they often don't read out loud. They often read, um, in a choppy, slow way, they either will actually skim through the page and bounce all around and then get the gist of it, which they're very good at, or they'll read very slowly, um, and run out of time.

The other things we typically see with stealth dyslexics is, a lot of difficulty with, um, not only handwriting related to the dysgraphia, which is associated with dyslexia, but also challenges getting their writing out. So what you see is, um, you know, someone who can pontificate about the fall of the Roman Empire, or, you know, just name it, anything in history, um, and then you ask them to write about it. And if it's not a full blown meltdown, you might get three sentences. And then you get graded on those three sentences as your, as your knowledge base. So it's a real, it's, you really see it in writing.

The other things we see is challenges with rote memory. So on the flip side, strong knowledge for the way things are contextually presented, the way things are meaning, have meaning, the way patterns come together, challenges with days of the week, months of the year, times tables, um, presidents, capitals, you know, all of this rote memory, trouble with sequential memory, what do you do first, second, third, and fourth. Um, whether it's daily routine or it's a math problem or it's some operation you have to do in your class every day. So a lot of these executive functioning challenges, we see poor spelling. Um. And again, what you really see is a lot of frustration and not enough time to complete the task.

And then unfortunately, then some anxiety comes out of that because you're performing below and, um, you're not feeling very smart. And people are then wondering, wait, if he or she is so bright and can talk, why are they underperforming?

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:07:47] And what causes some confusion for people is that you can't use those age norms in the same way with dyslexic gifted kids to understand whether or not they're struggling. And that's a lot of times what happens in schools when they're deciding on IEPs and 504s. So we need to try to put age norms aside. What is it that we're looking for in terms of discrepancy with gifted kids and dyslexia.

Dan Peters: [00:08:14] So, so we're, we're, we're still looking at what, what has always been the discrepancy model, which I know with response to intervention, which some of people will know about. Um, a lot of the discrepancy model went away for qualifying kids for special education services. However, what that means is if your cognitive, if any of your cognitive abilities are at level A and your output abilities or your academic abilities are at level B, and there is what we say is one and a half standard deviations apart between those scores, and you can see, you can look at several different scores, but that's 23 points. So, so from education code, you know, if you, if you have a 123 verbal IQ, and you have a 100, which is the 50th percentile, for reading fluency, that's still is a reading deficit. That is a reading disorder based on special education code.

The problem is the schools aren't always following that discrepancy. What they're often following is what you alluded to, which is, well, no, it's just where they are for what is expected for their grade level. Are they meeting grade expected performance. And that's why it's so difficult to get twice exceptional kids qualified for an IEP, let alone a 504 plan. And when we look at the two, it depends on the level of dyslexia. I would say for, for the child, which is in terms of what they need. When you have someone, a bright kid who's on the mild side, it's impactful. But on the mild side, they might not need an IEP. They might not need pullout one day a week where they have specialized services. They often might need more time, copies of notes, um, take tests in a quiet setting. You know, a lot of the, um,

accommodations, but a lot of these gifted, twice exceptional kids who people say, well, yeah, they're reading at the lower end of their grade. Like if you're reading at the 23rd percentile and your intellect is at the 98th, 99th percentile, that is a huge deficit statistically, but also functionally, that person's reading and writing ability is going to be very impaired, even though at the lower end of the average range in terms of their ability, and that is a learning disability.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:10:37] One of the things that I see a lot of times with twice exceptional kids, they compensate really well. For example, um, somebody who their parents notice from a very young age that they were really struggling with reading, kind of the things that you mentioned, some of the very, you know, slow and labored and really having to work at it, but was also exceptionally gifted, and so then you could figure out from the context or, you know, do okay. And finally, when you know, this child reached late elementary school, it became so pronounced, the school recognized, oh yes, this is a concern. But then they still didn't know what to do with that. You know, they, they recognize that maybe, you know, even though this child's IQ was, you know, near 140 and their reading fluency was down 89 or 90 and so, you know, talking about that 23 point discrepancy, it's huge.

But you know, if we put them in these educational services, that's not going to meet their needs because they're still quote unquote, in the average range at a 90.

Dan Peters: [00:11:40] Yeah. And it's, I think you'd need to look at each child's profile and each child's needs. So the first thing, just to validate what you said is, um, gifted kids compensate and dyslexics are known to get the gist of what they read. So what happens is, you get these elementary school really bright kids that, um, they have really strong reading comprehension. And when we give the questionnaires to the teachers, that's about their performance, some of them come back and say they're the best reader in the class. Well now this is a kid who has to read out loud in two years.

And then, so their comprehension is at the 95th, 99th percentile. But then when you actually read their mechanics, their actually phonological decoding, it's really low. And so what, like you said, what happens is eventually they hit a wall when it comes to middle school or high school, when they can't keep up with the scanning and just, um, absorbing, you know, just kind of like extracting the information.

So then it's like, what do these kids need? Well, if you have a pullout resource room where they, you know, some kids need more time. Like some kids just need, they need more help with their writing. They need someone to help organize them. They need to dictate. They need to walk around the room and think of ideas and, you know, so that sort of support can be really helpful with some writing help.

If they say, well, you know, they're reading at the 25th percentile and the reading intervention, you know, a lot of the reading intervention doesn't help dyslexics, what they offer in the schools. Um, you know, we know that multisensory intervention is what rewires, helps rewire the neural networks of a dyslexic's brain.

And multisensory means you have tiles, you have touch, you have sound, you have your, the way your mouth moves when you make letters, how you hear words and the sounds. And so a lot of schools don't do that. So where I would agree with, if they have a program that is not a research based approach for dyslexia, which many aren't, to have a child an hour a day, getting that kind of intervention isn't going to help. So you're really trying to find what do they need, what kind of services and support do they need based on their profile in school. And you know, often you're getting intervention, the multisensory intervention, outside of school for the schools that don't have it. So I guess it's case by case.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:13:51] Yeah, definitely. They qualify for their gifted programs very young. And then as expectations grow as they get older, the reading, both in the gifted programs and in their classrooms, you know, that is required increases. And also a lot of times, performance on an achievement test in reading is often one of the qualifying factors to participate in a gifted program, but that can often be a barrier. What are your thoughts about how that influences participation in a gifted program?

Dan Peters: [00:14:19] It definitely influences identification. Let's just start with identification because you know, different schools use different measures. You know, some of them stick to the visual spatial. More and more people are using like the COGAT and others where there's, you know, visual, um, there's verbal, there's quantitative. You want to have a measure that, that first of all captures as many types of gifted thinking and processing. And then, you also need to know what sort of, does that, is that person a fit for the gifted program? Because, so to your point, you know, sometimes the gifted programs are math only and you have a verbally gifted individual who's not that awesome at math, right? So that doesn't work.

Um, what happens is when you have, a lot of the times you have these kids that do have very strong verbal intelligence and then they're going into these advanced literature advanced, um, verbally-laden classrooms, subject area, and they can handle the knowledge. What they can't handle often is the pace of the reading and the writing. And so best practices is that with these poor, these twice exceptional kids that they have accommodations within the gifted classroom settings, so they can be with their intellectual peers and have the engagement and challenge that they need, but also have support for more time, audio books, dictation, voice to text, that sort of thing. And that's the way to level the playing field. So they still can benefit from those classes.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:15:46] I also often see kids who are middle school or high school classes and they want to take the honors or the AP classes, which cognitively they are very able to do. And one of my biggest frustrations is when the schools, their first suggestion will be, well, don't take those classes. And I always, want to go, not taking an honors course is not an accommodation.

Dan Peters: [00:16:06] Not at all.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:16:07] And you know, you have to go and advocate for these kids and help people know they still deserve to be challenged cognitively and with the content

and with the critical thinking. And we just need to help boost them up with these other areas where they're struggling.

Dan Peters: [00:16:20] Totally agree. It's exactly it. And the hard part usually is getting the school first to just acknowledge that there is a learning difference, or you know, let's call it learning disability to use, you know, the required language, learning difference to use our neurodiverse-friendly language. That's A, and then once they say, okay, yeah, okay, I could see that, then it's saying, it's getting the schools to realize for AP and honors courses that having an accommodation is an education, special education, right, where sometimes they'll say, well, no, that's not fair. That's just going to give them an added advantage and you know, anyone who has this will not give them an advantage. It's all to equal the playing field.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:16:58] You mentioned dyslexia is not always the same as what accommodations would look like for another type of reading-identified learning disability in the schools. Can you clarify that a little bit for people who may not be as familiar?

Dan Peters: [00:17:11] First of all, dyslexia, general dyslexia, there has been a movement, which is wonderful, and we still have a way to ways to go for schools, districts, states, to recognize dyslexia and then put it, um, identification and intervention into practice. You know, a lot of times, first of all, it's just called, oh, they have a learning disability in the area of reading.

And so dyslexia is never even talked about as an actual profile. It's always broken down to, okay, they need work with their decoding and they need to work with their fluency, or they may need to work with their comprehension. And that's all true. But we just feel like if you don't understand the larger dyslexic profile, including the strengths, you're missing, you're missing the whole picture.

So in a traditional intervention program, um, IEP, for a person with a reading disorder, you will have generally one hour a day pullout support where they will get some reading intervention, um, they'll get some help with writing, they'll get some help with their assignments. Just speaking very generally now of course, it, it can be different, but generally speaking.

So when you're looking at a stealth dyslexic, or a gifted dyslexic, you really need to look at again, like how advanced are they? Where are the areas that they are strong and where are the areas that they need support? Because just blanket saying, okay, you need an hour, a day of pullout support, um, might not meet their need. Like I said, it might not have the reading support that they will benefit... they will really learn from, and then they will be pulled out of other classes where they could be benefiting. You really need to look at, what is the actual functional challenge in this dyslexic profile?

And, um, as I also said earlier, a lot of times with stealth dyslexics, their reading is good enough. They still need more time, but you might not be spending a lot of time on their reading. They might need a lot of support for their writing. And then the question is, how do they get that support when they're writing?

You know, do they have a writing coach? Do they have some pullout support? But do they need it every single day? Again, missing some of their other classes? Or does it really just need to be also a heavy emphasis on the accommodation of, um, all the supports that will help them?

So, for example, colleges are great at this. Um, so colleges have wonderful accommodation plans, and if you go in and you give a report, which we can talk about, you know, you need some documentation that says, Hey, I have this processing or this learning disability, and um, it affects my reading and writing. For example, colleges, you know, in my day you'd have to buy notes.

Um, these days, 'cause it's often hard to follow a lecture as a dyslexic cause your, your brain is actually, you're trying to process everything you hear. But if you have to write it and write it as fast as the professors or teacher is talking, you don't really learn anything and you get behind. So for example, one accommodation is you just get your professor or teacher notes emailed to you. So you just can sit there and listen and write down what you want.

So there's all of these ways that are actually pretty simple that can help a stealth dyslexic. So it's just looking at it case by case.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:20:12] You've mentioned dysgraphia. What are some of the other connections, either with dysgraphia or also something I think that doesn't get a lot of attention is dyscalculia. What is similar and different about those diagnoses?

Dan Peters: [00:20:24] So dysgraphia is really like fine motor disorder, the dys and the graphia. So like fine motor output. So what you typically see is illegible or very labored handwriting. So it could be at a muscular, um, level and the ligament level of the hand. But you also can see not only that, but a disconnect. It's usually a disconnect between the thoughts and the hand.

So it doesn't, it doesn't flow. I often say it's like for these gifted kids, they have a five inch water pipe that just flows, rushes with information. When you're dysgraphic that five inch pipe goes to a half inch pipe that's clogged and it just drips out. So frustrating. Um, so the dysgraphia really impacts handwriting. It impacts spelling, um, dyslexia and dysgraphia impact spelling. Um, it impacts written output. On a positive, you can get around that by helping someone learn to type, so that's something we want to have these kids do.

Then there is... so then dyscalculia is really what's thought of these days as the dyslexia of math. The field is, is a little bit split on this. So some people are calling all math disorders dyscalculia. And there's the folks that study dyscalculia we like to at our center, differentiate between a math disorder that could be related to dyslexia and/or dyscalculia. And what I mean by that is, so dyslexics have trouble with math facts cause, um, again, facts and sequences are difficult for dyslexics, but often dyslexics have very strong math concepts. They're very strong in concepts and conceptualization, right? This is like an Einstein, right? Failed ninth grade math did some other pretty good stuff.

Now a person with dyscalculia, they don't understand math concepts either. So it's literally whether you're talking about numbers, you're talking about time, you're talking about

estimation, you're talking about money, you're talk, like it just, it expands to all areas of math, not just the math facts.

So what we see is that math, rote math challenges are often a part of dyslexia, but dyscalculia is a separate and more expanded problem with math that needs its own multisensory intervention as well.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:22:42] I see. That's a good description. I think that's helpful. What are some strategies for parents who right now probably have their kids home more than expected and have kids who are struggling? What are some things that they can do to help their kids continue to progress?

Dan Peters: [00:23:00] So I have a few, a few thoughts about that. One, I think I want to quickly go over the dyslexic strengths because that will lead into, um, these few things that that people can do that would be really helpful. So the, um, the Eides in the Dyslexic Advantage, they talk about the mind strengths, M. I. N. D. So M stands for material reasoning, and material reasoning means advanced 3-D or spatial reasoning. So dyslexics are generally very strong in design, construction, seeing multiple perspectives. So that, and a cool fact is seven out of the seven modern manmade wonders have been designed by a dyslexic architect. Very cool. Okay.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:23:43] Interesting.

Dan Peters: [00:23:44] I stands for interconnected reasoning. Dyslexics have a strong ability to connect different ideas, properties, data points. They're considered the novel outside the box problem solvers, so think of connection and patterns.

N stands for narrative reasoning. Dyslexics are often storytellers, either visual or by story. There's a bunch of dyslexic, um, famous dyslexic authors. So dyslexics are often thinking in stories and context.

And then D is dynamic reasoning, which is really the entrepreneurial gene, which is the ability to take past and present data and information and predict future outcomes. Um, and so dyslexics are highly intuitive. Now, we might not be right now capitalizing on the D, but we can definitely be capitalizing on the other three, which is, think about how your child learns best. And often it's when they see something, or when they have they, identify the patterns, or when it's put into a story.

And so what's really challenging for all of the folks that are having to be homeschooled and not by design, is that the modalities, a lot of them are very much now traditional modalities to read, write, do work, and that is not a dyslexic strength. So dyslexics generally need to get hands on. They need to talk it through. They need to understand the story. So when it comes to history, if they're not watching a video, it might be you're reading to them or they're reading to you, or you're watching a documentary about the Civil War, about World War II, like it's really about making things meaningful and contextual and removing the barriers, and usually the barriers are having to memorize a bunch of non-contextual information and doing a lot of writing.

Those are the things that usually are making these kids collapse and not want to do any of this stuff, which they're being told they have to do right now.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:25:47] This has been a really enlightening conversation because dyslexia in gifted kids is something we've not talked about a ton before. Can you leave us with just a final nugget of encouragement before we go? Kind of something to think about?

Dan Peters: [00:26:01] Um, actually I had one just final thought. A non-dyslexic is a bottom-up processor and learns from the pieces of the building. So a letter, a sound, a sentence, a paragraph, and goes all the way up. Dyslexics are top-down processors, meaning they're always looking for the connections and how things go together, and then they back into the details.

So just, uh, just really thinking about, um, empathy for all the parents who are teaching and schooling their kids right now, when you have the stealth dyslexic, just remember how strong he or she is in putting the pieces together and getting the big picture, and if they can get that information, then they're able to back into those challenging details.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:26:50] Dr Dan Peters, thank you so much for your time today.

Dan Peters: [00:26:54] Thank you.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:26:58] Gifted students aren't immune from struggles, so we have to be on the lookout for difficulties that fly under the radar. Stealth dyslexia is difficult to spot, but if supports aren't provided early, there's a domino effect on both the student's academic future and their social and emotional development.

They aren't offered entrance to the most challenging coursework. Confidence and risk-taking skills are undermined. Our goal is helping all educators and parents recognize the ways that giftedness and learning disabilities can coexist, and that's vital for helping each and every student succeed. I'm Emily Kircher-Morris. I'll see you next time on Mind Matters.

(music)

Dave Morris: [00:28:25] Our thanks again to Dr Dan Peters. You can find him and his podcast called the Parent Footprint with Dr Dan at DrDanPeters.com. We have his bio and helpful links on the episode 59 page at MindMattersPodcast.com. Thanks also to the guests of our first video roundtable, Online Learning for Gifted and 2e Kids. You can watch it on our YouTube channel. Just go to youtube.com/mindmatterspodcast. We release all of our episodes on our YouTube channel as well, so, if you prefer to listen there hit the subscribe button. For Emily, I'm executive producer Dave Morris. Thank you. Be healthy, and we'll see you next time.

(music out)