

Living with Dyspraxia



Dyspraxia affects around 10 per cent of the UK population. What do you do if your child is diagnosed as dyspraxic? We meet a mum who has a child with dyspraxia. She shares her experiences and feelings, and offers advice to readers. Claim your Free "Engaging with English Pack" containing everything you need to improve your child's reading and writing skills with a [cheap trial membership](#) of My Child VIP.

If your child has a special learning need it's likely he receives support to access learning at school... then he comes home and there's just you. Expert Glynis Kozma speaks to one family about coping with a child who has dyspraxia beyond the school gates.

What is dyspraxia?

The Dyspraxia Foundation defines it as: 'An impairment or immaturity of the organisation of movement. It is an immaturity in the way that the brain processes information which results in messages not being properly or fully transmitted.' Dyspraxia can sometimes be called Developmental Coordination Disorder, and used to be known as Clumsy Child Syndrome. The condition affects around 10 per cent of people, with boys being affected four times more than girls. It is thought to be genetic and often exists alongside other conditions such as dyslexia, autism and Asperger syndrome.

Children with dyspraxia

Up to the age of a year, Caroline and Tom's first child Sam seemed to be a normal, endearing little boy.

Caroline was not aware of anything unusual in her son's development. Sam began to walk at fourteen months, and although he bumped into the furniture and tripped over his toys a lot, his parents weren't concerned; that was what toddlers did all the time.

They did notice that something wasn't quite right with one of his eyes, and at three years he was diagnosed with a squint and a lazy eye. Sam also had difficulty pronouncing his words - he had a 'lazy' tongue - so began to have speech therapy. Then a health visitor suggested he might be dyspraxic.

Caroline wanted to find out as much as she could about dyspraxia. She contacted the Dyspraxia Foundation for information. Dyspraxia can include a whole range of problems, such as high levels of activity, constantly bumping into objects or falling over; problems with all fine motor skills such as writing, using scissors, playing with construction toys such as Lego, poor concentration, an inability to relate to other children, and overall immaturity.

Accepting the condition

But whilst Caroline tried to educate herself about the condition, Sam's father's reaction was very different. As Caroline explained, 'Tom had been brought up very strictly. His mother had been a stickler for good table manners and controlled, polite behaviour and Tom expected the same from Sam. But he had a son who was running into everything and everyone, who couldn't hold a knife or fork properly, made a dreadful mess at the meal table, would sometimes vomit after eating as he choked a lot, and who seemed to be in a world of his own at times.

'Tom couldn't accept that he had a son who was different from other children. He buried his head in the sand until one day I made him sit down, handed him a book about living with a child with dyspraxia, and told him he must read it.'

Symptoms of dyspraxia

At the same time, Caroline discovered other aspects of Sam's behaviour that concerned her. Sam found it hard to understand body language.

'Even when I was furious with him for something, he wouldn't pick-up the signals from my body language. Neither was he aware of his own body language and how it affected others.'

Consequently, his relationships with his friends began to suffer as his interpretation of language was completely literal, and behaviour was often inappropriate. He also began to have a fascination with numbers; he would rush to look at digital clocks on friend's cookers, to the point where numbers became an obsession. It appeared that Sam possibly had Asperger Syndrome, too - a mild form of autism often characterised by obsessive behaviour, poor language skills, and an inability to understand other people's emotions or body language.

At school, Sam was immediately placed on the Special Needs' Register. He attended a small village school where he was given a lot of support. When he

moved on to secondary schools his problems became more noticeable and a whole new set of challenges arose. For a start, as Sam is physically immature he was bullied. Communication between the teachers in a large school was often poor, so many were unaware that Sam was dyspraxic and labelled him lazy and careless. He has problems making and keeping friends, because he looks much younger than he is and doesn't share many of their interests.

Dyspraxia and family life

So how does this affect Caroline and Tom's family life? 'One of the biggest issues was getting Tom to accept it, and also his side of the family, who still don't want to accept it, but I have learnt to cope with that,' Caroline explained.

As a family they have to make allowances for Sam with everything they do. It takes him ages to get dressed - he still can't manage his shoe laces even now he is fourteen - so they have to allow extra time for getting ready to go anywhere. It takes a team effort from Mum and Dad to get him out of bed and to school on time as Sam cannot judge how long it takes to get ready.

A sporty family, they love being outdoors, but Sam can't keep up with them either walking or running, so he rides his bike alongside, which he has now mastered pretty well. Sam's difficulties are made all the more obvious because his sister, who is three years younger, is almost as tall as he is, sporty, organised and outgoing - his complete opposite.

Sam finds solace in his computer. As he says to his Mum, 'I can be anybody on the computer. No-one can see me, they don't know I am small and have dyspraxia.'

But even here allowances must be made: Sam's parents restrict his time on his computer as it would be very easy for him to retreat into a world where meaningful communication with others would be even more limited, and he would be in danger of becoming more isolated.

Caroline worries how Sam will cope when he is older. She tries hard not to be overprotective and to let him learn from his mistakes, such as facing the consequences of being late or disorganised at school. She worries whether he will learn to drive - he is unaware of other people's behaviour and has poor co-ordination - and what kind of work he will do. Maybe, she considers, something connected with computers, but they are happy to let him decide.

It is quite possible that Sam's difficulties will diminish with time, as he matures. Caroline is now focused on raising her son's self-esteem, as he lacks confidence, and enjoying family life as much as possible. As she says, 'There is a lot we can do together as a family. Sam is doing very well at school in science and maths, so

I always try to focus on the positive and confront any problems as and when they occur.'

***Names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of Sam and his family.**

Daily life dyspraxia tips

When even the most basic of daily life activities are a struggle for dyspraxic children, often the most straightforward ideas can make a huge difference to quality of life both for the child and their family. [The Dyspraxia Foundation](http://TheDyspraxiaFoundation.org.uk) has some top tips to make these daily tasks stress-free:

- **Clothing - Lay out clothing layer by layer, avoid tight neck-holes, provide trousers with an elasticated waist, buy shirts that are one size larger to make it easier to fasten, baggy tee shirts and shorts are easy for dyspraxic children to manage**
- **Eating - Use a flexible straw with a drink to prevent spilling, don't fill cups too full, make sure you sit down to eat where possible**
- **Get organised - Keep to a daily routine, transparent purses and pencil cases let your child see and access the contents easily, keep keys and purses on a long chain which clips to clothing.**

For more top tips and support for your dyspraxic child, visit the dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk

Further Info

- **dyspraxiafoundation.co.uk or tel: 01462 455016**
- **discovery.co.uk or tel: Tel.029 2062 8222**
- **For information on autism and Asperger Syndrome see nas.org.uk or tel: 0207 8332299**