

On The Waterbed: The Impact of Learning Differences On the Family

By Linda Aber

Richard Lavoie, famous for his inspirational and award-winning videos and books, renowned teacher, educational supervisor, associate professor, consultant / school director, motivational speaker, addressed a Montreal audience and enlightened parents, educators and professionals about learning differences.

With humour and sensitivity, he shared his image of the waterbed as a metaphor for the impact and instability that LD has on family. "If one person on the bed shifts, everyone feels it. If one member of the family has a learning disability, it affects everyone." He cited Eleanor West's research out of the University of Virginia, which 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. He explained that it begins with denial, ends with acceptance and has not a set order in between, as people bounce back and forth for various reasons. There is no way to predict the order in which parents will go through the process. Lavoie described this as follows:

DENIAL

Initially, the only way to deal with the problem is to deny there is one. "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 these stages of bargaining, blame, mourning, fear, anger, guilt, envy, isolation, depression and flight.

Bargaining

Bargaining is part of denial. Parents will want to make a deal. "We'll move, change schools, hire a tutor."

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Blame

Parents 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

Parents need to adjust their expectations. "Think what could have been."

Fear

Parents feel powerless. "Maybe it's worse than they say." "What are they not telling me?" "Is it a progressive disease?" "Will she ever be able to marry, have children, and hold down a job?" Fathers especially are fixers by nature, and feel powerless to fix this.

Anger

LD families are families in crisis, as it's not fun. Their lives have 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're only out to make money with more tests and examinations. They're out of their minds."

Guilt

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

Parents feel envy towards other people's healthy children. "It's not fair." "Look at those other kids, they don't know how lucky they are, everything comes easy to them."

Isolation

A dangerous stage for all parents is feeling like you and the family are against the world. The family shuts themselves in and everyone else out. Siblings can't go out because LD brother has no friends and needs company. "I've failed him." "No one understands; there's no hope."

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Depression

Parents feel 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

Parents acknowledge the problem and are prepared to address it constructively. "OK, so he has special needs... What can we do to help?" "How can we make him feel better about himself?" "What are his strengths?" "We'll make it with time and cooperative effort." "Let's work together with the school."

According to Lavoie, once reached, acceptance is not permanent. Every new change or circumstance of life poses a new host of challenges that must be dealt with, as any family member can revert to a previous stage of mourning at any time.

He pointed out that fathers tend to stay in denial longer. Why? The apple doesn't fall too far from the tree and mom is so good at being mom. She settles the frustrated child she 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.

Lavoie raised two puzzling questions. 1) How do like-minded professionals differ so much in their perceptions of one set of parent? 2) Why is it so difficult for parents to achieve consensus in the struggle to deal with LD's? In response, he suggested that professionals might differ in their perception of parents over time because parents will have progressed through the different stages of mourning and acceptance. He proposed that the reason parents have difficulty reaching consensus is that they will go through the various stages at different times and different rates. He emphasized the difficulties parents have dealing with their own feelings, let alone their partner's simultaneously.

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Lavoie's parting message to parents and professionals was patience, cooperation and empathy. To teachers, he said, "Take parents seriously, not personally." To parents, "Be aware of the stages you, your spouse and child go through. Be alert and sensitive to the progression through these stages and try to look at the world through the eyes of your child."

A sensitive highpoint of the evening was his reading of *Welcome to Holland* by Emily Kingsley, an analogy of parenting a child with special needs. You plan your trip to Italy, learn the language and read about the sights, but your plane lands in Holland and you find yourself unprepared. Now you need to learn a new language and discover new sights. Acceptance is a prerequisite to progression and happiness. You may never enjoy all that Holland has to offer, if you spend your life pining and mourning for Italy. Holland has its special beauty, its own joys and wonders.

<http://www.lindaaber.com/articles/62-on-the-waterbed-the-impact-of-learning-differences-on-the-family.html>

You have questions?

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