

Lone Tree Dyslexia Center Puts Fun Back in Phonics

By: Peter Jones, Staff Writer

08/18/2005

In most contexts, Cher, Charles Schwab and Tommy Hilfiger would have little in common, except perhaps fame and a good publicist. But they, like nearly one in five Americans, are thought to be dyslexic.

The cognitive disorder has become not just a well-known disability, but a cultural reference point. Stand-up comics and an expert on the subject have suggested that President Bush has it. The disorder has spurred a host of treatments - and celebrations. Author Ron Davis has gone so far as to tout what he calls the "gift of dyslexia."

Lone Tree is home to the first franchise operation for Dyslexia Institutes of America, an umbrella organization founded by Dr. Elaine Jett, an Illinois-based special-education expert.

Educators Wendy and Rick Sorrentino moved from California to open the first of its kind center last October. Although the Jett model is not revolutionary, it is an approach that has a specialized nuance.

"A lot of programs treat phonics, reading and spelling, which is great and wonderful. What our research has found is that dyslexics have issues other than learning how to read and write," Wendy said.

That is why DIA emphasizes cognitive therapies designed to strengthen visual and auditory memory, visual perception and motor skills. While that may be technical-speak, the process is based in simple logic, according to the married instructors.

"If we have a child we know has a memory issue, why would we not treat the memory issue and just treat the phonics?," Wendy said. "They're not going to remember what we said."

To avoid that prospect, the Sorrentinos help students to discover their own "compensatory skills," through memorization activities and games involving shapes, letters and numbers.

"We'll say, 'Wow, you did such a great job. How did you remember this?,'" Wendy said of past sessions. "So (the student is) starting to think, 'Oh, well, I memorized them because I looked at them in my head and I created a pattern.' And we'll say, 'Wow, that's really cool. Could you do that in school?' And the bulb clicks."

A common sign of dyslexia - A child reporting that a teacher erased the blackboard before he could write down the information.

Dyslexia, the Jett program says, is the inability to read and spell relative to one's IQ. While that may sound like an over-generalized definition in search of generic symptoms, dyslexics have specific physiological distinctions, according much of the research.

"It is a medical condition. They can see lesions in the brain," Wendy said. The International Dyslexia Association calls the disorder "a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin."

Although some centers may offer programs as "exciting" for children as those exacting medical descriptions, Dyslexia Institutes of America has instead striven to put the "fun" back in phonics.

"I learn more here than I did at the other place," said 11-year-old Collin Rodocker, comparing DIA to another program he went through in Washington state. "We didn't do Parquetry or the computer stuff."

Parquetry Pals is the brand name for colored blocks that kids in the program form into shapes, based on diagrams they are given. Computer games test short-term memory skills. Four letters flash on the screen for less than a second. Collin quickly tries to retype them.

"When Collin was doing the Parquetry, you noticed his self-esteem and how excited he was," Rick pointed out. "If you say, 'Collin, go copy off the board,' it's not going to have the same reaction."

Such gamesmanship makes learning fun, according to the Centennial sixth-grader. He also has the added motivation of collecting tokens for his successful and earnest efforts. At the end of his individualized session, he can cash them in for rewards like Hot Wheels cars, a jump-rope, a snow cone maker or candy bars.

The "positive reinforcements" help make up for spending time indoors with the Sorrentinos instead of going out to play with friends on a summer morning. That is the biggest downside to being dyslexic, according to Collin. It is a trade-off that is understood by the Sorrentinos, who have adopted DIA's reward system.

"To (my kids) it feels more familyish," said Collin's mom, Sue Rodocker, whose 9-year-old daughter, Katie, is also enrolled in the Lone Tree program. "It's not really institutional. It's like, they're going (here) just to have fun. Everywhere else, they do their thing, but they didn't make it fun for the kids."

What's more, according to Rodocker, other programs her family has tried have tended to discourage parental involvement, so there was little "homework" or practice with flashcards after dinner.

"They actually like to come here," the mother said of her two youngest children. "Here, they don't get pulled out of class for special tutoring, which can be embarrassing for them."

Dyslexia Institutes of America requires a six-month commitment from each student, though some have taken as much as three years to complete the program.

The Lone Tree operation has 25 clients, ranging in age from 5 to 45. The oldest student, whose dyslexia was untreated for decades, signed-up in order to pass a test he needs to further his career. DIA has 10 independently-owned operations across the country.

Although the term franchise may more connote french fries than phonics, the Sorrentinos insist their business is not a generic or corporate-oriented enterprise.

"As therapists, we try to add our own style, which makes it fun, first of all," Wendy explained.

"People think because its a franchise, its cookie-cutter, and its not. We have 55 to 65 different activities. It is individualized to each child."

Evaluations, however, are not made in-house. Results are instead sent to Jetts Illinois office for analysis. According to the Sorrentinos, this is more of a quality-control measure than an indication that local educators are not able to make their own evaluations. "I like the extra hand to hold," Wendy said.

Such expert analysis has not dissuaded some from exploring alternative viewpoints. Rodocker is among those who view dyslexia as less a disability than an avenue for unusual life perception.

“Katie is a unique little girl,” the mother said. “Some children are brought to earth and they know what their purpose is. This is kind of weird, but she does talk to angels. I think it has something to do with dyslexia.”

It is an extra-curricular viewpoint not advanced by DIA or the Sorrentinos. They say, however, that many dyslexics are of above-average intelligence and are thus often able to compensate for their challenges, even without a di