Creating Confidence & Overcoming Relunctance

Getting Great Results Using Learning Tools

It is extremely important that you begin training your child to use text-to-speech technology if she has reasonable strength in verbal skills. However, be prepared for the difficulties she may encounter at the beginning. It takes at least a month before a child becomes comfortable with this tool, and it can take more than a year before she has genuinely mastered it. When you consider that a standard reading curriculum allows three to five years for students to become proficient in standard reading, this is not at all an unreasonable expectation.

Once you have the right tools, you'll need to go through a number of steps to help your child learn how to use them. Start your child using audio in the context of content that he will enjoy. If he is a sports fanatic, get him access to material regarding his favorite team. If he is into video gaming, get him access to the latest news on his favorite gaming platform. You can typically find this content on websites and use the speech engine on your computer, tablet, or smartphone to access it. Or you can find appealing content in audio book providers. *The Diary of the Wimpy Kid* or *Harry Potter* can be a great way to get the process started.

To keep them interested in learning this skill set, it is a good idea to explain the use of this software in terms of how much time your child will save: "Imagine if your homework took you an hour less each night and you could use that time to play with your friends." Or "How would you like to be able to skip sessions with your after-school tutor and just do this on your own?" You can listen with your child and make it a joint project. A great way to make your dyslexic child feel more at ease adopting this and other tools is to run the following experiment: ask your entire household to live without text for a week, and if you are successful, work up to a month. What if there were no more books or instruction manuals? What if you had to learn
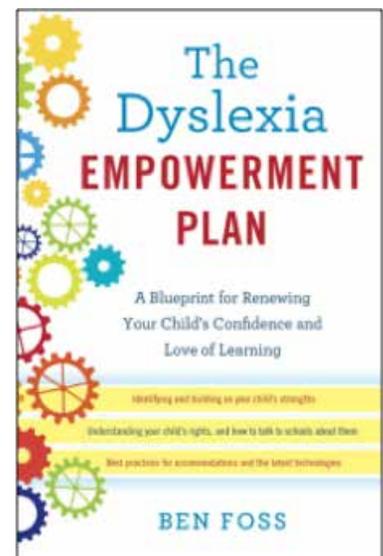
everything through another set of strengths beyond eye reading? This is the experience that a dyslexic person lives with daily. For your child to suceed as a dyslexic learner you will need to walk in her shoes and try to abandon what seems safe and easy in order to incorporate these new methods.

The no-text-household experiment has two important benefits. First, you will discover how much people rely on text, gaining empathy for your child's situation and perhaps even insights about how to include him better. Second, it will communicate to your child that the whole house is with him on this, meaning there is a community. Again, community is the chief antidote to shame and critical to long-term success.

Stick With It

It may take as much as a month before your child is willing to entertain the idea that this technology will be useful—this is what I have learned from talking to assistive technology coordinators at schools and watching the adoption curve for the Intel Reader with test users. It is only an estimate, but what's more important to keep in mind is that you should not expect this to happen instantly. If your child has a relative strength in listening, then this is a key way to support that strength. Keep up the campaign, trying different products and voices and selling the idea as hard as you can. Learning this skill is a huge help for your child's overall literacy—that is, access to text with their ears. It is useful for many people to visually track the written word as they listen to it. On the other hand, some people find the highlighting distracting. Similarly, many audio book tools will allow you to adjust foreground and background color for reading text on-screen. This can help some folks; you should experiment with these settings to see what your child likes best.

For starters, it's probably easiest to stick with the default speed on the audio setting, reading the text at a conversational speed or even slower if that feels right for your child. When you get to the point that your child asks to use the text-to-speech software in reading something on his own, it's time to start accelerating the rate at which text is read back. First try increasing the rate by 10 percent to see if your child can follow along. Every time your child increases her speed by 10 percent, it will take her 10 percent less time to get through material. You may find that your child can use different speeds in different contexts. For example, if I'm reading an article in Sports Illustrated from its website, I'll be able to listen to it at my highest rate, which is about 400 words
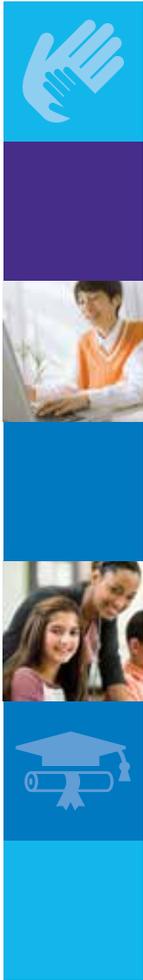
per minute (this is well beyond where you will start). On the other hand, if I'm reading over an important contract, such as documents for a mortgage on my home, I might read it at a much slower rate, say 100 words per minute.

A good rule of thumb is to increase the rate 10 percent every week, which will get a user to roughly a 50 percent increase within two months. If you can keep this up for another month you can get your child to a full 100 percent increase, which would be outstanding. This is unlikely to happen for anyone who does not have strong auditory skills to begin with, but if you can get there, it means your child will have better comprehension and will be able to more easily keep up with (and maybe even surpass) eye readers in speed and comprehension.

Overcoming Reluctance

Unfortunately, some children and many teachers are uncomfortable with students using accommodations. This was certainly true for me. When I was in school I felt a sense of stigma because the accommodation meant that I was getting something "extra" that the other kids in my class couldn't have in order to do the same work. But now I know that a better way to think of this is that some people were not given a key to the building, and the accommodations were simply a way of getting me into the school. That metaphor might help your child understand the value of accommodations and be comfortable using them.

I cannot count the number of adult dyslexics I've spoken to who have genuinely traumatic memories from their years in elementary school. Many were belittled or made to feel inept based on a grueling regime of teachers trying to—in some cases literally— beat reading into their head without accommodations.

My dyslexic friend Matthew Bickerton once told me very earnestly that his teacher had used a specific tool to try to teach him to read. He then held up a shoe: "He used this to hit me in the head." Today Matthew is a very successful entrepreneur who owns a home in the United Kingdom that has its own moat, but he still looks back on his early school experiences as tremendously damaging. Any school or teacher who tells you that the only way for students to demonstrate their capability is to read in a standard way not only is wrong but runs the risk of doing serious psychological damage to your child. It's doubtful they will employ the same technique as Matthew's instructor, but even a stern
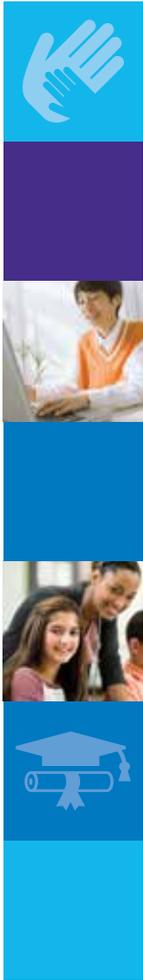
look and a red pen can do a lot of damage if they are all the child sees day after day.

Dealing with Resistance

Generally speaking, schools are massively behind on adopting new tools. Teachers often resist the arrival of technology in their classroom. They may be nervous that the students might be able to do something that they don't understand. And there's often an unfounded fear that the students could use the technology to cheat or that they could get some unfair advantage by using these tools. Over time, however, institutions slowly come to accept new technologies. When I was in elementary school, teachers became very upset about the invention of spell-checkers. They were concerned that students would "never learn to spell." These days, if a student turns in a paper without having run the software on it, the teachers become frustrated: "How could you be so lazy as to not use spell-check?"

It's important to look at your own anxieties about technology and figure out whether they have to do with your own nervousness about new things. Nine times out of ten, children are excited to try out new technologies, especially if a device gives children an opportunity to put down an unfair burden that they have been carrying. Think of it this way: even Betty White is on Twitter, and if she can tweet, you should be able to embrace an iPad and your child's teacher should be able to handle a word processor in the classroom.