

## DEREK'S STORY

# Venturing into the World of Learning Disabilities

*This story is the first in a series that will chronicle one family's experiences throughout the school year as they deal with their 8-year-old son's learning differences in a suburban public school. Though pseudonyms are used at the family's request, all other aspects of the story are true.*

As I walk my children to the bus stop on the first day of school I am filled with the same anticipation as they are. The oldest is starting third grade, the second, kindergarten and the third is beginning preschool. The strange thing is I'm not too concerned with the younger two starting their new endeavors. It's my oldest, Derek, who consumes my thoughts. As I smile and assure my daughter she will be fine I am confident in my words. Why can't I feel the same way as I tell my son this will be a great year for him, too?

## Getting Here

Our story is similar to many others. Our son showed signs of a reading disability as early as preschool, but we were unaware of it. During first grade, we began to question his inability to read. We spent most of first grade trying to get the public school to provide a proper diagnosis but had little suc-

cess. Testing concluded only that he has a superior IQ and was performing below average.

By the time second grade rolled around, we had educated ourselves in the state laws enough to secure special services for him that year. Still, he did not make progress. Homework and nightly reading were a nightmare. As we struggled nightly to make up the work he didn't understand in school, our household turned upside down.

It seemed as though the teachers didn't know what to do to help him. Why didn't we see progress? Many nights I'd look at him sleeping, and wonder why he had such difficulty. I strengthened my resolve to make it better for him.

## Starting Third Grade

Our son has been offered a new program this year. It is a research-based, scientific approach to reading, incorporating methods I've read about and even suggested to the school. Why then am I apprehensive? Because I have finally come to understand my son's disability. In the past, I was looking for the magic potion to cure him. Now I know there isn't one. I know the teachers try to provide appropriate educa-

tion, but they may not have the tools. After two years of educating myself, I've learned it's up to me to guide my son's education. My husband and I have agreed our focus this year will not be trying to get Derek to fit the mold, but to create a new one. We need to devote time to our whole family, not a disability.

We are now one month into the school year and have already applied these principles. Derek came home last week with a failed spelling test. How did this happen? He's reading better, has classroom support, and works with a tutor each week. When Derek started to give me an excuse for the failure, I asked him to tell me the conditions surrounding the test. I called all three teachers. In the past I would have been upset, questioning him and the afternoon would have been a disaster. His teachers and I came to an agreement: give the test one-on-one when Derek is in his reading class; have him repeat the word to the teacher, and have him read the word once it's written. These were solutions Derek's tutor and I compiled—not the teachers. At least their flexibility is a step in the right direction. He can repeat the test with his class if he wants to feel part of the group.

One thing I seem to overlook is Derek's positive attitude toward school. His teachers report his good behavior, perseverance, willingness to help, and his compassion toward his classmates. So maybe this is the positive side of a child with learning disabilities. As I watched him teach his younger sister a sight word game, I saw him display these qualities as he encouraged her with praise.

Maybe this will be a great year after all.

## HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Two months into first grade Derek couldn't remember or recognize sight words. I contacted the reading teacher and she didn't seem concerned. We struggled through trying desperately to help him, often ending the night with arguments and feeling that Derek wasn't trying hard enough. Finally in February we were encouraged to have a PPT. My husband and I entered the meeting with hope and confidence in the professionals there. However, the meeting quickly took a different turn when we were told our son had anxiety, was quiet and withdrawn and

should attend a support group during lunch. I thought the meeting was a formality for testing. As I sat quietly and listened, I felt a voice from deep inside insisting, "No, that's not it." My son wasn't unable to read because he was anxious, he was anxious because he was unable to read. It was the first step I took in advocating for my child. After demanding testing it was revealed that he had a superior IQ but performed at an average level. The professionals told me it was developmental. We felt abandoned by the system we trusted all year.