

“DON’T ACCEPT ANYONE’S VERDICT THAT YOU ARE LAZY, STUPID, OR RETARDED”

(The author stands as proof that youngsters can overcome learning disabilities.)

By former Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller

Those watching the Public Broadcasting Service program on “*The Puzzle Children*” Will include a very interesting Vice-President of the United States.

For I was one of the “puzzle children” myself—a dyslexic, or “reverse reader”—and I still have a hard time reading today.

But after coping with this problem for more than 60 years, I have a message of encouragement for children with learning disabilities—and their parents.

Based on my own experience, my message to dyslexic children is this:

— Don’t accept anyone’s verdict that you are lazy, stupid, or retarded. You may very well be smarter than most other children your age.

— Just remember Woodrow Wilson, Albert Einstein, and Leonardo da Vinci also had tough problems with their reading.

— You can learn to cope with your problem and turn your so called disability into a positive advantage.

Dyslexia forced me to develop powers of concentration that have been invaluable throughout my career in business, philanthropy, and public life.

And I’ve done an enormous amount of reading and public speaking, especially in political campaigns for Governor of New York and President of the United States.

No one had ever heard of dyslexia when I discovered as a boy, along about the third grade, that reading was such a difficult chore that I was in the bottom one-third of my class.

None of the educational, medical and psychological help available today for dyslexics was available in those days.

We had no special teachers or tutors, no special classes or courses, no special methods of teaching—because nobody understood our problem.

Along with an estimated three million other children, I just struggled to understand words that seemed to garble before my eyes, numbers that came out backwards, sentences that were hard to grasp.

And so I accepted the verdict of the IQ tests that I wasn’t as bright as most of the rest of my class at the Lincoln School in New York City.

Fortunately for me, the school (though it never taught me to spell) was an experimental, progressive institution with the flexibility to let you develop your own interests and follow them.

More to the point, I had a wise and understanding counselor in Dr. Otis W. Caldwell, the headmaster.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “just because you’re in the lower third of the class. You’ve got the intelligence. If you just work harder and concentrate more, you can make it.”

So I learned, through self-discipline, to concentrate, which in my opinion is essential for a dyslexic.

While I could speak better French than the teacher, because I’d learned it as a child, I couldn’t conjugate the verbs; I did flunk Spanish—but now can speak it fluently because I learned it by ear, later, at the Berlitz School.

My best subject was mathematics: I understood concepts well beyond my grade level. But it took only one reversed number in a column of figures to cause havoc.

When I came close to flunking out in the ninth grade—because I didn’t work very hard that year—I decided that I had better follow Dr. Caldwell’s advice if I wanted to go to college.

I even told my high school girl friend that we would have to stop dating so I could spend the time studying in order to get into Dartmouth.

And I made it by the skin of my teeth.

I made it simply by working harder and longer than the rest—eventually learning to concentrate sufficiently to compensate for my dyslexia in reading.

I adopted a regimen of getting up at 5 a.m. to study, and studying without fail. And thanks to my concentration and the very competitive nature I was born with, I found my academic performance gradually improving.

In my freshman year at Dartmouth, I was even admitted to a third-year physics course. And in the middle of my sophomore year, I received two A's and three B's for the first semester. My father's letters were filled with joy and astonishment.

I owe a great debt to my professors and to President Ernest M. Hopkins. I had met Dr. Hopkins earlier and was so impressed that I made Dartmouth my goal. Most of all, however, I think I owe my academic improvement to my roommate, Johnny French.

Johnny and I were exact opposites. He was reticent, and had the highest IQ in the class. To me, he was that maddening type who got straight A's with only occasional reference to books or classes. He was absolutely disgusted by my study habits—anybody who got up at 5 in the morning to hit the books was, well, peculiar.

Inevitably, Johnny made Phi Beta Kappa in our junior year, but my competitive instincts kept me going. We were both elected to senior fellowships and I made Phi Beta Kappa in my senior year.

Johnny, of course, had the last word. He announced that he would never wear his PBK key again—that it had lost all meaning.

Looking back over the years, I remember vividly the pain and mortification I felt as a boy of 8, when I was assigned to read a short passage of Scripture at a community vesper service during summer vacation in Main—and did a thoroughly miserable job of it.

I know what a dyslexic child goes through—the frustration of not being able to do what other children do easily, the humiliation of being thought not too bright when such is not the case at all.

My personal discoveries as to what is required to cope with dyslexia could be summarized in these admonitions to the individual dyslexic:

- ▶ Accept the fact that you have a problem—don't just try to hide it.
- ▶ Refuse to feel sorry for yourself.
- ▶ Realize that you don't have an excuse—you have a challenge.
- ▶ Face the challenge.
- ▶ Work harder and learn mental discipline—the capacity for total concentration—and
- ▶ Never Quit.

If it helps a dyslexic to know I went through the same thing...

- ▶ But can conduct press conferences today in three languages...
- ▶ And can read a speech on television
- ▶ (Though I may have to rehearse it six times...
- ▶ (With my script in large type...
- ▶ (And my sentences broken into segments like these...
- ▶ (And long words broken into syllables)...
- ▶ And to win Congressional confirmation as Vice President of the United States...

Then I hope the telling of my story as a dyslexic child could be an inspiration to the “puzzle children”—for that's what I really care about.

By Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller (“The Puzzle Children,” was a special on learning disabilities telecast on most PBS stations. It was hosted by Julie Andrews and Bill Bixby.)