

Overcoming the Stigma of the Learning Disability Label: A Story of Survival and Recovery

Shaking, trembling, heart racing, forehead sweating, a six-year-old boy sits nervously in the front row of a typical first grade classroom alongside 25 students, with his head down, hoping to God the teacher won't call on him to answer yet another question - a question that his mind will not allow him to answer; let alone process. Slowly, he glances to his left, and in the corner of his eye sees Gus, a short and stocky kid with a buzz cut. Gus may not be the best student in the class, but he definitely has much confidence in his ability to tease and torment the emotionally and physically weak.

The boy then glances to his right and sees Cindy, a pretty child by all accounts, raising her hand high in the air, yet again, to answer another question correctly. Everyone knows that Cindy is smart.

Gus is now sitting with his fists clenched. He glares with an intimidating stare that the boy has come to know all too well.

With his heart racing faster, and sweat now streaming down his forehead, the boy looks up in front of him at the large clock on the wall above the chalkboard. There are only 15 minutes remaining before the 2:30 afternoon recess, a time the boy has come to dread. At recess, he knows that he will have to endure yet another 20 minutes of physical bullying and verbal teasing from Gus. With his head spinning, fearing what will happen to him both emotionally and physically once he steps foot outside on the playground, the boy hears the teacher call his name.

"What is 5+4," asks the teacher to the boy.

"5+4?" asks the boy"

Yes, 5+4...are you not paying attention?"

As the boy wipes the sweat from his brow, he glances up ever-so-slowly at the teacher, and with tears running down his hot, rosy cheeks, shakily utters the words, "I don't know, ma'am."

With a look of utter disappointment, the teacher sternly looks to the boy's right and asks Cindy the very same question..

"5+4 is 9," Cindy replies, with confidence in her voice and a smug, pretentious smile on her face.

Gus, again, turns his head to his left, looks the boy square in the eye, and strongly whispers the words only the boy can hear: "God, you're so dumb."

The boy's heart sinks, as the self-fulfilling prophecy has now become a stark reality. With tears dripping from his watery eyes, he mutters the words softly to himself: "I know I am dumb. I'm really, really, really dumb."

I can recall this day so vividly, for it was the first day of a long and arduous road that, at the young and tender age of six, I was unprepared to endure. My utter lack of confidence in my intellectual ability was evident by my timid body language, which made me vulnerable to teasing and bullying from the other students in my class who,

for the most part, had the inner confidence that I so badly wished I possessed.

As a direct result, I had few friends, and I was perceived by my first grade teacher as being a child who was incapable of ever "succeeding" academically in the classroom setting. It was then that I was given the label "learning disabled." From that day forward, I was looked down upon by my peers as being "stupid" and "dumb;" a feeling that stayed with me for many years to come. The social rejection I experienced made it difficult for me to even function in the classroom setting.

Many others can relate to this brief "snapshot" of my early years growing up with a label in the public school system. Many others who, without any fault of their own, grew up with the utterly hopeless and empty feeling that they would never amount to anything after having been slapped with a life-long label. It is true that once you are labeled, you are always labeled, and the mental anguish one goes through from that point forward can only be poetically expressed by the person who experiences it for himself.

However, I can say now, after 27 tireless years, that there is, in fact, hope for all of those individuals who have been told they can't learn. I am one of many success stories and have proven "them" wrong. And after having earned a Bachelor's degree in elementary education and a Master's degree in special education from accredited universities, I can now lift my head high and say without a moment of hesitation that I did it! So with the risk of sounding too cliché, there is, indeed, "light at the end of the tunnel" to each and every child out there who has feelings of hopelessness and despair. And there is, indeed, hope to every loving parent who has a child who has been diagnosed with a learning disability.

And to each and every one of those parents whose child has been diagnosed with a learning disability, I have a very simple, yet valuable message to deliver to you. Plato once said, "The direction in which an education starts, a man will determine his future life." True, your child may have been diagnosed as being "learning disabled," but the direction he takes from that point forward rests solely on your shoulders and yours alone. Despite my label, my parents believed in me from the moment I was labeled until the moment I earned my Master's degree, almost three decades later. And so if you do the same for your child, I have every confidence that he'll be more successful in life than you ever dreamed possible. Learning disabilities can be overcome.

So that is my advice to you. Believe in your child and advocate for the best educational program possible. It is possible for your child to overcome the label "disabled" just like I did. From there your child will soar to heights beyond what anyone expected when the label "disabled" was assigned. A label is just that; a label. It doesn't have to be a life-sentence.

About the Author

Craig P. Gibson has a B.A. in elementary education and an M.S. in special education. He works as the Lead Evaluator for Elwyn, Inc., where he evaluates children for early intervention services in Chester, Pennsylvania. Additionally, Craig enjoys speaking to groups about his experiences growing up with a label, and has spoken at several colleges and universities in the Philadelphia area. Craig can be reached at craig.gibson@comcast.net.

Citation for this Article:

Gibson, C. P. (2008). Overcoming the stigma of the learning disability label: A story of survival and recovery.

ACA Special Education News, Article LD-8-3.

Permission is granted by the author and publisher to reproduce and distribute this article for non-profit educational use.

Academic Communication Associates, Inc.

P.O. Box 4279

Oceanside, CA 92052-4279

website: acadcom.com

ACA Special Education News -Copyright 2008 by Academic Communication Associates

Easy to remember connection to the home page of the ACA WEBSITE: www.acawebsite.com

Academic Communication Associates - Publisher of Language, Speech and Special Education Resources