

## Hope for dyslexics

**Dyslexia is not just a learning difficulty, it can have a severe impact on health. But an American treatment new to Britain is proving successful.**

Brigid McConville **reports.**

Dyslexia, commonly regarded as a learning difficulty, can also have a profound impact on health and well-being. One in ten people is said to have some form of the condition, which can, in severe cases, mean living in a topsy-turvy world.

Esther Nosworthy, a bright 11-year-old from Weston-super-Mare, grew up thinking that it was normal for objects to spin through three dimensions. "When I went into my room everything tilted and twirled," she says, demonstrating with a book.

This dizzying form of perception meant that Esther could not balance on one foot, ride a bike, catch a ball, or even walk downstairs without difficulty. "I always put my heel to the back of the step because I didn't know which bit was down and which along," she says. At school she was on the special needs register, "The letters jiggled and moved as I was reading. I could say the words but they didn't mean anything. I couldn't spell or do punctuation."

At night sleep evaded her until her parents went to bed; almost every day she suffered "flaring lights and colours" that Beverley, her mother, assumed were migraines.

Then Beverley heard about the Davis Dyslexia Correction Programme, devised in America in 1982 by Ron Davis, a dyslexic. The programme, which involves a week's intensive one-to-one tuition and counselling, claims a remarkable 97 per cent success rate, although Davis Dyslexia Association International concedes that its programme does not lend itself well to measurement. After all, how do you measure self-confidence?

The basis of the programme is that people such as Esther think in three-dimensional pictures, rather than in words. On one hand, this can bring extraordinary talents and creativity. On the other, it means that until they learn to control their 'mind's eye', they can suffer from the whirling disorientation that made the world such an alarming place for Esther.

Also, it means that every time they read an abstract word such as 'the' (which they cannot picture) they experience a mental blankness. With 217 of these 'trigger words' (so-called because they trigger confusion) in English, almost every sentence is confusing. The practical basis of the Davis remedy is to model key words in clay.

Esther began the programme in February 1998. "On my first day I started to control my mind's eye and did the whole alphabet in clay," she says. "Then I modelled trigger words like 'they', with two figures standing together. Now when I read 'they', that is what I see."

Next Esther tackled the previously baffling concept of time. “Before, I couldn’t tell the time, except on a digital clock, and I couldn’t say the months in order. But we made a big model of the Earth, Sun, and Moon, and it’s clear in my mind now.” For many dyslexics order and disorder are another big issue, as they were for Esther. “I could never get my clothes on the right way around, so I made a model of me with my knickers on my head and my jumper round my knees!” she says. “Then I made one of me looking smart. After that I could get it right.”

Esther learnt other techniques such as ‘release’, to reduce tension. “I modelled my hand clutching a bee, and my other hand open with the bee flying out. Now if I can’t do my homework, I think about that, just for a second, then I can do it.”

Esther also has a mental ‘dial’ (her chosen image was the switch on the family oven) to regulate her energy. “If I’m working at school, I set it at five. For PE, I turn it up to ten, but if I’m getting really hyper I turn it down again.” At bedtime she sets her dial at one – and falls asleep without delay.

Esther’s tutor is Hilary Farmer, who in 1997 became the first Davis practitioner in Britain (11 are now listed on the Davis website, with some 30 more in training). She says all but two of the 100 clients she has worked with claim that they benefited from the course.

Farmer compares the Davis method to complementary therapy. “We tackle the causes of the dyslexia. As I understand it, we are creating new neural pathways while helping clients to understand and take control of their own thought processes.”

“The theory is that modelling a word, together with the client’s image of its dictionary definition, while also speaking it aloud unites its written form, meaning and sound. Words that were once disorientating blanks are replaced by images, and the dyslexic finally gets the full picture of what is on the printed page.”

Despite its cost (£1,250, including assessment, tuition and long-term support and follow-up), Farmer has always had a waiting list and has recently expanded her practice to include two trained colleagues.

The dyslexia ‘establishment’ has given the Davis method a qualified welcome. Carol Orton, the policy information manager of the British Dyslexia Association (BDA), says: “We certainly don’t discount it. BDA teachers do adopt Davis strategies very successfully.” But she is less convinced about the Davis assessment methods, and thinks liaison with schools could be better.

Farmer replies: “We are only too willing to liaise with schools where they are receptive, and some children now receive their follow-up support in schools.” And, as other Davis clients testify, the programme goes far deeper than literacy and numeracy skills. Anita, aged 14, says: “Dyslexia makes you an outcast, and people think you are dumb – but we’re smart, we just think differently. It’s like racism; people are prejudiced.”

A year ago she was labelled a wild child, smoking, drinking and in deep trouble. “Then she twice tried to kill herself,” says Lily, her mother. Anita began the Davis programme in February last year. “The change in her is almost miraculous,” says Lily.

“She is walking 6in taller, she wants to go to school, she has clear goals – and we haven’t had a row since the course began.”

Anita says, “I sometimes have a bad day, but I don’t let myself slip away into a corner any more.”

Dan, too, was in big trouble by his early teens. He began playing truant from school and was soon on probation for offences that included car theft and burglary. Having tried time and again to get help, even through her MP, Emily, his mother, was attempting to take her local education authority to court for failing to meet Dan’s educational needs. “It was the LEA that suggested that he try the Davis programme,” she says. “After the first session, he was standing upright, his shoulders back.”

Dan, now aged 16, says: “Jo [Farmer’s colleague] understood how I think. She helped me to keep calm and to make the right choices, so I didn’t get into any trouble.”

As for Esther, Beverley Nosworthy says: “She is a different child. She came home from the programme, stood on one foot and caught two balls at the same time. A few weeks later she could ride a bike. All our family stress and frustration has eased.”

Esther’s confidence has soared, she adds, pointing to the framed merit certificates on the wall. “She has been taken off the special needs register and her teachers says you wouldn’t know she was dyslexic.”

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