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Building My Son's Self-Esteem

When my child was identified with LD, I worried about how I was going to build and maintain his self-esteem.

By Fellissa Richard

A few years ago, I noticed my 15-year-old son was struggling with spelling, writing, and remembering words. After reading up on the subject, I began to suspect Buddy might have dyslexia. I talked to his teachers about my concerns, and, shortly after that, the school tested him. The results showed he had a learning disability (LD) in written language.

After his LD was identified, Buddy questioned his abilities even more. He said he felt more "stupid" than ever. He wanted to give up, and I started to panic. I worried about how I was going to build and maintain his self-esteem and motivate him to do well in school. How could I help him overcome his misperceptions about his LD?

Motivating My Son

Throughout the past three years, I've tried to figure out what works and what doesn't. I've learned that what may work one year doesn't necessarily work the next. This hasn't been easy, but I know what I need to do to support Buddy, even on those days that don't go smoothly for either of us.

- **Talk to him.** I often [talk to Buddy about LD](#). I show him examples of the many [successful people](#) who've learned to manage its challenges. I let him know LD doesn't discriminate; people from different cultures and backgrounds have similar problems. I phrase it positively and let him know he's not alone.
- **Focus on how smart he is.** Every chance I get, I let Buddy know how smart I think he is and what I believe he can accomplish. As a team, his school and I developed a system that works well. Each day, Buddy brings home an assignment chart we review together. This gives us a starting point to help him be successful with his homework assignments. Because I believe in him, he's learning to believe in himself.
- **Identify his strengths.** I try to appreciate everything Buddy does well. I often remind him of his many talents. He's an outstanding artist and musician. One day at a music store, he just picked up a guitar and started playing it without ever taking a lesson. Not many people are able to do that!
- **Celebrate his successes with words.** I don't believe in buying gifts for every achievement. Kids really need to talk to their parents and be able to express their feelings in a safe environment. Buddy

gets constant reminders that I'm proud of him. He knows he has my support. I try to recognize his small successes, as well as his big achievements.

Staying Positive.

Realistically, there are some days I doubt my own ability to support my son. To help me get through the more difficult times and stay motivated and confident, I tell myself what's really important, such as:

- **Devotion to my son.** I want my child to succeed, and I need to make it happen for him. I know my child best, so I am his greatest advocate. Even though he's now in high school, I'm there for him - at conferences with teachers, IEP meetings, contacts with other professionals in his life, and other occasions when he needs a "cheerleader."
- **Continuing knowledge.** The more I understand about learning disabilities, the more hope I have for Buddy. As I continue to learn, I understand my son better and show him more patience when he's having a hard time. I've learned not to ask him to "try harder"; now I help him find a different way to try. This helps me keep things in perspective on the tough days.
- **Growth and change.** Over the years, Buddy has become more mature and less defensive about his LD. This has altered the way he reacts when he's upset. In turn, I have to remember to be sensitive to those changes and modify my responses to him.
- **Role modeling.** How can I expect Buddy to stay motivated if I'm not? I show him I have complete confidence in him and his abilities and help him learn how to handle disappointments. I need to make sure my actions match my words.

I know there are no easy solutions, but Buddy and I have faith in each other. Each day we remind ourselves of the hopes and dreams we share for the future.