

# Going the Dys-tance

Supporting children with  
learning disorders

by Ellis Friedman

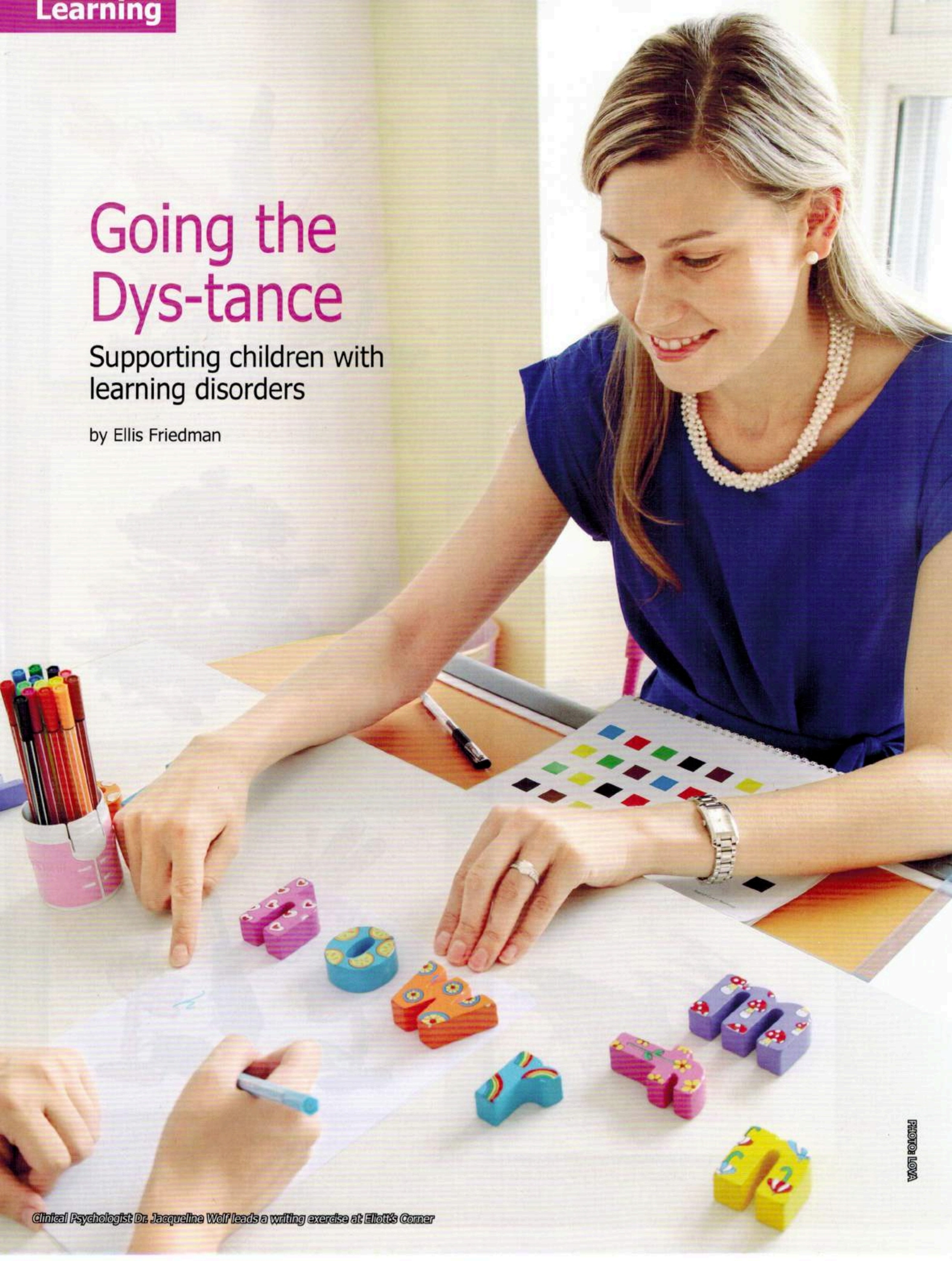


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**“Our aim is to teach the child ... the aim will always be increasing independence and confidence within their abilities”**

**W**hile starting a new school year isn't thrilling to most kids, it can be even more difficult for students with learning disorders. Most local schools lack support for children with learning and attention difficulties, and support can be limited or too general at international schools. For insight into learning disorders, the diagnostic process, and how local programs can work with kids, we spoke to Elliott's Corner, a center for occupational, speech, and physical therapy, and Side by Side, a center that provides support for special needs and learning difficulties.

### What Are Learning Disorders?

According to Clinical Psychologists Dr. Jaqueline Wolf and Danielle Speybrouck from Elliott's Corner, learning disorders are different from typical developmental difficulties in that specific learning disorders are experienced in reading, writing, and/or math. Learning disorders are present for at least six months and persistent, meaning that a child's skills don't progress or progress very slowly despite standard academic instruction and specific intervention. A child with a specific learning disorder also performs well below the skill level expected for their age group.

Common learning disorders include dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia. Dyslexia is an alternative term for specific learning difficulties in reading. This includes trouble with phonological awareness, word decoding, spelling, word recognition, and sounding out a word. Dyscalculia is difficulty understanding and mastering math and numbers, while dysgraphia is difficulty with handwriting and written language.

Specific learning disorders often co-occur and overlap with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD). Anita Franklin is a special education and learning support specialist, as well as the owner and director of Side by Side Beijing; she holds Master's degrees in both education and applied linguistics. An attention disorder like AD/HD means that "a child has difficulty concentrating, keeping still, keeping on task, multi-tasking, and attending to certain tasks." While AD/HD is not classified as a learning disorder, it can affect learning because "sometimes children take too long to complete tasks, they are too fast and rush their work, distract others, or are distracted by others. They also may not follow directions, especially multi-step directions, well."

AD/HD has specifications or subcategories, say Speybrouck and Dr. Wolf. These include Predominantly Inattentive Presentation, commonly known as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), which involves difficulty with sustaining attention, organization, task completion, avoidance of tedious activities, carelessness, forgetfulness, and high distractibility.

By contrast, Predominantly Hyperactive/Impulsive Presentation involves fidgeting, restlessness, high activity levels, chattiness, impul-

sivity, and poor behavioral inhibition. Finally, Predominantly Inattentive Presentation involves a child daydreaming in class and having difficulty focusing. This is often a more difficult presentation to diagnose, and tends to be diagnosed later than others as a result.

The most common specific learning disorder is in reading; about 80 percent of all learning disorders are reading-specific. The prevalence rate of learning disorders falls between five and 15 percent among all school-aged children, with a five percent prevalence of AD/HD. Specific learning disorders and AD/HD are more common in boys than in girls, but girls are more likely to present with Predominantly Inattentive Presentation and are thus often diagnosed at a later age.

### Diagnosis

There are things that parents can look for if they suspect their child has a learning disorder and/or AD/HD. According to Speybrouck and Dr. Wolf, younger children with AD/HD demonstrate more obvious hyperactive behavior as early as age 2 or 3, but adolescents or adults are better able to inhibit such behavior. Teens and adults may also fidget instead of not being able to sit still, or have racing thoughts rather than restlessness.

For specific learning disorders, Speybrouck and Dr. Wolf point to precursors like language delays, difficulties rhyming or learning the alphabet by kindergarten, early difficulties learning to count or identify numbers, difficulties drawing, or difficulties with fine motor skills, such as fastening buttons or using eating utensils.

The diagnostic process usually begins with a teacher or a parent expressing concern about a child's skill acquisition during the early elementary years. Parents can start the diagnostic process by contacting a child psychologist or educational psychologist who has experience with assessments. At Elliott's Corner, the assessment process includes gathering the child's early academic, social, emotional, and behavioral history; having a psychologist visit the child's classroom to observe them and talk with their teacher; evaluating the child's cognitive abilities in broad and specific subjects; completing emotional-behavioral evaluations for AD/HD assessments; and discussing results and recommendations with the psychologist.

### Meeting a Child's Needs

Once a child is diagnosed with a learning disorder and/or AD/HD, they will require extra support. "None of these disabilities have cures," says Anita Franklin. "It's important that my clients don't come to rely on my assistance too much. The aim is always to increase independence and confidence within their abilities." Side by Side designs individual programs for children based on their specific difficulties and consults



*A common learning disorder is dyscalculia, or difficulty understanding and mastering math and numbers*

teachers, parents, and previous reports. The center also observes the child's difficulties before placing them in a specific program.

When Franklin works with clients, she finds that chocolate sauce makes an excellent teaching tool. The children's favorite is a multisensory activity for spelling. First, the student uses the chocolate sauce to spell a given word on a cookie tray, saying the letters out loud as they're written down. Once the word is spelled correctly, the student uses both hands to smear the chocolate sauce all over the tray. They then use a finger, a pretzel stick, or a similar tool to write the word a second time, again while saying the letters out loud. Franklin may ask them to write the word big or small, in capital or lowercase letters, or even while blindfolded. Once the word is spelled correctly, the student can lick the sauce or bite off the pretzel as a reward; if the word is spelled incorrectly, the sauce is smeared out and the child starts over.

This activity is designed to engage all the senses. Children hear the letters as they're called out, see them as they appear on the tray, smell the chocolate sauce, touch the chocolate or pretzel as they write the word, and taste the chocolate sauce at the end. "The more senses are integrated into a session, the more likely the lesson will be remembered," says Franklin. "And if it's fun, it's even more likely."

Philip Schiffers also works at Side by Side. He's a social worker, music therapist, and special needs support worker with a degree in

social work and music therapy. He uses music therapy to help children overcome attention-related difficulties. Music can help improve concentration and focus when a child is challenged to play a melody for a specific period of time without any mistakes. Once the child can manage this, they have to learn another melody and play it for an even longer duration.

A child with a learning difficulty will need adjustments in the classroom as well. According to Speybrouck and Dr. Wolf, a student will need increased organization and structure; strategies for organization, planning, and self-monitoring; decreased demands for speed for children with specific learning disorders; and access to learning support services. Side by Side can act as a valuable resource for children in schools with inadequate learning support. "Our aim is to help our clients work within the school system, so sometimes we deliberately add distractions to help the child develop strategies, and we like giving and getting feedback from students, parents, and schools," says Franklin.

Constant communication between the school and the parents is key. Side by Side provides progress reports and is available to answer questions from both teachers and parents. Parents of children may also find that they need to tailor their approach. "It can be that parents need to improve their ability to give directions or let the child handle more tasks by [themselves]," says Schiffers. Franklin points out that



*Dysgraphia is defined as a learning disorder in which kids have difficulty with handwriting and written language*

parents of children with attention issues will need to be more patient. Speybrock and Dr. Wolf also recommend that parents break the cycle of negativity by praising their child for a job well done when appropriate, even if they demonstrate behavioral issues or academic problems.

Parents may themselves benefit from a consultation with a child psychologist or learning support specialist to find out more about stimulating a child's at-home development, set up a strategy such as a reward system, and advocate for a supportive learning environment at school.

While medication is sometimes an option for children, Franklin says that "children are capable of learning strategies to work with their issues and these strategies can help them in a lot of areas where medication can't." Schiffers agrees: "[Whether] a child with ADD or AD/HD needs medication is not for us to decide. We believe that medication often gets prescribed too soon and shouldn't be the first choice for parents who realize that their child has AD/HD."

Currently, Elliott's Corner offers learning disorder assessments and reading support, as well as the services of occupational therapists who work with children with dysgraphia. They also provide assessments for behavioral and emotional issues and coping strategies for managing AD/HD, but currently don't offer any learning support services. Side by Side Beijing offers a wide range of special education classes, as well

as music therapy; learning support for learning difficulties, AD/HD, and a number of other disorders; and community support, including workshops and training for schools and parents, and parenting and family support.

## Resources

### Elliott's Corner 胡宝小屋

Mon-Fri 9am-6pm. Rm 1905, Bldg 2, Kandu International, 10 Dongsihuan Beilu, Chaoyang District (6461 6283, [contact@oliviasplace.org](mailto:contact@oliviasplace.org)) [www.oliviasplace.org](http://www.oliviasplace.org) 朝阳区东四环北路10号 瞰都国际2号楼1905

### Side by Side

Mon-Fri 8am-6pm (after hours by appointment). Capital Paradise 3336, Houshayu, Shunyi District (8046 3858, [info@sidebyside-beijing.com](mailto:info@sidebyside-beijing.com)) [www.sidebysidebeijing.com](http://www.sidebysidebeijing.com) 顺义区后沙峪名都园 3336号