

Saturday 14th Oct

Isaac aged 5

Let me tell you about this photo. This photo was taken 5 years ago on the first day in his life that Isaac was not in my sole care, it was his first day at nursery. This photo is jumping 'across' tree stumps in your first pair of giant leather school shoes. This photo is brave. This photo used to break my heart. This photo is 'neurodiversity'. This photo is 'why didn't we get his hair cut?' This photo is a funny, smart, determined little boy. This photo is Dyspraxia. This is what a 'hidden disability' looks like.

This week is Dyspraxia Awareness week. Dyspraxia is a neurological condition that Isaac was diagnosed with this year. Nobody really knows what causes it beyond an immaturity of neurone development and, as with all types of neurodiversity, it is different for everyone. I asked the Dyspraxia Foundation for a handy infographic to share and there aren't any good ones because it is so complex. But there is no-one with Dyspraxia who doesn't struggle physically, emotionally and socially almost every day. Given 5-10% of people are believed to have some degree of Dyspraxia I couldn't believe I had never heard of it.

Having Dyspraxia mainly means that the signals between your brain and body don't work quickly or reliably. Not only does this impact gross and fine motor skills making the 'simplest' things such as walking, playing in a playground, holding a pen or doing up buttons a frequent struggle, it also means that compromised signals to the mouth and tongue muscles can mean, as with Isaac, that speaking clearly enough to be understood can be hard work, almost to the point you may stop bothering. It also means your 'vestibular' system (eye movements and balance) is a bit wonky and you have very low levels of proprioception – the unconscious perception of movement and spacial orientation that most of us take for granted. Imagine not having a sense that gravity is holding you in place. Imagine going somewhere new and just not having a sense of where you are in relation to any 'landmarks'. It is hard to feel truly safe. Staying in often feels like the safer bet.

Dyspraxia has no bearing on intelligence but school can be so problematic that the greatest negative impact of Dyspraxia is the 'frequently observed chasm between academic potential and achievement'. Imagine having an A4 worksheet to complete for homework. Even though the work is pretty easy the sheet leaves little room for your giant messy writing so you struggle to fill it in, rubbing out over and over again until your hand aches and your eyes are filled with tears. Then you have no idea how to fit it into your satchel so you just shove it in and it crumples up and the next morning the teacher makes you complete it all over again 'neatly this time' because you should have 'more pride in your work'. That's Isaac. Or having a clear talent for Maths but always scoring poorly in tests because you struggle with a ruler and your problems with sequencing mean you have got to the age of 'almost 8' without knowing your alphabet or whether 11 or 12 comes after 10. Being Isaac is tiring. Organisation, planning, short term memory, and concentration are all

compromised meaning the demands of a new timetable, a new sort of exercise book, remembering your homework and exams are all magnified. Don't get me started on Games lessons, or even getting changed for Games, or carrying all the kit from the car to the changing room for that matter. Or Sports Day. It is exhausting, and it knocks your confidence every day so it is very easy to start saying 'no' to things. Every time you say 'no' and everyone else you know says 'yes' you fall that little bit more behind and become that little bit more isolated. Making and keeping friends can be hard if you lack confidence and you can't communicate easily or keep up with the games your friends play. You are always, always 'it'. The fun doesn't stop there though because a huge number of Dyspraxics, including Isaac, also have 'joint laxity' and hypotonia – basically they're very bendy and don't build muscle easily. So on the way to assembly, where naturally you're at the very back of the line because it took you ages to get things back in your pencil case and put it in your desk, you might be teased for your 'funny walk' and then once you get there you are told off in front of the whole school for slouching because your lack of core strength makes it really uncomfortable to sit up straight.

In addition, it is common for Dyspraxia to sit alongside Dyslexia, ADHD, autism or like Isaac, Sensory Processing Disorder. Isaac's SPD means that whilst he has a heightened sensitivity to light, smell and sound which can make the world feel stressful and scary, he also has an unusually low sensitivity to pain. It is a blessing in some ways given that he falls over every single day and his joint laxity makes him more prone to snapping a bone. However, trying to get medical staff to take us seriously when he's barely wincing has meant that each of his 3 broken bones in the last 3 years has taken a week to be diagnosed and treated.

When he's older, organizing himself for University lectures, learning to drive, tidying his house, finding and maintaining the right job, navigating to somewhere new, going on dates are all likely to require a herculean effort on his part. Anxiety and depression can easily follow. All kids need 'down time' and none more so than one with dyspraxia whose energy supplies are depleted just by everyday life. But instead, the 'lucky ones' like Isaac also have a weekly schedule that includes Occupational Therapy, Speech Therapy, drum lessons, touch typing and the management of a myriad of brightly coloured bits of 'kit'. Starting these 'interventions' early enough can help with the physical challenges of Dyspraxia so they are 'less impactful' in adulthood but none of these therapies are available on the NHS except in the most severe of cases.

Either way, Dyspraxia doesn't ever go away.

But it is not all doom and gloom. Daniel Radcliff, Ed Sheeran, Cara Delavigne and Cara Delavigne's eyebrows are all dyspraxic. I love the idea that they may all still be rocking an elasticated waistband. There are many strengths to this 'diversity' - tenacity, the habit of trying hard, *all* the time, amazing visual perception to compensate for the lack of special awareness, great long-term memory, compassion, creativity, the list goes on. And of course, just like these superstars, my superstar is so much more than the challenges and

advantages that are a result of this slight 'neurodivergence'. He's also a lovely, sweaty little boy who likes fish, archery, pizza, science, Roblox and Pokemon and has an amazing giggle, most often heard immediately after one of his 'awesome' burps.

I don't have a punchy ending for this but I'm grateful that you're interested enough to have stayed with me. Thank you. It would be great if Isaac could grow up in a world that treats him with a little more patience and understanding. Compared to many with 'disabilities' (I prefer 'differences'), hidden or otherwise, Isaac has it very very easy. His Dyspraxia is fairly mild. He will be fine. But there are many with less support and fewer resources than us who could do with being shown a lot more kindness and being a cut a little bit more slack here or there. Isaac and all your fellow Fantastic Dyspraxics, I salute you.

If you want an official 'at a glance' version you can get it here
<https://dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk/about-dyspraxia/dyspraxia-glance/>