

Dyslexia becomes lost in translation

BY RAIZEL DRUXMAN

VANESSA RADOM made aliyah in 2006, with her husband, Mark and their four young children. Like other olim, they knew they would encounter challenges but they did not realise that one of these would be their daughter's dyslexia, which would not be diagnosed for seven years.

Dyslexia affects one in five children, according to an ongoing Yale study. It causes children to struggle with reading, comprehension, writing and spelling. However, they also have average-to-superior intelligence, are particularly creative and out-of-the-box thinkers and have a strong motivation to succeed.

Although dyslexia is so common, there is little awareness of it in the Israeli school system. When a child with dyslexia tries to learn a second language, it takes longer to identify that the challenge is coming from the dyslexia.

It was years before Radom worked out how to help her daughter, Liora. "As an olah it is particularly tricky," says Radom, "because there is an expectation that learning Hebrew for a non-native will be difficult."

Rinat Green, a psychologist, noticed

this challenge when she came to Israel. She founded Kol Koreh, a non-profit organisation aimed at increasing education and providing resources for kids with dyslexia.

"Kids with dyslexia who are trying to learn two languages have to master and break the code for two languages that have different coding systems," she says. "It overwhelms the system."

Dyslexia should be tackled as early as possible. "Researchers have discovered that when given appropriate and proven intervention at a young age, the brain can self-correct and begin to use the weak reading areas more efficiently," says Dr Green.

When Liora was in nursery school, the teacher noticed she was not picking up important aspects of Hebrew language and alerted Radom.

An assessment discovered she had processing issues, so Liora repeated nursery school and then attended a class for language development. Although this helped, she still did not have a specific diagnosis and school continued to be a struggle.

It was not until fourth grade, when Radom decided to get Liora a private tutor for English reading and writing, that the root of the issue was uncovered.

"The teacher said: 'We've gone over this 1,000 times and she just isn't getting it. She doesn't look uninterested, she's really struggling,'" Radom recalls.

It was through this tutor that Radom met Dr Green and finally identified Liora's dyslexia.

Dr Green also has children who have dyslexia but because of her background, she knew how to spot it. "I already knew what dyslexia was, so I knew how to help my kids. They have healthy self-esteem, a good social life and a lot of talents I've helped them cultivate," says Dr Green.

Although her own children were lucky, Green started Kol Koreh because she was distraught that many other children were being misunderstood and did not have the tools they needed.

"Many bright and talented kids grow up feeling that they are not smart or capable, because teachers are not trained in knowing how to cater to the specific needs of students with dyslexia," says Green.

Radom experienced this with Liora. "She actually felt illiterate and hated school, and that's the last thing a person making aliyah wants for their kid," Radom says.

Dr Green advises families to spend money on private tutoring only if the

tutor has been trained in a proven method of teaching reading to dyslexic pupils. Radom's daughter herself told her that she was wasting money on the tutors. "They were never dealing with her dyslexia," says Radom. "They were dealing with a generic learning issue so it was always a guess: 'Should I teach it slower? Should I repeat this another 100 times?'"

Dyslexia often goes hand in hand with anxiety because kids with dyslexia excel in so many other areas and just think something is wrong with them.

"We want to minimise the kids' anxiety by focusing on areas of strength and help them own their disability so they can advocate on their own behalf," says Dr Green. Radom helped Liora develop her other talents even before they discovered she was dyslexic. "She's an artist," Radom says. "She paints beautiful work and is a creative thinker."

Radom hopes that with the influx of future olim, dyslexia intervention will become the norm in Israeli schools.

"It's more likely that change will come from the new olim. They will fight for the resources that they are accustomed to getting and know are available," says Radom. Education and awareness of dyslexia is crucial to ensuring Radom's story becomes an anomaly, not the norm. With Dr Green's determination,

Kol Koreh will soon be able to help kids get the evidence-based, intensive intervention that they need starting at a young age. As Dr Green says: "No one ever regrets starting early."

HELP IN CLASS

1. Allow students to photocopy text or take a photograph of the blackboard instead of having to hand-write notes.
2. Organise a rota among students in the class for daily note-taking. This will also help kids who miss a day of school, not just kids with dyslexia.
3. Give dyslexic students extra time for tests and provide them with a list of key names or locations, to assist them in retrieving information, as they may find this particularly challenging.
4. Do not ask a child with dyslexia to read aloud. Ask their opinion about what is being read.
5. Use text-to-speech and speech-to-text technology, so that their typing or writing pace does not impede their ability to learn.

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