What If It's Not Just AD/HD?

A family's struggle to identify a "hidden" coexisting condition

By Esther Falcetta

"I HATE THIS! I WISH I DIDN'T HAVE TO GO TO SCHOOL! *We do this in school, why do I have to do it at home all over again? Why do I have to learn to read and write cursive, anyway? I already KNOW this!!"*

These statements were regularly articulated by our daughter during the first three years of elementary school. Reading, spelling, and handwriting were frustrating skills for her to develop, at least from our perspective as her parents. However, school standardized testing results did not reflect delayed development or evidence of a learning disability. Ironically, we had also regularly queried our pediatricians about the fact that one of our daughter's eyes seemed to drift and not always focus the same as the other eye. These concerns were dismissed because she never "failed" the acuity/efficiency vision screenings at school or the doctor's office. It is discouraging to remember how many times we were told, "Don't worry, she just might not ever like to read," or "She just might not be a good speller," or "Many kids just have poor handwriting."

Tessa in a recent photograph.

At the beginning of her first-grade year, we took Tessa for an independent exam with a local optometrist, who prescribed glasses. In hindsight, we realize that her handwriting skills were much better during that time. However, when she was in second grade, we again pursued independent examination, this time with an opthalmologist. At the end of a three-hour appointment, we were told to discontinue the use of the glasses because her eyes would become "dependent" and "weak." No one *ever* mentioned anything about visual processing despite our articulated concerns about her academic struggles.

In her third-grade year, our daughter's frustration level skyrocketed due to increased academic workload. Six weeks into the school year, we made the decision to homeschool and enrolled with a state-funded public virtual charter school. Our main goal was to alleviate the stress caused by homework and environmental classroom distractions, with the hope that we could better understand why our daughter was struggling academically. During that same time, we also pursued an evaluation with a well-known researcher who provided us with a diagnosis of AD/HD. For some this diagnosis might bring more stress; for us it was a huge relief! We began implementing strategic interventions such as reduced assignment length, block scheduling, personal planning, and so forth. We also pursued cognitive behavioral therapy and began to see a reduction in her emotional stress responses as we learned the value of developing and fostering emotional intelligence.

While these efforts did begin to alleviate some of the stress related to academic work, she continued to struggle with oral and silent reading, comprehension, math errors, writing, and spelling. We tried everything we could think of, but we were as baffled as her teachers when none of our efforts produced any significant improvement. After three years of unanswered questions and hours of independent research, we stumbled across information about visual processing disorders, often termed "the hidden disability." Two separate evaluations with developmental optometrists yielded the same diagnosis: *convergence insufficiency* (one of several widely accepted and well-researched visual processing disorders).

Almost immediately, we had some much-needed hope and treatment options. Thankfully, our medical insurance covered all but our deductible costs. With this diagnosis, we now understood why the child who constantly asked questions never wanted to work with puzzles or games that required visual strategy skills. Similarly, it was obvious why the child who loved to draw and paint would only scribble on her school worksheets, often using just one color and marking well outside of the lines. Math errors were no longer just "careless mistakes," and we had insight about why she could correctly spell words orally, but would write them with reversals and/or omissions. Equally important, we were no longer experiencing extreme emotional responses due to her personal frustration

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about schoolwork. We also stopped considering her expressions of fatigue and headaches as excuses to "get out of reading" and started working with her proactively because we better understood where and how she was struggling.

We want to stress that appropriate diagnosis and treatment of our daughter's visual processing disorder was NOT a miracle cure for AD/HD. Visual function is only one area that must be comprehensively evaluated. Although she now reads at grade level and with proficient comprehension, our daughter continues to struggle with typical executive function issues in the areas of sequential processing, short-term and working memory, sustaining focus/attention, managing frustration, and regulating her emotional responses. Her written expression work has improved tremendously, and she rarely makes math alignment errors.

We have continued to homeschool, but hope to re-enroll our daughter in the local brick/mortar school system for her seventh-grade year. We use a web-based remediation program for reading fluency/comprehension and have sought additional assistance and support in other academic areas. It is our opinion that she had to "catch up" because she missed so much during the first three years of school. In hindsight, we know that the signs and symptoms were all present, but the solution to many of her academic struggles truly was "hidden."

French philosopher Jean Baudrillard once said, "Information can tell us everything. It has all the answers. But they are answers to questions we have not asked, and which doubtless don't even arise." We knew something was wrong, but didn't know the right questions to ask. We are thankful for CHADD, and the many researchers who are diligently striving to better understand AD/HD, including the presence and effects of coexisting disorders. However, from our personal experience, we understand that a great need exists for increased awareness among the education and medical communities. Regular, comprehensive screening for all aspects of sensory processing is vital and should be part of all early intervention evaluations.

Information really is everything. We encourage parents and caregivers to never stop asking questions. If all you have is a gut instinct, continue to research and seek every possible opinion you can find. Our daughter was not lazy or careless, but she was becoming apathetic and unmotivated to learn. She was beginning to hate school, and our home life was emotionally stressful because of it. We trust that sharing our experiences will provide hope, and create possibilities for our children.

Editor's Note: *Only a qualified professional can diagnose and treat visual processing disorders. Read the joint statement from the Academy of Pediatrics (Section on Ophthalmology, Council on Children with Disabilities), the American Academy of Ophthalmology, the American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus, and the American Association of Certified Orthoptists published in the August 2009 issue of* Pediatrics. *You can access the statement through* help4adhd.org, *the website of CHADD's National Resource Center on AD/HD. Go to the NRC's* Coexisting Conditions *page (from the homepage drop-down box under Diagnosis & Treatment); under Other Web Sites, click on* Learning Disabilities, Dyslexia, and Vision.