



Why Audiobooks?

Why Access to Audiobooks is Critical to Success

A Ramp, not a Crutch

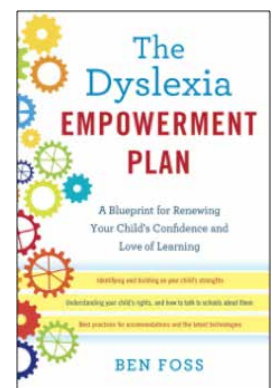
Frequently parents will be concerned that if their child uses audio or kinesthetic learning at a young age he will not learn to read because he has become reliant on a crutch. These alternative ways of accessing information are not a crutch; they are a ramp. Referring to alternative ways of learning as a “crutch” connotes that the person using those alternative strategies is broken; without the crutch, the logic goes, he would heal on his own and return to standard ways of doing things.

To repeat: dyslexia is not a short-term situation or an injury to be healed. It is a trait that will last a lifetime and needs to be incorporated into a person’s entire way of being. The best way to do this is to discover what his or her strengths are in terms of learning. However, having strengths does not make you a “super-cripple,” as some of the disability literature warns. While it’s true that some people can compensate by being able to do exceptional things, this is not the rule and you should not put your child in this position, making him find one area of success to make up for other weaknesses. For example, not all blind people can scale Mount Everest; not all one-legged teenagers will become captain of the high school swim team. And while your child should be given a chance to determine his best learning style, you don’t need to ask him to perform extra-amazing feats of awesomeness such as memorizing the name, date, and winner of every battle in the Civil War in order to demonstrate that he has “overcome” a disability. The key is that having dyslexia is really not a flaw, and accommodations that play to his strengths are certainly not a crutch.

Three types of reading

There are three types of reading: eye reading, ear reading, and finger reading. A child with dyslexia may never eye-read as well as his peers, and that, I hope to reassure you, is fine. Yet all children need to be exposed to vocabulary and ideas to be successful in school. If your child was blind, providing text as audiobooks or Braille would allow her to read with her ears or with her fingers.

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No one would ever claim that a blind person was lazy or stupid for not reading text with her eyes. When your child listens to audio, that's ear reading. She is leveling the playing field for her. It's not what the mainstream conceives of as reading. But it's ear reading. It's learning. It's literacy.

These terms address an underlying bias in our schools: that eye reading is the only form of reading. You can help move the needle on this limited assumption by using the terms eye reading, ear reading, and finger reading yourself and explaining them to your child. We need to celebrate a child's love of ideas and quest for knowledge and give her permission to not like standard books at the same time!

Eye reading is what children are taught in school, but it is no better than ear or finger reading in terms of information absorption or comprehension. In fact, each reading approach has both benefits and challenges. Whether you walk on two feet or use a wheelchair to get around, the goal is to get from one place to another. No matter if you roll or walk, you will still get there; indeed, you can get there faster in a chair if you know what you are doing and the landscape is conducive to it. Focusing on eye reading overlooks the real goals of education exclusively, which are learning, independent thinking, and mastering the ability to make new connections in the world of ideas.

Eye reading is definitely a valuable skill and given it is the default for most education, it has a built-in benefit that ear and finger reading do not, but that is a social choice we make. Just as being able to walk up stairs is useful because many buildings do not have ramps, eye reading is useful because it is the standard way into printed material. If we got rid of all stairs, then being in a wheel chair could be a benefit, e.g., allowing you to roll through a marathon is faster than running it. However, the key point is that none of these choices is inherently better, but we choose to make one more favored. The trick is then to learn how to avoid putting a moral judgment on a social choice.

We must question what we are taught is the "normal" way to do things, and instead integrate multiple ways for our children to access information. As a parent, you can confidently embrace the notion that while your child may not love eye-reading books, he is going to love learning just as much as you do, if you can match his educational needs with the skills he has.

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