



“SUDDENLY HIS RESULTS WERE TWO GRADES HIGHER”

What do you do when your child is clearly intelligent but struggling to write legibly? Will it improve with time, or is there an underlying problem?



This was the situation faced by Nicky Smith, whose son Chris regularly found himself in detention at primary school because teachers couldn't read his writing. Typically, just 30-40 per cent of any written piece Chris produced was legible - which meant consistently low grades when teachers marked his work.

As the situation continued, Nicky looked for practical solutions. Chris took a test for the school exam board to enable him to use a computer when sitting exams. But his class work remained largely illegible.

Things came to a head when Chris fell over and broke his wrist when he was 12. He visited a physiotherapist, who quickly spotted that the wrist injury was not the only problem Chris faced. After a thorough assessment, she diagnosed dyspraxia accompanied by Asperger syndrome – which explained all the problems Chris was experiencing with his writing

Dyspraxia, or developmental co-ordination disorder, is diagnosed in children who have significant motor difficulties with no evidence of neurological, biochemical or physical abnormalities. It affects about 5 per cent of children, and tends to co-occur with Asperger syndrome, one of the autistic spectrum disorders. Children with Aspergers frequently suffer from clumsiness and motor coordination problems.

The news was a revelation for the entire family. Nicky had always been aware that Chris had problems with his coordination. “Even riding a bike was difficult for Chris,” she says, “but some children find these things harder than others. I just assumed that Chris was less sporty than some of his friends.”

For Chris, it was even better news. “Mum, I’m not an idiot – there’s something wrong with me,” he said.

To try to help Chris with his schoolwork, the school gave him an AlphaSmart computer companion to use in lessons. This enabled him to type his written work in all his subjects. He printed the work out by connecting the AlphaSmart to a school printer using a USB cable, and handed it in for marking.

The results surpassed even his teachers’ expectations. Suddenly a child labelled as ‘Grade C’ was getting A and B grades in every subject.

“It was a complete transformation,” says Nicky. “With the pressure to worry about his handwriting taken away, Chris could concentrate on his work and show what he was really capable of. His results improved immediately, which gave him a real confidence boost. Once he started believing in himself, he just got better and better.”

Chris used the AlphaSmart in all his lessons for the next two years, continuing to achieve high grades. He was also able to use it for his Year 9 exams, because it provides text entry only and does not allow connection to the internet.

There was initial teasing from other children, jealous that Chris could use a keyboard in all his lessons. “Why are you so special?” they wanted to know. But they quickly got used to it, and because the unit is small and discrete and runs off batteries it was easy to carry around and use in any classroom.

The school gave Chris a laptop when he moved into Year 10, but he continued to use the AlphaSmart as back-up.

“I also found the AlphaSmart very helpful when Chris was having problems concentrating,” admits Nicky. “If he wasn’t getting on with his homework, I took the laptop away so he couldn’t be distracted. Once he’d done his homework on the AlphaSmart, he could have the laptop back!”

Chris is now studying Computer Science at university, and - thanks to the generosity of the Isle of Man government – the original AlphaSmart has gone with him. He uses a laptop most of the time, but the AlphaSmart provides back-up and is also convenient for taking into lectures for note-taking. The notes can then be transferred to his laptop when he gets back to his room.

“Using the AlphaSmart made all the difference,” concludes Nicky. “By showing him that he could get good results, it gave Chris the confidence he needed to succeed.”

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