

Proudly and clearly, seven-year-old Billy Bellini announces, “Now I can read. I am not stupid.”

BACKGROUND

Billy has not always expressed this level of self-confidence and happiness. In fact, until recently, his short school history had been anything but successful. From as early as the age of two, his family noticed that his speech lagged behind that of his peers, and when he did speak it was with a slight lisp and a pronounced stutter. In addition, Billy had a very low frustration level. If he could not perform a task, he would cry, become highly agitated, or have a tantrum.

When he was three, his mother, Rachel Bellini, took him for a routine screening to determine whether he had special needs, since children with special needs automatically earned a place in the town preschool. The teachers were unable to administer the tests because Billy had temper tantrums and refused to answer questions. They suggested he attend a private preschool for a year in the hope that he would mature and learn better control over his behavior. The teachers at the private preschool were not special educators, but they also felt “something was not right” with Billy.

When he was four, he went back to take the town test again. At this time he was evaluated for special needs. The tests indicated that Billy might have a learning disability. His mother remembers that he had particular difficulty with directions, and that he did not understand the differences between such words as “later” and “earlier”, or “up” and “down”, or “before” and “after”. An educational plan was written to address Billy’s speech and language problems, and he was admitted to the town preschool. He attended this school four days per week for four hours each day.

THE LOCAL SCHOOL

Billy’s behavior improved, but he did not seem to be making strides with his language skills. At the end of the year, the school decided to renew the educational plan that was to be implemented in kindergarten. The situation did not improve. His new teacher reported that Billy was a “daydreamer” and a “lazy” child who would not follow directions. She saw no indication of “special needs”. When he was unable to understand a mapping system that included color-coding, her explanation was, “You could never accuse Billy of being an over-achiever.” Also, due to an administrative mix-up, he did not receive special services during the first three months of kindergarten.

In the meantime, his mother observed that he did not seem to understand the concept of directions at all. He had to be told one step at a time what was expected of him. Additionally, many of his letters were written backward, and he could not connect appropriate sounds to the

letters. He cried a lot. Of equal concern was the fact that the other students tended to tease him. He was not succeeding socially, either.

When Billy entered first grade, his paternal grandmother offered the information that there was a history of dyslexia in the Bellini family. In fact, Billy's father had been on an educational plan, too. His mother went back to the school to ask for additional testing, specifically for dyslexia. She was met with several obstacles. She was told that the test could not be administered without a pediatrician's referral, that the test would not be valid because Billy was too young, and, finally, that the test was not offered by the school system anyway. If Ms. Bellini wanted that test administered, it would have to be done privately at her own expense. The family was unable to incur the expense at that time.

Although he started first grade "reading backward," he did well in math and science. His first grade teacher agreed that he was struggling with reading and spelling and felt that his problems should be attributed to more than just daydreaming. The special educator, however, stated that he would do better by the end of the year without further intervention. There were again no complaints about Billy's behavior, but he still "withdrew" when the work was difficult for him. The little boy and his parents were frustrated. And still the school system refused to test him for dyslexia.

INTERVENTION

It was at this point that Billy's grandmother took him to visit her friend, Paul Miller. Mr. Miller is a former teacher who holds an advanced degree in education from Harvard University. He has had a long career consulting on educational issues and problems. More importantly, he "knows kids and cares about them." He observed Billy's agitated behavior and recognized that academically the little boy was far behind his own grandson, although they were close in age. He listened to Billy's grandmother describe his language problems.

Mr. Miller was also familiar with **Lexia Learning Systems, Inc.**, a developer of computer software designed to help teach the first elements of any reading program: phonemic awareness, sound-symbol correspondence, and word decoding skills. He obtained a copy of the **Lexia Phonics Based Reading Family Edition** software and encouraged the family to work with Billy at home.

RESULTS

The Bellini's had bought every computer software teaching program they could find, but none had worked. Because they trusted and respected Paul Miller, they agreed to try again. Billy and his father were conscientious about their new task. After only a short time, Billy's skills and attitude improved. Rachel Bellini described the change this way:

He used to be in a kind of confused state when he tried to read. He would stall by stuttering or saying, 'Um, Um,' when asked a question. He didn't have tantrums any more, but he did seem to be daydreaming. Suddenly, after he started using the Lexia software his thought processes started to click. He now seems finally to be making connections between sounds and objects. He recognizes different sounds accurately now. And his vocabulary has improved.

He has a working use of more words. A 'cooking thing' has become a 'stove', for example.

His mother also observed that Billy's spelling improved dramatically, and he is able to recognize the difference between homonyms. He sounds out unfamiliar words when reading. His thought processing time is shorter and he no longer stutters. In general, Billy seems to be learning *more* at a *faster* pace.

Billy's teacher says that you just cannot reach Billy's mind "through the front door" as you can with other kids. Rachel Bellini claims that Lexia Learning Systems goes in "through a side door". Her son, she believes, sees things differently than other children. The Lexia software's teaching style has taught him different ways of approaching tasks. He uses these techniques to solve problems at school. And because he is now understanding the material, he is more interested in learning and applies himself at school.

Billy has a large workload. His classroom teacher gives him assignments, and his special educator also expects him to do some reinforcing of class work at home. He works very, very hard. Yet, he is always eager to work on his Lexia software. His mother says that he usually works for an hour at a time every other night - always cheerfully. At first he wanted his dad to be with him all the time. Now, after loading the software, his father can usually leave the scene. Billy feels confident and successful on his own. Often while he works he can be heard exclaiming to himself, "I get it! I get it!"

THE FUTURE

Billy is still on an educational plan for extra support in reading and language. He is not yet reading at grade level, but recognizes that now he can read. Billy knows that he is not "stupid". He approaches school with more confidence, and he has made new friends.

Rachel Bellini is very happy with Billy's progress. "I don't know who wrote this software," she says, "but whoever it was must have worked with billions and billions of kids. He really knows what he is doing. It not only helps kids, but it gives parents the tools so that they can help their kids, too."

She encourages Billy's younger brother and sister to use the program as well. "It can't hurt, right?" she asks. His sister who is going into kindergarten in the fall is already sounding out words and writing them. And even four-year old Brian is using the program and showing an interest in reading. Ms. Bellini worries about the "other children out there" who don't have a friend like Paul Miller to guide them. Most parents, she feels, do not have the knowledge or the confidence to effectively help their children at home or advocate for them in school. She wonders, "How will these parents, who are not professional educators, find out about Lexia?"

By Elaine Dohan