

IEW and Dysgraphia with Jennifer Mauser

Transcript of Episode 378

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, “IEW.” My name is Julie Walker, and I’m honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

So Andrew, as you know, we have been spending a lot of time on our podcast this year in particular, focusing on how IEW helps students who have learning differences. We've talked about dyslexia. We've talked about ADHD. Today I would like to spend some time talking about dysgraphia.

Andrew Pudewa: Right, and I think a lot of people, including me, are confused

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: About what is exactly the difference between dyslexia and dysgraphia.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: And so I, I don't really know, so don't ask me the hard questions.

Julie Walker: Well, this is either going to be a very short podcast then, or we should probably invite someone to join us.

Andrew Pudewa: You already invited her.

Julie Walker: I did already invite her. And Jennifer, welcome to our podcast.

Jennifer Mauser: Thank you, Julie, and thank you, Andrew.

Julie Walker: So to our listeners, Jennifer Mauser is actually on our team. She works in our school's division. She in particular works with a lot of schools that are working with students with learning differences. In addition to being an IEW accredited instructor. She is also accredited through Barton, Susan Barton's reading program, and you're gonna have to correct me, but she is a master level teacher and so she, you have many students.

Jennifer Mauser: I do.

Julie Walker: Jennifer, that you tutor, and I'm sorry, dear listener, if you have a student with dyslexia or dysgraphia, I think Jennifer's calendar is already booked, but she can certainly help us today unpack this idea of what is, what is dysgraphia and how does it differ from dyslexia?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and she is the most expert of all the experts that we personally know.

Julie Walker: it's true.

Andrew Pudewa: We, we have had Susan Barton on our podcast.

Julie Walker: Yep.

Andrew Pudewa: As well as some other dyslexia experts, but I think Jennifer stands unique in that she knows what we do really, really well. And how that works with a whole range, a whole spectrum of kids

Julie Walker: yep

Andrew Pudewa: who have these types of visual challenges and, and maybe it goes beyond just vision. So we have some good questions for you today, Jennifer.

Jennifer Mauser: Oh, great. I hope I can answer them.

Julie Walker: So I actually did a Google search and said, what is dysgraphia? And I landed on a website from the International Dyslexia Association, which I find interesting. It's a dyslexia association describing dysgraphia. So dysgraphia is something to do with dis impairment. Right? So this is Greek. Is it Greek?

Jennifer Mauser: It is. You can tell because there's a medial y in that prefix, d y s-

Julie Walker: alright. dys- and then -graph. I think of chart, but this has to do with the inability to make letters by hand.

Jennifer Mauser: right

Julie Walker: And this is different than just the lazy student who doesn't wanna write this. There's something going on there.

Jennifer Mauser: There most definitely is something going on. You are right. Dysgraphia is a bit of a challenge. In fact, um, there's a lot of confusion out there. I don't know if I would say confusion. There are a lot of people that use their own definition of it. So I actually wrote a blog post, this was a few years back, called "What exactly is Dysgraphia?"

And this is a question I wondered as well as I was getting more involved in working with students with learning differences. And so I went on that journey of trying to clarify, I contacted the Barton office. I went to dyslexia, the IDA website, and I consulted with other experts and what I learned out of that, and I, I did learn, the, the technical qualifications for that. But I also learned that it's important for parents and tutors and teachers to, rather than focus on a, a specific word, but focus on what it is that you're seeing, what is the difficulty that's presenting? Because, um, vocabulary sometimes gets lost in the shuffle of the needs of the child.

So when I refer to dysgraphia, I mean in, in a pure sense, that child or that individual is really struggling with the physical act of forming those letters. But dysgraphia goes beyond the physical element. It really is a brain-based disorder. So it's not necessarily caused by a motor difficulty, if you will. And um, although starting out to, to address it you do work with the motor skills, so I don't know if that helps clarify things a little bit or if it muddies the water. But in the end, you really wanna focus on what it is that you're seeing that your child is presenting with, um, when you approach a tutor or a doctor or a professional.

Andrew Pudewa: So a couple questions come to mind. The first would be, you know, I meet people at conventions or whatnot who will say, oh, my child reads really well, but has the hardest time writing anything on paper. Would that be an indicator of a dysgraphia without dyslexia condition or what? What would be your response to that?

Jennifer Mauser: It is very possible. Yeah, the first thing I would ask is I would ask that child's age and get a little bit of a history. Difficulty with writing is not unusual in younger, years, and there's some really, uh, studied ways of how to teach. Letter formation. I really love some of the, the programs that we have, like the PAL writing and our cursive knowledge programs because those programs do teach stroke order, which does matter.

But if I'm finding that a student is fourth, fifth, sixth grade and reads well and otherwise seems to have what you would say at least average intelligence. Then I'm going to be starting to wonder a little bit about dysgraphia. Dysgraphia does frequently appear with another disorder. Um, some, it, it's almost always parceled. It seems to me that I've experienced it with either dyslexia or ADHD or both, but it doesn't necessarily have to come packaged that way. So, like you said, if you've got a strong reader who enjoys reading but really struggles with writing the physical act of writing or even, um, content creation coming up with words to say, then I'm starting to think, okay, this is more of a um, uh, dysgraphia written expression challenge that's going on.

Andrew Pudewa: Are letter reversals, number reversals, or letter placement reversals? Are those typical with. A child who has primarily dysgraphia, like if they read pretty well, but the writing is hard, or do the letter reversals really strongly indicate the dyslexic aspect as well.

Jennifer Mauser: That's a good question. Letter reversals are not necessarily indicative of dysgraphia, however they can appear with dysgraphia. I guess I would say that that's more of a symptom than a cause. Really, when we think about dysgraphia, we're thinking about difficulty with actually forming those letters. So it could be spacing, challenges. It could be, um, stroke order challenges. It could be, you know, all of certainly legibility is going to come into play and sometimes you will see letter reversals, but that doesn't necessarily mean dyslexia. It takes, for a true diagnosis, it's going to take an educational psychologist or somebody who has the training to really get in there and run the diagnostics to make a complete determination about what's driving what.

Andrew Pudewa: That's a another question. People will, I, I don't know if it's a question per se, but I will often hear the content of, of a conversation will be, I think my child has, you know, dyslexia or dysgraphia and their, their implied question is, should I get him tested? Should I have

her tested? Um, how, how do you determine whether that's worth the time and expense? I know, uh, Susan told us, if you think your child is dyslexic, he probably is.

Jennifer Mauser: probably is right.

Andrew Pudewa: so, you know, I've, I've used that in conversations with people, but then you were saying, you know, there may be some benefits to getting an actual kind of professional diagnosis. So at what point or under what circumstances would a parent do well to spend the time and money to do that?

Julie Walker: Well, and I'm just gonna insert. Um, another website that I went to that talked about if you have this actual diagnosis, then especially if your child is enrolled in a school, that child could get some type of, what do they call that? You know, adjustments on their testing so that they don't have to take the test the same way.

Jennifer Mauser: Accommodations.

Julie Walker: Accommodations. Thank you.

Andrew Pudewa: And that's, that's, you know, I think schools are increasingly more sensitive to that.

Julie Walker: Yeah right.

Andrew Pudewa: You know, I think homeschool parents are the ones who are most likely to kind of not know when and if,

Julie Walker: right.

Andrew Pudewa: Because they don't need that type of accommodation the same way as parents who have kids in school.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: So what's your advice?

Jennifer Mauser: Yeah, I would say there's a couple of situations where you might want to investigate, um, to see if there's something else going on. Uh, as I mentioned before, dyslexia, dysgraphia these. Very rarely appear in isolation, but let's say that you have a child, you suspect your child is dyslexic, and you start using an intervention program such as Barton or there are others out there and you're not seeing results, and this child is getting more and more stressed out.

You're finding that you're getting more stressed out. There's possibility. There could be it, it could be a compounded issue. There might be some other, um, learning challenge that your child

is facing that an educational psychologist might be able to tease out. And just knowing can be so freeing for parent and student and saying, okay, um, so this program's not working.

Because we've got this other element that maybe, perhaps we need to address, and that can just be so validating. Um, students who struggle will silently diagnose them themselves with a condition of stupidity when it, in fact, that's not what's going on at all. So rather than, you know, making this a, uh, a marginalized condition, I would say meet it head on and, and, um, own that.

And say, look, this is what you're dealing with. You are every bit as intelligent as anybody else. Your brain works a little bit differently, and we're going to learn together how to optimize your brain to be the best at the academics that you're facing right now.

Um, the other time that I would say that you might want to pursue a diagnosis, and this is what I did for myself, is I knew I had a really bright student. I knew that this child wanted to go to college. But I also knew that in order to be able to do well at college, um, she would need supports. And those would come in accommodations and universities need to see a track record for those. Also, I had a student who was going to be taking ACT and SAT and I knew that there would need to be extra time for reading and, and, um, taking time to get those tests to be able to show, look, this is really what I know.

And without having a documented learning disability with all of that documentation, documentation in place, there was no way we were going to be able to receive that. And that would be a little bit like telling a child who is maybe unable to walk but needs to get upstairs to say, well, you know, let's do the best you can. Pulling yourself up. No, that's not, that's not fair. That's not even, I wanted to level the playing field and make certain that my child had the accommodations in place so that they could demonstrate really what she knows and not be counted as penalized because it took her longer to get there.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah so talking about accommodations, obviously one of the things that. That people immediately think of is if a child is having a hard time making letters or words on paper, then just teach them to type. And you know, I, I always point out yes, that. Is definitely going to probably make things easier. But you want to remember that anytime you use technology, it will atrophy the skill which it replaces. So yes, you could. Teach a nine year old to type everything, and maybe that's the thing to do, but you could also end up with that child 10 years down the line, still not being able to write on paper much at all. And is that a price you're willing to pay? That's kind of the, the logic that I've pursued. Is that similar to your thinking

Jennifer Mauser: It is.

Andrew Pudewa: or are there accommodations that I'm not. Aware of that can help kind of on both ends.

Jennifer Mauser: No, I, I agree with you Andrew. I think we, we need to, as parents and educators, we need to think about what our primary goal for any activity, any learning activity that we have. So let's take an assignment, um, with written expression. Some, some assignment for IEW perhaps. If my goal with my student who has dysgraphia is to complete a unit for

assignment, but I know that this child has dysgraphia, I'm probably not going to focus on the actual physical act of writing during that session because that's going to divert the brain to focus on getting that writing down. However, I will definitely take a later session time to focus on handwriting skills. So I might divide, you know, separate complexity if I'm working on penmanship

Julie Walker: you used his word, Jennifer. It's like you know us. Oh wait, you do.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah but I didn't create that idea. I just embrace it.

Julie Walker: I create that idea. I love it. Embrace it.

Jennifer Mauser: Yes, embrace it is right. So take a separate time, work on that penmanship, definitely, um, teach stroke order. Work on all of those elements. However, when you're working on content creation, let's not provide an extra barrier for our student who really, truly does have that learning disability. Let's be a bridge.

Julie Walker: I love that. So I, again, I'm looking at the International Dyslexia Association and we'll put a link in the show notes to this article that I found. I thought it thought it was really helpful. There's some strategies for pre-writing, letter formation, spelling, and writing. And of course a lot of these things are right in our wheelhouse. This is, this is what we do. But some of the ideas for pre-writing is playing with clay to strengthen the hand muscles, keeping lines within mazes to develop motor control. That would be fun. You know, just like here, can you, and then.

Andrew Pudewa: fun if it's not overwhelmingly stressful.

Julie Walker: exactly. Yeah. Connecting dots or dashes to create complete letter forms. But then I asked myself this question, which I'm now asking you, Jennifer and Andrew, you as well, because I have heard different camps speak to, yes, stroke order. But what about this idea of tracing letters to learn to form letters? I've heard that this is, it's a widely used practice, but I've heard that there might be some problems with tracing. Do you know anything about that?

Jennifer Mauser: Here's what I think works well, and this is just personal experience, so I'm going to set aside and just speak from what I've learned in my approximately 20 years of teaching students. I find that it's important to start with large body first, so that would be writing letters using the large body muscles, so going to the whiteboard and writing lowercase a's. I do think that tracing letters can help, but I think that it's something that we take time and don't, don't spend over large amounts of time focusing on it. Do a few, do them well, and then keep practicing on your own as well. So again, if, if we look at the primary arts of writing, we have that opportunity where, we, describe the, the stroke order for the c, the cookie shape and how that begins and where that ends. And then we provide those opportunities to create those letters. Um, using a traced model, if I remember correctly, and then going on and using the various lines as guides for that. And I think that that does really help over time. Um, but also we have to keep in mind that there are different causes for, for poor handwriting, and not all of them are, um, dysgraphia. Some of them are simply just kind of that, that motor control that's not finally tuned yet. So different approaches will work for different students.

Andrew Pudewa: Have you any experience with cursive first? I know there are some people who, uh, promote this idea of learning cursive first as a way to avoid, uh, letter reversals and the argument that actually curves are easier for children to create than straight lines. And that when you connect up letters to make a word, um, you're actually kind of you know, treating or, or helping with attention issues because you know, if you're kind of a ADHD, you write a letter, you're done. Now, where's the next one? Whereas the discipline of connecting letters in a word requires a stretching of the attention span. Um, any experience or opinion on that idea of cursive first?

Jennifer Mauser: I'm a big fan of cursive first. It works very well, um, for a lot of students, not all students, but a lot of them. Um, as you mentioned, there is that idea of connectedness. There's also, um, the spacing tends to be better because I have had students who have learned the manuscript letters first and writing a word, it can sprawl across the page or it can be compressed into one.

When we have cursive we, that, that spacing is a lot easier to deal with. Um, not only that, but hand fatigue is lessened. Like you said, it's easier to write curves than it is to do sharp angles and to constantly be lifting and replacing, uh, a writing tip. It is more relaxing for the hand to, to teach the cursive.

I do find for some of my students who have dyslexia, that decoding cursive, however, can be a little bit of a challenge. A cursive E looks awfully similar to a cursive L, and so letter height, some of those shapes are a little bit harder for some of my dyslexic students, so I have to kind of be cautious with some of my students, which, which method I recommend.

Andrew Pudewa: And um, some people find somewhere along the line an italic system. Where you connect the letters and it's kind of this halfway between printing and cursive. I personally don't like that because I find it much harder to read, especially the letter R, in italic connected. It looks neither like a printed R or like a cursive R, but that may just be my personal allergy to it, so you know, any experience with that? That idea of teaching italic as a preparation for connecting the letters in a cursive style.

Jennifer Mauser: I have not personally taught italic, so I really can't comment on that. What I can comment on, however, would be the writing utensil. I find that I need, a lot of my students need to have some feedback from the writing tip, but the drag of a pencil is too much it, it's very fatiguing to the hand. So I, I have to experiment.

What I have personally found with most of my students is that either an, uh, a roller ball or a fountain pen, depending upon that student's grip. Because sometimes with my dyslexic, dysgraphic students, they have a unique grip that makes writing with a fountain pen challenging, but for those who can, um, there's just enough feedback, but it's still light enough that they feel empowered to write longer and to write more. It's not nearly as fatiguing. So that's one thing I would recommend. Um, parents and teachers tries look at different writing utensils and see if a student has a preference, and then use that to your advantage.

Andrew Pudewa: Okay, I'm gonna push back just a little bit here. I, as you know, I strongly recommend pen on composition for drafts, but I meet a number of parents who have these kind of perfectionistic kids and they, they get anxiety from writing in pen because they can't fix it and make it good, make it closer to their concept of perfect. And, you know, dealing with perfectionism in children and writing is, is that, that's a whole topic right there, but how, how do you deal if you've got a child now, let's assume they're just doing copying or copying letters or copying words, and they are using a pen and then they mess up. How do you coach that?

Jennifer Mauser: Well, I like to use analogies in my teaching and. And one of the analogies that I use a lot is, and this is because I'm a knitter, is I say, okay, when I'm teaching knitting, I get a student going and I say, just keep going. There's going to be mistakes. But mistakes are an opportunity to learn. Don't pick it out, don't unwind, don't recast on, you are making mistakes because you're building perfection down the line or approaching perfection down the line. So mistakes are always an opportunity to learn, but that's with a caveat. And that caveat would be for students that really do have, as you mentioned, Andrew, a true anxiety or perhaps an OCD. And they are out there. I have to accommodate for that because then I'm losing my students.

So I guess again, separate out complexity. Focus on, you know, major on the majors. If this is going to be a stopping point for your student, then don't allow it to become one, accommodate and make certain that student is equipped with whatever tool he needs to be successful. But I encourage mistakes. We all make mistakes. That's part of life. So mistakes are always an opportunity to learn.

Andrew Pudewa: This is a random side question, but I'm wondering if you see a connection. Do you think there's a benefit to teaching children knitting or maybe crochet that carries over into other fine motor skills like writing on paper?

Jennifer Mauser: Most definitely. I have my own son that I could use as an example. He has pretty severe dysgraphia and when he was young, I taught him to knit. And I taught him to knit because he's very ADHD. And if I hadn't given him some activity and the Legos were driving me crazy because they were noisy. So knitting is nice and quiet. So I got him going with knitting and he just became quite a wonderful knitter as we listened to. Um, he, he'll still tell me today, his favorite novel that we ever encountered together is Bleak House, by Dickens, which is a tome of a novel, but he knitted his way through it and we saw just as a side result, the improvement in his handwriting.

So I didn't do it, uh, initially as an experiment to improve handwriting. I did it as an experiment or perhaps maybe a survival technique for mom because I knew otherwise I'd be, you know, calling him back to the couch and lecturing more than I was reading. So, yeah, I do think that uh, any type of skill where you're using fine motor, uh, is going to help in other areas.

Andrew Pudewa: It's a side point, but, um, I remember reading a book talking about a, a very successful computer guy who went to Waldorf School for 12 years. Which is like a zero tech school. And then he became, you know, one of the most successful computer entrepreneurs of his time. And, um, one of the things he said in this interview was, you know, in Waldorf school we had to knit a pair of socks.

It was grade four or five, I don't remember one or the other. And, and then he said, if you can knit a pair of socks, you can do anything. I thought that's, that's very interesting. And, and how probably, you know, the Waldorf curriculum, you know, put that in for more of a philosophical, spiritual reason, but the technical benefits to people.

Andrew Pudewa: So we are kind of running out of time. And, um, where, where, what are your favorite resources for people who either know their children are dyslexic or maybe not dyslexic, but dysgraphic? Where, where do you send people to just start to educate themselves and develop strategies? And, um, last advice because I, I would say this is the most common thing that people ask me about.

Julie Walker: Dysgraphia? Wow.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, just this problem, dyslexia, dysgraphia, they don't know.

Julie Walker: right.

Jennifer Mauser: Well, and there's a reason why Andrew, it's estimated that there are approximately 20% of our population that have at least some impact from a learning disability, such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, but it's not diagnosed very often, so Julie already mentioned one of my favorite sites, and that would be the International Dyslexia Association.

They have wonderful infographics and articles that are accessible to parents. The vocabulary is within, you know, just it's easy to make sense of. I also like a website out there. I think it's called Attitude, and that one is really focused on ADHD, but like I said, there, ADHD is part and parcel with other learning differences, so they have some wonderful articles out there as well.

Julie Walker: And we'll be sure and put a link to that website, both of these websites, Jennifer, in our show notes.

Jennifer Mauser: Sure. And I like to think that we've got some really nice resources on our own website. Um, we have Andrew, you've written some wonderful articles out there that I think are very applicable, whether or not they necessarily use the technical terms, I think that's a benefit perhaps. But the real idea of separating out complexity and being very, um, incremental and spending a lot of time. You know, one aspect we didn't get time to really talk a lot about is the whole content generation that is difficult for students who have dysgraphia and how you model in, for example, our *Structure and Style for Students*. Taking source texts and breaking them down so that the students are very clear about what's going on within that source text.

The way you model that is so wonderful for parents and teachers and, and of course the podcast, the blog, there's so many resources just on IEW's, um, website that are available that I would encourage people to take a look at as well. So there's a lot out there.

Julie Walker: Let me just give a link to kind of like the overarching page for that iew.com/learning-differences, and then you'll find a lot of the links to the resources on IEW that Jennifer was speaking to. Great. Jennifer, you are a delight. We are so grateful for your

partnership with us here on our IEW schools division team, but also just whenever we have, uh, families and parents and teachers who have some challenges, you're so willing to chime in and give us some input and we know how to better help them guide their students on their educational journey.

Andrew Pudewa: And it's always good to talk to an expert.

Julie Walker: it's so true.

Andrew Pudewa: just gives you a sense of, okay, this is not earth-shaking crisis. We can work through this together and.

Julie Walker: A lot of what she said is exactly what we do here at IEW and I love that.

Jennifer Mauser: Well, thank you so much for inviting me on today. It's really a pleasure and I am very happy to have an opportunity to work with you all because I tell you what IEW is like the chocolate ice cream to my vanilla ice cream of working with dyslexia, and then it just goes so well together. So I feel like I've won the lottery by having exposure to both of those programs.

Andrew Pudewa: Or I, I would say the olives to the avocado.

Julie Walker: Oh, I see. Yes

Andrew Pudewa: where wherever you are nutritionally

Jennifer Mauser: you're, uh, umami or sweet as it is.

Julie Walker: Thank you, Jennifer.

Jennifer Mauser: Thank you.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Google podcasts, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.