

Lauren 00:12

Welcome to The LDA podcast, a series dedicated to improving the lives and education of all learners. In this episode, we talk with Director of Counseling Services Dr. Helene Dionne and counseling team leader Laura Polvinen, and both work at Landmark school in Beverly, Massachusetts, a school dedicated to helping students from second to 12th grade who have language based learning disabilities and executive function disorder.

Kristina Scott 00:52

Hello, everyone, I'm here with Dr. Helene Dionne, the director of counseling services at Landmark School in Beverly, Mass. and Laura Polvinen, the licensed social worker and counseling team leader at Landmark School. They both have an expertise in recognizing social emotional challenges seen in students with language-based learning disabilities. Thank you for joining us, Dr. Dionne, and Miss Polvinen.

Laura Polvinen 01:14

Thank you for having us.

Dr. Helene Dionne 01:15

Exactly.

Kristina Scott 01:17

So what are some common social emotional struggles you notice in individuals with language based learning disabilities?

Dr. Helene Dionne 01:23

So the way we think about it is that there's like two categories. One is like, they're struggling with their sense of self as a learner, and their sense of self as someone who can relate with others. So the emotional struggles very often have one or both of those components. More specifically, we see what we call PTSD-like symptoms. So post traumatic stress disorder. Not that they were threatened with violence or anything of the sort. But it's because very often in their schooling experiences, their sense of selves, as a capable learner was really affected. And so, they might find themselves, a teacher may use an expression that seems, 'why don't you try harder?' for instance, is a famous one. And for them, it may have a terrible impact, it may get flooded with memories of similar expressions that were used. They're trying their best, and bringing up all sorts of memories about what has happened before to them. And so that's accompanied very often by strong physiological responses. And then very often, it has this wanting to avoid the task at all cost, because who wants to face something that's terrible? And also, very often they're gonna be, what we notice is what we call hypervigilance, definitely be on the lookout for those kinds of words, not purposefully, but automatically, because when you've been injured, in some ways, you kind of expect it or you worry that it will happen. So we see a lot of those behaviors and that really, a lot of those that can get in the way of them being able to attend to the task at hand, obviously.

Dr. Helene Dionne 03:18

We also obviously see a lot of kids who have got it, you know, the rates of ADHD are some is higher than in the general population. That means that it affects their attention for some or many of those students that can be hyperactive, quite impulsive. And so all of that also gets in the way of the learning.

Dr. Helene Dionne 03:39

Something that a lot of people don't know, sometimes it may affect the ability to initiate a task, actually, because we think about them as being impulsive. But some of them, it's the opposite, it affects their ability to start a task. The rates of anxiety and depression are higher. Now, we're not saying that those kids have full blown diagnosis, but they tend to worry more about their ability to be successful, to make friends. And so then they also get more easily discouraged, again, because of the accumulated number of failures. So we see that, and sometimes it's accompanied by...we've seen that populations are higher rates of suicidal ideation or attempts. Now we like to remind people that we are saying those are all risk factors that are present, they can very well respond to the right intervention. And by that we mean both the academic intervention that if they feel that they're learning, they're being taught the way they need to be taught, then obviously, they get more encouraged and we can see a lot of those elements kind of be mitigated. Also, we can ask if often have direct intervention, to help them figure out strategies to cope with their anxiety when they're looking at a task and they feel overwhelmed.' What can you do? Or say to yourself? Or how can you manage your anxiety to be able to attend to the task?' So sometimes we work directly with the emotional component. So all of that, that's about the learning because all of that affects their working memory, and it affects their attention, and their executive function and so forth. But then there's also the I don't know, if you want to talk about the issue of them feeling like they're able to connect with other kids, because that's such an important piece of it all.

Laura Polvinen 05:34

Sure. I think in terms of the emotional piece, such an important part of being human is connecting to other people socially and feeling accepted and loved. And we know that students with language based learning disabilities have different challenges in terms of social needs, and even a higher rate of potentially being isolated or bullied. And that can present a larger social emotional need with regard to anxiety in social situations or even depression. We know that students with LD have some challenges sometimes around social interaction overall, whether it be pacing of conversation, or social pragmatics, which is like all the aspects of social interaction, besides the words, tone of voice, body language. Again, the pacing, staying on topic, those pieces. And so when students have difficulties, not only in language based learning disabilities, areas affected by school, but in social interactions, that can have a real effect on their self esteem, and kind of lead more to some of those negative emotional feelings about themselves, which then cycle back and affect future social interactions or their learning. And it's kind of a cycle in that sense. So the cycle really seems to be self confidence, social emotional, and feeling like community and part of something and then academics.

Kristina Scott 06:47

Where do you start as a teacher to even target? Is there one area to start? Or do you try and do it all at once, or...

Laura Polvinen 06:54

I think, you know, ideally, of course, doing it all at once. But knowing we're only human, I think the biggest piece is to have students feel safe. And I think good teachers want students to feel safe in their classroom. And when they create that environment where students feel like they're seen, and that a teacher values who they are, that enables them to feel more comfortable to reveal whatever it is, whether it be their challenges in terms of academics or that social piece. I think we have kids who have challenges with social pragmatics, but who are able to really do well in a classroom, because they're given what they need academically and they're made to feel part of a community, even if they don't relate the way many of the other kids in their class do. And so I think teachers who foster that sense of 'you are part of this community. And I want to know about you. And I want to foster those strengths that you have, and nurture you as a learner and address the challenges you have. And there's nothing wrong with you, because you have challenges, that helps take care of that emotional piece.' And then they get more out of them academically, right, a student who feels emotionally safe is going to take more risks. And students who take more risks are going to learn more.

Dr. Helene Dionne 08:00

What we find as a way to kind of develop that trust between the students and the teacher, is also if the teacher can find a way to have the students understand what their learning profile is, sometimes the teacher, if it's a special education teacher can understand the reports and can explain, sometimes this could be a psychologist at the school, or it could be, sometimes you need to involve another professional. But the idea is for the kid to really understand what's going on. Let's face it, language based learning disabilities are complicated enough, because it's a wide range of possibilities in the menu of learning disabilities, and not all of them have the same. As we know, some of them struggle with dyslexia and have no trouble with expressive or receptive oral information. So it's confusing for the kids themselves. And once they understand what it is that they're struggling with, that there's nothing that...their brain kind of processes information differently, or processes the written word differently, but that they can learn, they just need to learn differently, that makes a big difference. And already, there's a sense of trust, because this adult gets me. And also it is this beginning of a collaboration between the kid and the adult, because it's not just that we're doing something to you, you get it so that you can help us teach you. And we're gonna work on that together. And the element that gets added to that is letting them know that there are millions of other kids like them. So that again, gives them hope. And you know, and we can go on about the actors who are dyslexic, who have dyslexia, and so forth and have managed and people who have been successful in different fields. But again, it's in the idea of giving them a different perspective.

Dr. Helene Dionne 10:00

If instead of, 'I'm not able to learn,' 'I think I learn differently, and there is hope for me.' And that in itself creates quite a different environment in which to teach. And then, you know, there's obviously a number of specific strategies, but what we're talking about is creating a structure in a container, in which, you know, as I said, it's different, the way that the teaching occurs.

Laura Polvinen 10:25

We have a student who said, in her advice to teachers, she said, remember, they're not just brains in those seats. They're people in bodies with emotions and experiences. And I think that's really like the

perfect message to teachers is, these are complex individuals in the seats in your chairs, and bringing lots of different pieces to the table totally captures that with what the students said.

Kristina Scott 10:47

So it sounds like you're very much about empowering students. Is there a certain age developmental level where students may understand their disability a little better?

Laura Polvinen 10:59

I would say students as young as second grade, when most students get diagnosed, can start to understand. Many of our students will say they knew in kindergarten that they were different, because everyone else knew their alphabet when they didn't. We know a number of twins who have a reading challenge or language based learning disability and their twin did not. So I think even as early as elementary school, you can explain to students that their brain learns differently. We really do our best to explain that it's not about intelligence, it's not about your ability to think and process, it's about your ability to use and manipulate language as it works in your brain. Obviously, you can be more detailed with an older student to help them understand the intricacies of their profile. But oftentimes, younger kids just want to know that, yes, they are feeling different. And that's true, they are different. But they're not different from everyone else, it's not their fault. And there are ways to help their skills that they can learn to lead the kind of lives they hope for, because we know that students even as little as six and seven have hopes and dreams of what their lives will turn out to be.

Dr. Helene Dionne 12:02

Right. And what I like about this way of thinking about it is that it's like any of the big topics in life. And kids, we know they could be three or four years old and they wonder about death, right? They wonder about big topics, let alone sexuality and all of this, and what do we say? We say at different ages, they can't process it, but they process it for that period of life. And then maybe when they go to middle school, then they have to rethink about it. What does that mean? And once they go to high school, and then when they're thinking about college, each time, they're going to be reworking the meaning of it all. So that's part of their life project, because for a lot of them, it's not going to disappear. But they have to figure out a way around it, on top of it, through it or whatever, right? And so it's a nice project. A lot of us have our own little ones too.

Kristina Scott 13:01

Yes, we all have our life projects.

Dr. Helene Dionne 13:05

Yes, exactly.

Kristina Scott 13:07

So you talked about kind of empowering students and helping them understand their disability. And then moving on to developing social emotional competencies. What are some interventions that teachers can use in the classroom to really help students progress?

Laura Polvinen 13:07

So I think as Helene said, you know, helping teachers to know what the learning challenges and profiles are of their students would be really helpful because that gives a starting point, especially if a student feels understood in that way, like the teacher knows what's going on with me. One of the big interventions we suggest is putting an agenda on the board. That not only helps their language based learning disability, but any sense of anxiety or worry about what might happen in class is going to be diminished by knowing the plan. And kind of what they can project for the next 45 minutes of class, let's say an hour and a half, kind of gives the students the emotional power to think about how they're going to sustain the energy that they need for that class period. And to understand that the teacher is in control, and kind of put that worry maybe at ease a little bit. So I would say that's a big piece. In general, following the same routine, having boundaries and structure, making the expectations explicit. What is it that the teacher expects from that classroom students, from little things like how homework is turned in, or their jobs in class, especially for younger kids? Or what is the expectation if you come in late to class, because we find that students with LD have the opportunity to worry about all the little pieces if they don't know what's happening. And definitely in terms of avoidance, because work can be really challenging, we'll find any and every possible way to avoid it, so that they don't have to do a really challenging task. I think additionally, giving structured choices where students feel like they have an option of what they can do in terms of okay if you don't do this worksheet here in class, it will be for homework, or I'm asking you to do a sentence summary of this book in a small paragraph form and draw a picture, you can draw the picture first, or write the paragraph first. So you're not giving students an out, but you're giving them some sense of control and choice. And it really helps to hold them accountable. And also, I think just guide your expectations of students. What else can you think of? There's lots of...

Dr. Helene Dionne 14:13

That's part of the longer presentation, I guess, with keeping in mind, again, not all of the students with language based learning disabilities struggle with expression and reception of language, however, a significant number of them, they struggle with that. So one of the things is to be aware of that, to kind of slow your speech down, and also make sure you do not assume. So make sure that they get what you said, and that you get what they're saying. So obviously, that would be in a smaller, and if you're dealing about within incidents, for instance, or expanding something so, you know, to some very...how often do we say, just, 'I just want to make sure, this is what I hear you say to me,' and then you give it back to them, so that they can confirm or not if you are correct. The same way is, 'can you repeat to me what I told you?' So that worked for a small group, you can use a kid, we'll go, 'can you repeat, for everybody what the homework will be tonight, or you can have a round robin?' kind of thing. We know that anxious kid, for instance, if they know when it will come, they'll get themselves ready, right? So on Monday, maybe it's this one, and on Tuesday is going to be this one, who's going to have to tell everybody what it is that they have to do for homework tonight. So we bought the idea of being able to plan that, but we don't excuse it, they will do it for the other ones, but also to make sure that everybody hears, so we don't assume in our interactions with students. It's really important to be mindful of the words you use. Again, you know, that the big one that we hear a lot from the students is, they always think 'I don't work hard enough', they assume that, you know, try harder, they say, Oh, if you just applied yourself. So be mindful that what seems like a small word could really kind of cause quite a bit of emotional injury.

Dr. Helene Dionne 17:38

Like I had this kid who said, you know, I listen, I work on my spelling test every night for like a long time. And I memorize it the best I can. And ideally, at the end of the week, when we have the test, I get the worst score than everybody. Even though some of my friends, they only took five minutes to look at it. And so can you imagine this kid who still is not giving up? And then if he's told: 'Well, if you had just studied harder,' it's an injury. It's also infuriating, you know that the unfairness of it makes them so angry. So be mindful of the words you use. Same thing with sarcasm. Sometimes we mean it, it's a joke, you know, and I think it's a great joke. But some of those kids don't understand sarcasm, so they may think you mean it literally. And then again, they're gonna 'Oh, my God,' you know, so if you don't know for sure that the kids can take the sarcasm, you know, sometimes I will, you know, kind of make, because sometimes we don't know, the only way is to try it, sometimes I will try it. And so you know, it's a joke, right? And then when I get this, like, crickets kind of, yeah. And then I'm thinking, okay, he did not know, now he knows, but in the future, I'm not going to go there. So those all kind of seem like nothing, but you know, every day is built over 1000s of interactions, right? So the way that we communicate makes a big difference.

Laura Polvinen 19:11

There's another piece I think many skilled teachers do anyway. But the more they can do it, the more helpful, which is kind of anticipating what students brains are thinking, especially with regard to LBLD, if you give a written assignment or a reading assignment for in class, and a student sees a page full of words, saying out loud, 'okay, I know what you're thinking, your brain is thinking like, oh, my gosh, there's so many words, what am I going to do with this?' I think that helps mitigate the social emotional challenges in the moment, because you're kind of predicting what their brain is saying, and you're helping to regulate for them. So where they might not have the skills, given how overwhelmed they are with feelings to say, it's okay. The teacher is going to help me through this. They know that they're not going to give me something that's too challenging for me. If a teacher can put that up front and say, 'Look, I know what you're thinking. I gave you a three page summary for homework, and you're thinking you can't do this, but you can, you're going to use the template that we did. And then we're going to have a check in,' I think that sort of talking through the process is both breaking it down, which is important. But it's also kind of conveying your level of understanding of their needs and their minds.

Kristina Scott 20:18

So we hear a lot about home-school partnerships. And we've talked a lot about the school front. Sometimes when students come home is when they completely shut down, because they've held it together all day at school. So what advice do you have for parents who are seeing maybe the meltdown or the frustrations of school come out of the home environment?

Dr. Helene Dionne 20:37

I mean, besides snacks...

Kristina Scott 20:40

Snacks, just a little bit of downtime for themselves.

Dr. Helene Dionne 20:46

And it's a challenge at times, you know, with some of those ADHD kids, when you will want them to do the work before the medication gets out of their system. So you'd want to give them some downtime, but not too much, because then it gets worse and worse, because then they have even less ability to...

Laura Polvinen 21:05

I think the same of understanding your profile goes for families, I think sometimes we think LBLD is contained in the school day. And it's knowing it's not, and if families really understand the intricacies of okay, slow down your speech when you're talking to your student, or know that they might not be responding to you because they're thinking of the right words. Oftentimes, we have students who say I just agree with my parents because it's easier than trying to think of what to say. So they kind of put words in their mouths, which are well intentioned, but I think for students, they have processed all day long. And it's hard for them to think and talk more about what is happening either in their school day, or to explain a piece of homework to their parents, than to just do it. And so I think it's understanding, really, if parents can take a class on the intricacies of LBLD, we'll understand the anxiety that might go along with it. We always say to parents, it shouldn't be surprising that emotional challenges go in tandem with LBLD, because if we as adults had to do something that we hated most, six hours a day or taxes for six hours a day, like I'd be pretty cranky and worried too. And helping parents to understand that I think it's that perspective taking piece that's really valuable at home. And I think it's the similar concrete strategies, if you have a plan to share it with your child, if you're having a certain expectation, communicate that, give them kind of markers for how the time is gonna go. So many of our students with LBLD have significant executive function challenges. So understand that that's going to pop up constantly, you ask your child to clean their room, they don't know the steps, you have to walk through for them or don't get frustrated when they can't pack their gym bag. They don't know what goes into gym bag for soccer, even though they've worn cleats and shin guards and are in uniform every day for the past two years, it's really having to kind of map that out and give students the tools to be successful.

Dr. Helene Dionne 22:54

What I like in general, also is to think about it at any age as a collaboration, again, so when you say develop, you know, make the expectations clear. It's so nice when you can build it together. I mean, obviously there are some non-negotiables. You're gonna have to do your homework. So how about if we figure out this year, you're now a fourth grader, so do you have a good place to do your work? Is it better when you're in the kitchen? Is it better when you're in your bedroom? And because there are different answers to that. So you want to do it in your bedroom this year. Okay, we're going to need to see if it works. So how will we know that it works? And so kind of do it with them so that it makes, again, the difference between empowering and when you are part of the negotiations, you are less likely to see control struggles, which are obviously a beautiful way to avoid. I will forever remember this adolescent, she would pick a fight, she was not happy. She just picked these incredible fights with her parents, and like the night before the exam. And then after that, she'd say, 'well, for sure if I flunk my test tomorrow, we'll know why. You know, look what you put me through.' And then she'd go. Beautiful. Beautiful. Well done. So yeah, one wants to avoid those struggles as much because it's very often an avoidance technique anyway, besides being exhausting for everybody, but you're more likely to do that when you negotiate around a negotiable. And so that would be, so...

Laura Polvinen 24:38

And I think, decide what the non-negotiables are because there's that dance of like these things aren't negotiable. We're not negotiating on them, never. And here are the negotiables. What am I you know...off screen collaborative practice.

Dr. Helene Dionne 24:51

Exactly. The three baskets. Yes, yes.

Kristina Scott 24:55

So do you have any final thoughts to leave us with or pieces of advice? Resources for those that want more information on this topic?

Laura Polvinen 25:05

Sure, we are a big fan of Lynn Lyons who works specifically on anxiety work and really approaches anxiety much like approaching LBLD where you want to teach skills. It's not about accommodating for the anxiety or the worry, it's about teaching skills to manage it, because worry is a human part of existence. And much like we would never say to students, you don't need to learn to read. You need to learn to manage your anxiety, we're not going to avoid situations that cause worry or anxiety. So I think she's an excellent resource.

Dr. Helene Dionne 25:39

And Wagner with that surface.

Laura Polvinen 25:41

It also talks about kind of going over the worry hill, and oftentimes is this feeling like, you don't want to go over the hill, it's going to be awful. But once you start kind of getting to the top and going over, you realize you did it. And for so many students, their heels dig in when they're going up that hill, and they don't want to go, but it makes the hill higher and higher, the more you resist going through whatever challenging situation it is. I think too, so often we have families who are very worried about the outcomes. A first student, they'll be LD, but definitely one who has significant social emotional symptoms. And trying to say that, you know, with intervention, things really do get better. And our student's biggest advice is don't give up. Don't give up even when you think you need to, even when you think nothing is possible, that with the right supports, these kids are so resilient, and typically much better problem solvers, and perseveres than their typically learning peers. And so I think when students know that and are exposed to famous people with language based learning disabilities, or people in their own lives, that they don't know have LBLD, but are doing amazing things. It's really encouraging and helpful to know what life will be like moving forward.

Kristina Scott 26:54

Thank you, Helene and Laura. I appreciate your time. I know that you're very busy people. So we appreciate all you've had to share with us today. Thank you.

Dr. Helene Dionne 27:01

Thank you for having us.

Lauren 27:09

Thank you for listening to the LDA podcast. Our theme music is little idea by Scott Holmes. This series is made possible by The Learning Disabilities Foundation of America. In our next episode, we talked to Lyn McMurry and Julio Rivera from the North Texas FASD Network, a support group for those with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder to talk about the connection between learning disabilities and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. For more resources from Ida, visit Idaamerica.org