

Lauren 00:06

Welcome to the LDA podcast, a series by The Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our podcast is dedicated to exploring topics of interest to educators, individuals with learning disabilities, parents and professionals to work towards our goal of creating a more equitable world. Hi, everyone. Thank you so much for joining us for the LDA Podcast. I'm here today with Dr. Rebecca Rolland, a speech language pathologist and education lecturer, who just recently published *The Art of Talking With Children*, a book focused on enhancing relationships with kids. So Rebecca, thank you so much for being here today.

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 00:39

Thanks for having me.

Lauren 00:41

So just to start off, could you give us a little bit of your background?

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 00:44

Yes, definitely. So I'm a speech language pathologist. And I teach, as you mentioned, at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, as well as Harvard Medical School. And as part of that work, I teach educational assessment, so focused on understanding language and literacy skills, and really, basically creating learning profiles of children. So integrating information about their math development, their psychosocial development, and their obviously reading and writing skills with their oral language skills. So I was trained very much to integrate oral language with reading and writing. And so that forms a big part of my work as well.

Lauren 01:21

That's great. So you've had some experience working to diagnose learning disabilities at the Children's Hospital in Boston, I believe. So when you're working with kids to test for a diagnosis, as somebody who studies language and is very conscious of language, is there any sort of certain language that you use when you talk with them to help them understand the process? I know that can vary by age and things too.

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 01:43

Of course, definitely. Yes, I do always talk to kids about the process. And I think that is so important. So many children I've worked with over the years really don't necessarily know why they're being assessed, or even have fears about it. They might have assumptions. For example, I've had kids say to me, Oh, I'm doing this because I'm probably not smart. Or even things like I'm doing this because I might have to leave my school if it doesn't go well. So all the way from kids who do know a lot about it. So some children will say, Oh, I'm doing this so they understand how to learn, how to teach me better how I learn, and so on. And so I really approach it with children from an empowerment perspective. So I think about helping educate children, and then actually helping them take lessons back that they can use even in their classrooms. So I'll say to them, for example, that this is really about understanding how you learn and then how teachers, your parents, and so on, can help you learn best. So really kind of creating a map of your thinking process, and how all of the pieces work together. So I've also emphasized that we all think and learn differently, I think some kids think, you know, there's some

typical learners, and there's some atypical learners. And I think it's important to kind of break that stereotype or that assumption and recognize that really, there is a spectrum of learning. So I bring that up to children as well.

Lauren 03:03

Absolutely, yeah, there really is this misconception of I'm just not smart, and things like that. So helping to explain that away is helpful. And it sounds like a lot of just being open with them about the process and being honest as well. So that's great.

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 03:17

Definitely.

Lauren 03:19

So how do you go about discussing a learning disability diagnosis with your child, as a parent? Say they've just gotten this diagnosis and maybe they don't understand it? What can a parent say that can really kind of start these conversations?

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 03:33

Definitely. Yeah. So I think it does depend on age. But I think the first part is really just to reflect on and kind of check in with your child about if they feel ready to discuss it. So I think sometimes, if we get a diagnosis, we want to leap in and kind of process it together with a child. But at the same time, it can be helpful to reflect first, what is your perception of that diagnosis? How much do you know about it? And it might be a time and opportunity to educate yourself a bit more before going into that conversation. Because sometimes there are a lot of misconceptions from the parent side as well. And so it's really important to go in with a bit of facts and a bit of understanding so you can support your child. So that's one, and to really check in with your child. Do they want to talk about it now? That's the first thing. I think the second thing is really to ask what they understand about the diagnosis to see what is their perception of it. I've been really surprised, some children really welcome a diagnosis. So for example, I've worked with kids who have been struggling with reading for several years, and they've, you know, gotten a very negative self perception. They think, oh, this is evidence that some kids have said my brain is broken or there's something wrong with me and I don't know what, so actually hearing okay, you have dyslexia and here's what this research is about it. Here's what the science says, and here's how we can help you. It really does come as a relief to some kids. To others, obviously, not so much. So they might find this to be quite negative. But I think one thing to keep in mind is that kids are really affected by the way we perceive and talk about their diagnoses. And same for the classroom and the teachers. So if we can create an environment where it's normalized and talked about in terms of learning differences, in terms of supports, and so on, kids can really feel better to be open about it. I've even encouraged some students who want to, and where the teacher is open to it, to talk openly. One actually presented about their dyslexia diagnosis as one of their classes. So I thought that was really great, because he felt empowered to do that, and to educate his classmates as well.

Lauren 05:42

Absolutely. So there's obviously a wide spectrum of where kids might be falling, whether they want to talk about it or not, could you give me an example of how you would approach a conversation with a

younger student who might not have the skills to entirely understand their diagnosis yet, versus maybe an older student who maybe needs to focus more on like self advocacy?

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 06:03

Definitely, yeah. So for younger students, I really do think a little bit more concretely. And I think the younger the child, the more concrete you might want to be. But to really emphasize, you know, that there are certain things that can be hard for us, and certain things that can be easier, and everybody has those things. So you might look at a child and a book and say for you, you know, listening to a story might be really easy. Like, well listen to it, you can understand it really well. But sometimes these words on the page can be hard to read and ask them, you know, what happens to you when you read? So what do you feel like your brain is doing? And to get in that conversation with them? Sometimes kids have said to me, oh, it's like my brain gets stuck when I try to get to a word I don't know. Or the words are floating, you know, something like that, like there are a lot of them who will have these kinds of comments and talk to them about the fact that there are strategies we can use to help you. And so there's research, we know that we can actually teach you to read so even though this is hard for you now, there's hope. So not to feel as though we don't know. And that's I think what's great about dyslexia is that we do have such a large body of research to help. So I think that's one thing. But I do think even for younger kids, we can start thinking about self advocacy as well. So even saying, like when you don't know something, or we don't get to a word you don't know, do you close the book? You know, can you raise your hand? What things can you do? And so even for a child who's in first or second grade, we can start to think about those things. Obviously, as the child gets older, we can really talk more about, you know, what are the options? What's working for you, can we transform some books into audiobooks? Can we use a scribe and so on? So there's a lot more of that self awareness, but overall, I do think that self advocacy piece is really critical.

Lauren 07:52

Definitely. Well, that's a great point that you can start really young with self advocacy. And you know, it can get more complex as it goes on. But no, that's a great point. So what is the importance of having these conversations with children about their learning disabilities? Are there any studies that support that these conversations have a beneficial impact?

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 08:08

Right. Definitely, yes, well, there's a couple of things, for example, that we really know. So one is that children with learning disabilities are at risk for a lot of social emotional difficulties, including depression, anxiety, low self esteem. And a lot of it has to do with this sense of locus of control. So they feel as though a lot is out of their control. And they don't really know enough ways to cope. And so I think a lot of the research I've seen on this is really powerful in bringing back students that locus of control where it's more internal, meaning that they actually can make a difference in their lives, they can make a difference in their reading or their writing, they can help themselves become better at school. There was a really interesting study, actually, at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, that did a six year evaluation. And it really found that this study was really trying to teach children or students to empower themselves. And it really found that by empowering themselves by discussing the options, it improved their self esteem and reduced their stress and anxiety. And I think that is really key because we don't always see how much these social factors inform how well students are doing. And then vice versa,

how much that you know, student's performance or their skills impact their self esteem. So I do think it can be either a positive spiral or negative one. And I think the conversations help turn it towards that more positive side.

Lauren 09:36

That's so true. And to expand on the social challenges that individuals with LD can face, can a parent start to have conversations that can encourage resilience and empowerment? And what would that conversation look like?

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 09:50

Definitely. Yeah, so I've been working a lot on these questions of how we can support resilience with students with learning disabilities and even conversation starters and questions you can ask. And so I've written about some of them. But I can even suggest some now, which is, for example, if a student is or your child is struggling with, you know, reading, say, and they say, Oh, I'm just terrible at reading, I'll never get there, you know, I'll never be able to read. So obviously, this is kind of catastrophic thinking and black and white thinking where it's, you know, either good or bad. And so really to help them involves seeing a lot of those gray areas, seeing the nuance. So for example, well, is everything about reading bad for you? You know, what parts of reading are actually working for you? And we know that, for example, a lot of students with dyslexia or other LDs may have very strong comprehension. So even though their decoding might not be completely adequate, they're still able to get a lot out of the material. For others that's not necessarily true. But to really find the nuance and to help your child find their strengths, even within the difficulties, is really important. And one question I often ask is, well, what else is true? So even if a child is saying, well, this is bad, this is bad, okay, well, what else is true? And something else positive might be true? Well, that might be difficult. But what else is actually positive? Another thing I found very helpful is to actually help children visually chart their progress. So a lot of teachers would, you know, use these kinds of methods of oh, you've read this many books, you've done this, and I don't suggest going that far. But I do think when we can check in with our child or children about, you know, how much more are you able to understand, how much more are you able to read. They really do find that often very empowering when they see that their skills are improving. So I do think that we can't improve self esteem without actually improving skills as well. So I think if you can work on both of those, that's the key to resilience, is helping children see their progress and set goals for themselves.

Lauren 11:55

So some parents might not feel, or even educators may not feel like they're equipped to start these conversations with their kids. What would you say to them? And what would you recommend getting these conversations started? Are there some good conversation starters?

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 12:08

Definitely, yeah. So I think one thing to recognize is that it's very typical to feel fearful about this, because there is so much stigma. If you look at their most recent State of Learning Disabilities Report, it's you know, it's so surprising to me still how much we still often think about, for example, LDs are a result of laziness, or, you know, if a child just tries harder, they'll recover, they'll be able to do the work. So it's just a matter of not trying hard enough. And these are just heartbreaking misconceptions,

because they really do make it so difficult to feel as though we can have open conversations without blaming or without shaming. And so I think parents can realize just to break that stigma is a great start with kids. So to really say, you know, this isn't a result of you not trying hard enough, I know how hard you're trying, I know that you want to do this, and to even start there and build a foundation of bonding with your child over it. Rather than feeling as though oh, this is really scary, or oh, you know, I shouldn't talk about this. And the second thing, I think, is to realize that kids have so many emotions, often that they don't talk about, because of the stigma and so many kids are longing to talk about these things, and they really just want to be heard. So I think even if parents don't know what to say, even starting with just, you know, well, how are you feeling about it? Well, you know, what did it feel like to you to hear about this diagnosis? And to even model how it felt to you, you know, so I was kind of wondering what the difficulty was, and for me it felt a little surprising, but now I feel like I can help you better. To actually sort of verbalize those thoughts can really help you bring closer together as well.

Lauren 13:51

Absolutely. Well it sounds like it kind of goes back to what you mentioned before too is that the parents can do some research ahead of time to sort of get any preconceived notions out of their head and be ready for that conversation as well to bring a more positive influence into the conversation.

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 14:05

Exactly. And there's some great websites out there. So I think that if you are just looking for information that is really helpful, just to really start, there's Understood.org and other websites that I think are really great resources, if you're not sure where to go.

Lauren 14:19

Absolutely. So do you have any recommendations on what you should keep in mind when having these conversations so they don't sort of turn into a one sided conversation or even confrontational?

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 14:30

Definitely, yeah. So I think the key is to really recognize that the back and forth is needed, so that we want to, I talked about an approach I called Rich Talk in my work, where we're really thinking about what I call ABC. So the A is to just be adaptive. So to really think about in the moment, noticing a child's moods, noticing their temperament, sort of when do they want to talk, when are they open to talking? And B is that back and forth. So recognizing how much are we talking versus how much This is our child talking. And I think especially when talking about LDs that it is so important, because sometimes we don't think about it. But a child may have a drastically different understanding of a diagnosis, for example, or of their challenges than we do. Sometimes, for some kids, especially younger kids, have no awareness that they were struggling with reading. So for them, they were doing fine. And I've seen this especially, for example, with multi age classrooms that you know, a child who is the youngest in a multi age classroom may not have any idea that their reading is below grade level or is, you know, is a problem or is a difficulty. And so for them approaching that conversation looks very different for them. For example, a child who's in fifth grade who has been really struggling with reading for three or four years. So actually recognizing and just saying to a child, well, how do you feel about your reading, but how's it going for you these days, and letting that be an open conversation. So having that back and forth is so important, to not just assume that we know what a child is thinking, and the theme, so the

ABC, the C is actually child driven. So it is really to focus on what a child is worried about, what a child is thinking about or even excited about. And so for example, if a child feels like, oh, reading is just so difficult for me, Well, are there subjects that are more interesting? Are there formats that would be more interesting? So really, to follow the line of your child's motivation can be so important, and I often think, with parents about not necessarily becoming your child's teacher, so a lot of times it feels as though the parents, you know, feel very anxious and feel, oh, I need to try to teach my child, I need to fix this. Whereas I think what can be so helpful and so important is just to say, well, let's try to make this, whether it's reading, writing, or any other type of schoolwork, a warm and bonding experience. So how can we make reading feel like an enjoyable experience? And maybe that means the parent reading to the child, maybe that means taking turns reading, you know, maybe it means a variety of things. But I think to be a little bit flexible about that, and to not feel as though it needs to come from a place of panic, but can rather feel like oh, this can actually be you know, reading is a complex thing. And we can approach different aspects of it with a child.

Lauren 17:21

Absolutely. How early can you start having these conversations with your children? Is there a right age? Or can you really start at any age?

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 17:27

Definitely, yeah. So I really think you can start at any age, obviously, I would think, you know, a child probably should be experiencing some difficulties or something like that before you have this conversation. But I really do think conversations about how we think and learn differently can start even before a child has any kind of diagnosis. If a child even is just learning to read and is a typical learner, you can have these conversations and talk about, you know, well, yeah, some words are hard for you. And even some words are hard for me to read, you know, and actually, what's really funny is we, my family, I actually have two kids, ages five and 10. And we start together to play the spelling bee, which is a New York Times like an online game where you come up with words, there's like six letters, and you come up with words. And it's actually been really interesting, because as part of that we talked about, you know, do you know that word? Well, you know, I don't know that word, even sometimes, well, your dad doesn't know that word, you know. And so I think to recognize that we're all growing and learning and even some adults, you know, have challenges with certain aspects of things or don't know everything about language is really important, I think, for kids to hear.

Lauren 17:39

Do you have any tips for getting adolescents to open up in these conversations? Sometimes, you know, they might not be as open?

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 18:43

Definitely. Yeah, so I've definitely seen that. And I do think, sometimes I found a lot of success and talking with parents about supporting kids to start with something they feel good about. So this might be actually helping your child or inviting a child to teach you something that you authentically don't know about. So oftentimes, we may start wanting to probe or wanting to get more answers out of a child. And sometimes that can be really frustrating, obviously, because the child shuts off further and doesn't want to speak. So I think if you kind of flip the situation a bit, and give that control back to a

child, and also offer them a sense of mastery. So allow them to teach you, you know, is it a basketball move? Is it something about a video game? Allow them to kind of show you something, maybe it's something very active, so you actually go outside and do something together. That can be a really a way of opening up a conversation before you start talking about anything specific. It just gives the child back the sense of control and the sense of showing you, you know, here's something I'm proud of, here's something I can do. And so then you can move on, you know, just talk about things that might be a little bit more challenging. Sometimes I really get the sense that we focus a lot of times on deficits without starting with, well, let's see what your strengths are. Yes, there are obviously challenges. And we'll talk about those too.

Lauren 20:03

Absolutely. Would you be able to tell us about what you've been working on lately? And tell us a little bit about your book?

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 20:09

Definitely. Yeah. So I've been really excited about this book, because it's actually out now in the US, but it's going to be out in, I think, 11 international territories as well. So it's being translated into Chinese and Spanish and Japanese and other languages. So I'm really excited to get this message out to educators, parents and related professionals. So that's really what I've been working on. And especially what's been interesting to me is I've been doing professional development based on the book as well. So actually working on how do you develop empathy, for example, in students through conversation, how do you develop kindness, confidence, and so on? And I'm working, especially with teachers, to think about how does this integrate within a curriculum, because obviously, these things can feel very abstract and big. So I think it's really important to actually say, well, let's actually sit down and figure out how do these things make sense within the context of a state or local curriculum as well.

Lauren 21:09

Absolutely. Well I'd love to expand on educators and creating empathy. Do you have any conversation starters, or any tips for educators, maybe to help other students who don't have an LD to sort of have empathy and understanding for somebody in their classroom who does have a learning disability?

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 21:27

Yes, definitely. So I think, I think a lot about that, especially in how to make an environment and a culture where everyone feels welcome and supported. And the first thing I really do is draw a lot from principles of Universal Design for Learning, which is, you know, I don't know how many listeners are familiar with that. But it really is a method of learning where we open up the way that we access curriculum, the way that students respond to it, and the way that students are actually engaging with it. So for example, you can allow students to, for example, write a poem about something, you can have them record something, you can have them, you know, use a video to respond. And I like to do that as part of an exercise in empathy, because I start there. And then I really allow students to talk about, well, what was the experience like for you? Well, how do you think you learned best? What is hard for you? Why did you not choose the other option? And actually having students, whether they are typical learners or whether they have LDs, talk about that, it really opens us up to a conversation to say, yes, all of us have our own unique ways of approaching things, we have our own unique ways of

responding. And it's really exciting and interesting to celebrate those differences. So I think that's what's so key is to create an environment where we feel glad that there are so many different ways of responding that there are people with different strengths with different challenges in the classroom. And that I think, creates a really strong foundation for empathy.

Lauren 23:01

Absolutely. Well, and how can our listeners follow what you're up to and connect with you?

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 23:07

Definitely, yeah. So I have a website, which is just rebeccarolland.com. Two C's in Rebecca and two L's in Rolland. And so they can find me there. I also have a weekly newsletter, where I've been writing tips and sort of suggestions and things like that we can find on my website as well. And obviously, you can look for my book, if you're interested in reading that, which is available through all the major bookstores.

Lauren 23:30

That's great. Well, is there anything that I didn't touch on that maybe you wanted to talk about, or any last notes for us to end on?

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 23:38

Yes, I guess one thing I would say is, it's interesting that I wrote this book before the pandemic. But I think now, especially given so much isolation, so much anxiety, stress, and burnout of students and teachers, I think that the importance of these conversations, it's kind of more now than ever. And so I really do think that even if you can start small and try out a few of these conversations and conversation starters, I think it's so important for students at the start of the year.

Lauren 24:07

That's a great point. Well, thank you so much. This was such a great conversation.

Dr. Rebecca Rolland 24:11

Oh, thank you. I really appreciate it.

Lauren 24:19

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