

Louis Braille Celebration

A Parent's Perspective on the Importance of Braille for Success in Life

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When my daughter, Cara, was 3-1/2 years old, she had some remaining vision in one of her eyes. However, her vision was unstable due to a partial retinal detachment and various treatments she had received for retinal cancer. Her prognosis for improved sight was poor. Despite continual monitoring and medical treatment, her useful vision was decreasing.

Cara attended a preschool program in the neighborhood, at a school where I taught half days. The program she was enrolled in provided social opportunities for her with non-disabled children her own age. These social experiences were very important for her. However, I became aware of a need for a different school setting for Cara. The school-work was causing her increased frustration due to her limited vision. Some of the skills she had developed were decreasing. She could no longer identify colors, numbers, and letters with accuracy. Also, Cara would stumble over toys and objects during playtime, and often bumped into other children or objects in the room. It was obvious she needed some classroom accommodations and modifications that she could not get in a private neighborhood preschool.

I looked for a school program that would best meet her needs, spent some time talking to various doctors, and called the school for blind students in my state and the local school district to find out what programs were avail-

able for a child who was rapidly losing vision. After comprehensive educational evaluations, and considerable investigation on my part, I enrolled my daughter in a preschool program at a public school that had a full-time teacher of students who are visually impaired in a resource room. Cara's resource classroom had five preschool students with one teacher and a classroom aide (now known as a paraeducator). Almost immediately, Cara began to learn tactile discrimination skills and the fine motor skills that would prove to be very helpful for future braille reading. She also began to learn about protective extension used in travel and other techniques, such as trailing walls. The orientation and mobility (O&M) specialist offered me some basic O&M instruction and showed me the techniques Cara was learning. I was very excited to have these specialized teachers work with me and increase my understanding on how to teach Cara some very specific activities and techniques designed for children with visual impairments.

INTRODUCING BRAILLE

Cara loved "reading time," and every night I would read a book to her before bedtime. I realized her vision was failing and soon she would not be able to identify the pictures and letters in her favorite books. This realization made me very sad, knowing how much she valued books. I could see her frustration as her sight diminished to the point that she could not see the print or pictures very well anymore.

Her resource room teacher explained that it would be a good idea to introduce Cara to braille even though we would still encourage her to use her remaining vision to identify letters and numbers. I followed the recommendations of the teacher of students with visual impairments and worked on prebraille skills with Cara. We explored tactile discrimination skills and fine motor skills. Like most parents who have no previous knowledge of braille and its usefulness, I was clueless. I had occasionally observed adults who were

The guest editor of the *JVIB* Louis Braille Bicentennial Celebration is Susan Jay Spungin, Ed.D., consultant and retired vice president for International Programs and Special Projects, American Foundation for the Blind.

blind reading braille books or magazines when we were waiting for an appointment at the eye clinic of the University of Illinois. I was amazed by how rapidly their fingers could fly over the pages of dots.

LEARNING BRAILLE TOGETHER

Because the university programs that offered braille instruction in my state were too far from where we lived (there were no distance-learning programs then), I sought out a place where I could take courses in braille. Fortunately, I found a community college program that offered braille classes in its adult education program.

In my classes, I learned about the braille cell and was absolutely amazed! A teacher from the Hadley School for the Blind in Winnetka, Illinois, loaned me an old brailler and an used braille-instruction textbook that became my bible. Because of assistance from Hadley, Cara's teacher of students with visual impairments, and the community college classes, I was able to read and use uncontracted and beginning contracted braille. Meanwhile, Cara was learning to identify and discriminate some braille alphabet letters tactually. I would observe the teacher working with Cara in the classroom so that I knew what to work on at home. I have to commend Cara's teacher of students with visual impairments, because she spent a considerable amount of time explaining how she was going to introduce braille to Cara and teaching me some basic braille-instruction methods. She told me that her resource classroom was also a resource for parents. To this day, I am thankful that the teacher, who was very young herself, was aware that the parent needs to learn about braille and teaching methods if the young child is to succeed in reading braille.

ADJUSTING TO BLINDNESS AND BRAILLE

By the time Cara reached kindergarten, she was spending half the school day in the resource room and half in a kindergarten class-

room, and she was not really interested in learning to read braille. Cara was the only student with a visual impairment in her kindergarten class, and she began to notice that she was different than other children because she could not access text by reading visually and writing as they could. Even though she could tactually identify the braille alphabet letters, she wanted to read print like the other children. Cara began to have temper tantrums in school, pushed the other children away if they wanted to be her partners, and called the school bus driver "stupid" on several occasions. In her class picture, she was the one sticking out her tongue instead of smiling like the rest of the class. The school principal began to suggest that we should consider family counseling. During our weekly counseling sessions, I realized that Cara was angry because she perceived herself as different from other children. Once I became aware of her hidden feelings, I learned how to discuss these issues with her, explaining that it was all right to be a person who is blind. I felt that learning to read in braille might be a key to her overcoming her anger and frustration due to her vision loss; once she could read braille fluently, she might feel that she had accomplished something important, which would boost her self-esteem.

Fortunately, Cara's love of books and her intelligence won the battle with braille. Even though she didn't want people to notice her reading braille books, she couldn't keep her hands off the braille books she had. In the early elementary grades, she used to hide braille books in her desk and read with her hands inside the desk. By the time she was in third grade, however, her fellow classmates had already gotten used to the sound of her brailler, they had already explored her braille books, the novelty of her cane had worn off, and Cara's began to place her braille books on top of her desk as she read effortlessly and without embarrassment. Through the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically

Handicapped (NLS), Cara was able to get books in braille and audiocassette delivered to our local library. She devoured the books, and her reading skills increased rapidly.

As Cara's braille skills increased, I also continued studying braille. In the early years, I had to help her with her homework by monitoring and proofreading her braille answers and tutoring her when she needed assistance spelling words. It was very fortunate that I found the classes, instructors, professionals, and mentors who helped me as I struggled to learn braille.

When Cara was in middle school, she had long since surpassed me as a braille reader and writer, and I didn't need to monitor her school work in braille anymore. As her braille literacy skills improved, mine slipped because I wasn't using them as I had in the past. One summer during this time, Cara had the opportunity to attend a two-week summer camp, Camp Lions, for children who were blind or deaf. She absolutely did not want to go because she had never been away from home for such a long period of time. I promised her that I would send her a brailled letter every day so she wouldn't feel lonely. After reading my letters that arrived at camp each day, Cara would pass them around the campfire for all to read, and her fellow campers would laugh hysterically over my misspelled or poorly written words.

EXCELLING ACADEMICALLY BECAUSE OF BRAILLE

Because she could read and write so rapidly in braille, Cara became an excellent student, getting top grades in all areas. In contrast, a friend of Cara's at school who was visually impaired and a dual-media reader had a more difficult time with reading. Debbie read print very slowly and sometimes suffered intense headaches after completing her homework. She learned to read braille for "recreational" reading, since her eyes bothered her too much to read print by the end of the school day. The

same resource room teacher who helped Cara and me had the foresight to teach Debbie to read braille and print. Eventually, Debbie relied more and more on braille as her sole reading medium.

Because of Cara's excellent grades and her knowledge of braille, she graduated from high school with high honors, receiving several scholarships. She went on to college, graduated with high honors, and attended graduate school, acquiring a law degree. The opportunity to learn braille at an early age helped her to develop the academic skills she needed to be a successful student later in life. Braille was the key to literacy for her and helped to "level the playing field."

As Cara's experience illustrates, the decision regarding whether or when to introduce braille to children can have a great impact on their literacy and their future academic successes and employment opportunities. By talking to our children's ophthalmologists and low vision specialists, teachers of students who are visually impaired, and classroom teachers, we parents become a part of our children's educational team and are able to help make decisions about the relevance of braille as a reading medium for our children. Now more than ever, on the bicentennial of the birth of Louis Braille, we, as parents, must be aware of the importance of braille to children who are blind or visually impaired.

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MORE BRAILLE

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