

## Young, Gifted... and Stuck (Part 2): or helping children with ongoing spelling problems, assisted by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, Joni Mitchell and Blondie!

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*Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young with Joni Mitchell: singing to a lost generation?*

I'm part of a lost generation. I was too young to be a hippy and too old to be a punk. I turned 13 in 1970 and stood on the platform at Guildford railway station watching trainload after trainload of hippies heading to the Isle of Wight festival. There they would see countless legends such as Jimi Hendrix, the Doors, The Who and Joni Mitchell. Being a hippie seemed to make perfect sense to me, and I wanted to be like them. All you needed to do was grow sideburns, wear a tie die t-shirt and sit on the grass, singing *Woodstock* by Joni Mitchell, listen to Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young on your portable cassette recorder, while talking about changing the world, though not actually doing anything about it. I turned 16 in 1973 and just about had sideburns. I sneaked out of school and watched *Woodstock* at the local cinema. After that being a hippie made even more sense: you needed to wear very bright clothes, have a *chick*, and say 'far out man' a lot. Rock and roll was still important, as was looking cool. I turned 17 in 1974, and saw Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young at Wembley Stadium. They sang *Woodstock* with Joni Mitchell. But there was a change in the air: Joni wore a smart white suit and sang jazzy, discordant songs with Tom Scott and the LA Express. The Band did a set, but they were boring. Practically every musician onstage that day was over 30, but they really could sing and play (apart from Neil Young, who was very drunk.)

I turned 19 in the summer of '76. Elvis died and punk exploded across the UK. Punk made no sense to me whatsoever. Why dress like an extra from the Rocky Horror Show, or take a perfectly good tee shirt, rip it to pieces and then stick it back together with safety pins? Why pay good money to see a band who spat at you and could neither sing nor play? Someone explained to me that The Sex Pistols were 'the apotheosis of bad taste and a counterpoint to years of hippiedom and prog rock', which just confused me even more: but that's philosophy students for you. No matter how much I tried to understand Punk, it made no sense. There were no hippies around anymore, so I was in a cultural void. Then Punk morphed into *New*

*Wave*, along came Debbie Harry and Blondie, and everything began to make sense again: hippies were gone forever, but rock and roll and looking cool were back. I'm messing about here, because music, like cheese, is a matter of taste, and it's not the end of the world if a musical genre and the culture that goes with it doesn't appeal or make sense to you. However, growing up not being able to make sense of reading and spelling can have a devastating impact on your life. Teachers in mainstream schools have an increased awareness of how to identify and support children with dyslexia, though there is still a long way to go before all children with severe dyslexia will have their needs met. It's still the case, however, that children are being diagnosed late. This is particularly true when they seem to be reading well, but as they grow older their spelling lags increasingly behind their reading skills. They can be as old as nine or 10 before teachers start to notice a problem.



*Blondie: still cool and still rockin'*

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I received 11 responses on the day the paper was published. A pattern emerged among these children: they were all described by teachers as showing 'mild dyslexic signs', but their needs were not judged to be serious enough to warrant support. The children seemed to be reading relatively well, but all had very poor spelling: poor enough to get three out of 10 every week in a spelling test. Worse than that, they were literally spending hours doing homework that took their friends a tenth of the time. The children all had very low self-esteem and some even had sleep problems caused by anxiety. All of the parents had been aware of their child's difficulties with reading and spelling from when their children first started school. However they were not believed. Why? Because their children were well-behaved, high achievers in subjects with little reading and spelling, and had managed to convince everyone that they could read.

The *Lexion* assessment showed that all of the children had developed isolated skills in reading and spelling, but had failed to really understand what reading was all

about. Typically they had learned words as whole units, using their visual memories to identify words in reading. They had also memorized a large number of words that they could automatically spell. This all broke down in Year 4, when their visual memories could no longer cope with the level of spelling that was required of them. All of the children had only a very basic understanding of how to break down an unfamiliar word into phonemes and syllables in reading, or how to build a word up in spelling. They were, in fact, stuck at the very early stage of reading where children identify words as whole units. Lexion assessment also showed that their *phonological awareness*, including rhyming and identifying syllables, was very shaky.

Why were these children experiencing difficulties? Were they dyslexic? Possibly. Some had a history of dyslexia in the family; though I wasn't experienced enough to say categorically that what I had uncovered was dyslexia. Whatever we were going to call their problem, they would need support to help reading and spelling make sense.

Several of the children had experienced significant hearing difficulties under the age of five. They had been diagnosed with *otitis media* ('Glue Ear') and had had grommets inserted in their eardrums. In many cases this surgical procedure is enough to restore the child's hearing to normal, and with time everyone in the family forgets about it. However I think that there is a link between having had glue ear in pre-school years and experiencing spelling difficulties in school. In the early years of life children's phonological awareness develops rapidly, with their pronunciation developing quickly as they are exposed to the speech patterns of the language around them. Part of this development is the ability to recognise words that rhyme and to be able to play around with speech sounds. This is largely an aural/oral (listening and speaking) experience.

The children with glue ear weren't able to make the most of this rapid development in phonological awareness, because they couldn't hear well enough. Their brains compensated for this, as brains do, by saying to them, "Your ears don't work very well, so use your eyes. You can't hear, so *look* at everybody." Consequently the children began to ignore what they were hearing and concentrate on picking up visual clues to learn. When they started to learn to read, they had weak phonological awareness, and though some aspects of phonics teaching made sense, they largely relied on the visual skill of reading words as whole units. They also used their visual memories to help them to spell.

It was only in Year 5 that alarm bells began to ring for the Head Teachers and class teachers, who started to look closely at who was going to need support to get the best grades in their SATs. However, the damage had already been done. The children's parents had been telling teachers for years that their child couldn't read. In some cases they had been told, "We have tested your daughter, and her reading is only a year behind, so we are not going to allocate her support. Yes, her spelling is poor, but if she works harder to memorize her spellings each week then she will make progress."

Many of the parents were quietly furious, while their children were rapidly losing confidence and experiencing plummeting self-esteem. While the children were judged to be 'good girls and hard workers' at school, they were letting rip and expressing their frustration at home. They were finding it more and more difficult to complete written homework, and parents used to dread helping them to learn spellings. Year Six was a particularly stressful time, with the emphasis on doing well in SATs and the parents' growing realization that if you can't spell by the end of primary school, then you are stuck, because high schools don't focus on teaching spelling, and only pupils with a diagnosis of dyslexia or severe problems with literacy are likely to get support.

Lexion proved to be beneficial for many of the children: it took them right back to the early stages of learning to read, and the exercises helped to build up their phonological awareness. Reading and spelling began to make sense, and those with a history of glue ear made particularly rapid progress. The children and their parents were relieved that finally they were being taken seriously, and could do

something practical to get to the heart of the problem. I was left with a lingering suspicion about the children whose progress was less rapid: could it be that they actually had dyslexia, and would require in-depth assessment by specialists and ongoing support with literacy in secondary school?

I had done my bit to help a group of children, but I have met many parents since whose teenagers are failing in school because their spelling is poor, though apparently not poor enough to warrant support. Poor spelling impacts on the youngsters' grades, because coursework becomes a nightmare, and they are not entitled to extra time in exams. Parents are then thrown back on the possibility that they will need to pay privately for an assessment, which may or may not be taken seriously by the school. What is needed is an early recognition of those children who find reading and spelling difficult, and to use a range of approaches to teaching reading, rather than the 'one phonics approach fits all' method that is currently used throughout England.

A good place to start is to know which children in school have had glue ear, and to assume that they are likely to have literacy problems, until proved otherwise.

For more information about *Lexion* and the links between glue ear and reading and spelling difficulties, [click here](#) and [here](#).