

Narrator: Meet Dan. He describes himself as a pretty well rounded student.

Dan Fragnelli: Some of the strengths that I have are, being athletic, I'm really good at hands-on stuff. And another strength is, I'm organized and responsible, and I'm confident, and I'm beginning to become more independent for myself, and for my learning.

Narrator: And Dan has quite a bit of learning ahead. He's just been accepted to university, and hopes to go to teacher's college. But learning hasn't been easy for Dan, he has learning disabilities.

Dan Fragnelli: I have problems with expressive and receptive language, which deals with auditory learning. So let's say, for instance, in class, if the teacher is saying something like verbally, and I'm trying to write down notes, it just goes through one ear and goes out the other. So it's hard.

Narrator: Dan's mom had concerns when he was just a toddler.

Josie Fragnelli: Because Daniel wasn't speaking, he didn't go through that parroting phase. So at about two and half we went to a speech therapist and he was then diagnosed then with a speech delay.

Narrator: But it was an elementary teacher who suggested a formal evaluation.

Josie Fragnelli: She recognized some of those delays. I always knew, because he had the speech delay, I always knew, you know, it was going to impact his learning. To what degree, I didn't know, and to be honest with you, I was always very hopeful, thinking, you know what, maybe it's not going to manifest itself into a learning disability, maybe it's just a speech delay. So again, you're hopeful, a bit of denial. When she approached me and said, no, he's still having learning difficulties, we want to bring him forward, I had to trust her. I knew that, as much as, you know, you leave your child in their care physically, you have to leave them in their care, as well, emotionally, mentally, and all of that. So I trusted her. She was actually very, very good.

Narrator: So what are learning disabilities?

Sue Ball, Psychological Services: Learning disabilities affect the way individuals take in information, hold onto it, remember it, understand it, and use it in some way. That's probably the easiest way to explain it. They are neuro-developmental, in that, it's just the way the brain has formed, the way it's developed, and as such, that's the way they

learn for life. There's different levels of severity. A student with a learning disability has average to above average potential to learn. So their intellectual ability is well developed, it's solid. But along with that, there are one or more areas of processing that impact on their ability to show that potential, whether it be in the classroom, in terms of their oral language, their reading, their writing, their math, organization skills, social skills, that's how it would be impacting for them. When you diagnose a learning disability, you're taking a lot of information into consideration. You're making sure that it's not an English language learning issue, that it's not a vision or a hearing issue. That it's not because they haven't had access to instruction, or they haven't had the right type of instruction for them. And it's not that there's been a missed opportunity for learning.

Narrator: Here are some first steps to nurture the potential.

Chris McAdam, Superintendent: First of all, understanding what a learning disability is. Understanding the importance of the IEP (Individual Education Plan). We absolutely know that that's an area we have to work on, and ensuring that they understand the importance of accommodations that are in the IEP. That understanding the student with whom they're working, that that student, you know, really has tremendous strengths. That students with learning disabilities have average to above average intelligence, and that IEP and those accommodations are crucial to their success.

Narrator: So who plays a role in supporting the learning?

Debra Conrad-Knight, Principal: It has to be a team approach. We all have to be committed to the fact that students can learn, just some students learn differently, may take longer, they may need technology, they may need whatever, but they can learn, we just need to find the key and unlock it. The team has to include the parent, as well, and we all need to work together to find out what's the best way to reach the student. So the parent and the student will consult about their individual education plan, we review that, then we share it with the classroom teachers, the special education staff – and I have a fabulous department here – they will work with the teachers to say, okay, this is the area of weakness for the student, here is the supports that we can provide. So it's a team approach, and then the classroom teacher, as well as the SERT, so the Special Education Resource Teacher, will remain in contact with the student, with the parent, and it's a team approach. And then the students generally do a lot better.

Philemon Wong, Special Education Teacher: Just talking with parents, whether on the phone or in person is vital, so that you can even kind of, you know, dig deeper with the students, I find that really important.

Laura Hogan, Assistant Head of Special Education: I think the consistency is really important for a student, and once they see that in different classes, it really helps them feel safe and supported, and that they know people are, you know, advocating for them, as well.

Sue Ball: When you understand how you learn, that you have strengths, some areas that you have more difficulty with, but there's a plan for success, that there are things that help you, and there are people who can help you when needed, then they feel empowered to learn. And when they're given that message of competence, we see a significant difference in how they're able to take on their learning.

Dan Fragnelli: I've been asking my teacher for an outline of what's going to be mentioned in class, also an outline for tests, so I can plan ahead, so I'm working on my time management skills, too. And also, I've been self advocating for my teachers to scan my tests on the laptop, which has been very useful, and it's been helping me.

Josie Fragnelli: He lets teachers know, this is what I need and this is why I need it. And so he's taken on my role.

Narrator: Meet Elisa. She's in university and has a part time job.

Elisa Blasi: I feel so proud of myself. I've come so far, and that's really difficult for a lot of students with learning disabilities to feel proud of themselves, I think, because they're always comparing themselves to other students. So I always found that, growing up, there was a lot of negatives that came with my learning disability, the fact that I'm extremely disorganized, the fact that I don't have a great concept when it comes to numbers. You know, if somebody were to say, this house is so much dollars, I wait for their expression, and then I go, oh man, that's too much, or oh wow, that's really cheap, because I don't have the greatest concept for that. So different little things like that, out of habit, I've had to create really good skills to cover for that. So always having people make decisions for me, since I was in grade two and being diagnosed, out of habit, I became very vocal, and very firm with what I needed to say in order to get my point across, because there was a lot of people making decisions for me. Or I became even over-organizational, if that's a word, just because I wanted to make sure that I had everything in my grasp. So working hard, studying after hours, and sometimes it's quite discouraging to see that I get the same mark as another student after I stayed up half the night studying, but I know that I worked so hard, so I've created this really great work ethic out of my learning disability. I've also become very empathetic to other people who are struggling through things.

Narrator: While student achievement is a goal, so is well being.

Chris McAdam: For our students with learning disabilities, the sense of well-being is extremely important, and we've come to understand this year, in our work with research and focus groups, students shared with us the, the importance of feeling a sense of well-being, of feeling welcome in a school, and they very much brought forward this whole idea of stigma, how they feel about having a learning disability, what they think others think about them, and so we really have to address that sense of comfort, with them understanding their learning disability, and reduce the stigma. And I think, once we address that whole issue of stigma, I think a lot of other things will take care of themselves.

Narrator: Here are some tips that could make a difference.

Debra Conrad-Knight: Commitment, you've got to have it, because when you have commitment and you know, I'm going to ensure that this child is going to learn, you will go the hundred yards to see that it happens, and try and create the conditions that will allow them to be successful.

Josie Fragnelli: Please share, you know, the good things first. I think parents recognize what their kids can't do. Well, let them know what they can do.

Dan Fragnelli: We just learn differently, we're like any other student, it's just we have different strategies than others. Well, pretty much everybody, in my opinion, has their own learning disability, because I notice in class, I see people on laptops, which is a good strategy. I see people writing, I see people listening, using their phones, everybody has a different way of learning.

Elisa Blasi: Everything feels so out of control when you have a learning disability, I mean, people are doing things for you, you can't edit your own work, all that stuff is going on and you feel so out of control. So to pull that child aside and say, listen, I'm here for you, I want you to succeed, what can I do to help you learn? And create a lesson plan. And that may mean that their due dates are a little bit longer, you make a special schedule for them. Or that if they fail their first test, we refine and see what they did wrong, and then we have them take the test again, which is great, because that's what learning is all about, is refining and taking those extra steps. So if you just show that you really see what they're going through, and you want to help them succeed.

Sue Ball: That message of competence and confidence for our students, for their families, for teachers. To have those expectations. To make sure that they have access to the skills instruction that they need that would help them be successful. That we understand the

compensatory strategies, that we know that profile, so we look at those strengths, and we know that we can help them use those strengths to compensate for those areas that are weaker for them, to help them be successful. We can help them learn to advocate, that's so essential. That they understand their unique profile of strengths and needs, and they know what helps them, so they can be more successful.

Laura Hogan: A student with an LD not only can learn, they want to learn, and we just need to connect with them, and just be patient. But they're amazing, and let's just shift our thinking. They're as bright as any other student and once we know that they can learn, and once they know we know that about them, you'll see amazing things in your classroom.

Narrator: For more information, contact your board's student services, or your local chapter of the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario.