



A RIGHT TO WRITE

CASE STUDY

Hard work, commitment and a revolutionary computer programme helped the four Dunne children cope with dyslexia, writes **Emma Nolan**

It's hard to believe that Albert Einstein and Leonardo Da Vinci could have anything in common with Tom Cruise. Or even with Richard Branson, but they do. It's the same thing they all have in common with the Dunne family from Kildare — they all have some form of dyslexia. It's estimated that dyslexia affects between six and eight per cent of the population, making it quite common.

It is defined as a specific learning difficulty which makes it hard for some people to learn, write and spell correctly, despite their intelligence, motivation and education. John and Mary Dunne's four children, Denis, 12, Kieran, 11, Brian, 9, and Maria, 7, were each assessed with a specific learning difficulty, making school and home life very difficult for all the family. But a revolutionary computer programme has turned all their lives around.

Because of their dyslexia, it was recommended that each Dunne child get 20 minutes' reading support in school with a learning-support teacher, so they would not fall behind.

"The kids read things differently; sometimes the words on the paper are jumbled up. Their brain doesn't pick up the smaller words, like 'the', 'a' and 'and', whereas they can pick up bigger words. Their reading would have been quite slow too and their comprehension wasn't good at all. They could read a paragraph but then, because they read it at such a slow pace, you could ask them a question about it and they wouldn't be able to answer it," says Mary.

Knowing that the 20 minutes' support a day wasn't going to give her children all the assistance they required, Mary looked to the internet for inspiration, and found a groundbreaking American programme for children with learning disabilities called Fast ForWord. The programme — which involves a combination of at-home work with special software, plus assessment — helps improve short- and long-term memory, which is essential for word recognition. It improves students' concentration and attention, allowing them to focus on a task. It also strengthens processing skills and improves sequencing. Lessons are presented as fun games and as the child's skills get stronger, the exercises get more complicated.

Luckily for the Dunes, John Kerins of Neuron Learning was running the programme from Cork and was able to give them a demonstration.

"He said he'd put it on the computer for two weeks to see how we got on — some kids won't take to it because it's sometimes hard and very tedious. You have to sit for 50 minutes at a computer and go through a series of games, every day, five days of the week. We used to actually do it seven days because we might do a Saturday and Sunday and then take a day off during the week when they had something on after school," said Mary.

Since beginning the programme, the children have gone from strength to strength. "Their attention has improved so much. I used to have to sit down at the kitchen table with them to do the homework. The next thing, I'd look up and one of them would have disappeared. I couldn't even get up to cook the dinner because they'd be gone and that'd be it. They'd be all night just sitting looking at it," recalls Mary.

John, their dad, adds: "It'd take them an hour to write a paragraph. And they had this thing of 'I can't think'. Whereas now, you give them the same essay and they want to write two pages, and there's no giving out to them. They'll actually go

now and they'll do their homework. They'll come with it done and you just have to check through it."

While dyslexia can be a hindrance in their academic work, the Dunes excel at all things creative. John, a farmer, explains: "Kieran would be very creative — he loves drawing, and Maria would be the same, always doodling, singing and

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making up song lyrics. Denis would be good with his hands, he spends a lot of time chopping up timber and making stuff."

Dyslexia is not a behavioural disorder, but it can lead to disruptive behaviour. John says that Denis can sometimes get distracted: "If he heard a tractor passing, he might have got up out of his seat to have a look at it. But they can focus on things now. For example, yesterday Dennis had to make a paper airplane for school and it had to fly. He must have made three or four and he was still at it this morning, trying to get the paper airplanes to fly. Whereas before, he would have made one and taken it to school whether it could fly or not," he says.

Before Fast ForWord, the children relied on their memory rather than on understanding and learning. Mary explains: "Maria would come home with her English reader and she would be able to read the parents' side of the page as well as her own because, when the teacher was reading it in school, she was memorising it — so she would have the whole book off. This was the way they'd get by. I noticed it when the boys were that age as well."

John, who believes he is also dyslexic, found he did exactly the same in school, doing extremely well during the Junior Cert when he could learn off everything in class. However, at Leaving Cert level, when study had to be done alone and on his own initiative, John was lucky to scrape a pass.

Fortunately, his children have had some intervention. "They don't rely on memory as much," John says. "They're more of an interest in reading. Their comprehension is probably where they most excelled. They no longer need learning support in school."

Fast ForWord is a time-consuming programme. Parents and children have to be willing to put in the hours. John says: "It worked here because Mary put time and effort into it. She did it seven days a week, even over the Christmas holidays."

The children speak very enthusiastically about the programme. Denis says: "It helped me with my spelling and reading and I find my homework a lot easier to do." Brian, who has aspirations to be a spaceman, thought "it was kind of fun". Kieran found it very helpful for school: "I can think better now and I can do my homework quicker than before."

The baby of the family, Maria, has just started the programme and seems to be enjoying it so far. So that's a thumbs-up from everyone. **E**