

Ellen Meyers

Ellen Meyers retired after 35 years in education, including 22 years as a special education teacher, 11 years as a high school assistant principal for student services and two years as district-wide Director of Special Education/Pupil Personnel Services. She has been involved with TSA since her son was diagnosed 15 years ago and has served on the national TSA Board of Directors. She is currently a member of the TSA Education Committee.

My son is in the sixth grade. He is bright, but he avoids reading. I know that reading will become more and more important as he goes along in school and that his reluctance to pick up a book is likely related to his TS. Is there anything I can do over the summer that will help him overcome his reading difficulties?

You are correct when you say that reading will become more and more important as your son continues through school. There can be a variety of reasons why a bright student avoids reading. Despite being intellectually talented, a student may have a specific learning disability that makes reading difficult. This can only be determined through a battery of tests administered by a special education teacher and would be requested through the special education department at your son's school.

Assuming there is no learning disability, an eye blinking tic, even one that appears mild, could disrupt your son's reading. He may also be an inherently auditory learner. In these cases, I would strongly suggest that you get books on tape for him that correspond with books that he would like to read or books that are required summer reading. Have him listen to the books through an iPod or other MP3 player, so it is age and peer appropriate. He can either just listen to the book or listen and follow along in the book as well. He would then have the benefit of hearing the book while seeing the printed material.

Another suggestion is to find books that are particularly

interesting to your son. These books would be related to any interest that he might have, whether it is sports, history, a hobby, music; anything that will draw his interest. If he is a truly reluctant reader, you could get him books just below his instructional reading ability so these high interest books are easy for him to enjoy. This could "hook" him into reading.

Our daughter is doing well academically, but she feels socially inhibited by her TS symptoms and has always been a loner at school. She usually spends her summer vacation reading and hanging around with our family. Is there a strategy that will help her socially? She's funny as well as smart, but few of her classmates know her as anything but the 'girl with tics.'

One of the things you don't mention is whether your daughter's peers have received any training about Tourette Syndrome. When children or teens have the opportunity to learn about TS, they usually stop seeing a child as the "girl with tics" and she becomes just another kid. In my experience, students who have received training also become great advocates for the child with TS and will admonish others who may tease or isolate a student with TS.

I think it is important for children of any age to understand, at their level, that they have TS. They already know they are different and it makes them feel better to know there is a word to describe their symptoms. As soon as possible, a child should be able

to simply describe TS in a quick "tic talk" to his/her peers. If this is not an option, I would encourage the family to enlist the assistance of the TSA Youth Ambassador Program to explain TS to the child's peers. Your child will also feel less isolated if she reads, "That Darn Tic," a youth publication from TSA.

I would encourage you, as the parent, to enroll your daughter in an activity or week-long camp over the summer that she would enjoy and then plan, with the program director, to explain the tics to the other children in the camp or program. Education of your daughter's peers and self-advocacy, when and if she is ready, will both be very helpful to her socially.

We've just moved to a new town and our son will be enrolled in a new school. Everyone in our old district knew him and was very accepting. Do you have any suggestions about what we can do before the first day of school to smooth his way at the new school?

When you move to a new town, make sure you register your child for school immediately and present all relevant educational materials such as an IEP or 504 plan if your child has one of these. Next, it is really important to introduce yourself and your son to your child's school prior to the opening of school. I would suggest that you call the school 3-4 weeks before school begins and ask to meet with the principal or assistant principal, depending on the age level and size of the school. When you go to the school, bring some literature about

Ask the Expert



Tourette Syndrome from TSA to give to the school personnel. Some helpful brochures might include, "An Educator's Guide to Tourette Syndrome," "Teachers Who Get It," and "The School Administrator: Ten Things to Know about Tourette Syndrome."

When you call the school to make the initial appointment, ask for the opportunity to tour the school building. Be sure that your son's class placement and/or schedule has been determined by the time of your appointment/tour so he can see his actual classroom or homeroom. If he is a middle or high school student who will be changing classrooms, the opportunity to walk through his schedule will be very helpful to relieve some of his anxiety about the start of school.

Many school districts have summer reading requirements for all grades. It would be important to ask whether your son will be responsible for the summer reading and, if so, for the required list.

Some schools, especially at the secondary level, have open houses for new incoming students. If your son is at that age, be sure to ask if there is an open house or orientation program prior to the beginning of school. ●