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Dr. Sally Shaywitz discusses new studies about dyslexia

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ANN CURRY, anchor: Dyslexia is one of the most widespread learning disabilities. It affects one out of every five children, 10 million in America alone. Yet many children go undiagnosed or receive substandard support in overcoming their reading difficulties. Dr. Sally Shaywitz is a neuroscientist at Yale University School of Medicine and one of the nation's leading researchers in the scientific study of dyslexia. She's written "Overcoming Dyslexia," a guide for parents, educators and anyone who suffers from dyslexia.

Dr. Shaywitz, good morning.

Dr. SALLY SHAYWITZ ("Overcoming Dyslexia"): Good morning, Ann.

CURRY: The Who's Who's list of people who have overcome dyslexia is stunning. It includes John Irving, the author.

Dr. SHAYWITZ: Yes.

CURRY: Richard Branson, the owner of an airline and a few other things. Wendy Wasserstein, the writer/playwright, Charles Schwab, big guy on Wall Street.

Dr. SHAYWITZ: Right.

CURRY: Who else?

Dr. SHAYWITZ: Well, there are many people who are scientists. For example, Toby Cosgrove, who's the leading cardiothoracic surgeon in this country.

CURRY: And David Boies who was a Microsoft attorney that everybody was frightened by.

Dr. SHAYWITZ: Absolutely.

CURRY: You know, you're one of the leading experts on this subject, and it's interesting that so many people, I guess, misdefine dyslexia. How do you define it?

Dr. SHAYWITZ: Well, I define it very easily. It's an unexpected difficulty in learning to read. And that simply means that a person has the intelligence, the motivation and the schooling that would suggest, ah, this person should be able to read.

CURRY: But wait a minute. You're not just saying it's flipping words around or—or reading things out of order? It's beyond that. It's having trouble reading in general.

Dr. SHAYWITZ: That's right.

CURRY: OK. So you say then people should have their children tested or test themselves if they have trouble sounding out words.

Dr. SHAYWITZ: That's right.

CURRY: Avoid reading out loud. Reading takes forever.

Dr. SHAYWITZ: Right.

CURRY: And that they also have a family history. They avoid reading and also have a family history of reading problems. Well, so many kids fall under this definition but yet so many kids go undiagnosed. Why?

Dr. SHAYWITZ: Well, that's absolutely true. There's been an enormous amount of progress in science, in understanding the nature of reading, the nature of reading problems, and what can be done to identify children and give them effective treatment. And one of the reasons I wrote this book was that that information is not available. Parents call me or when I lecture, they ask me, 'What can be done?' And it seems to me such a shame that we have the knowledge and children are suffering, and yet we often do very little about it. And I hope to change that.

CURRY: OK. Well, let's start changing that this morning...

Dr. SHAYWITZ: OK.

CURRY: ...by talking about who should get tested. You say, if you're—well, we've already talked about that, but if you—if your child is diagnosed with dyslexia, you say get help early. That's key. Why?

Dr. SHAYWITZ: That's key, because we can really change a child's brain. For example, we've studied children before and after they've had a reading intervention, and you can really see a difference. And after they've had the intervention, their brains look like other children's. So if you get help early, and also earlier on, the brain is more malleable. And as children go on not reading, they become more and more behind, and they give up on themselves.

CURRY: You say insist on scientifically proven reading programs. Such as?

Dr. SHAYWITZ: Well, I—I want to talk about that for a second, because up until very recently, choice of a reading program was based on philosophies or I like this program. Now there's scientifically based reading research. I, as a physician, if I want to prescribe

a medication, I want to know, ‘Well, what’s the evidence?’ That was never done before in education, and now we can do that. We have very strong evidence. And in the book, I walk parents through what to look for, what are the signs of a scientifically-based program that works, and what they can do about it. And what are the specific programs. There’s no reason now for any child to struggle in read. The key thing is that we have to raise our standard. It can no longer be, well, that sounds good, that looks good. It has to be, let me see the evidence. What is the evidence that this program works?

CURRY: If you’re saying that dyslexic people can learn to read, that there is no reason for them not to be able to read, then really, it’s also about finding effective teachers, figuring out just the way—but how do we do that? How do we find the right schools and the right teachers for our children?

Dr. SHAYWITZ: Well, that’s a really good question. Finding the right schools is to ask them what kind of reading programs they use. Is there evidence of effectiveness, and how well trained are the teachers and how knowledgeable are they. Do they know about scientifically based research? There’s a huge need in this country to educate our parents and our teachers.

CURRY: I don’t want to run out of time before I ask you really quickly about people listening right now who are adults...

Dr. SHAYWITZ: Right.

CURRY: ...who cannot read because they have dyslexia...

Dr. SHAYWITZ: Right.

CURRY: ...what is your advice?

Dr. SHAYWITZ: My advice is go get help. It’s remarkable. The news is so good. We’ve learned so much and people who go and get help can totally turn their lives around.

CURRY: They can read.

Dr. SHAYWITZ: Absolutely.

CURRY: And you’ve seen it happen.

Dr. SHAYWITZ: I have seen it happen. It is the most wonderful thing in the world to see that happen.

CURRY: Dr. Shaywitz, thank you so much for everything you’ve done to help these children and adults overcome something that they should not let keep them back.

Dr. SHAYWITZ: Thank you for having me.

CURRY: Thank you. All right.

Dr. SHAYWITZ: Thank you.

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