

## SANDRA MARSHALL

### DYSLEXIA ADVOCACY

*When Sandra Marshall's son was diagnosed with dyslexia, it set her on a quest to help all kids with literacy problems.*

WORDS BY CAT RODIE



Sandra Marshall didn't know much about dyslexia until her youngest son, Brodie, started school. Watching her child fail to get to grips with the basics of kindergarten opened her eyes to a whole world of literacy problems.

"It was like watching him walk the plank. No-one seemed to know why he was struggling or how to help him. It was such a sad and lonely time for us all – but it was especially hard on him," Marshall recalls.

Brodie was eventually diagnosed with dyslexia, a learning difficulty that affects at least one in 10 of the general population. But despite knowing the cause of the issue, no-one in the school community knew how to help. More discouraging still, Marshall and her son were often blamed for the issue.

"It was suggested to me by Brodie's grade-three teacher that I hadn't bought the right books for my son to read. And another parent told me I was expecting too much wanting the school to teach him to read! In my frustration, it seemed so much time and energy at the school was invested in other areas, but not literacy – and the word 'dyslexia' was not seen or heard anywhere," Marshall says.

It was a difficult time. Brodie became increasingly despondent about his education. "I watched the spark in his eyes fade and his little shoulders slump. He lost his vitality for life. He refused to go to school."

Eventually Marshall was able to find a solution: private tutoring through a dyslexia specialist 60km from their home. Brodie was taught structured synthetic phonics – and within a year he could read. But while Marshall was thrilled to have found help for her son, she was enraged by the injustice of the system.

"The unfairness and the needless failure of little kids is what really fires me up. Working with disengaged

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teenagers, I see the mental health consequences play out as these young people struggle with their self-esteem and sense of worth after years and years of failure," she states. "They think that it is their fault, and that they are not good enough. Nothing could be further from the truth."

Marshall joined forces with other parents whose children had been impacted by dyslexia. She began locally, by co-founding 'DAGBAGS' (dyslexia action group Barossa and Gawler surrounds) in 2010. Five years later, she took her campaigning further by forming Dyslexia SA. Then in 2017 she took the fight national by co-founding the Code REaD Dyslexia Network.

"The aim of the group is to disrupt the status quo. We are here to create awareness of dyslexia, support families and individuals with dyslexia, and to formalise our ongoing work with government and educators to improve the education outcomes for those with dyslexia," Marshall says.

To date, the Code REaD Dyslexia Network has implemented a range of awareness campaigns – such as Light it Red, where prominent buildings are illuminated in red (as dyslexic kids often have their work covered in red pen corrections); and Get on Board for Dyslexia Awareness, a social media campaign.

Significantly, Marshall's advocacy has seen the Year 1 Phonics Check put into action in South Australia. This is a huge win for the dyslexia community, because it flags literacy problems early. "We want the Year 1 Phonics Check to be implemented in

every state and territory. Seeing kids identified early is a priority for us," Marshall states.


Marshall is clearly passionate about her advocacy. But where does her sense of social justice come from?

"My parents, who were farmers from the Eyre Peninsula," she says. "They have instilled in me to fight for fairness. After all, isn't that our Australian way?"

When she isn't busy fighting on behalf of dyslexic kids, Marshall works as a local GP. She has a passion for supporting kids that have suffered from childhood trauma. "The kids I see have often suffered from family violence, drugs and alcohol problems," she states. "It's common for them to have literacy difficulties too. This work is really important to me. It keeps me grounded and real."

This year, Marshall intends to continue the fight for dyslexia awareness. "We'll only be getting louder," she explains. "It's all about removing the stigma, [and] seeing kids identified early and receive the high-quality instruction they need."

Marshall also wants to help shatter the stigma of dyslexia, by getting adults who've never spoken about their struggles with reading and writing to open up to their family, friends and communities.

"Dyslexia affects 10 to 20 per cent of kids – which is exactly the same statistics as asthma, and yet asthma is mainstream, and no-one questions an asthmatic person's intelligence," she says. "There are so many myths about dyslexia." 

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