

Dyslexic children expose policy flaws

Campaigners estimate 70,000 children in New Zealand are dyslexic, but the Government does not specifically recognise the learning disability. A new foundation hopes to change that with a high-profile campaign. ARWEN HANN meets a family whose experiences led them to back the project.

When Shey Pope-Mayell was three he told his mother the alphabet song — a simple song used by millions of children to learn their ABC — was not a proper song.

It was useless to him because it did not fit with his way of thinking.

Shey, now 10, is dyslexic. He thinks in pictures rather than words, meaning the alphabet song posed a problem.

For his parents, Guy and Suzanne Pope-Mayell, it was difficult to reconcile their outwardly intelligent son with the boy who struggled to read or spell simple words.

In conversation, Shey can express himself clearly, but writing things down is a struggle.

When he was younger, it took him weeks to learn to spell words like "it".

"It is quite frustrating as a parent when you can see that your child is intelligent but they struggle," Suzanne Pope-Mayell says.

"We never questioned his intelligence, so we knew there was something else, but we couldn't work out what.

"We were lucky because Shey told us there was a problem rather than hiding it like some children do. He could see a difference between himself and others."

When Shey told them at the age of seven that he was struggling, the couple took him out of mainstream school and began teaching him at home, but they still could not pinpoint the problem.

Then one day his mother overheard someone talking about dyslexia and went home

and researched it on the internet. Everything fitted.

"The site I looked at had something like 37 characteristics of dyslexia and I think Shey had about 35 of them," she said.

"It was amazing. All of a sudden we had an explanation; something we could research and work out how to help him."

The discovery was the beginning of a series of revelations for the family. Dyslexia also explained the problems suffered by one of their elder children, and Suzanne Pope-Mayell began to recognise some of the struggles she had been through as a youngster.

Shey is now at a Montessori school where staff are trained to help him.

Now the couple, along with other backers of the newly formed Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand, want to help others. They want to put dyslexia on the map.

"This is a long-term vision," Guy Pope-Mayell says.

"What we want is for the Government to recognise that this is an issue. We have parents dealing with it and schools that have recognised it and are helping children, so why doesn't the Government?"

Next month the foundation will launch Dyslexia Awareness Week. The highlight will be the opening of the Dyslexia Discovery Exhibit in Christchurch.

It will feature original sculptures by English artist Mackenzie Thorpe and Weta Workshop designer Richard Taylor. Both men are dyslexic.

Taylor's creation is designed to show how it feels to be dyslexic and how dyslexic people see the world.



Right to read: Guy, Shey and Suzanne Pope-Mayell had to resort to different ways of learning when they realised Shey was dyslexic.

Photo: Carys Monteath

Another sculpture will celebrate Christchurch-born motorcycle designer John Britten. Britten was dyslexic but designed world-beating V1000 motorbikes.

The Christchurch project is being backed by the Cookie Munchers Charitable Trust, the charity arm of Cookie Time, of which Guy Pope-Mayell is managing director.

The company is also launching a fundraising cookie to

raise money for the foundation.

The Pope-Mayells are testament to the fact that dyslexia is not a hindrance.

"I have always been quite against labelling, but in a way having dyslexia as a label has actually helped our family," Suzanne Pope-Mayell says.

"We could show that other people had this but went on to do great things, like Einstein.

"It helped us to really understand Shey and keep his

sense of self-esteem," she said.

Shey believes dyslexia is something to be acknowledged and even celebrated. He wants to design computer games when he grows up. "It (dyslexia) doesn't really bother me any more.

"It isn't going to stop me doing anything," he says.

Last year, Education Minister Steve Maharey was criticised by a British academic after he told TV One's Close Up programme

that dyslexia was not a recognised condition.

Dyslexia expert Gavin Reid says he is "absolutely astounded" that the condition is not recognised in New Zealand as it is in Britain.

This year, Craig Ashby, founder of the DORE centre in Auckland that helps children with dyslexia, dyspraxia and ADHD, called for all primary school children to be screened for learning difficulties to

identify potential problems at a young age. Neither the Education Ministry nor the Health Ministry recognises dyslexia.

● Dyslexia Awareness Week runs from Monday April 23 to Sunday April 29. For more information visit www.dyslexiafoundation.org.nz