

How I got to Harvard after realising my greatest weakness is a strength

Caitlin Iles was recently asked to speak at Harvard University — an invitation that came 20 years after she opened up to her father about her dyslexia. She explains how she got there, with some advice for all of us.

Not too long ago, I was boarding a plane to the home of some of the brightest minds in the world, Harvard University, to speak to students at [Harvard's Asian and International Relations](#) conference.

So how did I, a girl with dyslexia from Australia, make it to this iconic Ivy League Institution in Boston, Massachusetts?

About 20 years ago, I mustered up the courage to tell my dad (Barry Iles, otherwise known affectionately to his friends as big bad Baz) that I couldn't read or write properly. I told him that I was dyslexic, and had basically used every excuse under the sun to fudge my way through school.

Dad (Barry), at the time, was relaxing after a hard day's work with a glass of whiskey and ice and watching the news on TV.

My confession was completely out of the blue. I had just started my final year of school at a private girls' school in Melbourne and I am sure this was the last thing he was expecting to hear.

To his credit, after muting the news and asking me to repeat myself, he looked me straight in the eyes and said: "I'm proud of you for being honest, you're going to have to work harder than anyone else to get what you



"It took 18 years for me to meet Richard Branson and thank him for lighting the way and showing me that dyslexia is not a weakness but my greatest strength."

want but ... if Richard Branson can do it, so can you".

That one sentence has shaped each day of my life since. It's played quietly on a loop, somewhere in the back of my mind on a daily basis. Without a doubt, it was the most valuable lesson and the best advice I have received.

It's what got me to Harvard.



Caitlyn Iles

As a Venture Capitalist, Caitlin Iles has helped create Australia's largest portfolio of early-stage startups (Artesian Venture Partners). Today she is preparing to launch a new edutainment (the perfect blend of education, entertainment & media) platform, Xchange, that will enable women in business to learn how to fast-track their professional development & / or grow their business, from the world's best entrepreneurs, global leaders, professionals, rising stars & education providers.

Twenty years ago, my dyslexia was viewed as a disability. It made me believe I was stupid.

At the age of 17, I found it near impossible to write or read properly.

When I tried to read, the words hovered and vibrated on a page. They seemed to change shape and refused to take an orderly form.

It may sound like a Harry Potter inspired spell, but my experience was far from magical.

Reading a page was a mammoth task that was exhausting, frustrating, heartbreaking and near impossible.

I was convinced that my future was bleak. How does someone succeed in life when they cannot read or write?

An inability to do so affects how we interpret the world and communicate.

At the time (1998), one's ability to read and write also acted as a measure of intelligence, capability and worth. I felt that my value was running in the negatives and that nothing was possible.



Read more of Caitlyn's inspiring story at

<https://womensagenda.com.au/leadership/your-greatest-weakness-is-your-greatest-strength/>

Q & A

With Abigail Marshall

(From the Dyslexic Reader No 76)

How Can I Help My Dyslexic Husband?

Q: I believe my husband is dyslexic, because he shows many of the characteristics listed on the [dyslexia.com](#) website.

Although I'm not a professional who is qualified to diagnose him, I can recognize it, because it's pretty severe.

The sad part is that he does not accept it, and, in turn, refuses to get help. Is there anything I can do to help him?

A: You can help by being supportive in other ways.

Learn more about the positive aspects of dyslexia so you can recognize and support his strengths, and also so that you can improve your communication style with him.

Most dyslexics think in pictures more than words, and often there are miscommunications

because the dyslexic person misunderstood the words used or has retained a different picture in his mind.

That can lead to conflict in a marriage, because it can feel like your husband is ignoring you or not valuing what you have told him, when the problem is really due to confusion and disorientation.

The Davis Program can help an adult of any age overcome difficulties, but Davis Facilitators only work with clients who are motivated and willing. So "refuses to get help" means that at least for now, you can't realistically expect things to change.

The refusal very likely comes from feelings of embarrassment and shame, so that is why positive support and encouragement are so important.

How Can I Help My Five-Year-Old Child Recognize Letters In Print?

Q: My five-year-old daughter is able to recite her alphabet and, when asked what sound a specific letter makes, can produce the correct sound. She is able to identify sight words when they are spelled aloud to her. For example, when asked what the letters t-h-e spell, she

can accurately say "the."

She, however, stills struggles to identify letters when presented with them in print. When asked to orally spell a word, such as mop, she can sound it out and identify the correct letters (m-o-p), but when asked to write the letters, she cannot successfully do so. Her school feels that there's not enough evidence to support testing. Can you suggest where I can get more help? We have a family history of dyslexia.



A: We would recommend modeling the letters of the alphabet in clay. The Davis Young Learner's Kit for Home Use would give you all needed materials, along with a manual, including suggested activities along the way.

The clay modeling, and the activities to be done at the same time, will help your daughter to be able to know all of her letters.

